

You Are Salt and Light

Subtitle

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: Jesus, Sermon on the Mount

Introduction

Have you ever lay awake at night pondering the purpose of your life? Have you wondered why you're here? Christian, do you sometimes struggle with understanding what God expects of you and wants you to do? Do you ever wonder what the ultimate purpose of the universe is?

Isn't it interesting that this curiosity is hardwired into us? We first begin to see this at about age two. If you're a parent you'll remember those days when your toddler began asking "why" to literally everything.

Me: "Do you want to eat lunch?"

Child: "Why?"

Me: "Because you're hungry?"

Child: "Why?"

Me: "Do you want to the go the park and play?"

Child: "Why?"

Me: "To enjoy the sunshine, get some exercise, and to have fun!"

Child: "Why?"

Me: ???

Something within us seeks meaning and purpose. We were created with an innate desire to find purpose and meaning in life. I think this is what the word of God is revealing when we are told that God "*has put eternity into man's heart.*"¹ There is something within us that instinctively senses that we were created for a purpose and that purpose extends far beyond what we can immediately see or experience. These words of Jesus, which Roger just read, flesh that purpose out for us a bit.

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:11.

You Are the Salt and Light

This morning we will consider together Jesus' words, "You are salt... and light..."

You Are the Salt of the Earth

First, Jesus speaks of salt. Let's read the first verse again.

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet." **Matthew 5:13 (ESV)**

You Who?

The first question is you who? Who is the salt of the earth? To whom exactly is Jesus speaking? The answer to that question is found in the previous paragraph, starting in v.11. There Jesus said,

"Blessed are *you* when others revile *you* and persecute *you* and utter all kinds of evil against *you* falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for *your* reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before *you*." **Matthew 5:11-12**

In these two sentences Jesus used the word 'you' six times. Jesus is talking to people who are being persecuted *on his account*. The 'you' to whom Jesus is speaking are the people who are bearing his name and are suffering for it. Thus, clearly Jesus is speaking to his disciples. Jesus is speaking to his followers, whom the Bible calls Christians.² If you are a Christian, then Jesus is speaking to you. Through these words, church, Jesus is speaking to us. And what is he saying?

"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet." **Matthew 5:13 (ESV)**

Stay Salty Through Persecution

Why is Jesus talking about the salt "losing its saltiness?" Most certainly it is because of the reality of persecution, about which he just spoke. The lesson on persecution was intended to prepare his disciples for *when*, not if, persecution came and to fortify them to remain faithful through it because if they do, then in heaven, as they stand before God, there awaits them a great reward. Thus, Jesus is calling his disciples to *stay salty through persecution*. He is using salt as a metaphor to help his disciples understand their purpose. He likens them with salt. If salt loses its saltiness, then its primary purpose is lost and the only thing left to do is throw it out. If his disciples allow persecution to derail them from their purpose, then they will no longer

² The disciples of Jesus were first called Christians in the city of Antioch (Acts 14:26).

be useful. Jesus does not want this to happen, so he teaches them to understand their purpose in this world by comparing them to salt.

What Good is Salt?

What good is salt? Salt is a preservative. Salt adds flavor. Salt causes thirst. Salt is everywhere.

1. Salt is a **preservative**. In the ancient world, salt was the primary means of food preservation. Salt preserves the goodness of food and prevents its decay and corruption. Salt's primary use was in preserving the usefulness of meat while at the same time preventing it from rotting. Salt was rubbed into meat, which it then draws out the water content which keeps it good and inhibits the growth of bacteria, which causes it to go bad.

The Natural Corruption of the World

This highlights a particular truth about our world. Our world is one that naturally tends toward corruption. Decay lies at the foundation of our world. There is rottenness in the heart of our existence. Thus, some outside agent must be brought in if that corruption and decay is to be delayed. Exposed meat left alone will decay and rot. However, if salt is pressed into the meat, then its useful shelf life is greatly extended and the meat is good for food and sustaining life.

The purpose of salt was to preserve goodness and forestall decay.

