

Turn On the Light
Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus obviously has a high opinion of us. He says that we are the salt of the earth. I know what you may be thinking - that doesn't seem like high praise; really now, how glamorous is salt. A young man trying to impress a young woman would probably prefer to say "I'm a computer programmer" rather than "I'm a salt salesman." Salt doesn't cost much and is readily available, so I'm thinking we sometimes fail to appreciate its sterling qualities. But think for a moment about salt...

Salt flavors food so that it becomes palatable. A little salt makes the difference between food that we love and food that we hate. Did you ever begin to eat a bowl of soup only to discover that the cook left out the salt? What a shock! You anticipated one taste, but got another. I am always surprised at how grievous is the absence of salt in food.

How many of you, like me have been "advised" by a doctor to eliminate salt from your diet? For me, that takes all the pleasure out of eating and most of the pleasure out of life. Was he seriously suggesting to stick to his no salt diet? I'm thinking it might be better to live with salt a few less years than a bland few extra years without salt. Right?

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth!" You are important! You bring Godly flavor to the world in which you live! You bring the flavor of *love* to the world! You bring the flavor of *joy* to the world! You bring the flavor of *service* to the world. "You are the salt of the earth!"

Of course, salt does more than add flavor. Salt also preserves. It is not easy for us to remember how important salt used to be as a preservative before the invention of refrigeration. In Jesus' day, people salted meat and other foods to prevent them from spoiling.

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth!" We, the church, serve as a "preservative" in our world. Of course, it is not we, but Christ, who saves the world. But we, the church, keep faith alive in our world, and our influence helps Christ save the world. When Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth!" he's talking to us. You're God's salt. I'm God's salt. God has made us partners in the grand enterprise of saving/preserving the world.

Of course, salt isn't always pleasant. Did you ever get salt in a cut on your hand? That stings - it hurts! I was reading an article by Donald Bloesch where he is talking about the church's role as the salt of the earth. He says:

"We are called to be, not the honey of the world, but the salt of the earth. Salt stings on an open wound...but it also saves one from gangrene."

So the Christian's saving role in our world will not always be popular, will it? Jesus said that people had always persecuted the prophets. The prophets were people who spoke for God. Why would anyone persecute people who speak for God? They were persecuted because they told the truth - and sometimes the truth stings like salt in an open wound! Salt is not always welcome; Christ's disciples were and are not always welcome. A.W. Tozer put it this way. He says: "To be right with God has often meant to be in trouble with men."

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth!" That means that we will not always be popular. Sometimes we will be unpopular. Jesus goes on to say:

"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (v. 13).

We, in the church, are always tempted to lose our saltiness. We are tempted to tell people what they want to hear, because you can get rich telling people what they want to hear. You can fill the pews by telling people what they want to hear. Jesus offended people by telling the truth, and Jesus' disciples have offended people by telling the truth. But it is easy to lose our nerve! People might get angry if we tell the truth. They might walk away.

And this can be a fine line. When people respond in anger, we must ask, "Am I a prophet/am I speaking for God, or am I simply a pain? Am I speaking the truth, or am I simply being insensitive?" Those are never easy questions to answer, but we must ask them. In any event, we must hear Jesus when he says: "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot"...

Jesus also says, "You are the light of the world." That is quite a tribute! In another place, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5). If Jesus is the light of the world and we are the light of the world, it sounds as if we and Jesus are the same. But Jesus is the sun and we are the moon. The sun burns brightly and provides light to the entire solar system. It depends not on the planets or moons for its light. It generates its own light, and gives light and life to all around it. Jesus is the sun.

The moon, on the other hand, is cold and lifeless. By itself, the moon gives no light. But when the moon stands in the proper position in relation to the sun, it bathes the earth in reflected sunlight – while we call it moon glow, it is really sunglow. Jesus is the sun, and we are the moon. When we stand in proper relationship to him - when we reflect his light - we beautify and enrich all around us.

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," and he says, "You are the light of the world." But we have no light but his - and that is all the light that our world needs. Without the light

of the sun, S-U-N, the world would quickly die. Without the light of the son, S-O-N, the world would quickly die.

Jesus says: "You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp, and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (vv. 14-16).

Note the purpose. Jesus doesn't call us to shine just to make people happy. He doesn't call us to shine to make ourselves popular. Jesus tells us to shine so that people "may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Jesus came to this earth to let people see what God is like. Now he calls us to do likewise. He says: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Our personal conduct, then, becomes critical. If we claim to belong to Christ but our behavior belongs to Satan - to the world, how can we draw anyone to Christ? And so Jesus says: "Whoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" (vv. 19-20).

We might be tempted to discount those verses by saying that the scribes and Pharisees were pretty bad guys - but they weren't. They were pretty good guys. But Jesus calls us to be even better. Why? So that people may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. He put us here to draw people to his love, and we can do that only by the witness of lives well-lived.

In preparation for this message I read a story about Benjamin Franklin. Franklin decided that the city of Philadelphia needed lights on its streets. You've been to Philly and have

seen their cobblestone streets. How would you like to walk on them in the dark of night? Lights would definitely keep people from stumbling on those uneven cobblestones. How would you like to walk Philly streets in the dark of night? Lights would certainly discourage thieves. Lights would make the city a much more wonderful place to live.

So how do you think Franklin persuaded the people of Philadelphia to install streetlights? Did he hire a consultant to draw up charts showing the positive effects on crime prevention? No, Franklin didn't hire a consultant. Did he go individually to each member of the Assembly to build political support for his scheme? No, he didn't lobby the city's power-brokers. Did he go door to door, persuading his neighbors, one by one, to cooperate and sign a petition? No, he didn't go door to door.

Franklin knew the power of example. So he set out to persuade the people of Philadelphia by a simple demonstration project. He bought an attractive lantern, polished the glass, and placed it on a long bracket extending from the front of his house. Each evening, he lit the lantern. His neighbors noticed the warm glow in front of his house. When they walked at night, they said, "Wow this is pretty neat!" Where they had walked oh so carefully, they now could walk confidently. Where they had feared thieves lurking in the dark, now there was no dark...

So a neighbor down the street bought a lantern for the front of his house. And then a neighbor down the street the other direction bought a lantern for his house. And people from adjacent neighborhoods were drawn to the light, and began to claim it for their neighborhoods. They didn't lobby the legislature; they simply bought lanterns and placed them in front of their houses. And the light spread. And the City of Brotherly Love became the City of Evening Light. All because Ben Franklin showed them what one person could do.

Jesus says: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

One commentary I read put it this way: "You are the light of the world, but the switch must be turned on." (Thumb story)

When you leave church today - when you return to your weekly routine, consider how your life affects the lives of those around you. Before you speak to a neighbor, or a friend, or even your family, consider whether you are enveloping them in darkness or surrounding them with light. Then: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Amen.

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August 115, 2021 Hatfield Church of the Brethren