

## 2. Salt and Light

### The Sermon on the Mount

#### Matthew 5:13-20

We are looking at the greatest sermon by the greatest teacher to have ever walked the earth, the Lord Jesus. Matthew gives us what many believe is a condensed version of Christ's teaching about how His disciples must live their lives and not grieve the Holy Spirit. Many Bible teachers believe that Jesus spoke the eight Beatitudes (the "beautiful attitudes") and then expanded on them or fleshed them out by giving us examples of how the inner attitudes work in real-life situations. In other words, the rest of the Sermon on the Mount explains the Holy Spirit's operation at the core of the believer's life. Our view is that Matthew did not keep to a chronological order when he wrote down the application of the Beatitudes by Jesus. Matthew records the application of these beatitudes as explained by Jesus, although it does not appear to be in chronological order.

When Christ's disciples live according to the leading and guidance of the Spirit of God, there will be encounters with those who operate under a different spirit with attitudes in opposition to God. In verses 11-12, Jesus spoke about the persecution that will come to believers when they live out the beautiful attitudes in their lives, but how are we to respond to such persecution? Should we withdraw and hide from the world system, lick our wounds, and never confront the darkness again? No, as believers, we are the conscience of the world in which we live. If mature believers allow this world to force its values upon us as believers, this world will be shaped by an evil agenda; however, if godly men and women stand up for truth, others will also gain the courage to stand against the darkness. Jesus said, **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"** (John 8:12). When we live our lives according to these beautiful attitudes, we point the way to Jesus. We are holding out to others the light of life! Regarding our response to persecution, Jesus gave us two metaphors as to how we respond to those who persecute us.

#### **The Salt of the Earth**

**<sup>13</sup>"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. <sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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 (Matthew 5:13-16).**

**What do you think came to the minds of those listening to Jesus as He talked about salt and light?**

Let's talk first about salt. When Jesus walked on earth, salt was a valuable commodity. In the time of Caesar, Rome paid their soldiers in salt, and in ancient China, salt was second to gold in value. Even today, we talk of people being "worth their weight in salt." Why was salt so valuable? There are three things that Jesus could have been alluding to in His metaphor of believers being like salt.

**1). Salt spoke of purity.** The Romans believed that salt was one of the purest things on earth because it comes from the whitest and purest properties, the sea and the sun. Jesus could have been saying that the believer was to be an example of purity to those around him, i.e., purity of speech and purity of life.

**2). Salt was a preservative.** When there were no freezers and refrigerators, salt was the only way to slow down putrefaction. It was a two or three-day journey to bring fish from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem, so to slow down the decomposition, the fish or meat was salted to remain fresh. In the same way, believers in Christ, by the way they live their lives through an example of holy living, believers in Christ will slow down the decay of any society in which they live. However, there need to be several grains together for salt to be effective and produce an effect on a community, i.e., slowing the decomposition of the culture.

**3). Salt lends flavor to food.** Some foods are so bland that food can be made more palatable with added salt. I often eat two eggs for breakfast, but I find eggs tasteless without any salt (and a bit of pepper). Any cooking recipe you can find will almost always have salt added. Before I gave my life to Christ, life felt meaningless to me. I found it hard to bear the day-by-day living, but when Christ came into my life, I suddenly began to see life as purposeful, meaningful, and even exciting. I found a purpose and worth by giving my life to the furtherance of the Gospel of Christ. The Lord adds flavor and meaning to life. No longer was I living for the things of this world, but I began to live for what is beyond this life. The Lord adds flavor to our lives!

When we hear sermons on this passage of Scripture, it is often separated from the text before it, where Jesus spoke about persecution. The Lord was saying that if we hold to the beatitudes, we will face persecution because of the values we uphold. If we buckle under the pressure and compromise our commitment, we lose our ability to influence others around us. There are always others around us who secretly wonder if there is any value to walking with Christ. You never know who around you may be inwardly seeking the truth. You are the expression of Christ to the world. If someone seeks light, peace, and hope in this world, will they see it in you? Will they be drawn to Jesus through you?

