

Salt and Light in a Dull and Dim World

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February 4, 2024

We continue in our series in Matthew. Looking at these snapshots in the life of Jesus as we go along at the sort of a drone's eye view. Then, we will settle down in a couple of spots to look at these places that are significant.

Of course, no part of God's word is not significant. But as we look at the Sermon on the Mount in particular and see just the amazing things that Jesus has said about those who belong to him by grace, alone through faith, alone in him and who have become his true disciples, were in Matthew 5:13-20.

So please pay careful attention to God's Word. It is holy and inerrant.

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You're the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand. And it gives light to all in the house. In the same way. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away. Not an iota. Not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

I'd like to read a quote that I found this week from a prominent pastor, theologian. Any time a prominent pastor theologian says something, you should take notice. I think it is true to say that during the last 50 years, the Christian church has paid more direct attention to politics and to social and economic questions than in the whole of the previous hundred years. We have had all this talk about the social application of Christianity. Pronouncements have been made and resolutions have been sent from church assemblies and the general assemblies of the various denominations to the governments. We have all been so tremendously interested in the practical application. But what is the result? No one can dispute it. The result is that we are living in a society which is much more immoral than it was 50 years ago, in which vice and lawbreaking and lawlessness are rampant.

My guess is that anyone here who can look back on the past 50 years with the knowledge of experience would find it probably pretty hard to dispute a statement like this. But it's worth

pointing out that these are the words of Martin Lloyd-Jones, and they were published in 1956. Now, my point in bringing this up is not to make the case that, wow, if things were like that, then if in fact we have this world in which there is rampant lawlessness and lawbreaking, then it must be out of control now. I bring these words up because of the truth that Dr. Lloyd Jones meant to draw attention to pronouncements and policy statements of church denominational bodies at large about cultural and political issues rarely do much of anything to impact our world or to arrest what Lloyd Jones can even say in the rotting of our world.

Now, Lloyd Jones is hardly anti church, and that's not what he's saying. He never suggested that denominations and the true church at large don't have a world focused, a world changing mission. They do. We do. The PCA does. His point is that this mission, making disciples of Jesus Christ to the ends of the Earth, is not accomplished by the church staking out cultural and political stances and announcing them via press releases. No, this mission, which is nothing less than the advancement of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven is accomplished on a more individual level by Jesus' true disciples being in the world, what Jesus here, declares them to be salt and light. Now, when you look at this text, take note. Jesus doesn't really tell his disciples nor does he tell us to do anything directly in these verses. What he does is tell us who we are, what we are, and what God's design is for His disciples by them being what they are. Now, it might seem like I'm quibbling, but it's a critical point. Dr. Dorian, he pointed out last week, the Beatitudes tell us the basic essential character of a true disciple of Jesus. Look back at verse two. Now, this is the essential character of a true disciple of one who has been born again through faith in Christ, who's been transformed in is being transformed by the power of His grace as his spirit is at work. Those who are poor in spirit know their utter spiritual need before God, and they in turn they mourn over their sin, which leads them to to be meek and a humble refusal to self-assert oneself or demand preferential treatment.

The spiritual consequence of these realities is that these disciples, hunger and thirst for righteousness, or Jesus will say later they seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Now, those who seek first, this Kingdom and His righteousness display their true character ultimately in their actions, which are described in the next three Beatitudes. They are merciful, pure in heart, which doesn't mean we're sinless. That means that we are transformed by his spirit in desire and long after the things that he places before us for His glory. And we are peacemakers and a true disciple and a true disciple of this character and its result and action are both something that are what they are. We are who we are. We can say, no matter the circumstances, no matter where we are when we are, we can't help being who we are if indeed we have been transformed by grace. Now it's not perfect, but certainly this blessed character stands out in a dark, dying world. That's the point of being a kingdom disciple.

What Jesus does next, is use two metaphors to specify the impact of his disciples. We're very familiar with it. If we are true disciples of Christ we are salt in light. Now, interestingly, these metaphors immediately tell us about the essential character of the world around us. It is dying and dark, and it is both of these things because of the reality of sin. There is no question about

that. It is filled with spiritually dead people and the culture that develops around it reflects that reality.

There's still sparks of God's grace, Yes, but it is a dying world because of the following that Jesus talks about us being salt of the earth, light of the world. And so we shouldn't make too much differentiation, I believe, between Earth and world. They are parallel terms which essentially mean the same thing people and collectively the cultures that people develop.

