
Matthew
Matthew 5:13-16

The World Needs Some Light Seasoning

One area of struggle for seriously committed believers is finding a balance between being involved in the world and living for the kingdom. Often the verses we're considering this morning becomes a basis for discussing the issue. Martyn Lloyd-Jones states:

*"There are certain senses in which we can say ... (the) ... question of the function of the Christian in the world as it is today is one of the most urgent matters confronting the Church and the individual Christian at this present time. It is obviously a very large subject, and in many ways an apparently difficult one. But it is dealt with very clearly in Scripture."*¹

Clearly we are to influence a fallen world, but how are we to go about it? I don't intend to answer the question. We each need to answer it for ourselves. The intent here is to get us to think about this scripturally.

Consider the way some have decided to be an influence. There have been numerous parachurch organizations with focuses on issues such as influencing government, courts, school systems, etc. Others have been concerned about social issues such as poverty, hunger, AIDs, abortion, and the environment.

Clearly all these areas should concern Christians. But should it be direct, that is suing, letter campaigns, giving to causes such as Green Peace, etc.? Or should our approach be more indirect, focusing only on evangelism and discipleship? Some would say, "As people are saved and grow, then necessary changes will occur." Should we expend energy helping meet individual's material needs or only spiritual ones? Or is reality somewhere in the middle?

How one views this issue is also impacted by various approaches to eschatology. This is especially relevant when considering the Sermon on the Mount. For those who believe the church is to bring in the kingdom, they feel they are not only to influence government, but take it over by electing only believers. Another approach says, "We should sit all of this out because, only God can bring change. Why make an effort to change the world? We can't! Our concern should only be soul winning. Isn't the effort to, say help bring peace to the Middle-east, just trying to whitewash a tomb?"

So is there a place for a social gospel? Are we only called to evangelism? Even if the answer to the latter is yes, just what does this mean? And finally, does scripture allow room for disagreement? What does it mean to be salt and light?

V First Discourse: The Sermon on the Mount
A. Introduction
B. The Sermon

5:1-7:29
5:1-2
5:3-7:29

¹ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p. 130.

2. A Christian's Influence
a. Salt
b. Light
Conclusion

5:13-16
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5:14-16

Introduction: The Sermon on the Mount shows how counterintuitive the Christian life is from the world's perspective. The characteristics we've seen in the Beatitudes are those God manifests in us. These are the antithesis of the world values. But it isn't enough that the world's perspective is different. It doesn't want to have to even deal with an active Christian presence. And, as we saw last week, the end result of standing for Christ is persecution.

This morning we move into a new section of the Sermon on the Mount. In these verses Christ tells the disciples and us, that we are to influence a world which rejects and persecutes us. This is certainly an example of loving one's enemies.

I'm reminded a bit of what it was like to be a prophet. "Okay," says God, "I'm going to send you with a message to (fill in the blank) and they aren't going to listen to you." "Swell," says the prophet, "that's encouraging." So, what's wrong with this picture? We're going to be persecuted, but we're called to influence the world. We shouldn't be surprised though because that is what Christ's life has done.

So, having studied the Beatitudes we know what Christian character is. Now we will consider how this character is lived out in a fallen world. So get out the saltshaker and the floodlight.

In this section Christ makes it very clear that there are two distinct systems going here. There are believers, disciples in context, the body of Christ – the Church, in the future. These individuals are distinct from the world's system, from the lost. But also it is clear the former are to interact with the latter and it is here Christ give illustrations of how.

a. Salt: First, let's talk about salt. We need to understand it's nature in the context of Christ's audience. Barnes explains:

*"In eastern countries, ..., the salt used was impure, or mingled with vegetable or earthy substances, so that it might lose the whole of its saltness, and a considerable quantity of earthy matter remain. This was good for nothing, except that it was used to place in paths, or walks, as we use gravel. This kind of salt is common still in that country. It is found in the earth in veins or layers, and when exposed to the sun and rain, loses its saltness entirely. Maundrell says, "I broke a piece of it, of which that part that was exposed to the rain, sun, and air, though it had the sparks and particles of salt, yet it had perfectly lost its savor. The inner part, which was connected to the rock, retained its savor, as I found by proof. So Dr. Thomson (*The Land and the Book*, vol. ii. pp. 43, 44) says, "I have often seen just such salt, and the identical disposition of it that our Lord has mentioned. A merchant of Sidon having farmed of the government the revenue from the importation of salt, brought over an immense quantity from the marshes of Cyprus—enough, in fact, to supply the whole province for at least 20 years. This he had transferred to the mountains, to cheat the government out of some small percentage. Sixty-five houses in June—Lady Stanhope's village were rented and filled with salt. These houses have merely earthen floors, and the salt next the ground, in a few years, entirely spoiled. I saw large quantities of it literally thrown into the street, to be trodden underfoot by people and beasts. It was 'good for nothing.'" ²*

² Barnes, Albert, Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, public domain.

