

Series Sermon on the Mount

Scripture Matthew 5:13-16

The Beatitudes are a wonderfully effective way to introduce the distinctive characteristics of people who are citizens of God's kingdom. Jesus used the Beatitudes to point out to His disciples the radical differences between the ways of God and the attitudes and habits of the Jewish people. Each of the statements made by Jesus would have surprised, even shocked, His Jewish listeners because they went against their commonly held assumptions. Even today, many scholars think that the lifestyle required in the Beatitudes is impractical and irrelevant to the conditions of the modern age. However, for individuals who truly want to be connected to God, the Beatitudes represent basic fundamental precepts which remain the same in every age and cultural circumstance

The Beatitudes are just the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. The entire teaching in the Gospel of Matthew covers three chapters. Immediately after He introduced the characteristics of kingdom people, Jesus gave two illustrations to show the impact that such people can have on the world. The verses in this message explain the relationship of kingdom people to the world.

Read Matthew 5:13-16

The final beatitude we thought about in the previous message described the attitude of the world toward those who live according to Kingdom standards. Jesus stated that those who practice righteousness are subject to persecution, but He said that the threat of persecution should not deter people from living righteously because there were benefits to those who pursued righteousness. They would be blessed by God because of their faithful endurance, and they could "rejoice and be glad because they would have a great reward in heaven."

The passage today turns this picture around. It describes the response of kingdom people to those who persecute them. God's people can have a positive influence upon the world in spite of the difficulties they face.

God wants the good news about His kingdom to be proclaimed to every person on earth. That is what Jesus was doing in His public ministry. Public outreach requires God's people to be in the world even though they are not part of the world. Yes, God's ways are totally different from the ways of the world, but God wants His people to have a tight connection with the world in order that His kingdom might expand on earth. He wants His people to function in society in ways similar to how salt and light function.

Let's think about salt. A small amount of the stuff can make a significant difference to whatever it is added. For example, "salty" people can have a purifying and preserving function in human societies. Without God's spiritual influence, there is moral decay and the deterioration of society. I have traveled in Tibetan Buddhist regions. There is a spiritual darkness and bondage which permeates every aspect of the Tibetan Buddhist culture — educationally, economically, technologically, and morally. The same situation generally holds true in Hindu regions, and in areas of Africa and South America where the people are animists, and in post-Christian areas such as Europe.

In contrast, wherever the Christian faith has taken root in society and culture, there has been improvement in health and life expectancy, living conditions, educational levels, technological achievements, matters of human rights and justice, etc. You can trace through human history and discover that this is true. The spiritual salt and light dispersed by kingdom people has kept the world from deteriorating into chaos and has helped the cultures and societies of earth to advance in remarkably diverse ways.

When Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," His listeners would have understood several things. Most Galileans were familiar with the needs of fishermen. Boats, nets, and salt were all very important to the fishing industry. In the absence of refrigeration, salt was used to preserve the daily catch. The fishermen would sprinkle handfuls of salt on the fish as they were placed in baskets ready to carry to the marketplaces.

By association, then, the listeners understood that disciples were to be like a preservative. Sprinkled among the human "fish" of the earth, corruption and decay would be hindered by the spiritual qualities of kingdom people. As I stated earlier, it is an observable fact that godly living retards the natural tendencies of evil and sin. Kingdom people have the privilege and responsibility to keep as many people as possible from the decay of moral corruption.

The people on the hillside in Galilee would have had yet another idea about salt. Salt was used to season foods that were bland in taste. Food that is blah and flat tasting can be rejuvenated with a dash of salt. In the same way, kingdom people can add a spiritual zest, and provide a pleasant savor, to the lives of non-believers to help them find more meaning and purpose.

Think about our society. Many people are desperately bored, living without any purpose other than to satisfy their own selfish interests, existing without enthusiasm. When we consider all the things that people do for excitement and kicks, it is rather obvious that many of them are desperate for alternatives to the sameness of life. Consider the risks that people take for a few thrills. Consider the damage they do to themselves in emotional and physical well-being and in their interpersonal relationships. Consider how much money people spend on entertainment and recreation in an effort to find satisfaction or just a little distraction. The kingdom person can create a spiritual thirst in others through the demonstration of a righteous lifestyle and through the sharing of the good news of salvation.

St. Augustine, in his writings entitled “The Confessions,” said, in speaking of God, “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” The kingdom person who has himself/herself experienced that rest, is then able to point other people toward a relationship with God.

There is a third idea that the people on the mountainside might have had. This idea is related to the special use of salt in middle eastern countries, where bargains, agreements, and negotiations are often sealed by the parties eating a pinch of salt. The salt signified that the parties would be faithful in honoring the conditions of the agreement.