So let's look at salt first. Most of us have heard messages on this text, probably so many that we look at what's going to be preached on me. yeah, know, I know this text. We've heard him so many times. Lin Downing, you may remember him, who was my predecessor in the position I am in, used to call this ice slick passages. You're so familiar with him that you see him. You just kind of skip over them and go on to the next one. We can't do that. Salt, as we know in Jesus' day, was not merely to flavor food, but to act as a preservative in meat and fish, which are highly perishable, with no such thing as cold storage, basically, meat and fish would begin to decay immediately after butchered are caught.

So salt inhibits the growth of bacteria. It's not likely they understood that scientifically, but they knew when they rubbed it into fresh meat or fish, it preserved. It cured so well that in some cases when it was dry, salted, it could last indefinitely. Now, it's not hard to see Jesus point if we as disciples of Christ or the salt of the earth and God means for us to have a curative preservative effect on the earth, which is decaying. Now, I know it may sound a little weird, but it's Jesus' metaphor, so it only works if we follow it through. You must rub salt into meat to keep it from decaying. So since we are the salt of the earth, we must rub ourselves into it. As it says in other places, we were in the world, but not of it. But this goes deeper. We are to rub ourselves into the world around us and to continue the metaphor. Since salt curing doesn't work unless the salt is rubbed and worked all through the meat, then we only work as salt in our world if we rub ourselves all through all the places that need our saltiness. That means our being wherever the earth is decaying.

So where is it not decaying? Let's ask that. There is nowhere that it's not decaying. The whole universe is broken by the fall. And of course, because of that, the point is that we are needed everywhere to be. The salt of the earth means we must be rubbed into it. The social structures, our extended families, our work settings, whatever public and influential associations we may have opportunity or responsible charity to belong to. So we're not hiding from the world. We want to be in the world, but we won't be in the world as who we are not accommodating anything but being salt, as he have been called to do. Now, as believers, we have an appropriate desire, of course, to pull away from the world. We've been saved out of it and we don't want to be pulled down by it.

And we need the fellowship of believers. We need to be with like minded, like hearted people. But if we want to be like Jesus, we must have the same compassion for the lost that He has seeing them as sheep without a shepherd. That's our function in the church to be equipped, as

Ephesians 4 says, so that we might do the work of ministry in the world carrying out this commission.

But we're no good sealed up in, what the Brits call salt cellars. Salt is useless unless it's poured out, unless it's rubbed in, not locked away in the cellar, but poured out and rubbed into the world. But too many of us stay shut up in our Christian ghettos and never have any meaningful contact with the world that is decaying around us.

I know that when I became a believer, I was surrounded by unbelievers and I was so excited to share the truth. I had an impact, as I remember my roommate basically saying, Man, you need to chill. You're no fun anymore. And as I grew in my faith, my passion for my lost friends didn't decrease, but my associations became less and less Christian, and I became more and more involved in the Christian bubble. When I went to seminary, I was immersed, and even as I began ministry, the Lord put me in a place of working with evangelism. It was because of my job that I was going out and meeting. People had the privilege of leading two men who now to my best friends, to the Lord, with EE.. But it's so easy for us to get out of the world. So if we do have opportunities because of our training, because of our skill, our interests, our profession to be a voice in places of influence, then we should take it. I'm so thankful for those who do that professionally in the medical field here out of this church, in government, state and federal government, those who are where they are because of God's providence and calling and they are who they are because they are true disciples of Christ, that is to have an influence.

But there is no point in rubbing ourselves into the world if we lose saltiness. Verse 13 If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on our people's feet. Now the salt we use today is incredibly stable because it's basically pure salt. It's amazing to me how salty it stays. We have this jar of pink Himalayan salt, and it says on the label, millions of years in the making, but it's got an expiration date of 2025. That makes no sense to me. I bet you in 2025 it's still pretty salty. But the salt of Jesus day was usually a rocky compound of which sodium was only one component. And whenever it got wet, the salt would often be leached or rinsed out. And what was left behind was the substance that looked like salt but had no salt in it. It had lost its saltiness. It was useless. That's what Jesus means. But that can happen to us as Christians. We can look like the real thing. We could even talk like the real thing. But when we most need to be salty, we are salt less. One of the primary ways that we as Christians can keep from losing our saltiness is by telling the truth in love, not compromising the truth at all, specifically the truth of God's Word. Jesus goes on verse 17, It looks like it's a separate section and unrelated, but of course it's not. It's all part of the same sermon. *Do you not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets? I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away. Not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Even the smallest stroke of a pen, he said, is not purposeless. It is inspired is from God, and it will all be accomplished.*

