

Salt And Light
Matthew 5:13-16
Pastor John Miller

I want to read the entire text in Matthew 5:13-16. Follow with me in your Bibles.

Jesus speaking said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

In the Beatitudes, which we have just covered, Jesus has described the essential character of all those who are living in “the kingdom of heaven.” Now Jesus uses two metaphors, salt and light, to indicate the kind of influence that Christians will have for good in the world. In other words, He goes from being—the Beatitudes—to doing—salt and light. Before you can have an influence on the world around you, you must “be” those Beatitudes; you must have that “poor of spirit,” you must “mourn” over your sin, you must be “meek,” you must “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” you must be “pure in heart,” you must be a “peacemaker.” When you find that those Beatitudes are true of you, then you will have an impact for good on the culture around you.

Jesus moves from “being” to “doing.” Notice it’s interesting in verse 12 that Jesus says, “Great is your reward in heaven.” That’s how He ended the Beatitudes. But then notice in verses 13-14, He says, “You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world.” So we move from “Great is your reward in heaven” to “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.” We go from our focus on heaven to what we are here on earth.

It’s the believer’s blessed privilege and mandate to exert upon the world in which they live a saving and helpful influence. The world is decaying—we are “salt,” and the world is dark—we are “light.” The inference here, when Jesus said that you are “the salt of the earth” is that the world is decaying, and we need to be a preserving influence. When He said that you are “the light of the world,” the inference is that the world is dark, and we need to shine brightly for Jesus Christ. So He is talking about the church’s mission in the world and how we are to influence it.

It is tempting, though, to dismiss the idea that the people described in the Beatitudes, verses 3-10, could influence the world. How is it that these kind of people—“poor,” “meek,” “hungry,” “merciful,” “peacemakers”—could influence the world? Jesus didn’t share that skepticism. Looking at this humble handful of faithful followers, Jesus said—and, by the way, still in the second person and emphatically—“You...”—and you only—“...are the salt of the earth” and “You...”—and you only—“...are the light of the world.”

Now these followers were fishermen. These were Galilean peasants. These weren’t highly-

educated individuals. This was a rag-tag bunch of men and women. Jesus said, “You...”—and you only and no one else—“...are the salt of the earth.” He said, “You...”—and you only—“...are the light of the world.”

I believe that the same is true today. Jesus would look over this congregation and say to us who are here, “You are the light of the world,” and “You are the salt of the earth.”

You would say, “Me?!”

“Yes, you.” If you are a child of God living in “the kingdom of heaven,” you are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”

It reminds me of 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, where Paul says, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.” So God chooses the weak and the despised so that He will be glorified. The same is true of us today.

Let’s look at these two metaphors, salt and light, and seek to understand what our mission is in the world around us. First, blessed are those who are salt and light. Notice it in verse 13: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor...”—or “saltiness”—“...how shall it be seasoned”—or “salted”? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.”

What did Jesus mean by, “You are the salt of the earth”? We need to understand what salt meant to the ancient world. Today we have salt in our salt shakers. We have salt everywhere; we have salt in our food, and nutritionists say we are having too much salt. But in the ancient world, salt was highly prized and very valuable. The Greeks believed that it contained something almost divine. In the Roman world, they sometimes paid their soldiers in salt. The old expression, “He’s not worth his salt,” comes from this time. So you were a soldier, you get your pay, and you get a big bag of salt to take home. “Honey, here’s my paycheck.” You wanted to be “worth your salt.” So salt was a very precious, a very highly-valued commodity in the ancient world.

What was salt used for? What was its primary purpose? What did Jesus have in mind? First of all, salt was used as a seasoning agent. That’s no surprise. Salt was used to bring zest and spice to food. In Job 6:6, it says, “Can flavorless food be eaten without salt?” No. I share that verse with my wife, because she’s always trying to get me off salt. She says, “You don’t need salt.” I say, “It’s in the Bible!” Have you ever tried to eat eggs without salt? Blah! Or without pepper? I have a friend who puts so much pepper on his eggs, you don’t even know there are eggs under the pepper. It looks like a big ant hill or something. But you have to spice it up!

