

Sermon Title: Be True
Biblical Text: Matthew 5:13-16
Teaching Series: Kingdom Being
Preaching Date: June 11, 2023
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Matthew 5:13-16

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 are 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.

Dr. John Stott summarized the beatitudes—the list of kingdom realities in Matthew 5:1-12—as the *character* of Jesus' disciples and the salt and light as metaphors for disciples' *influence* for good in the world. This should strike as a wildly astonishing notion. *How could the poor and meek have any influence in such a harsh and divisive world? How could a relatively insignificant group of common Jewish people change the world? How could those whom the world persecutes find the fortitude to serve the world in a meaningful way?* There's something other-worldly about what Jesus is suggesting. Yet this is precisely what makes the rise of

Christianity in general and the reality of the resurrection so intellectually satisfying. A group of obscure disciples did indeed change the course of history, not by returning power for power, or evil for evil. Rather, as nineteenth-century German pastor Rudolf Stier put it well, "*This must be your only retaliation—love and truth for hatred and lies.*" Today, as we continue our new exploration of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we too will be invited into this kingdom way of being.

In a world that is simultaneously decaying and improving daily, disciples of Jesus are called to live in such a way that arrests this deterioration and preserves its goodness. And in a world darkened by sin, disciples are invited to illuminate the reality and righteousness of God. Jesus says all of this by saying: you are *salt* and *light*. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about how we preserve goodness as salt and how we illuminate righteousness as light. Particularly, I want to talk about how these two identities and callings are meant to be lived out in concert. I think we can have a tendency of either being salty but not very bright, or being really bright but not very salty. To borrow Stier's language, we either demonstrate love at the expense of truth or we stand for the truth at the expense of love. Yet, love and truth belong together.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- The *love* of the kingdom
- The *truth* of the kingdom

- The *incarnation* of the kingdom

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Love of the Kingdom (v.13, 6:10, John 10:28, Ephesians 4:4)

If you remember, a crowd has assembled around Jesus. Yet, for whatever reason, Jesus moves away from the crowd and goes up on the side of the mountain. Then, Matthew (the writer of this record of Jesus' life and ministry) tells us that his disciples gathered around him. So it's probably best for us to understand that what follows is a message Jesus intends particularly for his disciples, people who love and follow him. The Sermon on the Mount isn't a way for society to achieve utopia. It's not a way for religiously-minded people to live happy lives or find salvation or distance themselves from the world. Rather, it's an interim vision for Jesus' disciples, a way for us to be and live between the *inauguration* of the kingdom and its *consummation*. Its express purpose is to see the realities of the kingdom of heaven become realities on earth. That's why in a couple of weeks, Jesus will teach us to pray, ***Read Matthew 6:10 ... Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*** This sermon is meant to shape our spiritual imaginations so that we clearly see and participate with the rule and reign of Jesus until the kingdom is fully realized at his return. *With me?*

Within that context Jesus speaks about these two identifying markers of our influence and identity: *salt* and *light*. We'll look at salt first, then light. **Read Matthew 5:13 ... *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.*** We should answer a couple questions in order to understand what Jesus is getting at here and in the next metaphor. You see, Jesus gives us a metaphor and then explains how the meaning of that metaphor can be lost. *You're salt, but salt can lose its taste. You're light, but light can be hidden.*

What's the metaphor of salt mean?

Well, in the ancient world salt had a number of uses. Basically, though, it had two primary functions: as a *condiment* and as a *preservative*. We still use salt to add flavor but the idea of preservation is unique to societies without refrigeration. Salt was used to curb decay, keeping things like meat cured for healthy future enjoyment. So, *what's that mean for disciples of Jesus?* Well, notice Jesus doesn't simply say *you are salt*. But rather, *you are salt of the earth*. Jesus is making a clear distinction between his disciples and the rest of the population. John Stott points out, "***The basic truth which lies behind these metaphors and is common to them both is that the church and the world are distinct communities***" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 58). Being salt of the earth is a way of describing our relationship as disciples of Jesus with those who are not. Therefore we can extrapolate from the metaphor that Jesus is suggesting that while the world is susceptible to moral

decay, his followers are meant to be like salt in the culture, curbing the effects of social deterioration. But even though this is who we are—you *are* the salt of the earth—Jesus explains that our saltiness can be lost.

How's the meaning lost?

Well, it's important to admit that in the truest sense of the word, it's nearly impossible for salt to lose its taste. Chemists would have us understand that sodium chloride is an extremely stable chemical compound. However, especially in Jesus' day, salt is easily contaminated. Before refineries, salt that made its way to household kitchens often included various foreign elements and sediments which neither tasted like salt nor behaved like salt. In other words, the salt lost its saltiness. *What's that mean for followers of Jesus?* Well, theologians talk about Christians enjoying something called the perseverance of the saints. Jesus says, ***Read John 10:28 ... I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*** You are salt forever. You are saved forever. Once God has rendered your salvation by grace through faith, you are his eternally. In Christ, you are stable spiritual compound of Word and Spirit and grace. However, like salt, our hearts and minds are easily contained by the will and values of our culture which render the flavor and moral preservation of the church ineffective. The Apostle Paul puts a fine point on Jesus' metaphor when he wrote to Christians in Ephesus. He wants them to build each other up in Christ, ***Read Ephesians 4:14 ... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in***

deceitful schemes. Like salt we are durable, but we can be influenced by various influences and schemes of the very world we are meant to influence—the influencers become influenced.

Because we are so susceptible to influence, we ought to think deeply about our relationship with the world. In Richard Niebuhr's classic book, *Christ and Culture*, he lays out five basic ways disciples of Jesus relate to the world, or wider culture. Five ways we might embody this call of being salt of the earth. And I've found Dr. Tim Keller's reflections of Niebuhr's work in his book *Center Church* really helpful. So this is not original to me, but a bit of hybrid of their observations ...

- Christ against culture. We *withdraw* from the evil so we're not contaminated.
- Christ of culture. We *accommodate* the world and highlight the ways and places God's goodness is present.
- Christ above culture. We *merge* what is good in the world, toward what ultimately brings God glory.
- Christ and culture in paradox. We *accept* culture as a completely different realm—one secular and one sacred.
- Christ transforming culture. We *convert* every aspect of culture to reflect the particularities of the gospel.

No model is perfect. Models aren't even always helpful. We don't have time to unpack each of these but suffice to say being salt is about navigating different social values, experiences, and ideas through the lens of the gospel, from the

vantage point of Christ, as his people. Ultimately being salt though is about loving our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus even said this was the second greatest commandment (see Matthew 22:39). In each model we could very well be loving our neighbors as salt, curbing decay and preserving the good by influencing others toward Christ.

- Sometimes love is *withdrawing* yourself from a situation. Like removing ourselves from a lunch table at work that's descending into mean-spirited gossip. That shows love.
- Sometimes love is *accommodating* the weakness or limited understanding of someone. Like seeking wisdom from another parent who ultimately sees the world very differently than you. That shows love.
- Sometimes love *merges* what is good in the world, pointing it to the glory of God. Like supporting the education or protection of children in Chicago. That's love.
- Sometimes love *accepts* the prevalence of a secular and sacred divide. Like the separation of Church and State in our country. That's loving.
- Sometimes love *converts* what is headed for destruction to bring life. Like telling people the story of Jesus life, death, burial, and resurrection. That's really loving.

As the salt of the earth, our love should take on many forms. But that love should always reflect the values of Christ not the values of the prevailing culture. In each of these expressions our saltiness is not compromised. But once we limit our

expression of love to only one of these models, I think that's when our salt loses its saltiness. When our love has nothing to do with Christ, but our comfort or tradition or preference or mere feeling ... it's no longer good for anything but to be trampled under people's feet. Because our love must always be complemented with the truth. Or what Jesus calls the *light*. that's where we're headed next ...

Movement 2: The Truth of the Kingdom (vv.14-16)

Look with me at the second metaphor. Jesus says, *Read Matthew 5:14-16 ... You are 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.* Like with salt, light gives us another layer of understanding our relationship with the world and people around us. And we should ask the same two questions. *What's the metaphor of light mean? How is this meaning of the metaphor lost?*

What's the metaphor of light mean?

Throughout the Bible, light is a symbol of truth. Confusion, foolishness, violence, anger, and sin ... all of these persist in our world casting a moral darkness over our existence. Light is meant to penetrate this darkness bringing hope, clarity, honesty, righteousness, and wisdom. And light and truth are not limited to what we say.

Often when we think about truth within the Christian context we think about articulating theology or sharing the gospel. Which, of course, is good. However,

notice Jesus says, "***let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works ...***" Being the light of the world is not simply about *speaking* but about *living* in light of the truth. Again, John Stott, "***We are not to pretend to be other than we are, but be willing for our Christianity to be visible to all***" (Stott, 62). What we say and do, flows from who we are—we're followers of Jesus. As his followers we're meant to be a people who reveal the beauty and holiness of Jesus in the way we engage, care, minister, neighbor, parent, advocate, worship, eat, play, and live in our city. You and I are meant to be a moral counterpoint to the prevailing darkness around us.

How's the meaning lost?

As our witness can lose its loving influence, so too can our witness conceal its veracity. Jesus' metaphor of light is enhanced with another picture, *of a city on a hill*. Being a light is about being unhidden, following Jesus in plain sight. In the ancient world it would have been silly to light the one lamp in the house and put it under a basket. A city on a hill is impossible to miss. Jesus is saying it's just as counterintuitive to hide the truth of our identity and the truth of our Lord. Our words are meant to be seasoned with the good news of Jesus. Our behavior is meant to be teeming with mercy, grace, faith, and hope. *Do you sound like everyone else? Do you act like everyone else?* I'll tell you, the Lord just this week got my attention about this. I can be easily annoyed and separate myself from people I find annoying. Whether they talk too much or only talk about themselves or are constantly presumption. This week I was forced into a situation with one

such person and the Lord made it clear that my behavior was indistinct from how the world treats annoying people. I was hiding my light under the basket of social comfort and superiority.

There's a final clause that holds this aspect of our influence in check. Look how Jesus finishes, *Read Matthew 5:16 ... so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* Perhaps the most startling way we can live with distinction in this world, as light, is by not seeking our own glory.

Particularly in the West, living for the glory of another makes no sense. It's a real challenge. Our good works, the truth of what we say and do, are going to be seen. And yet this visible display of goodness isn't meant to go to our heads, rather it's meant to go to the Lord, for the glory of our Heavenly Father. In other words, for those who are in Christ a good work is incomplete until the praise for that work has pointed to the goodness of God ... *until the light reveals God.* This of course, requires love. When we love God more than we love ourselves we want him to be properly glorified. This is precisely why love and truth belong together.

Movement 3: The Incarnation of the Kingdom (John 1:14)

Remember, Jesus is speaking to his disciples who are to embody the character of the kingdom. The poor in spirit, meek, mourning, hungry, and persecuted. In other words, the exact opposite kind of person whom we think has the power to arrests social decay or to be a light which penetrates the social darkness. Nevertheless this

is how God has chosen to make spiritual change happen. After all, this is the way Jesus himself brought transformation. Not by matching power for power, but through love and truth.

The Apostle John summarizes the incarnation as the Word of God becoming flesh. Over two thousand years ago the eternal Son of God became a human being. And in his arrival we see the fullness of this kingdom way of being on display. John tells us, *Read John 1:14 ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Do you see? Jesus is the one who is full of both grace and truth. Or we might say, love and truth. And, *what was the point and power of love and truth's harmony?* It manifested the glory of God. You see, Jesus doesn't simply call us to a life of salt and light, Jesus himself embodies the character of the kingdom and embraces the influence of the kingdom. Jesus is salt. Jesus is light.

Jesus is *salt*. He himself is the incorruptible Son of God who embodies love. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus never lost his saltiness. He graciously arrested decay and dignified the good of his neighbors.

Jesus is *light*. He himself is the timeless truth that has shined in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome him. Yet his posture of shining light does not destroy, it heals. It is not concealed for fear or discomfort.

As the salt and light Jesus brings kingdom renewal in the most astonishing way, through death. In a world that seeks self, Jesus gave himself to bring healing. In a world that loved the darkness, Jesus conquers the darkness by stepping into it. He is love. He is truth. Pastor Tim Keller explains the power and necessity really of these two metaphors being together. In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, he writes, "*Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it.*" You can't be good salt without being light. You can't be light without being salt. Love and truth belong together. And, they are deeply effective.

Remember how Jesus walked away from the crowd? Well, by the end of Jesus' sermon the crowd has gathered again. They couldn't stay away. This seemingly innocuous context clue demonstrates the very heart of what we've learned today. Salt and light bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.