

**The Sermon on the Mount: Salt and Light**  
**Ephesians 5:8-14 and Matthew 5:13-16**  
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Earlier this month I had breakfast with a couple of friends. Like me, they are moms to Millennials, those 20-somethings that are in the throes of finishing degrees and getting launched into adulthood. These are two women I've known the better part of a decade, and we have that kind of relationship where we can share hard things, ask one another hard questions, and know we will find love and support.

On this particular day I inquired about one of their children and the conversation that ensued is one I've continued to think about ever since. My friend shared that her eldest daughter has been dating a young man who was raised with an entirely different set of values than the values that were taught and lived in their household. In her daughter's own words, she said, "Mom, you don't think like most people." She went on to describe a family whose primary value and goal is to "get ahead" which they define as having a big house, a nice car, more money and more "things." Their worldview is shaped by a pervasive cynicism and an attitude of superiority over how well educated and "successful" they are. Even relationships are seen in large part with an eye to how they advance one's own position or cause.

Many of you are not at all surprised by this conversation. You regularly work or interact with people who are all about their image, their career, their achievements, the power or money they wield or at least want to wield. To describe our culture as self-absorbed is not a stretch; rather, it is a sad observation of the truth, and the evidence of it gets constantly paraded across our television and computer screens. Please don't get me wrong—I'm not pessimistic about us. There is nothing new under the sun, as Ecclesiastes says, and human beings have always been self-centered and driven by our greed and fears. What this conversation did for me was remind me of how radically different Jesus' call to discipleship really is. When we gather here for worship on a day like today, we are making an audacious statement—that we are not the center of the universe, and the Person who *is* the center of the universe has something to say about who we are and how we live. If you've been going to church for a long time, it's easy to forget how nonsensical and downright weird we look to the rest of the world.

In the Beatitudes Jesus describes the character of the person who would be his follower. In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, which we begin exploring today, Jesus describes how the Christian is to live in the world, and he immediately begins by likening us to salt and light.

To a first-century listener, these metaphors would have had much more impact than they usually have with us. In the ancient world salt was widely used for a variety of purposes. It was a preservative, certainly, and it seasoned food, just as it does today. But, it was also used to fertilize soil and ratify covenants. It had purposes in worship as well—sacrifices, cleansing, purifying and signifying loyalty were all ways in which salt was regularly used. Whether we focus on its culinary, preservative, or liturgical functions, the point is that salt was an essential commodity in Jesus' day, and it didn't—and still doesn't—take a lot of it to have significant results.

Similarly, a relatively small amount of light can make a big difference. A beacon of light in the right place can safely guide a traveler along their path or usher someone into safe harbor. A lamp can illumine a house, thereby making a host of other activities possible, long after the sun has set. Right outside my bedroom window there is a street lamp, so my bedroom is never totally dark, and in our urban setting we have so much light pollution that we have to leave town if we want to really see the stars. But, Jesus' audience didn't have such challenges. When the sun went down, their day was done unless a candle or lamp could be found to dispel the darkness that descended.

Salt and light are useful, and they are indispensable to the way life is lived. By comparing us to salt and light, Jesus is making a bold statement about who we are and what our presence as Christians means in the world. No, the church is not indispensable, at least not on the surface of things. Gone is the era when the church was at the center of society. Gone is the time when church leaders were admired and their opinions mattered in public discourse. Gone are the days when the church's ethics were lifted up as a guide to appropriate behavior. As my breakfast conversation reminded me, people make up their own rules and values, largely without reference to anything outside of or bigger than themselves and their sense of right and wrong as they see it at any given moment.

But, it was no different in Jesus' day, and we need to remember that. The early disciples had no political or cultural clout. They were an odd lot of fishermen, homemakers, tax collectors, and eventually, former Pharisees and assorted Greco-Romans. They were small in number; they had no organized

church. There were no mission or vision statements. According to every standard by which we currently measure the health of congregations, the early church would be deemed anemic at best.