This symbolic use of salt extends back into the Old Testament Law, which required every offering to be sprinkled with salt before it would be accepted by God. (*see Numbers 18:19; Leviticus 2:13; II Chronicles 13:5.*) Salt was a symbol of God’s faithfulness. The people sprinkled salt on their offerings as their way of acknowledgement that God would do what He said He would do.

Jesus looked over the assembled crowd on the mountainside and said that they had the unbelievable privilege and responsibility to affect society in good ways, just as grains of salt affect every substance to which they are added. However, Jesus knew that His disciples might have problems living up to His standards. Perhaps that is why He added the warning in verse 13. Jesus gave the warning as a question: “If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?” He said that salt which had become insipid was “good for nothing.”

From what I understand from Scripture, God has no alternative game plan than the use of His people to bring rejuvenation to a perishing humanity. The kingdom person who fails to be what he is intended to be is useless to both God and mankind. The phrase “loses its saltiness” is translated in other places in the New Testament as “fool” or “foolish” (*Romans 1:22; I Corinthians 1:20*). The point is that God’s people would be fools to lose their distinctive kingdom character through spiritual complacency.

There is nothing so despised, ridiculed, or dishonored as the professing believer who does not manifest any distinctive, salty, spiritual characteristics. Such a person would be a hypocrite. The same is true of local church fellowships. From the standpoint of non-believers, spiritual mediocrity is worthless and irrelevant. On the other hand, there is a healthy respect for the believers who stand up for their faith. Even if the world doesn’t agree with them and persecutes them for their boldness, the “sold-out” believer is an effective witness for God. Our ability to make the ways of God known in the world depends on our being different from the people of the world.

The second illustration begins with the statement, “You are the light of the world.” Elsewhere in Scripture Jesus said, “While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world” (*John 9:5*). Jesus knew the day would come when he would leave the world, and that at His ascension into heaven, His disciples would become the world’s light. Kingdom people have the responsibility to continue the ministry Jesus started.

One of the unique properties of light is that it is self-evidencing. If you can see, you have light. There is no mistake about the presence or absence of light. Generally speaking, kingdom people are to be just as self-evidencing. There should be no mistake about the essence of God’s people. Society should be able to recognize the people of God for what they are, an extension of Jesus Christ.

Another unique property of light is that it banishes darkness. Light and darkness cannot co-habit the same place. When the light shines, the darkness disappears. Jesus stated, "He who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (*John 8:12*). The light within the kingdom person is supposed to be abundantly obvious to everyone around. In fact, it should be as obvious as a city situated on a hill. Such a city cannot be hidden or disguised. In the same way, the kingdom person should not try to hide his/her spiritual qualities.

Jesus then pointed out that light can be used appropriately or foolishly. No one, for example, would light a lamp in order to hide it so its light could not shine. The listeners on the mountainside would have understood the absurdity of trapping light under a bowl. They knew that for a light to be useful, it had to be positioned in some prominent way so that it could shine as far and brightly as possible.

Jesus wanted His listeners to understand their options. They could suppress their lights with the result that their lives would make no impact on the world, or they could let their lights shine in a strategic way with the result that everyone around them would benefit. God wants His people to be the source of spiritual enlightenment and to give people spiritual orientation.

Jesus was very clear about what God's people were to do. They were to "shine so that others may see their good works and praise their Father in heaven." Good works are works which can be seen. They are works which attest to the faithfulness and power of God.

A word of caution is appropriate here. The purpose of good works is that the Father in heaven may be glorified. Light is not very helpful when it draws attention to itself. Just think what it is like to try to move around while looking directly at the light. The purpose of light is the illumination of objects, to keep people from stumbling over objects which cannot be seen in the darkness. In the same way, kingdom people do not do good works for the purpose of self-glorification. They are to help people to see God and let God be praised.

Jesus used these two illustrations, salt and light, to describe the responsibilities of kingdom people. Like a little pinch of salt, individual believers might think of themselves as insignificant and powerless in a chaotic and disintegrating society. Yet they have the ability to influence those around them and, collectively, to permeate their entire culture and society. Salt has unusual properties that far exceed its value. So it is with the members of God's kingdom. God can use them to be a positive spiritual influence in their world.

Concerning our ability to help people to see God, there is a hymn which was written and sung by children many years ago. The words sum up our responsibility:

Jesus bids us shine with a clear, pure light,
Like a little candle burning in the night;
In this world of darkness we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Jesus bids us shine, first of all for Him;
Well He sees and knows it if our light is dim;
He looks down from heaven, sees us shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Jesus bids us shine, then, for all around
Many kinds of darkness in this world abound:
Sin, and want, and sorrow; we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Jesus bids us shine, as we work for Him,
Bringing those that wander from the paths of sin;
He will ever help us, if we shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.