So perhaps—and I don’t think primarily that this is what Jesus had in mind—when He said, “You are the salt of the earth,” He had the idea that we should bring zest and flavor to life by the

way that we live. Someone said, “Christians are to be the condiments of life.” I like that. You want a hotdog without mustard? Not me. The spicier the better. So Christians are to bring spice and zest to life. Remember that sin leads to sadness, and holiness leads to happiness. Jesus brings joy to life.

Salt was also used to create thirst. Even today, Arabs will take salt and force themselves to eat it so they will drink and avoid dehydration caused by the hot desert. They would take salt and eat it so they would be thirsty and remember to drink. That is a challenge in my own life. I’m not a big fan of water. I don’t like water; it bores me. But I know you need to drink water. So that’s another thing my wife tells me to do: “Did you drink enough water?” Yes, I drink water, but it doesn’t excite me. But if you don’t drink water, you get dehydrated, so you eat potato chips so you get salty and drink water, which is supposed to be good for you. (I just thought I’d throw that in. Praise God!) Salt creates thirst.

I believe that we should live our Christian lives in such a way that we should create a thirst in others. Some Christians live so sadly and joylessly and are so depressed that no one would want what they’ve got. It’s like a disease; “If that’s a Christian, keep away! I don’t want it.”

There was a survey of unchurched or unbelievers asking them why they don’t go to church. The three top reasons were number one, the church is always asking for money; number two, they’re always sad; and number three, they’re always talking about death. There was the poet and author, Robert Lewis Stevenson, who said in his diary that he was surprised because, “I have been to church today and I’m not depressed!” He was amazed that he went to church and he was not depressed.

But thirdly and lastly, salt was primarily used as a preservative. I believe that most likely, Jesus is speaking of this when He said, “You are the salt of the earth.” It was what Jesus had in mind.

By the way, the goal of preaching and the goal of Bible study is always to get to the meaning of the text. It’s not to impose on it what we want it to mean, but what Jesus meant. In this case, Jesus doesn’t really say; He doesn’t tell us in what way we are salty, what the significance is.

The number one purpose and use of salt in the ancient world that made it most valuable—and in the not-too-distant past in our modern world—was that it was used as a preservative. In Jesus’ day, there obviously was no refrigeration. There was no ice chest. There was no ice. There was no other way to keep their meat fresh. So they would salt it down to preserve it, like we might do with jerky to keep the meat from putrefying. The fishermen of Galilee would catch fish, pack it in salt and ship it to Jerusalem.

Have you ever been in the Midwest somewhere far away from the ocean and you see on the restaurant menu that they have ocean fish? You think, Where do they get it? It must take days for it to get here. I don’t think it’s safe. But we have refrigeration. So they would transport their fish and meat by packing it in salt.

When David Livingston, the great missionary to Africa, died, his body was sent from Africa to

England, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey. His body was packed in salt for the journey. But before it left Africa, they took out his heart and buried it in Africa. So to preserve his body, they put it in salt.

We Christians are to be a preserving influence on the decaying world in which we live. The implication of that is that the world is decaying. Jesus doesn't mention it, but it's implied very clearly: the world is decaying. We're going to see in a moment that you are the light of the world, and the world is dark. So the world is two things: it's decaying and it's dark, so you need to be salt and light.

It doesn't take man long to fall; it's in the book of Genesis. And it doesn't take long for Cain to kill his brother, Abel. It doesn't take long after that that we have the time of Noah. God said that the earth was so corrupt that He was going to wipe out all flesh upon the earth, except Noah and his family. There were only eight souls in the Ark. I believe that story is true. Noah actually built a big, old honkin' boat. In the Hebrew, it's the word "honkin'." (I'm kidding.) God brought the animals into it two-by-two. The rain came down, and Noah and his wife and family were in the Ark, and God shut the door. The Ark is a symbol of Jesus Christ; there is only one door, only one way to be saved, and that's by Jesus. Then the rains came down, and the fountains of the deep were broken up and the entire world was flooded. I believe the flood was universal. Do you think God would have had Noah build a big boat if Noah could have just moved to the next town? I doubt it. So the whole world was destroyed by a flood.

