

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus begins His sermon by pronouncing blessing upon the unimportant and insignificant, basically the rag-tag crowd of people who were following Him. By conventional worldly standards, and the prevailing assumptions of the time, these were not the people who would have been thought of as “blessed”, nor would these people have likely considered themselves “blessed”. So Jesus’ pronouncement certainly caught their attention. Their immediate reaction would have been something like this, “Who? Us? Blessed?!?!”

Just as a reminder, they weren’t blessed because of their status as unimportant and insignificant, but because the Kingdom has come to them in Jesus.

But blessing never comes without responsibility or expectation. That’s consistent throughout the scriptural story. (Perhaps you’re familiar with the adage, “*Blessed, to be a blessing.*”) So what is the responsibility/expectation? Well, it’s the same responsibility/expectation that God has always had for His people...to represent Him to the rest of the world.

There are different ways of articulating this responsibility. Jesus puts it this way...

- “*You are the salt of the earth.*” (5:13)
- “*You are the light of the world.*” (5:14)

What an honor! What dignity Jesus is bestowing upon His followers. Such a lofty purpose and designation was typically thought to be upon the important and significant people, the rich and powerful, the religious and civic leaders, the achievers and accomplishers...i.e. the “winners”. Not this band of “losers” who were coming to Jesus and following Him around. And that is precisely the point. Humans have a great tendency towards warped values that do not reflect God and His Kingdom. We create our own qualifications for who is “blessed”, our own criteria and standard of who and what’s important/significant. When we’re in charge, there are winners and losers. Jesus and His Kingdom turn all of that upside down.

But here’s the thing. When a subset of people start to live by a different value system, by a different paradigm, who align themselves with someone or something other than the established order/structures, and claim they are part of a different Kingdom and society...well, things don’t always go so smoothly for those people. The very existence of such people is a critique of the powers-that-be, and raises questions of the legitimacy of the “establishment”. The power brokers tend to push back on these “different” people, these “disrupters” of the status quo, and they see them as problems and as a threat.

With that in mind, remember how the Beatitudes ended. What were the last “blessings” mentioned?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (5:10-12, emphasis added)

Jesus is a realist. Jesus understands human nature. Jesus was/is the smartest person EVER. So it should not surprise us that He can accurately predict what will happen when people live loyally/faithfully to Him. Though one does not need to be as smart as Jesus to reasonably predict what will happen...you just need to know a little history...look at how the prophets of old were treated. They were minority voices calling the majority to repentance and back to covenant faithfulness to God. And more often than not, things went poorly for the prophets. At best they were ignored. At worst they were tortured and killed. Regardless, they were true to their purpose, which could be described as being “salt” and “light”.

Use of the metaphors salt and light would have been very familiar to Jesus’ listeners. While you and I primarily use salt for seasoning, in the ancient world it was also (and more importantly) used as a preservative and disinfectant. But notice that Jesus doesn’t spend any time explaining the role of salt...because everyone listening to Him understood that...rather He warns against salt losing its saltiness. We’ll come back to that momentarily...

The role of light is easily understood to both ancients and moderns. Though the only light Jesus’ audience would understand is the light of the sun or light from fire (candle, campfire, oil burning lamp, etc.). In more modern times, with all the ways we harness and use electricity, we have light at our fingertips all the time. If you’re like me, you may even have a source of light in your pocket right now with the light feature on your phone. But the main use of light, then and now, is to illuminate darkness, to reveal what can’t be seen in the dark. This is obvious to us, as it would have been to them. Which is why Jesus didn’t explain the purpose of light but rather warned about hiding it, or shrouding it, not allowing it to do what it’s meant to do.

Why would Jesus be concerned about salt not being salty or light being hidden? Remember, Jesus told His listeners, “You are...salt and light”. Salt and light both have an important purpose. His followers, His people, likewise have an important purpose that He expects them to fulfill (not in order to be blessed, but as a way of living out their blessedness).

But why would Jesus so immediately be concerned that they might not fulfill their purpose? Remember the aforementioned persecution. The life Jesus calls people to, then and now, while blessed, is not easy. There is a constant temptation to shrink back. The salt and light metaphors give us two of the main ways that temptation is given into.