2. Salt adds **flavor**. Salt is a wonderful solution to tasteless food. Recently my wife and I did a ten day vegetable diet. One night she made some vegetable soup by combing a can of every vegetable we had in the pantry. When we sat down to eat, she said, "It's a little bland, but just add some salt." I tasted it and agreed with her, then followed her instructions. I added salt and it was wonderful. Salt adds flavor to food. Salt is delicious on watermelon and cantaloupe.³
3. Salt causes **thirst**. Salt pulls water out of your body, thus when you're eating salty chips or peanuts, or salty food, you'll soon find yourself craving water. Salt makes you thirsty.
4. Salt is **everywhere**. Salt is ubiquitous. It's in every restaurant. It's on every table. You can find in little jars or in small paper pouches. It's so common it comes free with any food purchase. To test this, I ordered a coffee at Dunkin' the other day and asked for some salt. I received a very strange look, but I was handed some salt free of charge.

Salt preserves, adds flavor, causes thirst, and is found everywhere.

³ I know it sounds strange, but don't knock it until you've tried it (unless you have high blood pressure, then don't).

How Are Christians Like Salt?

So, Jesus, how are your disciples like salt in this world? What can we learn from salt that might help us this week—at work, school, and home—to embrace your purpose for your people in this world?

1. **Christians, like salt, ought to preserve what is good and prevent what is bad.** Christians ought to preserve what is good and prevent what is bad. Christians ought to preserve goodness and prevent badness. We ought to preserve what is good and right and prevent the ascendancy of what is bad and wrong. The purpose of Christians is to be an antidote to rottenness in the world.

The fundamental reason our world is corrupt and naturally tends towards death and decay is spiritual before it is physical. Death and decay entered our world when sin entered our world.⁴ Before sin entered our world, there was no death and there was no decay. In the beginning, God said everything was “very good”⁵ before sin entered our world. The physical problems of corruption and decay in this world stem from a spiritual problem. Thus, the cure to the physical problems is spiritual at root. If we focus only on fixing physical problems, without addressing the spiritual root, then we will be like the fool who energetically paints the wood siding of his house, while the foundation of the house sits on sand. Christians are like salt in the world when we help others understand this. Part of your purpose as a Christian is to help people see that our primary problem is spiritual, rather than merely physical.

Christians are the salt of the earth when we are *leaders in doing good*. In other words, when we *do* what the world is *not* doing. No matter if all the world is embracing the doing of what is wrong, we must do what is good. Christians ought to be the first to do what is good, and right, and true, even if all others are doing what is evil, wrong, and false.

One Turkey Leading Through Danger

This week I noticed a string of six turkeys walking in single file line across my yard. The lead turkey approached the very busy Cambridge Road, which runs in front of my house. He stopped at the end of my drive, as the cars were whizzing by. When he stopped all the other turkeys stopped, including the last turkey who was standing in the middle of my yard. Then, apparently seeing a gap, the lead turkey slowly walked out into the road. As he did, all the other turkeys also became their slow march forward. After the first two crossed, the car quickly bolted through the line. I wondered if the latter four would turn and go a different route, but they did not. They kept slowly marching forward. When they approached the road, they looked across the street and saw the lead turkey, who had slowed his forward march a bit while he occasionally looked back at them. The last four then very cautiously but

⁴ Genesis 2:17; 3:20; Romans 5:12.

⁵ Genesis 1:31.

deliberately entered into Cambridge Road, stopping traffic in both directions. They all marched through the danger, following their leader safely into the woods.

I thought interesting this was and how some times all it takes for good to be embraced is for one brave soul to courageously lead the way in doing good even if it is risky or dangerous or may even result in persecution. Sometimes all it takes is for one person to do good and others will follow.

