

We return to the Sermon on the Mount today in Matthew's Gospel for this 5th Week in Epiphany. Here, Jesus is in Galilee. And He sits down and teaches His Disciples. You can picture Jesus sitting down—and looking up at the crowds—with the Sea glistening behind Him. I am sure the view was incredible. But the content of Jesus' sermon—for those with ears to hear—was even more incredible.

We touched on the Beatitudes last week—the blessings of God in Christ Jesus. And we aren't quite done with them yet. But now, after these Gospel-filled statements—Jesus speaks about our identity. And the words are a little surprising.

Here, Jesus calls us the light of the world. It's an uncomfortable statement. It sounds like He has it backwards. I like the idea of *Him* being the Light of the World. And Jesus says as much in John 8. But even with what Jesus says here, we get to see why He says the same the same of us. He says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The ideas are clearly connected. Being the light of the world is all about reflecting the light of Christ. It is walking with Him. It is about our communion with Him. It is not just knowing about God, it is knowing God.

I think it is much like Moses after forty days up on Sinai communing with God. He comes back down and his face is still literally glowing with the glory of God. We hear it this way in Exodus 34, "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God."

Jesus wants something like that for His disciples. Not the literal shine of a bright face. But He would have our lives glow with the glory of God. The world really should see Jesus in us. Light casts our darkness. This is what it means to be image-bearers—to bear the name of God.

Jesus also talks about His Disciples as salt. And of course, it is important to understand what salt is good for. Salt preserves. Salt adds taste. And we want to think of this in connection with Jesus as well. Salt is not about being a little salty—with our language or lifestyle. In fact, it is much more like what Jesus does in our world. In this sense, salt is the Word of God. And both theology and life begin with the revelation of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus calls His Disciples the salt of the earth—He transfers His task on earth to us. We are caught up into the life of Christ—into the ministry of Christ. And we quickly understand that following Christ is a new way of living—along with a new set of priorities.

It is interesting. Notice that the Disciples aren't given a choice in the matter. Jesus says that they are the light of the world. They are the salt of the earth. And so, they are. And this Word is for us too. His word is performative. His words do what He says. No appeal is made.

Whether we want to be or not—we are salt and light—by the power of the call of Jesus that reaches us. The only decision possible is Jesus' decision. Now, we have to *be* who we are—or we are not following Jesus. And so, we see discipleship as a visible act

which separates us from the world. It is as visible as a spotlight shining into the night sky. The desire to hide from discipleship—to be invisible—is not an option.

Now, this passage is often used as an evangelism text. We are salt and light—and so go witness about Jesus on the streetcorner. But that diminishes the meaning of this text. And yelling at someone on the streetcorner—or even on social media—doesn't change hearts and minds. Instead, we go back to the Beatitudes to grasp what it means to be salt and light.

Last week, I encouraged you to hear the Beatitudes as blessings. And I don't want to diminish that in any way. Many of the Beatitudes promise us future blessings in Christ—comfort—mercy—even the promise to inherit the earth—and to see God.

The first and ninth blessings reminds us of Jesus present work among His disciples—for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven. For those who are poor in spirit—and for those who are persecuted because of righteousness—the rule and reign of God had begun. And this blessing continues with us today.

But my point is this: this blessed way of life is something visible. It is something for the world to see. To pick up a third metaphor—with salt and light—Jesus says a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. And returning to light, He says, you don't light a lamp and then cover it so no one can see by its light.

And so, Jesus says, “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.” But we don't get to decide what those good works are. And it certainly is not about holding the right views on social media—and then telling everyone else how much better you are—without actually doing anything at all.

Let me just mention two of Jesus' blessings—two Beatitudes—that make us salt and light. Back in verse nine, Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called Sons of God.” Jesus' followers are called to peace. We don't just have peace—we are called to make peace.

This is a huge theme in Scripture—one we do well to understand—one we want to form in our own lives. It indicates completeness or wholeness in every area of life—especially in our relationship with God—and then also our relationships with our neighbors.

As those redeemed by Christ—as those formed in lives of discipleship—we bring God's peace to our little corner of the world. We live at peace with one another—at work, at home, at church—even at the restaurant today. Jesus is our peace and His peace flows from us.

