

## Sermon 12, The Church's Witness: Salt and Light, Matthew 5:13-16

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OT Reading: Isaiah 60

### Body

The text we just read ought to sound very familiar to you, even if you are not well-versed in the Sermon on the Mount. It is one of the founding texts of the idea of American exceptionalism. It was first invoked in that context way back in 1630, in a sermon John Winthrop preached on board the *Arbella* to the settlers who had come out with him to establish a colony they would call "New England." Winthrop said, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."<sup>10</sup> Later, JFK called the United States a city set on a hill. So did Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. Only a few weeks ago, none other than the Mormon Mitt Romney invoked the same image to attack Donald Trump's candidacy for President: "He has neither the temperament nor the judgment to be president, and his personal qualities would mean that America would cease to be a shining city on a hill."<sup>11</sup> Regardless of whether that statement is true, notice that it again presupposes that the United States of America just is a shining city on a hill.

Now, what do all these appropriations of the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ tell us? Well, they tell us that His metaphors were so good that people have been stealing them ever since. They tell us about American exceptionalism, which is not something I'm going to preach about today. Whether America presently functions as a shining city on a hill or not, one thing is clear: Jesus didn't say, "The USA is the salt of the earth and the light of the world." These statements, as originally given, don't apply to any nation. They apply to the church. Jesus spoke these things to the disciples, as we see at the beginning of the chapter. And they describe the disciples and all who follow in their footsteps. The light of the world is Jesus, and though good government and freedom is a wonderful example to set before the world, it is not the good

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<sup>10</sup> "A Model of Christian Charity," available at [http://winthropsociety.com/doc\\_charity.php](http://winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in "City on a Hill," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City\\_upon\\_a\\_Hill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_upon_a_Hill)

news we proclaim. We have better news — the news that Jesus Christ transforms His followers into salt and light. Indeed, our passage this morning teaches us that, transformed by Jesus, the church preserves and seasons the world, and it illuminates the world. Let's move through the text, looking first at salt and then at light, and then at the conclusion Jesus draws.

## **I. The Church Preserves and Seasons the World, v. 13**

### **A. The Truth: Christians Are Like Salt, v. 13a**

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. What does that imply? Well, it implies that the earth needs salt. In Jesus' day, salt was used for seasoning and flavor, as it is today. But its primary purpose, in the days before electric refrigeration, was to preserve food from spoiling. Salt bursts the cell walls of bacteria, and very few germs can live in a saline environment. Thus, salted meat lasts a long time, without refrigeration, whereas unsalted meat goes bad in the heat in a matter of hours. We've all smelled rotten meat. It's pretty gross. And the idea here is that, just as salt prevents meat from putrefying, Christians prevent the world from putrefying.

This is not just a claim. This is the gospel truth, literally. The world is rotting. The world is getting worse, less and less fit for human consumption. The solution to this problem is not to refrigerate the world (Eskimos sin too). No, the problem is spiritual and the solution must be spiritual. The problem is one of a corrupt heart producing a corrupt life in every single individual, which then becomes the problem of corrupt groups and really the corruption of the entire world. Christians are the only solution to the problem. Their presence retards moral decay. Just as bacteria can't live in the presence of salt, sin can't live in the presence of holiness.

I trust that all of you have met someone who just by his bearing and speech discourages you from your gaudier excesses. One of my friends in college was like that. Around him, snappy comments and mean words would die on my lips all the time. I just knew better than to shoot my mouth off around him. Well, Christ is saying that you are, if you are a believer, clothed with the Holy Spirit. You radiate a presence that discourages the wicked from their grosser wickednesses.

Again, Jesus doesn't say “get nice and salty.” He simply says that His disciples *are* salt. And He says it in the plural. Each of you is the salt of the earth, but especially all of you are the salt of the earth. The individual Christian functions as salt. So does the whole church, whether considered as a group or as a multitude of individuals. Think about your salt shaker on your table at home. Every little crystal in there is salt. The entire shaker is full of salt. One crystal won't have much of an impact, but the whole shaker-full is overpowering! So believers are individually salt and the church is together salt.