I have organized and led tours of the land of Israel, and every time I go, I always take people to one of the hotels down in the lowest place on earth, the Dead Sea and Jordan River Valley. Many enjoy the relaxing and healthful float on the Dead Sea and the spa and massage services that most hotels in the area offer. The evening before we leave for the Dead Sea, I have to warn people not to shave due to the high salt levels in the water in which they'll float. If they ignore my advice, their floating experience in the Dead Sea can be painful, even though the waters have healing properties.

Salt is painful to an open wound, and of course, no one likes pain. The pain is not often received well, but the salt and other minerals in the Dead Sea water can heal the skin. One feels cleansed and invigorated after bathing in the water. As the cleansing of the salty water is to the body, our salty values bring an antiseptic cleansing power to the world. The light and salt we carry can bring healing to a decaying society. Still, often there is a recoiling and persecution due to the values that the believer in Christ holds. If those without Christ see Christians compromising their

beliefs and values, it will strengthen them further to live an ungodly life in this world system. If those who do not believe in Christ see no difference in our Christian lives, there is no challenge to their worldview. There will be no hope to hold out to them. Therefore, the “saltiness” of our values is then thrown away and trodden underfoot (v. 13).

### **You Are the Light of the World.**

Christ then used the metaphor of light to describe the believer. As He looked around the hillside at those who were His disciples, He told them they were the light of the world (v. 14). In the days when the New Testament was written, a household lamp consisted of an earthenware container of oil with a wick half in the oil and partly showing out of a small hole at one end. Unfortunately, there were no matches in those days, which made it difficult to relight a lamp when they went out of the house, so most people kept the lamp burning but shortened the wick so that it didn't use up all the oil in the light.

The householder would usually set the lamp up high in the room on a tall stand, but the lampstand could be knocked over, and oil on the floor along with a lighted wick could be dangerous, hence the need to sometimes protect the lit lamp by hiding it under a basket. When they needed bright light, they brought out the lamp from under the basket, put more oil in it, and pulled the wick out further to fill the room with light (Matthew 25:7-8).

By referencing His people as lights in the world, the Lord said that instead of hiding our testimony of Christ, lowering our light, and hiding away, we are to shine in dark times and push out the darkness. The light that comes from believers was not their light. God is not expecting us to present ourselves as the answer to man's problems; our light is reflected light, i.e., the Light of the World is Jesus (John 9:5). When people of this world look at us, they should see Christ:

Let's think of the early apostles as our example. After God healed the lame man through Peter and John at the Gate Beautiful in Jerusalem, the apostles went through persecution at the hands of Israel's religious leaders for doing the good deed. The disciples responded by pointing away from themselves to the Lord Jesus as the Healer. They said:

*Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well (Acts 4:8-10).*

Think of the boldness of the Spirit-empowered apostles. Something about their response took the rulers and elders by surprise. How were the elders to respond to someone disregarding their authority? The elders of Israel put Peter and John outside and talked among themselves about the two apostles. They acknowledged that there was something different at work in their midst, and they recognized the tell-tale signs that the disciples had been with Jesus. The Lord was the One glorified as the Healer.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, in the same way, believers reflect the glory of the Lord and speak forth His message of life. When we live our lives in close relationship to the Lord Jesus, those around us will see Christ shining through us, not us. This reflected light is not to be lived out just among believers, though, for Jesus didn't say, "You are the light of the church." No, He said that we "are the light of the world" (v. 14). As believers, we are to be guiding harbor lights or lighthouses that show forth the way to the safe harbor of Christ. Good works will be seen by those who are in the darkness of the world system in which we live, and true reflections of the Light of the World in us will draw all people to Christ: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Our salt and light will make others thirsty for the truth of God and will draw them to the Light of the world.

A song called "Portrait" by a popular Christian musician, Phil Keaggy, perfectly illustrates this point. It is from an old poem entitled "Indwelt."

"Portrait"

"Not only in the words you say,  
Not only in your deeds confessed,  
But in the most unconscious way is Christ expressed.