By the way, people get upset with God for bringing the flood. "Oh, that's not nice! Why would God destroy the world?" God destroyed all flesh because it became corrupt. The Bible says that He will do it again, but not by a flood but by fire. The environmentalists are freakin' out, trying to take care of the earth. So we should, but wait 'till you see what God's going to do to it! "The elements will melt with fervent heat." God owns it all by right; He is the creator.

Then you come to Sodom and Gomorrah. The wickedness of man was so great. There weren't even ten righteous people in the city, so Lot and his family were spared, but God rained down fire and brimstone on the city.

In Paul's book to the Romans in chapter 1, Paul describes the deterioration. Man started with the knowledge of God, knowing God, but he didn't want to retain God in his knowledge. Instead he turned away from God and degenerated down to a perverted lifestyle. Therefore, "God gave them over to a debased..."—or "reprobate"—"...mind." That's pretty much where we are on the scale in America today. We basically have a nation of reprobates. The word "reprobate" literally means "does not work" or "does not function." Their minds don't function. They don't know right from wrong. They don't know good from evil. We're sadly seeing the decay of our own nation. In the years that I've been a pastor, I've watched the decline. We've seen the decline in marriage as a divine institution.

God has given several restraining influences on society. First, there is the state, with its authority to frame and enforce laws. I thank God that we still have laws in America. I hope we

live by those laws. We have the ability to frame those laws. We should have laws that reflect God's moral standards in the Bible. So God has given us the state as the authority. I thank God for the police department. Thank God for our peace officers. They are there to enforce the laws for our protection.

The second restraining influence on our society is the family. God has given it as a divine institution, with marriage as its foundation and parental influence in the home. "Honor thy father and thy mother" is the first Commandment with a promise. The family is a God-ordained, God-designed institution. Its foundation is in Genesis 1. Genesis 2:24 says, "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Marriage is one man with one woman. Jesus said that specifically in Matthew 19, where He talked about marriage. In verse 4, He said that God "made them male and female." He said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

As goes marriage, so goes the family. As goes the family, so goes our nation. One of the reasons for so many of the social ills in our nation today is because of the breakdown of the family. We don't even know how to define marriage in this country. We don't understand that it's a divine institution and that you can't change something that God established. It's one man with one woman for life, raising children "in the fear and admonition of the Lord."

The third restraining influence on our society—and this is what our text ties in with—is the church. So there's the state, the family and the church. Without redeemed, regenerate and righteous people, these God-ordained institutions can never affect the moral decay of sinful society. We Christians are to be a moral disinfectant.

By the way, I believe the church works with the family and the family with the church. They're not in competition. Sometimes people say, "Well, we get too busy at church, and it disrupts our family." I can understand that. But the church is to be a blessing to the family, and the family is to be a blessing to the church. This church should strengthen, encourage and bless your family—your marriage and your family. And you should bless, strengthen and encourage this church. We're not working against each other; we're working with each other to be salt and light in our world, culture and society.

The effectiveness of the believer as salt is conditional. There are some conditions that we must keep. Number one, salt must come into contact with the culture. We can't live in isolation from the world. Jesus said, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." Salt must come out of the salt shaker. It doesn't do any good if it just sits in the salt shaker. Why have salt on the table if you're not going to use it? Let's spice that food up. I know it's not the best thing for you, but, hey, it's there, that's its purpose; use it.

Christians are to get out of the salt shaker. We need to break out of our holy huddle. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel." So we're all gathered in church, and we call it the "holy huddle," but when church is over, you leave. Don't go to find some sanctified,

Christian, Holy-Ghost-filled restaurant to eat at. Make sure the waitress is born again and the cook is redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Everything's sanctified. No; go somewhere where there are heathens, and let your light shine. Be polite and give a generous tip; waitresses say Christians are the worst tippers after church on Sunday. That ought not to be. If you're not going to tip good, don't tell them you came from this church.

"We came from that Revival church down there."

"They're a bunch of cheapskates!"

Be a blessing. Be salt and light and permeate the culture that is around you. We must come into contact with our culture.