Salt, by its very nature, has a very distinctive presence. If you taste something with too much salt or not enough salt you know it immediately. Jesus’ people, likewise, are meant to have a very distinctive presence wherever they are. When Jesus’ people lose that distinctiveness, typically by conforming to the culture around them—so you can’t tell the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian—then what good are we? What would cause Christians to be tempted to conform? Well, with the likelihood of persecution or ridicule or slander or being misunderstood or looked down upon or misrepresented...it would simply be easier to try and fit in.

The opposite response to the pressure and stress that comes with faithfully following Jesus, is to avoid it by disengagement from the dominant culture/society. This is akin to hiding light under a bowl.

So these are the two pitfalls Jesus is warning against, compromise (salt losing its saltiness) and disengagement (hiding light). Historically, Christians have fallen into both of these ditches time and again. My personal observation is that giving into the temptation to compromise/fit in tends to happen more than disengagement/withdrawal. (You're welcome to disagree with that assessment.) While fear of persecution is one main motivation that can tempt people one way or the other, the underlying motivation is simply fear in general. Out of fear of compromising or being corrupted by the dominant culture, Christians sometimes resort to disengaging and starting communities away from the corrupting influences.

Jesus understood/understands how hard it is for us to stay engaged while not compromising Kingdom convictions. Being distinctly Christian, being holy as we are called to be (being salty) is challenging enough by itself. Throw in a dominant culture that values the opposite of Kingdom values, and it is easy to see why some pockets of Christians throughout history have opted to move away, or otherwise withdraw, thereby taking their "light" with them.

But this is the tension we are called to live in: to be salt and light in a world that would prefer us to not be. There's probably no greater challenge. The Christian life is NOT easy...but it is blessed.

Jesus also adds HOW we go about being salt and light...by doing good deeds (5:16). But we don't do good works primarily so that people will like us or think well of us, but to alert people to the reality of our heavenly Father and His Kingdom among us. (FYI, "good deeds/works" is a broad category ranging from helping the hurting, alleviating suffering, standing up against oppression/injustice to generally working for the common good and human flourishing.)

At this point let me pause to mention a common phenomenon pertaining to the Sermon on the Mount. When people encounter the Sermon on the Mount (or any of Jesus' teachings generally speaking) it is often the case that people can fall into two typical camps. We might call the first camp "admirers" of Jesus. They respect what He has to say, and His integrity to stick to His convictions, but they don't have any real intention or conviction to follow Jesus. They will say things like, "*Oh, Jesus is overly idealistic...following His teaching isn't realistic, or practical.*" Or, "*That will never work. That's not how you get things done in the 'real world'.*"

Then there are those who take Jesus seriously. We might call them "followers", "disciples", "apprentices" of Jesus. They assume Jesus knows what He's talking about, and are compelled to trust and obey.

Friends, let me be clear...Jesus is not looking for admirers. He invites us to a radically different kind of life. Sadly, the Church (big C Church...particularly in the West) is filled with (sometimes led by) admirers of Jesus. When this happens, the salt loses its saltiness. The Gospel gets

watered down, the Church becomes compromised, complacent, perhaps even corrupt. The only thing that prevents this is taking Jesus seriously. The question we need to consider is whether we (individually and collectively) intend to be followers of Jesus or simply admirers.

To take Jesus seriously means to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. In the remaining part of this week's passage (5:17-20) we see that Jesus took the Law and the Prophets (i.e. the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, as we refer to them) seriously. He took Israel's covenant partnership with God seriously. He took God's intent to bless the entire world through Israel seriously...even if "Israel" meant only Him. Jesus represents all of Israel, and all of humanity, before God. (He's a BIG deal folks. High Christology, baby!!!)

At this juncture, before we go any further, let's take a moment to consider that there are at least three different audiences we want to keep in mind as we consider the Sermon on the Mount. First, there are the original hearers of the Sermon. Second, there's the original readers of the Gospel of Matthew...those Matthew had in mind that he was writing to. And third, there's the variety of readers across time and place who have set out to read, understand, and follow Jesus' teaching. We are part of the third category, but we need to keep the others in view. Another way of saying it is, this (as well as all of Scripture) was written FOR us, but not TO us. In order to understand it properly, we need to strive, the best we can, to understand it from the point of view of the original hearers and readers.

From the standpoint of the original hearers, a question on their mind would have been something like, "*What does this rabbi from Nazareth think about the Law?*" (Keep in mind that Nazareth was not known for producing rabbis. Rabbis usually came through the "establishment" in Jerusalem.) The main thing rabbi's of the time did was offer their interpretation and commentary on the Law/Scriptures. In that vein, Jesus was operating as a typical rabbi. Jesus' comments make it clear that He held the Law in high esteem, while implying that the Pharisees and teachers of the law didn't understand or esteem it as much as they let on. (More on that in the coming weeks.)