Is it a beatific smile?  
A holy light upon your brow?  
Oh no, I felt His presence when you laughed just now.

To me, it was not the truth you taught,  
To you so clear, but to me so dim.  
But when you came to me, you brought a sense of Him.

And from your eyes, He beckons me,  
And from your lips, His love is shed  
Until I lose sight of you and see Christ instead.

Is it a beautiful smile?  
A holy light upon your brow?  
Oh no, I felt His presence when you laughed just now."

After reading Christ's words, what are the dangers of being a secret disciple and hiding our light or works?

**Christ Came to Fulfill the Law.**

<sup>17</sup>“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup>For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-20).

### What are your feelings about Christ’s words in verse 20?

Jesus said that He had come to fulfill the Law and the prophets. The endless rules of the Scribes and Pharisees were invented to get around the Law of God so that they could do what they wanted. Their man-made rules to help them keep the Law of God were built up over time, layer by layer, until the spirit of the Law was obscured. The weight of all these laws became burdensome and complex for anyone to keep. Jesus accused these religious leaders of teaching rules that turned men away from God:

<sup>8</sup>“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>9</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8-9).

Their teaching did not draw people closer to God. Jesus pointed out that they were paying “lip service” to God, but their hearts were far from Him, and their worship was empty and self-centered. How did the false teaching come about? Because of the idol worship and the sacrificing of innocent children, as in the case of king Ahaz and king Manasseh, who sacrificed their sons in the fire (2 Chronicles 28:3; 2 Chronicles 33:5-7), God banished Israel to the nation of Babylon for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:8-11).

While in Babylon, the Jewish people began to ask themselves why God had punished them by casting them out of the land He gave them. They concluded that they had broken the law of God and that the only thing to do was to build a fence around the law so that, if they did perhaps cross the fence, hopefully, they would still not break the law. They developed a system of rules and interpretations that became commentaries called the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*. These rules, they felt, would keep people from sinning against God.

The religious elite did not practice these things themselves. For example, the Scripture said they were not to work on the Sabbath day, so they made up volumes of rules that defined what constituted work on the Sabbath. How far could a person walk before it became work if one could not work on the Sabbath and had to rest? They stipulated that a Jew could only walk 2000 cubits (1000 yards) from his house, but if they tied a rope across the end of the street, the end of the road became his house, and he could go another 1,000 yards beyond that. However, if he needed to go further on the Sabbath evening, he could place enough food for two meals along the way, and the food then became his residence, and he could go another 1,000 yards.<sup>1</sup>

Living life became a rule-keeping system focused on looking righteous on the outside but

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/view.cgi?bk=41&ch=11>

forgetting the inner core of love for God and others. Of course, the regular people could not keep such heavy, burdensome rules that did not express God's heart of love. The rule-makers extended very little grace to the poor and needy until Jesus came along. No wonder they responded as they did to Jesus when He challenged their teaching and called out their hypocrisy.

What do you think the Lord meant by saying that He came not to abolish, repeal, or do away with the Law but to fulfill it? What did He mean by the Law and the Prophets?

Living by religious rules has become part of many churches in the West. We see it so often we don't even think of it. As a young Christian, after the Sunday evening service at my local church, I went to a meeting of young Christian teens whom I was hoping to reach with the Gospel. I thought it would be good to bring along candy and chips and the sort of things enjoyed by young people, so I stopped at the one place open on a Sunday night in a small town, i.e., the off-license. (A British off-license is similar to a liquor store in the USA and also sells all kinds of snacks.)

As I came out of the shop with sweets and snacks, I was met by an older lady who went to the church I was attending. She tore into me harshly and reprimanded me severely, saying that it was Sunday, and asked me why I was visiting such a place as that on a Sunday as a Christian. This incident was very early in my Christian walk and was very confusing. I remember shrinking away under a cloud of guilt. The rules by religious people can be burdensome and lacking in grace. Legalism and rule-keeping are most popularly defined as "redemption by human effort." The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were the legalists of Christ's day.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: <sup>2</sup>“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. <sup>3</sup> So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach <sup>3</sup>therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for **they say things and do not do them.** <sup>4</sup>“They tie up **heavy burdens** and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. <sup>5</sup>“But they do all their deeds **to be noticed by men**; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments (Matthew 23:1-5).

