

When I think of the *Sermon on the Mount*, I picture Jesus sitting on a beautiful hillside. The birds are chirping. A gentle breeze tempers the hot Galilean sun. Creation is grateful to host its Lord.

And then, His disciples sit down around him. The crowds are off at a distance. And Jesus picks a single daisy—or maybe one of the lilies of the field. And he stares at it as He begins to teach.

And the words of this sermon are as beautiful as the setting in my mind. But they are also serious. They can be both things.

Jesus isn't there to talk about the weather, or the Superbowl, or the latest balloon spying on our backyards. His topic is the kingdom of heaven. And nothing could be more important. I hope the disciples were listening. I hope the crowds were listening. And we should listen too—as if Jesus is right here with us—because Jesus is right here with us.

We come to a new section of the *Sermon on the Mount* today in our Gospel reading. Here, Jesus moves from what the disciples are—to an application of that identity. We move from the objective to the subjective.

The transition is made in the last beatitude—as we heard last week—as the disciples now begin to interact with the world. Although, as we saw, this includes the disciples being rejected by the world.

Next week, as we continue, Jesus will become shockingly clear about what He means—even to the extent that we might not like what He says. He talks about anger, lust, divorce, oaths. You will want to be here next week.

But for today, we hear that as Jesus calls disciples to Himself, we exist to be salt and light in the world. In the beatitudes, disciples are called into the grace of following Christ.

As member of the crowd, their lives had limited, selfish, and often destructive purposes. They were at odds with the kingdom of heaven. But now, they are presented as something essential—and not just to the kingdom—but to the world as well—whether the world likes it or not.

Disciples are to be meek, poor in spirit—they are to mourn over sin—they are to hunger and thirst for righteousness. But these are virtues that disciples are to manifest in the world. Thus, Jesus has a purpose—a mission—for His disciples right now—long before the Last Day and the end of the world. As those bound to Jesus alone, they are sent out as salt and light. And let's deal with both of these purposes.

There are a couple of references to salt in the New Testament. Here, of course. But we find something similar in Mark 9. The language is a little mysterious. And there are direct parallels to the *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus says, “For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Salted with fire is admittedly problematic. Salt had its place in the Mosaic sacrificial system. That might be what the reference is about. As Paul says, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

But here, it is probably a reference to the trials that all true disciples face. Even so, as we talk about salt otherwise—the thought has been—as a description of the lives of disciples—salt has two functions in the minds of His hearers.

Salt preserves—and salt adds flavor. And again, this describes the disciples—and the disciples alone—within the context of this world. Notice that Jesus says “you are the salt”—not “you should be salt.” The disciples are given no choice. All disciples are salt. Their faith makes the salt. And if they are not salt, they are not disciples.

Much has been made of this idea—of the disciples—of the church—being salt. And here I think that Christ has in mind the beatitudes—but also the commands that follow. Some have suggested that this only about the church bringing the Gospel to a lost world. It is limited to the disciples’ message.

But Jesus’ comments about disciples as the light of the world help us to get this right. Certainly, the message of the Gospel changes everything for the disciples. But Christ’s work in us when we hear His call changes our whole disposition—our identity—and our obedience to His call.

And now, the world is to see our good works—and because of them—give glory to God. Disciples serve the world by checking its moral corruption—by living with godliness and holiness. In this way, we are salt. We keep the world from perishing in rotteness.

The world needs a dash of the commandments—and not just proclaimed—but lived. We fear, love, and trust in God above all things. We lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. And thus, we bring a taste of the kingdom that is to come into a bland and corrupt world.

Thus, this is about our whole existence as disciples—that existence to which the beatitudes speak. All those who follow Jesus Christ’s call to salvation are also called to discipleship. And by that call, we are the salt of the earth.

Second, Jesus’ call promises not only the efficacy of salt, but the visible shine of light. Again, Jesus says, “You are the light,” not “You should be the light.” The call itself has made us light. It cannot be any other way. Disciples are light that is seen.