Christ calls the disciples to be effective as salt. Salt is used as a seasoning, a preservative, and causes thirst. It adds flavor to the food with which it interacts. It slows down the process of corruption. Note, it doesn't stop the process, just slows it down. And if you'll forgive the illustration, the reason that free salted snacks are offered in bars is to make customers thirsty so they'll drink more.

If we are called to make disciples, to influence the world, we need to make it "thirsty" for God's truth. When the lost discover they are thirsty for truth, then hopefully they'll turn to Christ. Under the Holy Spirit's leading they can be saved, and then He will indwell them.

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive....” (John 7:37-39).

The most important aspect of the believers "saltiness" is to advance the kingdom, seeing people saved. All other aspects, though important are secondary. Nevertheless, as we are used to draw people to God there is a preservative effect. As people are saved, living the "Christian" life, there is an effect on the corruptive aspect of sin on a fallen world.

Each aspect of the salt illustration can be used to picture the call of the believer. For example, how can we "flavor" the world? We do this by bringing the richness of God's glory to the flavorlessness of the world's beliefs and perspectives. Worldly "truths" don't satisfy; they are flavorless when contrasted with the richness found in God's truth. I must ask myself, do I convey this richness? Boice notes:

“Do you go around with a long face as if the world and everything you know are depressing? Or do you go about as one who bears within the Spirit of the living God? The second is your true responsibility. It is by doing that, that you show forth the flavor of Christ and Christianity.”³

The third aspect of salt is its preservative nature. As we live for the Lord, we do impact the world around us. This is the case whether we strive for righteousness and justice in our personal dealings with others, or as a community of believers striving to influence the world on a broader scale. We do impact our world slowing down the corruptive effect of sin. Consider how believers have been the driving force behind the end of slavery in western civilization, the development of a public hospital system leading to medical care for the poor, and a public education system so even the poorest members of society could be educated.

But this verse should also be a warning to us. If we move away from the Lord and aren't empowered by His Spirit, we lose our effectiveness, our saltiness. But it is obvious God intends His kingdom to interact with the world. This is summarized by saying we are not "of the world," but nevertheless, we are "in the world." Therefore, through the Spirit, we must remain salty.

b. Light: Christ reiterates these truths with a second illustration. This speaks even more directly to the need for believers to stand for Christ before a fallen world, a world that lives in

³ Boice, James Montgomery, The Sermon on the Mount, "Matthew 5-7," Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1972, p. 65.

darkness. Here the two worlds are contrasted as ones of light and darkness. While we are of one, we are to influence the other.

Okay first, Jesus isn't talking about a lava lamp. What would the disciples picture here?

lamp. In Jesus' day people used small clay lamps that burned olive oil drawn up by a wick" ⁴

This is consistent with us being reflections of God's light. We are not the light. We are to be the reflection of light to a world living in darkness. And darkness hates light.

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” (John 3:19-21).

This is again consistent with the warning that we will face persecution. While we are to be light, it is a light that is a reflection of Christ's glorious light. Here again the call goes way beyond Israel in Christ's day. The call is to be light before the whole world. And eventually God's light has gone into all the world.

This light, shining before all the world, is like a bright city showing itself to the people on the plains below. Carson states:

“The reference to the “city on a hill” is at one level fairly obvious. Often built of white limestone, ancient towns gleamed in the sun and could not easily be hidden. At night the inhabitants' oil lamps would shed some glow over the surrounding area (cf. Bonnard). As such cities could not be hidden...” ⁵

There are different words used in verse 15, depending on the translation. It can be either bowl or bushel. The word refers to anything that can be placed over a lamp to hide the light. And why is a light hidden? So evil and sins can be hidden. But the believer is to put his lamp out in the open, on a stand. (This is reminiscent of the Temple Lampstand which was a reflection of God's glory.)