Salt not only preserves; it seasons. It flavors. One commentator pointed out that most people seem to think that they have pretty boring lives, because they are always racing off to be entertained. I remember one of my co-workers at Walmart telling me that he reads George R. R. Martin because it's totally unlike his daily job wrangling bananas at Walmart. In other words, it's safe to say that many people find their daily lives somewhat insipid, and they seek to supplement them with excitement, whether in the form of entertainment or in the form of chemical highs.

Christians, though, have access to God Himself, who is the source of all fullness and excitement. This is not to say that if you're a Christian, you always find life exciting. I'm just saying that Christians of all people ought to enjoy life, ought to find meaning and zest in everything they do because they're doing it for God. In the same way, that joy in daily life should rub off onto the people around you.

### **B. The Caution: Christians must not Lose their Saltiness, v. 13b**

Well, Christ tells us that salt can lose its savor. What does He mean? Salt is salt, right? Well, in those days salt was a chunk of something salty-tasting that you found out by the Dead Sea. It was only partially salt, and over time the salt could leach out and leave behind a chunk of "salt" that wouldn't have any flavor at all. That chunk of non-salt was totally worthless.

Well, let's think a bit more about salt. How do you salt something? Is there a complicated chemical injection process? Of course not. You simply sprinkle salt on a thing and that thing is salted. Nothing to it. Well, in the same way, if you are being the salt of the earth, then the people around you should be getting saltier. They should not be succumbing to greater degrees of moral corruption and spiritual degeneration. The people you see every day should be getting better if you're really acting like salt. If the people who know you best are getting worse, then, you need to ask yourself if you're in the condition Jesus describes here. Are you pseudo-salt? If so, Jesus is saying that there's very little hope for you. Again, He's not talking here about someone who's never been salt. He's talking about someone who used to be salt, but isn't anymore. For that person, whom we might term an apostate or a hypocrite, his only destiny is to be thrown out and to be trampled underfoot. If you recognize today that you used to be a good influence in the world, but are no longer so, then repent! Try once again to live as salt.

How can salt be salted? Well, the fact of the matter is that God made salt originally, and that He makes people salty today. That's why Jesus doesn't directly say "Become salty." If you are a disciple, you are already salty. And if you're not a disciple, nothing you can do will make you salty. Indeed, like the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, this section presupposes that you are building your life on Jesus's righteousness. If you're believing in Him, walking as His disciple, you are salt.

We see this more clearly when we look at the next three verses.

### **II. The Church Illuminates the World, vv. 14-16**

Jesus said, "As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world" (John 9:5). So when He calls Christians the light of the world, what is He saying? That they are the "light lit," while He is the "light lighting," to use the Scholastic categories. Or to put it in other terms, Jesus is the Sun and Christians are the Moon. He is the light source; we're simply the reflector. The same is true of saltiness, of course. Jesus is the salt of the earth; He's the one preserving all things by the word of His power. He's the one who gives light to the world. But those united to Him by faith are united so closely that what's true of Him becomes, in its own limited way, true of them. He's the Son of God; we're sons of God. He's the light of the world; we're the light of the world. He's loved by the Father; we're loved by the Father. And so on it all goes.

### **A. The Truth: Christians Give Light**

Thus, if you're a disciple, you're like your Lord. You are the light of the world.

What does this mean? That the world is plunged in sin and ignorance. The shorthand term for this is "darkness." Eph 5:8 explains: "for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light." You give light by reflecting something of the light that Jesus brings.

This is a radical claim. It is the claim that if you are a believer in Jesus, you have more to offer than any supposed expert. You can give people what they most need — knowledge of the Lord Jesus, knowledge of why they're here and what it all means. Without Christianity, and thus without Christians, people are plunged in darkness, and they have no way of striking a light or extricating themselves from darkness. "The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble" (Pro 4:19).