Jesus will confess in John 8, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

And because of this possession—because we have Christ—because we have the light of life—we cannot be unseen anymore. Light shines—that is just what it does. The city on a hill cannot stay hidden anymore. Salt is the answer for corruption. Light is the answer for darkness. As disciples oppose and overcome foulness, so they oppose and drive out falseness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says this about this moment in the Sermon on the Mount—and its own of my favorite quotations, “With all this, the followers of Jesus are no longer faced with a decision. The only decision possible for them has already been made. Now they have to be what they are, or they are not following Jesus. The followers are the visible community of faith; their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world—or it is not discipleship. And discipleship is as visible as light in the night, as a mountain in the flatland.”

And this is where it is important to deal with the warnings of Jesus here. To hide—to be silent—to refuse to be salt and light—is to deny the call. Christians, as the body of Christ,

cannot be hidden. It would be ridiculous to take a lamp and put it under a basket. Salt is worthless if it somehow lost its saltiness.

And of course, Jesus understands that salt doesn't lose its saltiness. Such things don't happen. But that may be precisely His point. Jesus is using as a figure something that doesn't happen in nature. All that can be done with saltless salt is to throw it out—it's only use is to be trampled underfoot. And we understand perfectly what that metaphor means.

But this is not His plan for His disciples. He wants them to continue in Him as salt and light. As we follow Christ in faith, and in obedience, in some weak way, we reflect the light of Christ to our world. And again, remember the setting. We should think of Moses as he comes down off of Mount Sinai, glowing with the very glory of God. So much so, that they had to cover his head.

And so, as we hear the Word of God, and receive the Sacrament, as we listen to Jesus—even though we aren't in an idyllic Galilee today, we walk out of here with a certain glow which, brings the light that shines on us here out into our world through our lives.

Now this certainly means that we are going to be speaking to our world those things that we hear at church. But this has great implications for how we live as well. So being salt and light is our mission. It is our purpose. This is our identity and our calling. Over the next few weeks, we are going to let Jesus tell us more about what that looks like.

But just use your imagination. Think about this. It gives us a unique purpose for our lives. We are salt in a bland world. We are light in a dark place. We are simply going to be living life in a different direction than the rest of the world. And it is going to make things interesting. As we will see.

And let me make one more comment about the rest of our reading. Here, Jesus ties our discipleship identity as salt and light to the Law and the Prophets. We shouldn't read the Sermon on the Mount as disjointed topics artificially pushed together. Jesus' thought flows with sophisticated connection. This is a beautiful sermon. And we have exactly what the Son of God intended for us.

With the coming of Christ and the blessings that are found in the beatitudes—with a renewed focus on grace—with the necessity of faith—it would be easy to assume that Jesus would draw a line of separation between the Old Testament and the New. Between the law and the gospel. But that is just not the case.

The whole Old Testament is the Word of God—even still—but it best serves to point us to Christ. Now, the righteousness that Jesus sets forth here certainly contradicts that of the Pharisees. They had so much wrong. And much of the rest of the sermon will deal with their misunderstanding of righteousness before God *and* before the world. And it is very easy for us to find ourselves in the same place.

But Jesus came to fulfill the law, not to abolish it. And, as He says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The fulfillment of the law, that Jesus speaks about here, is all wrapped up in His work on the cross.

He steps between His disciples and the law. And thus, the disciples path to the law is by way of the cross. We stand in the righteousness of Christ or we don't stand at all. This is Christian righteousness—passive righteousness—the righteousness of faith.

But this means that God's law holds a special place in our hearts. It is His righteousness that shows us the way He would have us go. Our allegiance to Christ means that we will embrace all that He has commanded.

And thus, we rejoice in what Christ has given us to do. We are to stand out in the world as His called disciples. It is just who we are. And disciples have a special look to them. We are being conformed to the image of Christ. This has implications for all the commandments. And Jesus is going to get into them going forward.

But for now, we have a new purpose in keeping them. It flows from our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. We make His Word known. We live as He has shown us in Himself. And our obedience to all that He has commanded is good for us—and good for the world. We preserve what is good—we shine out as those who love His righteousness without apology and without excuses—as salt and light.

So, picture Jesus sitting on a beautiful hillside. And you are there too. The sun is shining. The birds are singing. And after Jesus' gracious call to follow Him—the call that makes you His disciple—and after hearing the blessings of the beatitudes—Jesus now says to you, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... So, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*