Christ finished up by pointing out this light is the light of our works, that is our righteous works lived out before men. This explains why it is possible for us to hide our light. We can keep our faith “private” which is what the world and Satan wants, or we can live as God has called us to do, and bring glory to the Father. Society wants us to keep our faith private. And sadly, too many of our leaders, who claim to be believers, have agreed that this is the appropriate position. I've had people tell me, my faith is a private matter. But the whole thrust of this passage says, this is a lie. If we are committed believers, committed to God that is, our faith cannot be private. We can't hide in under a bowl called “political correctness.” We are believers not for our own benefit, but to bring praise and glory to God.

⁴ Earle, Ralph, and Walter W. Wessel, The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985.

⁵ Carson, D. A., The Expositor's Bible Commentary, “Matthew,” Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990

Conclusion: Which brings us to the question, what are the most important aspects of being called to be salt and light? Keep in mind we are citizens of the kingdom. Our calling is to love God and others, and to make disciples. We need to consider all applications of being salt and light in consideration of this calling. And it is not inappropriate that under the leading of the Holy Spirit we may come to somewhat different conclusions as to how we go about acting as salt and light. These are always matters of conscience and relate to secondary questions of faith.

First of all, how have you acted as salt and light in your walk? Regardless of how we see the larger picture, the need to impact the culture and the world at large, we are all called to influence the world around us. *What are ways you can cause someone to be thirsty? How can you shine your light into the world around you?* Just think about these questions for a few moments and we'll get back to them.

Now, here's an example of the larger picture. How should we understand the church's involvement in the political scene? First, we shouldn't use the Old Testament as the pattern for decision making. The Church isn't Israel. With Israel there was no question of a distinction between "Church and State"—they were synonymous. The priesthood was the government.

But, we live in a pluralistic society. This is not a Christian nation, even if it was founded on Judeo-Christian values. The church should be able to influence the government, but it is not the government nor does Christ intend it to be.

We are citizens of God's kingdom, which isn't at this time political entity, nor is it intended to be one, at least not until Christ returns. This needs to be clearly understood if we are to apply the principles of "salt and light" in the larger arena with any accurate understanding. Wiersbe states:

*"There are two pictures of the Christian in closing: salt and the light. Salt speaks of inward character that influences a decaying world; light speaks of the outward testimony of good works that points to God. Our task is to keep our lives pure that we might "salt" this earth and hold back corruption so that the Gospel can get out. Our good works must accompany our dedicated lives as we let our lights shine."*⁶

The approach we should take when considering our involvement in big picture issues is similar to the one we've considered. We need to remember our primary call is to be ambassadors of the kingdom. We are to love God and others. We are to spread the gospel, making disciples. This is our primary responsibility, not involvement with other specific "agendas."

Now, back to our questions. Have you been shaken out of the shaker? *What are ways you can cause someone to be thirsty?* Have you been put on a Lampstand? *How can you shine your light into the world around you?* Each of us are living before a fallen world and we cannot be obedient to God while staying in the shaker, much less hiding under a bowl.

The blessing here is when we get out and around, we can have a great adventure. We get to see God working through us in the lives of individuals, and impacting our church, commu-

⁶ Wiersbe, Warren, W., Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament, Victor, Colorado Springs, CO, 1993.

nity, country, and even the world. Let us remember our primary focus in life always needs to be looking up not living under the circumstances, blessing and being blessed.

*Sweetly, Lord, have we heard Thee calling,
"Come follow me!"
And we see where thy footprints falling,
Lead us to Thee.*

*Tho' they lead o'er the cold, dark mountains,
Seeking His sheep,
Or along by Siloam's fountains,
Helping the weak.*

*If they lead thro' the temple holy,
Preaching the Word,
Or in homes of the poor and lowly,
Serving the Lord.*

*Then at last, when on high He sees us,
Our journey done,
We will rest where the steps of Jesus
End at His throne.*

*Footprints of Jesus
that make the pathway glow;
We will follow the steps of Jesus
where'er they go.⁷*

⁷ Slade, Mary B.C., The Celebration Hymnal, "Footsteps of Jesus," Word/Integrity, USA, 1997, #685

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Introduction:

- a. Salt:**
(John 7:37-39)

b. Light:
(John 3:19-21)

Conclusion:

Personal Application: Each of us are living before a fallen world and we cannot be obedient to God while staying in the shaker, much less hiding under a bowl. So this week consider how you can be a light seasoning in a world needing a really spiritually healthy lifestyle.

Prayer for the Week: Lord, let us shine for You. Amen.