We need Christian high-school teachers, middle-school teachers, elementary-school teachers, principals. We need Christians in the White House. We do have some in the White House; praise God for that! We need Christians in the Senate. We need Christians in the House of Representatives. We need a Christian governor of California. Wouldn't that be awesome?! We need Christian policemen and lawyers. We need Christian used-car salesmen. (Let's pray for that right now, in the name of Jesus!) We need Christians in every sphere of life. That's what He means here when He says you're "the salt of the earth." You have to get out of the salt shaker.

Secondly, as salt, we need to be careful that we are not contaminated by the culture. We should make contact with the culture—you're "in the world but not of the world"—but we shouldn't be contaminated by the culture. Jesus ate with prostitutes and harlots and wicked people, but He wasn't contaminated by them; He had an influence on them. When Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus was converted and he gave half of his goods to the poor. Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." So when we go out and rub shoulders with the world, we need to have a purifying effect upon our culture, but we don't want to be polluted or contaminated by it.

How does salt lose its saltiness? In verse 13, He says, "If the salt loses its flavor..."—or "saltiness." Now scientists kind of chide Jesus here by saying that He's not scientific; salt doesn't lose its saltiness. Some critics of the Bible have attacked this and said that it's unscientific; salt doesn't lose its saltiness. But I believe that what Jesus had in mind was that salt can become contaminated by mixture. If you get dirt in the salt or a foreign substance in it, then it becomes polluted or contaminated.

The danger for the church is that the world comes into the church. The church is to be in the world, but the world is not to be in the church. Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones said it like this: "The influence of Christians in and on society demands on them being distinct from society." They are not to be the same, but distinct. So we have contact, but we don't become contaminated. We go into the world, but we're not like the world. We live the Beatitudes. We live the Sermon on the Mount, and when we do, we're different and we have an impact.

So ask yourself: "Have I lost my saltiness? Is there anything distinctly different about me? Do I spend my money just like a non-Christian? Do I spend my time like a non-Christian? Do I think like a non-Christian? Do I act like a non-Christian? Do I talk like a non-Christian? Can people look at me and say, 'There's a child of God'?" Children of God are meek, humble, poor in spirit and show love to other people. Can people see Christ in you? Are you being the salt of the earth?

Someone said, "The great tragedy so often is that the world does the church more harm than the church does the world good." How true that is. The great Francis Schaeffer, before he went to heaven, said, "Tell me what the world is saying, and in seven years the church will be saying the same thing." He concluded that the church is following the world. Tell me what the world is saying, and you watch, the world will be saying the same thing. All the trends, all the fads, all the ideas that are popularized in the world—we'll pick them up. You say, "Christians can do that too. We can Christianize that." We've lost our distinctiveness.

I'm not saying that we go out into the world, and we're corny or weird. I don't believe we should all live in a monastery, but we should get out of the salt shaker. It's our distinctiveness and the way we talk and live that gives us impact on the culture that is around us.

Now Jesus moves to the second metaphor, which is the light, verses 14-16. "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

So, number one, the world is decaying, and we need to be salt. Go out and be salt; be distinct and make contact. Number two, the world is dark, and we need to be light. Again, in verse 14, "You are the light of the world." In the Greek, it's emphatic, so it's "you and you only." No one else; you are the only ones who are the light of the world.

You say, "Pastor John, I thought Jesus was the light of the world." He is. In John 8:12, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life." Someone used a cool illustration that Jesus is like the sun, and we're like the moon. The moon doesn't have its own light but reflects the light of the sun. When you see the moon, it's reflecting the light of the sun. So Jesus is the sun, and we are moons; we are to reflect the light of Jesus Christ. We are to be super moons in this dark world. If you really want to enjoy a bright moon, you go out when it's very dark. The moon glows. And the super moons are so amazing.

It is true that once we become believers, Christ lives in us, and we become lights in ourselves. Ephesians 5:8 says, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." That light comes from God. That light is still Christ within us, but we need to let that light shine out.

From our text, I want to show you how we are to let our light shine out. How shall we shine in

this dark world? Number one, we should shine openly. Notice the end of verse 14 and verse 15: "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house." I was reading about the city of Quito, Ecuador. It sits at about 9,000 feet elevation. You can see the city lights from 75 miles away.