- When Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the scribes and pharisees who brought only the woman and not the man caught in adultery, to him for condemnation, it was one old man who first dropped his rock and then all the others followed him.⁶
- I thought about the time in my freshman year in high school when someone from behind me pushed all my books and folders out of my hands and they went flying forward into the fray of hundreds of fast moving feet. In that moment I was certain that I would be trampled to death as I tried to recover what was lost, but an amazing thing happened. As I knelt to pick up the mess, I was not being trampled. I looked up behind me and there was Skip Borcher, the very large and intimidating senior, whom I knew only by reputation, standing with his arms outstretched, holding back the flow of students in the hallway. He looked like one of the massive cherubim inside the temple whose wings stretched out over the Ark of the Covenant touching both walls. For a second I was totally stunned. With his massive arms stretching out, every moving student in that hallway suddenly came to a complete stop. He stood looking at me with grace in his eyes, along with a slight nod of his head, as if to say, "You're safe, now get busy picking up this mess." He stood there with arms wide until I picked up every sheet of paper and then, like a giant drawbridge coming down after a ship passes under it, he lowered his arms and allowed student traffic to return to normal.

Christians can be the salt of the earth by being leaders in doing what is right. No matter what all the rest of the world is doing, Christians ought to be the first ones to do good. Part of your purpose in life, Christian, is to be a leader in doing good.

Secondly, Christians can be the salt of earth when we ***stop decay*** and ***prevent corruption***. In other words, we are the salt of the earth when *don't* do what the world *is* doing. For example, how different would the work environment be when Christians refuse to participate in all the crude jokes in the office and when we refrain from coarse and profane language. What a difference it would make if Christians stopped laughing at obscene jokes when they are told at work. People would certainly notice if you do not use profanity at work. You don't have to say anything against such joking or bad language, rather all you have to do is refuse to join the bad behavior. The apostle Paul writes,

⁶ John 8:9.

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. **Ephesians 5:4 (ESV)**

Christian, you can be the salt about which Jesus spoke of by simply refusing to allow your sense of humor and your choice of language be determined by those who do not know God. Swear words and profanity are "out of place" in the mouth of the Christian. We are like salt when we don't do what everyone else is doing. This is part of God's purpose for your life.

2. **Christians, like salt, ought to add flavor to life.** Just as salt adds flavor to food, so Christians can add flavor to life. This necessarily means that Christians are different from the people of the world. For many people, life is bland and directionless. It's pointless and meaningless. Most of the world believes that human life is nothing more than a biological accident, without purpose and without meaning. Christians, have a very different understanding of life. Life with Christ is not bland and directionless. The Bible teaches us that God himself has intentionally created every human life.⁷ Each and every person has life because God willed him or her to live. The Bible also teaches us that God's actions are purposeful and never pointless. Thus, he has a purpose for every human life. He has created us as relational beings, which exposes the truth that one of the deepest purposes for our lives is that we enjoy a relationship with him. He does not need us, but we need him.⁸ He, in his amazing grace, has chosen to give himself to us through the sending of his Son, Jesus. Thus, life for those who do not know God is insipid,⁹ but life for those who do know God is inspired.¹⁰
3. **Christians, like salt, ought to cause thirst.** Just as salt causes thirst, so Christians ought to cause thirst for God. That is, Christians ought to live in such a way that those watching them, will thirst for that which fills them. If we Christians are filled with the life-giving Spirit of Jesus, then let us be so full of life that others will thirst for the life within us. If Jesus said, "*Whoever believes in me will have flowing out of his heart rivers of living water,*"¹¹ then let us who believe in him have such living water flowing out of us that people come to us to have their spiritual thirst quenched. If the Holy Spirit of him who is one with the Father dwells within the heart of the Christian, then may the evidence of that sweet we Christians enjoy be so seen by all that they too might thirst for fullness of such communion. If salt causes thirst for earthly water, then may the Holy Spirit in us, like salt, cause thirst for the heavenly water.

⁷ Psalm 139:13-14.

⁸ Acts 17:24-26.

⁹ Tasteless.

¹⁰ That is, enlivened by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit.

¹¹ John 7:38.