Now we don't have time for a deep dive exposition of the nature of the Old and New Testaments, or of the inspiration and inerrancy and infallibility of the word of God. But the upshot is this because Jesus taught, as Matthew says at the end of this service, as one who had authority, as opposed to the rabbis who taught us those under authority, it may very well be that describes and Pharisees had accused Jesus of teaching against the law or above the law, maybe setting himself up as a new authority over both as they whispered about him. But that wasn't at all the case. He's proclaiming himself as the one who fulfills what God has already spoken, therefore affirming the law and affirming the prophets. But He's also proclaiming the inspired, unbreakable nature of the Scriptures in verse 18, and that leads him to this application in verse 19. *Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.*

I think this was a direct hit on the scribes and Pharisees and a warning to his disciples the scribes and Pharisees routinely messed with God's Word, both exalting their own rules and traditions to the level of Scripture. But also manipulating the law with technicalities that ultimately excused their own disobedience and sin. And as those who were, at least in appearance, religious experts, professionals, the scribes in Pharisees should have been the most salty people around, but they had become useless because of their weakening the weight of God's Word for their own use.

The bottom line is this. If we as true disciples of Jesus are to be salt and light, we must be in the strongest and most faithful ways embracers, loving embraces of the Bible as our voice in authority so that we tell the truth in love. We can't downplay, we can't relax God's Word, even if we think what we're doing is removing a stumbling block. We may think we're doing that, but we're actually causing people to stumble. We may think we're being loving, but we're actually being deceitful when we compromise or downplay the word of God. Rosaria Butterfield, as most of you know, was a gay rights activist academic who was converted to Christ in the late nineties after living many years in a same sex relationship. And though since that time she has been stalwart in standing for biblical sexuality, she defended for many years using transgender pronouns when engaging with those who called themselves non-binary. Last April, almost a year ago, she posted an article in which she, in her own words, repented of this practice. She wrote that she had previously used transgendered pronouns as a way she believed to meet everyone where they were and do nothing to provoke insult. Yet she eventually came to the conclusion that her practice did in fact provoke insult to God. In the name of building bridges she had been relaxing the teaching of God's Word and teaching others to do the same. That's why she used the words I repent. She writes. The Bible defines this as sin. Sin does not lose its evil because of our good intentions or the personal sensibilities of others. Changing cultural forces can bring sin into fresh light as the Supreme Court's above or Obergefell decision did for me, she says. But a renewed focus is no excuse for sin and no dodge for repentance, not for a real Christian. She's right, of course, and it's the exact opposite of being salt. And those Christians who trade loving, truth telling for what they think is winsomeness or in reality bearing false witness to those who

need their salt and the truth of God to halt their sad slide into a decaying life, to bring them into the hope of forgiveness. A new life is found in the Gospel to know, as Richard Seb says, that there is more grace than there is sin in us. More grace in Jesus than sin in us. And if there is anyone who has compassion for them, it is Jesus. Our Jesus.

She goes on to tell the story of Laura, a woman who in her past lived as a transgendered man and called herself Jake. Laura pumped testosterone and engaged in mutilating gender affirming surgeries and God saved, redeemed and transformed her into a beautiful trophy of his grace. She has recounted in countless interviews and in her book, Transgender to Transform the power of the opposing opposite approach to that of the old Rosary for Laura. When the Lord enlivened her heart and mind with the Gospel, she returned to the church of her youth and her conservative Christian parents, her church and her parents had refused to use her preferred pronouns throughout all the years she lived in the false identity of transgenderism. Why did she return to them? Their refusal to lie compelled her trust. Laura is among the most beautiful, godly and feminine women I know, she says. Think about that. Their refusal to lie compelled her trust. They had been salt. What a pressure we are under to do the opposite. Even in our own circles. Because we're afraid. Because there have been those who have been ugly evangelicals who are self-righteous, hypocritical. But that's the very thing the Sermon on the Mount is addressing as a corrective. That is not what true disciples look like. And if others have done it, then the way we avoid it is not doing it ourselves. Not softening, not downplaying. Ultimately, Laura's church and her parents showed that that's true disciples. They were focusing on faithfulness and not results. There is no doubt that Laura's parents longed and waited for the result that they ultimately, blessedly received. But who knows how many tearful, prayerful nights and weary days they endured until it happened. I'm sure they felt like giving up, giving in through all of it. They were, by God's grace, faithful to the truth of God's life, giving word. And that is what we must be about. Faithfulness to the Lord's call to uphold the truth. It is a dangerous thing to think we can be more gracious than God who gave us his son to prove that graciousness.