Unlike a typical rabbi, if we jump to the end of the Sermon, Matthew offers this comment about the crowd listening to Jesus, "*...the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*" (7:28-29) A typical rabbi would tend to quote, or refer to, previous/prior rabbis and their teachings or school of thought. (Sort of like name dropping...the more people you could quote or refer to, the more learned and impressive you were.) Then along comes Jesus, who as we'll see, doesn't quote anybody...because He doesn't need to...His words/comments on the Law stand as authoritative all on their own.

From the standpoint of the original readers, it is important to grasp what Matthew is doing in his portrayal of Jesus in his Gospel. Matthew draws parallels between Israel & Jesus and goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Jesus fulfills the calling and purpose of Israel. For example...

- Israel was "baptized" in the Jordan when they entered the Promised Land (see Joshua 3); and Jesus was baptized in the Jordan (Matthew 3)

- Israel was tested for 40 years in the wilderness; Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted.
- Moses went up a mountain to receive the commandments (the first covenant); Jesus, here in the Sermon on the Mount, claims to be fulfilling the first covenant and inaugurating a new covenant.

(If you'd like to geek out some more on this, check out this article...

<https://bibleproject.com/articles/gospel-of-matthew/>)

From the standpoint of modern readers (us), this section (5:17-20) can be a little confusing. Are we to obey the Old Testament Law? That question is a bit overly simplistic. A key concept to understand when reading Scripture is God's use of covenants as a way of relating to people. (The "Law" is often shorthand for the Old Covenant.) Covenants consist of the parties/partners involved, as well as the commitments/promises outlined for those parties/partners. In other words, what each party/partner can expect from the other.

The Old Covenant parties were Israel and God. So, if you were a party to that covenant, it was absolutely expected that you would adhere to it. But you and I are not party to that covenant. Christians are party to the New Covenant. Now, some of the commitments/commandments of the Old Covenant are also outlined, or carried over, in the New Covenant, but not all of them. For example, anything having to do with the sacrificial system is now obsolete by what Jesus accomplished on the cross. (Please note the word I specifically used..."*accomplished*"...that's the same word Jesus used in verse 18, "...*until everything is accomplished.*" Jesus had the cross in view when He made that statement. At the cross the Old Covenant is completed, finished, accomplished...over and done with.

Now, the commandments that reflect God's holy character, and the resulting moral and ethical behavior He expects His people to abide by, were incorporated as part of the New Covenant...and if we're party to the New Covenant then we are expected to obey. (In coming weeks we'll see Jesus expound on six case studies of "laws" that are part of the Old and New Covenants...thus applicable then and now.)

Speaking of obedience...as Christians we like to describe/summarize God's expectations (commands) in the shorthand, "*Love God; Love others.*"...which is fine, on one level. But Scripture clearly demonstrates that to Love God means to obey God...so it behooves us to know what God expects/commands a bit more specifically. This is what makes the Sermon on the Mount so important...it gives us a clear presentation of what God expects of us.

If you would like to understand a bit more of God's use of Covenants, check out this video...

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/covenants/>

Earlier I mentioned that there are two pitfalls we can run into: fitting in so much with society that we lose our distinctiveness (salt losing its saltiness), and disengaging/withdrawing from society so we don't/can't represent God to those around us (hiding a lamp under a bowl). Well, there's one more pitfall we need to beware of, which is also quite common today. That is to be highly engaged and distinct, but being jerks while doing so. Or, to be engaged and distinct, but

in the wrong way...in ways that are self-righteous, legalistic, domineering, and generally not representing/reflecting God well or accurately. (Does anyone, or group, come to mind? History is replete with examples.)

God's people (then and now) are called to be engaged and distinct...but in the right way. Notice what Jesus says, "*For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*" (5:20, emphasis added)

Let's pause for a moment and remember something from last week. Recall that Jesus turns the prevailing assumptions upside down. And keep in mind that Jesus answers questions like, "*Who is well off?*" and "*Who is a good person?*" Well, the prevailing assumption of the day was that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were "good" and were "well off" or "blessed" as a result. Jesus says, "*Not so fast...*" (my paraphrase). It is possible to be highly engaged and highly distinct in all the wrong ways and for all the wrong reasons. Being religious is not necessarily the same thing as being righteous.