In fact, none of the things that seem to us to be measures of strength are conditions Christ sets for usefulness in God's kingdom. Notice that Jesus does not say, "You *should* be the salt of the earth" nor does he say, "You *will* be the light of the world." Consistent with the Beatitudes, becoming salt and light is not something we can set about doing ourselves, as if we can make ourselves into something useful for God's kingdom. Nor is it just an eschatological hope, something that we will finally live into at the end of time. Jesus says, "You *are* the salt of the earth," and "You *are* the light of the world." Right now. Right here. Already.

So what does it mean for us to be salt and light today? Let's start by thinking about the nature of salt and light. Both are God-given; they are elements in nature, rather than things that humans must produce. So it is with the faithful who follow Jesus. As disciples, we are not self-made. Rather we are created by pure grace, out of the love and will of God.

Neither salt nor light is rare. They are the most ordinary of elements, and so it is with us. Christ's disciples are valuable not because the world deems us a tradable commodity or because we are rare and costly. Rather, we are common and humble, people whose existence could easily be overlooked.

Still, both salt and light are essential to life. They are good for the world, and their value is found in their usefulness. So it is with the church. Our goal is not to be valuable according to the world's standards; our worth is not measured by whether we have the largest budget or the biggest attendance or the most popular youth program. Like ordinary salt, or ordinary light, our goal is to be beneficial, useful, life-giving elements in the world. To the extent we stay true to this calling, we give glory to God.

There is a fascinating juxtaposition in the metaphors Jesus chooses to use to describe discipleship. His followers are to be hidden, like salt, yet also visible, like light. This juxtaposition points to the truth that we are to embody God's kingdom, a kingdom that is fundamentally different from the kingdoms of this world, starting with how it defines power and success. Instead of measuring success by the prominence of our congregation, perhaps we could look instead to whether our church is a place for safe and honest conversation, where people of all ages and

stages can share doubts and fears and all the ways they don't have it together—and know they will be welcomed with grace and compassion and encouraged to grow in their walk with God.

Instead of measuring our worth by how powerful and wealthy our members are, perhaps we could look instead at the ways we serve the weak and the poor—the relationships we build with new immigrants or disadvantaged children or those who don't have jobs or who struggle to put food on the table. What if our effectiveness as disciples does not depend on success according to the world's standards, but is measured instead by the acts of love, mercy and justice that we do both individually and collectively?

We do not do these acts of loving service, or “good works,” as Jesus calls them, in order to feel better about ourselves or to draw attention to ourselves or enhance our status. Still less do we do them to earn something from God, as if our acceptance or salvation depends on them. We do them, instead, because we are made for them. People who are yielding to the work of God's Spirit, who are being formed as peacemakers, as those with pure hearts, as humble men and women who know their own poverty of spirit, act in loving, merciful and just ways because doing these good works is one and the same as “being who we really are.” We do them not to gain stature but as the overflow of the stature we already enjoy in the presence of God.

There is one last feature of salt and light that is important to note. The primary function of salt in Jesus' time was to avoid something negative: it prevented decay. The function of light is positive: it illumines darkness. As Christians we are to exert a similarly double influence on our world—a negative influence in the sense of arresting society's decay and a positive influence in bringing light into the darkness. It is one thing to stop the spread of evil; it is another to promote the spread of truth, justice, mercy and goodness. This dual function calls us to be courageous in speaking out against evil, and our denunciation goes hand in hand with our proclamation of the truth of the Gospel.

As disciples we are to be in tune with God and the actions and attitudes that are consistent with God's kingdom and God's ways of working in the world. By comparing us to salt and light Jesus makes clear that we are to be a distinctive and unique kind of community that influences the world for good by bringing God's kingdom to bear in every aspect of life. God intends us to penetrate the world. We have no business remaining snug and content in our elegant little ecclesiastical salt shakers or gathered together in holy huddles shielded from the world. Our place is

to be rubbed into the culture around us and to be a beacon of hope to those who inevitably discover the emptiness of the world's promises. This is the way to true blessedness, Jesus says, and it brings honor and glory to God. Amen.