What Isaiah and Jeremiah did as they faithfully proclaim God's truth to his people, even though God told them ahead of time no one was going to believe, and they would only be persecuted. They were faithful. All too often, in our pursuit of clamoring to gain a seat at the world's table in order to have a voice. We make ourselves way too much like the world to be even distinguishable from it. The truth is that we don't need a seat at the world's table. All of those seats are taken and they're well-represented, and it's like an echo chamber. Instead, we must intentionally be in this world and rubbed into it salt and light and my being. So, draw attention to a different table that is being set in plain sight of those in the world who have eyes to see it. The table of the King and the invitation to sit at that table as the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Don't hear what I am not saying. Not needing a seat at the world's table does not mean we don't care about the world and that we don't regard influence in the world as a worthy endeavor. Of course we do. The very fact that Jesus says we are the salt of the earth and light of the world makes it abundantly clear the impact that he has designed is for us to be in

the earth in the world so that we have an impact. But the problem comes when desiring to impact the world, causes us to downplay, sideline or even hide the very thing that makes us have an impact. Our saltiness. We are no good at the world's table if we blink or keep silent when it exalts God honoring and human debasing practices, that is the opposite of being salty. Some may object well, but what if it causes us to be shut out of the conversation? What if it prevents us from having the opportunity to build deeper relationships? Then granting we have been faithful to God and respectful to people made in the image of God lovingly, then Jesus says, We're blessed and we should rejoice at having been persecuted, even at this relatively small level for hungering and thirsting after righteousness. But consider this. What if we aren't shut out of the conversation? What if our faithful saltiness creates a thirst in those around us to have a deeper drink, a closer look? The fact of the matter is that our fear of offending non-Christians frequently robs us of the opportunity to see God at work in lives and communities in powerful and fruitful ways. Ways that exalt the Savior as the one who holds the key to all men's hearts.

It happens. It happens throughout our culture. It happens in this city, I'm sure all of all of the time. It's just common, ordinary people who are salt and light, minding their own business, as it were, being salt and light or filled with a passion to speak the truth. It's a bigger example. But just think of William Wilberforce in the 19th century and being who he was ultimately leading to the end of slavery in Britain.

Now the next image Jesus uses is plain and simple, and it needs very little explanation since we are the light of the world. Here it comes, *We must shine for all to see*. I think sometimes it might have seemed a little embarrassing to think, was Jesus talking down to us as children? Of course, if we were the light, we got to shine. Verse 14. *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light on land and put it under a basket. But on a stand it gives light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father.* Who is it? Have it now. Really, the only thing that gives us pause here is Jesus direct affirmation that we are the light of the world. It's pretty stark. Bible is clear that quoting Jesus himself and plainly saying that Jesus is the light of the world, the one who dispels the darkness and dispels sin. But given the design of his world changing mission that he's given us and calling us to make disciples to the end of the earth, it's clear that he means that those who come to know him by grace alone, through faith, alone in him alone, they are the ones who possess the light because they possess Jesus. And as such they are the ones who now can dispel the darkness of the world by propelling out the light of the gospel. I was little doubt in my mind that Paul had this very passage in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians in Chapter five. *You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord* and to the Philippians that *believers like stars shine in the universe as they hold out the word of life*.

So we must shine by uncovering our light. Now, the reason why I put it that way is because many of us, we will we live as undercover believers literally in the world, because our light is undercover. The purpose of light is to reveal, to penetrate the dark and show the way. We lived

in hurricane land for 20 years and in hurricane land, the power goes off quite a lot. We didn't have a generator that first year, but we did have a lot of candles. And I remember the first time we lit the candles, one of the kids basically said, I need a candle for my room. And he grabbed the very first candle and ran off to his room, leaving us in darkness. You know, he hid the light we couldn't see. Thankfully, I another candle. And then we did get a generator. No one lights a light and then covers it. No, they put it on a stand, which is a lamp stand, by the way, so that everyone in the room can see by its light. All too often we are undercover in the world for all kinds of reasons, none of them very good.