Interestingly enough, religiosity is another way for salt to lose its saltiness and light to be hidden. Religious folks, and religious leaders, can, if they are not careful, disengage from the dominant culture by hiding out in their "holy huddles" and religious institutions. In so doing, they create an echo chamber in which they convince themselves that they are better off (of higher character) than they really are. Religious communities, if they are not careful, can create their own power structures, their own "Haves" and "Have nots", their own set of who's in and who's out...thereby reflecting the dominant culture. In other words, it can become a breeding ground for a false sense of righteousness. This is not what Jesus had in mind for His people being "salt" and "light".

Righteousness is a key word in the Sermon on the Mount. It's about the right way to be in the world, the right way to relate to others, the right heart/attitude toward God and others. (Please keep in mind that "justice" is another word for righteousness.) As we'll see as we continue through the Sermon on the Mount, it is possible (quite easy in fact) to keep the letter of the law and completely miss the heart of it.

Quick review:

- We are to be Salt (distinct people in the world).
- We are to be Light (illuminating God's truth and love to the world around us).
- We are to be Righteous (good people, reflecting a good God)

How do we do all this? We shall see as we continue our way through the Sermon. (Hint: if we focus on being righteous/good and following Jesus' teaching, then being salt and light will take care of itself.)

P.S. Just as a reminder, when we see "*kingdom*" or "*kingdom of heaven*"--as we will numerous times throughout the Sermon--don't think in terms of the after-life but rather as the present reality.

P.S.S These three videos, also found on the resource page on the website, might be helpful in your study.

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/a-surprising-new-world/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/finding-gods-wisdom/>

Possible Discussion Questions

- When you decided to follow Jesus, what did you understand to be the responsibilities and expectations that came along with that? What costs/consequences did you understand and accept that came with following Jesus?
- In what ways do you think Christians should be distinct from the world around us? In what ways do you think Christians ought to be engaged with the world around us?
- Followers of Jesus are meant to be distinct from those around them (salt) and also engaged with those around them (light).
 - How/when have you seen this done well?
 - How/when have you seen Christians lose any distinctiveness and conform to the world around them?
 - How/when have you seen Christians disengage from the world around them?
 - Which of these two pitfalls (compromise/not being distinct, or disengagement) do you think is a bigger concern, or more likely to happen?
 - What reason would you offer for why people fall into one of these two ditches?
- Share about your experience of trying to be engaged yet distinct. What challenges have you faced? Or what pushback, critique, or misunderstanding have you encountered? (Or, perhaps, what mistakes have you made along the way?) How has that affected you?
- How have you seen Christians attempt to be salt and light in obnoxious ways?
- Jesus seems to expect His people to be in the minority and among the marginalized. How do you feel about that?
- We can't fulfill our purpose as Christians without being salt (distinct) and light (engaged). Yet, that is an inherently difficult role to play...sometimes even dangerous. At the same time, there are wrong ways to go about doing that as well. So, then, why would anyone even attempt to do so?

- Hint: the apostle Paul would put it this way, “*For Christ’s love compels us...*” (II Corinthians 5:14) Christ’s love for us, and Christ’s love working through us towards others.
 - Describe your experience of being compelled by Christ’s love. How has Christ’s love made you distinct and engaged?
- What are some “good deeds” that you can identify that bring praise/glory to our Father in heaven?
 - How would you describe your/our relationship with the Old Testament? Of the 613 laws of the Old Covenant, which are we expected to adhere to? What is your/our basis for making that determination?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Paying Attention to Light

In the Gospel of John, which we covered during Lent, Jesus said, “*I am the light of the world.*” (John 8:12). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells His followers, “*You are the light of the world.*” (Matthew 5:14).

We’re going to work with this metaphor this week. We live in a time and place where we basically have light on demand. Since our goal is to always be mindful of God’s Presence and activity, let’s use our use of light to remind us of His Kingdom among us and His will for us.

So, everytime you turn on a light this week—be it at home, at work, in your car, wherever—allow that to be a trigger to turn your attention toward God. Perhaps say a short prayer, or offer a quick thanks or praise. Or, whenever you step outside into the daylight, allow the light and the warmth of the sun to remind you of God’s love for you.

We have the gift of light. Let’s use it to remind us of the greater gift of God’s love and Presence in our lives.