I grew up in San Bernardino at the foot of the mountains. On a clear night, you can see the lights from the mountain cabins and certain places up there. They can't be hidden. So when a city is set upon a hilltop, the light radiates out and can't be hidden. So what Jesus is conveying is that the purpose of light is to give out light.

Jesus moves to the next illustration of a lamp. Now in that time, they didn't have wax candles. Rather they were like lamps that were filled with olive oil, and they had a wick. They would light the wick and put the lamp on a lampstand. The reason you light a lamp was to give light to the house. No one would go to the store and buy light bulbs and not use them. You wouldn't just put them in a drawer and never put them in a lamp. No. You would bring a light bulb home, put it in a lamp and turn the light on, because the purpose of a lamp is to give light. You wouldn't buy a lamp, put a bulb in it and hide it in a closet.

When you turn the light on, what happens to the darkness? The darkness leaves. If you want to get darkness out of a room, do you get a stick and start beating the darkness? No. You just turn the light on. When you turn the light on, the darkness has to leave.

So we live in a dark, dark world, and it's getting darker every day. The Bible says that we are to shine as lights "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation." So we are to shine openly. We're not to be cowardous or compromising. Secondly, the purpose of light is to give light to everyone who is in the house. When you're on your job, when you're in your neighborhood, when you're at home, let Christ shine through you and from you.

Notice verse 16. It says, "Let your light so shine before men." Sometimes Christians get the idea that it's "Christ of the secret order." I had a guy say to me one time, "I've been on the job for a whole year, and it's really good; they still don't know that I'm a Christian. They haven't busted me for reading my Bible yet." You think that's good? You're supposed to let your light shine. Now you don't want to be obnoxious or weird about it. I encourage you that when you meet somebody, don't wait to say, "Hey, I'm a Christian. I love Jesus. Are you born again?"

I was talking with a guy the other day who didn't know I was a Christian and I said, "Praise the Lord." He just looked at me as if to say, Wow! What just came out of your mouth?! I'm a Christian, and I love Jesus. Praise the Lord! God is good. Let your light shine. So you're to shine openly. "Let your light so shine before men." Don't put it under a bushel; don't cover it.

Thirdly, verse 16, we should shine beautifully. I love this. "...that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Jesus used an interesting Greek phrase when he said "good works." He didn't use the word "good" meaning in quality. He used the word "good" meaning

“beautiful” or “lovely.” Now it would be good in quality, but you’re doing it in a lovely or beautiful way. So what Jesus is actually saying is, “Let them see your beautiful, attractive or lovely works.” Isn’t that awesome? He wants us to have a beautiful life. He wants us to live attractively before the world.

And we are saved not by good works but unto good works. Paul, writing to the Philippians, said in chapter 2, verses 12-15, that they should “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

There is a fourth and last way we are to shine, verse 16: we are to shine for the glory of God. Notice how Jesus closes this section: “...that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” So He tells us what to do: live a beautiful life—good works, the fruit of your salvation. He tells us why to do it: “...that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Do you know that God saved you for His glory? God didn’t save you because you’re awesome. (Yes, I just said that.) God didn’t save you because He needed you. If God needs me, He’s in big trouble. God didn’t save you because He’s lonely. I hear some people say, “God didn’t want to be all alone in heaven, so He saved us.” Listen: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost have been around for eternity. They’re fine without you and me. They don’t need us in heaven to repave the streets of glory or for anything else. God saved you for His glory.

Read Ephesians 1. In the three times where it says that we are elected by God the Father, redeemed by God the Son, sealed by God the Holy Spirit, it says “...to the praise of the glory of His grace” who first trusted in Christ.

When we get to heaven, there will be no bragging about what we did to get there. I think when you get to heaven, people are going to be surprised to see you. They’re going to say, “We went to high school together! What are you doing here?! You were messed up!” And you, in turn, will look at them and say, “You were super messed up!” It’s the grace of God that gets us in. And everything God does is for His glory.

So you are salt in a decaying world. Don’t lose your saltiness. Be in contact with the world, but don’t become contaminated by it. You, and you only, are the light of the world, and we live in a world that is living in darkness. Let your light so shine before men that they can see your beautiful deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven.