

# Salt & Light

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus is the king who is “preaching the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23). He identified the poor in spirit, those who mourn, hunger for righteousness, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are reviled and persecuted as blessed both now and in the future. But what impact will they have right now? How will Jesus’ kingdom affect the world?

## The Salt of the Earth

The phrase “the salt of the earth” comes from this passage and has come to mean “good people.” The salt of the earth are the best of society. But it would be terribly reductionist to think Jesus is saying, “You are good people!” The Jews offered sacrifices which were the “bread of your God” (Lev. 22:25). They were unmaimed, healthy animals that He would symbolically “eat”, teaching Israel how to honor and serve the Lord. This might seem pedantic, and in a sense it was (Gal. 3:24; Heb. 9:9-10). But now we give money, and God certainly has no more need of that than He did of bulls and goats (cf. Ps. 50:10-12). Still, He teaches us through giving and uses our gifts in His kingdom. Every offering had to be salted: “And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Lev. 2:13). Salt obviously adds flavor, and Israelites learned they ought to be savory. We are familiar with the metaphor of hungering for God, but it goes both ways (Ps. 42:1; 34:8). Idols devour and dehumanize those who worship them, but the living God receives, enjoys, and tastes His people. His covenants are also salty. God covenants with the Levites to serve Him: “a covenant of salt forever before Yahweh with you and your descendants after you” (Num. 18:19). Similarly with David: “Should you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt?” (2 Chron. 13:5). Salt indicates a lasting, preserved, meaningful covenant. Jesus is a new teacher in Israel, and so we might expect Him to call His disciples to be salt to their nation. Instead, He tells these multitudes they are the salt of the *earth* (v. 13). He takes the sacrificial and covenantal salt into the whole world. This is a blessing, but it comes with a warning. If salt isn’t salty, it’s “good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (v. 13). The great privilege of being salt comes with serious consequences for refusing to be salty. Jesus speaks to the plural “you”, the whole church: “Ya’ll are the salt of the earth.” So this has individual applications: Do you live differently because you’re a Christian? Do your neighbors and colleagues know you’re a believer? But the church as a whole must be a salty presence, preserving and seasoning the world because Christ came to save it (Matt. 28:19-20). Everything doesn’t become the church, but the church flavors and influences everything.

## The Light of the World

Just as the church does not become the salt of earth, but by definition is the salt of the earth, so we are also the light of the world (v. 14). Jesus piles on another metaphor: “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Cities are built where people are so they can be found, and in the ancient world cities are built up on hills for protection. Jesus came shining His light in the dark region of Zebulun and Naphtali (4:15). After He dies, rises, and ascends into heaven, the Spirit is poured out on the whole church at Pentecost in tongues of fire that will light up the world (Acts 2:3). You don’t take a lamp and hide it under a bushel, but put it on a lampstand to give light to everyone in the house (v. 15). The lampstand in the tabernacle and temple lit up the heavenly worship of God’s people (Ex. 25:31-40). Now the church shines the light of God’s truth and grace to the whole world. John says that in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of men. The

# Salt & Light

Matthew 5:13-20

light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (Jn. 1:4-5). When you flip the light switch, the darkness disappears quickly. It can't withstand the light. Jesus tells us exactly what He means: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (v. 16). You do good works, showing the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control—so that people can see the light. The result of this is not to bring you glory, but God. Later in the sermon, Jesus will also say: "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deed before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you will have no reward from your Father in heaven" (6:1). The question is one of motive for the good deeds, which flavors the whole endeavor. If you do good so people will think well of you, you have your reward. But if you do good works not drawing attention to yourself, but with a heart full of gratitude to God, He will be glorified. Most people who become Christians do so by witnessing the good works of believers. They see that the good works are not done for selfish or self-righteous reasons. Proud people and those who pretend they are perfect don't show anyone the glory of God. But good works done out of gratitude to God cause others to glorify Him. Neither you nor the church can be hidden. So live and love, radiant and unashamed, and light up the world.

## Great in the Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus is obviously on a mission to conquer the world. He is not going with physical weapons, emotional manipulation, or political propaganda, but with salt, light, and love. He will be slandered anyway for setting aside the law of Moses, but He emphatically teaches that He didn't come to abolish but to fulfill the law, and not one jot or tittle will pass until all is fulfilled (vv. 17-18). How does He fulfill it? So far in Matthew, the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled in surprising ways: fleeing to Egypt to fulfill Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (2:15), and the massacre of innocents by Herod to fulfill Jeremiah's description of exile (2:18). We recognize God's faithfulness to His promises, but we could not have predicted the way He did it. So it is with the law. Jesus will teach about murder and adultery in a way that reveals the fullness of the law. He will thrash the Pharisaical rules for Sabbath keeping, insist He came not to bring peace on earth but a sword, set people against members of their own household, and teach you cannot love your father, mother, son or daughter more than Him (Matt. 10:34-39). He fulfills the law by being the new Israel, the faithful citizen and light to the nations. He will keep the ceremonial laws, honoring God and not the false traditions of men. And He will keep the moral law perfectly, loving God entirely and His neighbor as Himself, and then die on the cross with the penalty for our sin placed upon Him. He will rise again having made all things new, including the commandments. To be great in Christ's kingdom is to do and teach the commandments, and to be small is to set even the least of them aside (v. 19). This description explains what He means by salt and light—what defines good works. The scribes and Pharisees were tedious, accusing, self-congratulating and full of themselves. But God's people are about His glory. The commandments direct you to love God and others, and if your righteousness doesn't exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, "you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (v20). Jesus is trashing religious hypocrites as well as calling you to take up your cross and follow Him.