Share a story of coming across rules and regulations in Christianity. In the above verses (v. 5), what did Jesus say was the motive behind the religious person of the day?

How would you help a young Christian understand the difference between living by the “beautiful attitudes” and seeking to obey the law of Christ within as opposed to living by adherence to a set of rules?

After living in Israel for a year and a half, one of the things a person becomes aware of quickly is the passion by religious Jews for everyone to keep the Law. The orthodox Jews of Jerusalem today believe that if they can get all Jews in the land to keep one Sabbath day holy as a nation, then the Messiah will come. There is no Scripture to support that position; it is just a belief of those seeking to be righteous by keeping the fence around the Law. There are areas of Jerusalem in which your car will be stoned if you are driving on the Sabbath. It can be very frustrating and confusing for tourists to be in a hotel on a Sabbath, for if you get in the wrong elevator, it will

stop at all floors between your room and the lobby or restaurant because it is regarded as work for you to press the elevator button on the Sabbath.

For instance, Jesus was accused of being a lawbreaker by healing on the Sabbath, but these laws or rules were not God-ordained; they were the fence rules put around the Law. Jesus did not break the Law of God, for He came to fulfill the Law: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).**

**Why was the Law given?** This question is crucial for us to understand, for God gave the law to show His righteous moral standard. The conscience, Puritan Richard Sibbes, wrote in the seventeenth century, is *the soul reflecting upon itself*. Conscience is at the heart of what distinguishes the human creature. Unlike animals, people can contemplate their actions and make moral self-evaluations. That is the very function of conscience. The problem with our conscience is that it can be educated, ignored, and disregarded. The law enlightens the conscience and gives an objective line in the sand. To transgress is to cross the line into sin.

The law demands total obedience with an obligation to keep the whole law, not just a part. In the New Testament, James wrote, **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10).** The law defines what sin is. Until the Gospel reached into the South and Central American jungle, the Mayans and Incas sacrificed their innocent babies and children, for they rejected the input from their conscience. Paul wrote that, without the law, we would not have known what sin is (Romans 7:7). When God gave man His law, a man was without an excuse before a holy God and held accountable for his actions (Romans 3:19). None of us can keep the law. We all fall short of moral perfection (sin) and see ourselves as the depraved individuals who need a Savior from sin.

**Did you try to live by a moral code, such as the Ten Commandments? Share your story of trying to be good. Do you remember a moment of failure or weakness that convinced you of your need for a Savior to deliver you from the consequences of sin?**

For those gathered on the northern slopes of the Sea of Galilee, some wondered if this new preacher, the Lord Jesus, was against the Law of God. The Lord upheld the Law and completely fulfilled all the sacrificial system that the Law laid down, and He is the spiritual High Priest. He went into the Holy of Holies with His blood, thus fulfilling the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:11-15) and many other shadow laws of the Old Testament.

Suppose today you feel that you have gone against your conscience (and who hasn't). Maybe, you'd like to pray a sincere prayer to the One Who has loved you before the foundation of the world and sent His Son, the Lord Jesus, into the world to pay the price for you to be clean from all guilt and shame. Here's a prayer you could pray with a sincere heart:

Heavenly Father, I believe that Jesus Christ, Your only begotten Son, came to earth to be the Savior of the world and that, by His death on the cross, He paid the price for the sin of the world so that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. Thank You for the free gift of salvation and that, by placing my trust in Christ, I am forgiven of my sins. Thank

You, Father, for sending Your Son to die on Calvary's cross in my place, i.e., that His innocent life was sufficient to pay the full price for my sin and the sin of the world.

Lord, I turn from all my prideful sins and everything dishonoring to Your name. I pray that Your Holy Spirit will help me grow in grace and the knowledge of Jesus until I come to that day when I will enter into Your kingdom. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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