In Romans 12, Paul says, “Live in harmony with one another. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

And to do this, we renounce strife and conflict and resentment. We overlook offenses. We give up grumbling and complaining. Arguments, family tension, drama, demanding our own way—never serve the cause of Christ. And so, we are not difficult, moody, selfish people.

We are patient and kind—even merciful—as one of the other Beatitudes suggests. We preserve community when others destroy it. We bring Christ’s healing to our relationships. We are people of peace. And in this way, we are salt and light in the world.

A second beatitude gives us more direction. Blessed are the pure in heart—Jesus says—for they shall see God. How is your heart? Do you give thought to the condition of your soul? Now, Christ is the one who makes our hearts pure. But, often we lack a desire for His work. There is a particular disposition to the redeemed heart.

Being a peacemaker is a very public application of salt and light. People can see if you are peaceful—or always pursuing conflict. But purity of heart is something more internal. It is a heart of repentance. A heart that longs for personal renewal and reformation. It is a life of adoration for God—a life of prostration—a particular posture before God—detached from our own will—living freely in the will of God. It is communion with the living God—a vibrant, relational life that unfolds over time.

The heart must be warmed by prayer—softened by repentance—and emptied of self. I think we often forget about the First Commandment. And it is the most important one. We memorized it years ago—and I hope it still sticks with you. “You shall have no other gods.” And the meaning in the Small Catechism is fundamental—something we should have also learned by heart, “We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.”

As a human being, we were first made to be in right relationship with God. We should desire His presence and guidance in our lives. It is His voice we need ringing in our ears. We should love His commands. This should be our primary passion. We should know God best.

During Holy Week in Jerusalem, one of the Pharisees asked Jesus a question. And it was a good question. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And because there was no guile in this question, Jesus answered. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.”

We are quickly approaching the Lenten season. Ash Wednesday is February 18. And I want to encourage us to give some attention to the condition of our hearts before God this year. Remember that Christ comes to save us—to heal our souls—to reform our lives—to restore us to God.

Our Old Testament reading takes up the issue of fasting. And we will talk about it a little more next week. Fasting is not just about giving something up. It is not about proving our sense of self-discipline. It is about making space for Christ in our lives.

Whether we give up gossip or gluttony or distractions—and I have a specific challenge for us in that regard—take a look at your newsletter—and we will talk about it next week—we make changes in our lives to better quiet the noise.

We focus on hearing and loving the voice of Christ. We follow in Jesus steps—as He fasted in the wilderness. We take this time to make sure we are on the path that leads to Him. Lent is a time to give ourselves over fully to the purposes and direction of God—as we love what He has commanded—as we love what He has done for us—as we love Him.

Well, you might ask, what does purity of heart have to do with us being salt and light? And my answer is *everything*. People will notice—and give glory to God—when our

lives are consistent with our faith. The pure heart becomes a vessel of light—a window through which God’s presence is known, seen, and adored. The pure heart is meek, humble, not envious, not rebellious. It is full of trust.

Again, the heart must be warmed by prayer, softened by repentance, emptied of self. And the real medicine for our hearts is the prayer we find all over the Scriptures—and in in the liturgy of the Church, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Prayer and fasting awaken the soul. God uses these means to conform us to His will. And the Lenten season casts out the noise of the world and makes room for Christ in us. If we want to see God, then let us seek purity—not just outwardly, but of heart. Let us call on the Lord with sincerity, with silence, with stillness. The promise remains—the pure in heart shall see God.

This is God’s will for us. This is why we are on the planet. We are to be salt and light. Our lives are to be so categorically different—that the world notices. We are to be people of peace. We are to be pure in heart. We are to reflect the purposes of God to the world with our lives and faith.

Our lives reflect the life of Jesus. And our goal is that in the end—others will glorify God through us—because of Jesus Christ. In the brightness of His light, our light will shine for the blessing and salvation of the world.

The life of the Beatitudes is how this happens—all nine of them. Visit them again this week in Matthew 5. We are rescued by Christ from sin—and into the life that He has prepared for his own. These practices keep us from the frustrations of meaninglessness. These practices give our lives meaning. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+