4. **Christians, like salt, ought to be everywhere.** Just as salt is everywhere, so Christians ought to be everywhere. Salt is easy to find, so ought Christians to be. They ought to be found in every restaurant and at have dinner table. They ought to be in offices, factories, schools, and malls. They ought to be in business break rooms and school lunch rooms. They ought to be found in museum cafeterias and college food courts. They ought to be found in State Capitals, Town Halls, and Zoom calls. They ought to be in doctor's offices and in funeral home dining rooms. Christians ought to be everywhere. God in his word said, that "*the whole earth be filled with the glory of the Lord.*"¹² Then, let the all those who are filled with the glorious Spirit of his Son fill the earth and be found in every sector of society; in business, industry, government, education, social work, healthcare, research and development, financial, and non-profit. Just as salt is everywhere and easily accessible, so may those who need God find his people everywhere and easily accessible.

Christians, you are the salt of the earth. Do not let persecution prevent you from fulfilling your purpose. Do not allow the hatred of the world to cause you to lose your saltiness. You are to preserve the good, the right, and the truth. You are to prevent from growing that which is corrupting. Let your love of Jesus add flavor to your life. Let your relationship with him cause spiritual thirst in those around you. Be filled with Jesus wherever you are. Church, you are the salt of the earth.

You Are the Light of the World

The second metaphor Jesus uses is found in verses 14 and 15. Let's read them together.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house." **Matthew 5:14-15 (ESV)**

The point is easy to see. Light cannot be hidden at night. The purpose of light is to be seen and its brightness is intended to benefit those around it. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and saying to them, "You are the light of the world." You cannot be hidden and you must be seen, for in so doing you will be a benefit to the whole world.

Persecution Aims to Diminish Light

Again, why is Jesus concerned that the light of his disciples might become hidden or not seen. Is it not because he knows the temptation of his disciples, when they are being persecuted for his name's sake, will be to make themselves hidden and unseen? Persecution aims to diminish the light of the Christian and Jesus is helping us to keep that from happening.

¹² Numbers 14:21; Psalm 72:19; Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14.

The World by Nature is Dark

This again highlights a fundamental fact about the world in which we live; it is a very dark place that is desperately in need of light. The default position of our world, and everyone in it, is one of darkness rather than light. The apostle John explains this most clearly.

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

John 3:19 (ESV)

This world is dark by default because every heart of every human being has been contaminated by sin. Sin is the Black Death of the spiritual world. The only hope we have of overcoming this spiritual sickness is opening up our dark hearts to the light of Christ. Jesus very badly proclaimed,

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12 (ESV)

Those Who Would Be Bright, Must Be Filled with Light

Those who dwell in darkness are greatly in need of light. Those who are filled with darkness and death in their hearts need light and life within them. We have already alluded to this fact when we considered the metaphor of salt, but again it is worthy of being repeated that the only reason a Christian can be light in a dark world is because he is filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. Friend, you will only benefit this dark world when your light and life within you is sourced in Jesus. Apart from him we can do nothing.¹³

When an unbeliever becomes believer he does so by receiving the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus within his own being. Becoming a Christian means receiving the Spirit of Christ within you. Jesus then manifests his own light and life through his disciples. There is no light and no life without him. Thus, the Christian can only be the light of the world in so far as the light and life of Christ Jesus is dwelling within her and shining brightly out from her. This is what Peter is referring to when he described Christians as "...*partakers of the divine nature...*" 2 Peter 1:4 (ESV).

Jesus described this mysterious reality to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion saying, "...*I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*"¹⁴ Speaking of his heavenly Father, he said, "...*we will come to you and make our home with you.*"¹⁵ God, who is the "*the Father of*

¹³ John 15:5.

¹⁴ John 14:20.

¹⁵ John 14:23.

light...¹⁶ ...who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all,"¹⁷ through Jesus and his outpoured Holy Spirit, takes up residence within the heart of man. This is the miracle of salvation and the wonder of what Christ has done for us.

Let Your Light Shine

Christian, how then can you be the light about which Jesus speaks? Jesus explains this in v.16.

"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."

Matthew 5:16 (ESV)

First, understand that your light is intended to be seen. Your life is intended to be seen. The light and life of Christ Jesus within you is intended by God to be seen by the world. Don't be afraid of this. "*Let your light shine before others...*" Jesus's point is that there aren't supposed to be secret Christians. Being seen is the purpose of light. Thus, Christian let the light of Christ within you shine out into the dark world around you. Yes, this might mean that you will be persecuted. But you cannot let persecution snuff out your light.

