

Our Ministry to the World
Matthew 5:13-16
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- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-7:29)
 - A. The Incarnation of Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - B. The Preparation of Christ (3:1-4:11)
 - C. The Beginning of Christ's Ministry (4:12-25)
 - D. The Beginning of Christ's Teaching (5:1-7:29)

We are the salt of the earth

Matthew 5:13 describes us as the salt of the earth. It is not something that we aspire to become; it is something that we are as true followers of Christ. The pronoun "you" is emphatic in Matthew 5:13, connoting forcefulness. We must recognize our special role as the salt of the earth.

There has been much examination of whether salt can be degraded so as to lose its savor. Technically, salt is the chemical sodium chloride (NaCl) and this compound cannot change. It cannot lose its saltiness over time without additives. It is extremely stable.

However, pure salt was not readily available in ancient times. Salt in Jesus' day had chemical impurities. Even modern table salt contains iodine to enhance flavor and health properties and anti-caking agents that protect it from clumping, and thus having a shelf-life. The experience of those listening to Jesus was that the salt they used could indeed lose its saltiness.

The analogy of salt could potentially reference one of many usages of salt in ancient times. From the Bible we find the following ways that salt was used:

- Seasoning for food (Job 6:6; Colossians 4:6)
- For sacrifices (Leviticus 2:13; Ezra 6:9; Ezekiel 43:24)
- Purification (Exodus 30:35; 2 Kings 2:19-22)
- A sign of a barren wasteland (Psalm 107:34; Jeremiah 17:6; Ezekiel 47:11)
- Judgment (Genesis 19:26; Judges 9:45; Mark 9:48-49)
- Loyalty (Numbers 18:19; Ezra 4:14; 2 Chronicles 13:5)
- Fertilizer (Luke 14:34-35)
- Cleaning newborn infants (Ezekiel 16:4)

One common use of salt, even today, is as a preservative. By reducing the amount of water available for microbial growth, the decay rate of food items are reduced. Many view Matthew 5:13's reference to salt in the sense of salt as a preservative. However, this may not be the sense of Christ's words.

To best understand this analogy to salt, we must look to the rest of this verse. The phrase "but if the salt has become tasteless" (NASB), "but if salt has lost its taste" (ESV) and "if the salt have lost his savor" (KJV) is based upon the translation of the Greek word (MORAINO). The reason the main literal English versions of the Bible translates this into some form of "become tasteless" rather than a more generic "lost its saltiness" (NIV) is because of the usage of the word MORAINO outside of the Scripture. This leads us to the conclusion that the point of the analogy of salt was related to taste rather than any other uses for salt in ancient times.

Another reason for understanding this analogy of salt as related to taste is the connection of Matthew 5:13 with Matthew 5:14-16. If our purpose in this world is to be an instrument that God can use to help people "glorify our Father who is in heaven", then the means to draw them toward this end is for us to be tasteful, not tasteless.

Supporting the conclusion that the meaning of "being the salt of the earth" related to taste is Colossians 4:6. Paul in Colossians 4:5-6 uses the analogy of salt for how we communicate to unbelievers: *"Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person."*

It should follow that Paul's familiarity with the teachings of Jesus would use the term salt in the same manner that Jesus meant it in the Sermon on the Mount. This is how a person is the salt of the earth—by engaging the people of this world in a manner that is (1) wise, (2) effective, (3) graceful, and (4) specific to the person.

When we fail to relate to the people of this world in the manner that Paul taught in Colossians 4:6, we lose our audience. When our words and conduct become tasteless, we cannot retrieve them back. Like salt that has become tasteless, when we are foolish in our response to outsiders, our ability to communicate with them is lost.

Interestingly, the Greek root word for MORAINO is MOROS, or "foolish." The word for "tasteless" is related to the word used in 1 Corinthians 1:20 to mean "foolish." When we fail to conduct ourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, our foolishness is like the salt that has lost its usefulness.

This understanding of salt as related to taste is in somewhat of a contrast to how many Bible teachers view salt in Matthew 5:13. To view salt as analogous to Christians being a preservative against the world's moral decay is not only without specific support in the passage itself or the New Testament context, it results in a potentially problematic application.