In my study for this passage, I came across a story of a pastor's sad confession about attending his ten-year high school reunion. Here's what he says. It was fun to see so many of my old friends whom I hadn't seen for years. Then one of my friends pulled me aside. He had been one of my closest buddies in high school. We had played basketball together and always sat together at lunch. He told me that a year earlier he had had a fantastic experience. He had become a Christian. He explained the change that had come over him and the new joy that he had and that he had experienced because of being in a relationship with Christ. He went on and on and on about his life as a new Christian. After his first pause, I interrupted him and said, Jerry, I'm so glad to hear this. You know, I'm a Christian, too. Jerry asked, well, when did you become a Christian? I explained to him that I suppose it was when I was a little boy. To this, he responded with a most intense question. If you were a Christian when we were in high school together, how come you never told me about Jesus? How come you never introduced me to Christ? I didn't know what to say.

We must not cover our light. The simplest opportunities abound around us to let our light shine. Even just standing in the grocery line, to learn how to say very quickly how thankful we are that our sins are forgiven. That Jesus, who he says he is. And he does what he says He will do.

Do you know Jesus?

It's fascinating. Paul talks about the very this very thing again, about this reality of us living by grace and bearing fruit as who we are, just being and exuding in one sense, almost becoming second nature. He goes on Ephesians 5:4. At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. *For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.* Exposing the unfruitful works of darkness. Does it mean going about, I like the old Saturday Life church lady shaking your finger and pointing out all the darkness around you and just being a sourpuss.

It happens by our being the Kingdom disciples that God, grace, God's grace fits us to be living out again our not perfect, but blessed character. That stands in stark contrast to the dull, dying, dark world. Some indeed around us who claimed Christ are ugly. Let's be beautiful, but let's not compromise and let's not cover our desire to be salt and light. We need to be doing what only we can do, and that is proclaim the Gospel. We alone are the ones who possess life and light in

the giving of the Gospel. There are all kinds of great humanitarian organizations to be a part of. There are all kinds of great individual causes that you can, and I'm sure many of us do support. They build houses for the needy. They provide food for the hungry. They make a difference in people's lives. But ultimately, only one organization, if you will, calls, equips and empowers us to bring true change to people's lives and ultimately affect the culture around us. And that is the church of the Living God, the Kingdom of God, and only those who have come to know the King can truly proclaim him offering a righteousness that is not a phony list checking external righteousness like those of the Pharisees as Jesus points out in verse 20, No, it comes from the heart because of the transformation of the gospel of grace, so that we, having been born again, are being transformed even before the watching world. Our gospel offers hope and the promise of the Holy Spirit, even to give a hunger and thirst for righteousness that causes us then to live a life that aims for what matters most. And that's God's glory. Verse 16. *The same way let your light shine before others so that you may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* Well, what kind of good works is he talking about? I believe he's talking about just the work of being a disciple and living out the reality of who we are as salt and light because we are so different, Are we?

I love what John Scott says about this as the disciples of Jesus.

We are not to conceal the truth we know or the truth of what we are. We are not to pretend to be other than we are, but be willing for our Christianity to be visible to all. Flight into the invisible is the denial of the whole community of Jesus, which seeks to hide itself, has ceased to follow Him rather are we to be ourselves, our true Christian selves, openly living the life described in the Beatitudes and not ashamed of Christ? Then people will see us and our good works, and seeing us will glorify God, for they will inevitably recognize that it is by the grace of God. We are what we are, that our light is His light, that our works are His works done in us and through us. So it is the light they will praise, not the lamp which bears it. It is our father in heaven whom they will glorify, not the children he has begotten, and who exhibit a certain family likeness.

Of course, all this begs a pretty critical question. Are you a true disciple of Jesus? Have you come to see your own spiritual need before God, your spiritual poverty? Are you mourning over that reality, knowing your sin and knowing that there is nothing you can do about it?

Do you see that God gave Jesus to be the sacrifice for your sin, giving Jesus on the cross so that we could be delivered, raising him from the dead, so we could have the hope of new life and then be able to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Do you sense that hunger and thirst now then the Lord is at work.

Come to Jesus. There are people who will be standing here at the front of the worship center at the end of the service, who will share with you how you can have that assurance. As Jesus said, *I tell you the truth, whoever believes in me has eternal life and you will become sons of the kingdom. Daughters of the Kingdom.* Salt and light.

Let's pray, Lord God, thank you for who you are and what you have promised us. And thank you for your great patience with us and forgiveness and reminding us and even warning us what is so important for us to remember and to know that we cannot be more gracious than you. And you have given words of life that we cannot lessen.

And as we follow you and trust you, are faithful to you and hold out the word of life. Make us to be what you have called us to be in this world - Salt and light and will you get glory for yourself in it all? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.