Light cannot be hidden and it is intended to benefit those around you, so let your light shine by "*doing good works.*" Christians are called to do good works. Paul teaches us that we were created for good works.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

God intended that his people fill their lives with good works. They are to "*walk in them,*" which means they are to be a regular part of the life of the Christian. Doing good is to be a daily pattern. "*Walking in good works*" means that doing them becomes a part of the normal rhythm of life. Part of our purpose in life is to do good things. This is part of the purpose for which God created us.

The Aim of Good Works (& All the Universe)

Not only must we do good works, but we must do them in such a way that people will "...**give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**" We are not to do good works so that we get the glory, but rather we are to do good works so that *God* gets the glory. This is the ultimate reason the whole universe exists. All that exists was created to display the glory of God. Thus, when we give glory to God we are fulfilling the ultimate reason for existence of all things. Paul taught us,

¹⁶ James 1:17.

¹⁷ 1 John 1:5.

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)

How do we do that?

Know that Without Him You Can Do Nothing

First, we begin by realizing that whatever good we do, we could not do it without him. Jesus drove this point home, "*without me you can do nothing.*"¹⁸ Peter also teaches us that whatever good work or good service we might do, we can only do because God has given us the strength to do it.

¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 4:10-11 (ESV)

Whatever ability we have has been given to us as a gift. We may improve it with our own effort and practice, but the strength to do and to improve comes from God. Thus, we ought to give him the glory for the benefit of our ability. Without him we would have no strength. Without him we would have no gift. Without him we would have no ability to serve, or sing, or speak. Thus, "to him belongs all the glory." The first step is to recognize where your strength and ability comes from.

Turn Your Praise Back to God

The second thing to do is tell people why you do what you do. We can glorify God with our good works when we explain to people why we are doing what we are doing. When you have opportunity, we ought to point people to God rather than to ourselves. For example, when someone praises you for some good you've done, you could say something, "Thank you. I'm very happy that you were blessed, but I couldn't have done it without the Lord." Or, "Thank you, but to God be the glory." When you help a colleague figure out a problem and she says, "Thank you, I was stuck." Then you could say something like, "You're welcome. I'm glad the Lord gave me the eyes to see the problem." Or when you take your coworker home because his car is in the shop and as he gets out he says, "Thanks so much. You really didn't have to come all this way. You're such a nice guy." Then you should say something like, "If it weren't for Jesus I'd have never offered, but he teaches us to do for others what we would have done to us. If I were in a pinch, I'd want someone to help me. So I'm just trying to be obedient to Jesus." Your good works are intended to be seen and there is a way to do them so that God gets the glory rather than you.

¹⁸ John 15:5.

Conclusion

So what is the sum of all this. This world is filled with darkness and death. Jesus came to bring light and life. He was here for only a short time and he returned to be with his Father. However, he has given his own Holy Spirit to his disciples and then sent them into the world to do the same as he had done; to spread light and life. This is his purpose for his people.

Jesus calls his disciples to go into all the world and just as the purpose of salt is to preserve goodness and prevent corruption, so the disciples of Jesus are to do good and stop corruption. Just as salt adds flavor to food, so the followers of Jesus are to add a different flavor to life by telling the world that there is a purpose to life. Just as salt causes thirst for water, so the lives of Christians ought to cause those around us to thirst for God. Just as salt is everywhere, so Christians ought to be everywhere. Christian, don't let persecution silence your saltiness. Be salty for the name of Jesus.

Just light cannot be hidden, so the Christian's hope in Jesus cannot be hidden. Just as light is intended to benefit those near it, so the light of Jesus within the Christian must be seen in order for it to benefit those in darkness near them. Christian, don't let persecution stop you from doing good. Do good works before the eyes of men, but do them in such a way that God gets the glory rather than you. So shine for the sake of Jesus.

Be salty and bright for the glory of God, for this is why you were created and why the world exists.