The idea, then, is that the very presence of a Christian illuminates the life of a wicked person. Light evicts darkness. Light banishes darkness. A person who is stuck in the darkness of sin will be able to see much more clearly what he's doing in the presence of a Christian. That's what Jesus is saying here. But not only does light expose darkness; it drives it away. Light and darkness cannot co-exist.

Again, I have to ask whether there's a lot of darkness in your life, and in the lives of everyone around you. Is your very presence, or better, the presence of the Holy Spirit within you, driving it away? Or is the darkness driving your light away? Which one is winning?

### **B. Two Examples of Visible Lights**

Jesus proceeds to illustrate His teaching with two examples of visible light. The first is the one that American leaders have claimed for centuries: a city on a hill. Now, you all have driven back to Gillette at night. You know how dark it is out on these Wyoming roads, and you know that you can see the glow of the city approaching from miles away. Our town is in a valley, though. Jesus was likely thinking of Jerusalem as the great "City on a Hill," the symbol of God's Kingdom on earth. Jerusalem is built on a hill, and its light was supposed to shine to the nations around it. But regardless, Christ says that the key point here is that a city on a hill cannot be hidden. Everyone will be able to see it, whether you like it or not. A city in a valley can be tucked away, only visible from directly above. But a city on a hill will shine to a vast area. Guess what? You are that city, if you're united by faith to the light of the world.

Similarly, lamps are supposed to be visible. It would be foolish to enclose your light fixtures in aluminum-foil-lined boxes. No one does that! No, if you have a light fixture, you leave it uncovered, so that when you turn it on it gives light to everyone in the house. Well, God is not foolish; He doesn't hide His light. God has made you shine for Him. You are supposed to disseminate light in this world. You are supposed to be a beacon of hope.

### **C. The Application: Don't Hide Your Light!**

So how does Jesus apply this truth? He says that you must not hide your light. As you can, speak about the truth. As you can, live a life in accordance with the truth. Let people see that there's a

better way. Pray for the Spirit to fill you so full that you can't help but shine! You are supposed to be obvious as a Christian. Remember that old question, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict?" Well, Jesus asks that question. Are you letting your light shine before men? Are you keeping God's law, telling people the truth as you have opportunity, and contributing time, money, and prayer to the task of evangelism and missions? The need is great. The world is a dark place. It's a truism, and everybody believes it. But we have the light! Let's not keep it to ourselves. Let's not try to hide our beliefs. Let's be bold in our witness. Again, the idea is not to be stupid or obnoxious. But we can all say more and do more to let our light shine before men. It's not about us and our lights; it's about the True Light, the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to see Him shine everywhere, in every heart.

#### **D. The Goal: The Father Glorified**

Why do we want to see this? Why do we want people to see our good works? Not so that they are really impressed with us. "Wow, that Christian is so brilliant! Wow, that Christian is so salty!" No. You are supposed to let your light shine in such a way that men glorify your Heavenly Father. All the time in the Gospels, after you read about Jesus doing a miracle, you read that people were amazed and glorified God.

Our goal should be to live like that--that wherever we go, people will glorify God because of us. Notice that Jesus says that this happens when our light shines and when men see our good works. To be salt and light, you have to be doing good works. If you want to see God glorified, you have to be doing good works.

This is possible only by reflecting the light of the world. How much electricity would it take to light up the moon? We certainly could not afford to keep the moon lit artificially. But the Sun powers it for free. In the same way, if you try to conjure up light from inside yourself, you will only burn out. Fast. Instead, you must seek to reflect the light of the world. Let the Sun of Righteousness shine on you by eagerly pursuing the means of grace, and then know that you will naturally reflect that light back out to those around you.

Politicians have appropriated this image of the city on a hill because it's so powerful--but it applies to the church and to the Christian, not to the United States of America or to any other earthly nation. Do you as an individual want to be a light? Do you want us as a church to be a light? Then seek the Sun of Righteousness. In His light we will see light, and we will shine light. "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear" (Mat 13:43). Amen.