Often the exhortation of the teaching of Matthew 5:13 is that we ought to engage the world to oppose moral decay. We must absolutely “prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15). But the attempt to bring change to our society through social or political means is foreign to the teaching and ministry of Christ.

“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm’” (John 18:36).

The desire to mobilize Christians to use political means to resist worldliness in society is to set us in potential conflict with the very people we seek to reach with the gospel of Christ. Rather than letting our speech be with grace, many turn to insults and belligerency in an effort to affect moral change. This foolishly serves to cripple the very message of forgiveness in Christ. We ought to distance ourselves from attempts to politicize the ministry of the church to the world, lest our gospel becomes “no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”

We are the light of the world

As in Matthew 5:13, Matthew 5:14 puts the pronoun “you” in a position of emphasis in the Greek text. We must recognize our special role as the light of the world.

While the Jews considered themselves a light to the darkness (Romans 2:19), Jesus was uniquely the “Light of the World” (John 8:12, cf. Matthew 4:16). Jesus applied the analogy of light to Himself to contrast Himself with darkness (John 3:19-21). Since apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5), then we are only the light of the world as far as we abide in Christ (John 15:1-6). In a sense we are the light of the world in that we reflect the Light of the World of our Savior.

Light in the Scripture is used in three primary ways:

- To picture purity in opposition to evil (John 3:19; James 1:17; 1 John 1:5)
- To picture truth as opposed to falsehood (John 1:4-9; 1 John 1:5-7)
- To picture God's presence vs. God's judgment (Psalm 44:3; 89:15; Rev. 18:1)

Matthew 5:14-16 uses the imagery of light in the first way, to picture good in contrast to evil. This is seen particularly in 5:16 with our light shining so people can see our good deeds.

Therefore, we are the light of the world in the sense of good versus evil. This parallels Matthew 5:13 and the salt losing its taste. When we do good, people can see this good but if we fail to do good, we become worthless for the purpose of being the light of the world.

Much of Matthew 5:14-16 addresses the need for us as the light of the world to let the light of our good deeds shine. The first exhortation toward this end involves the illustration of a city built upon a hill, being unable to be hidden.

Cities were often built on elevation for the purpose of defending them. It was much harder to attack up a slope. There is also often a water source at the base of elevated terrain. As such, they were easy to see from afar and particularly at night when the inhabitants would light lamps to see. Since cities built upon hills were impossible to hide, this served as an excellent illustration for how our good deeds ought to be seen.

Jerusalem was one particular city that was built upon a hill. It was hardly hidden but was also hardly obedient to God's will as noted by Jesus in Matthew 23:37: *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."* It is possible that this reference to a city set on a hill is an early rebuke to the city itself that will one day be established as the center of the millennial kingdom (Isaiah 2:2-5).

The second illustration to aid the exhortation to let our deeds shine before others is the oil lamp. Without electricity, lamps were essential at night and oil was the fuel to keep them lit. Lamps were so essential to function that to put one under a basket (used for measuring grain) would be absurd. Jesus used common household items to communicate that just as light is essential to mankind, so are our good works necessary to fulfill God's intended role for His followers.

Just as a lamp illuminates a house and allows people to function at night, so our good works should illuminate men and allow them to function as God has created them, for His glory. This requirement for Jesus' followers to let their light shine before men so that they may glorify God is likened to the lamp that shines in the house to give light to all the inhabitants. In both cases, there is a necessary direct result.

The application of being the salt of the earth and the light of the world

Matthew 5:13 is directly connected to Matthew 5:14-16 as they both describe our ministry to the multitudes in this present life by way of analogy. They are not addressing the same issue in ministry, but rather the same end goal of ministry. They are like two different sides of the same coin.

Matthew 5:13 speaks to the quality of our ministry to the world. Matthew 5:14-16 speaks to the quantity of our ministry.

Matthew 5:13 speaks to the removal of the problems that will negate the effectiveness of our ministry. Matthew 5:14-16 speaks to the requirement of practical service that will enhance the effectiveness of our ministry.

In the commission of Christ to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), we must take the initiative to engage the unbelieving world. Matthew 5:13 addresses how we might become useless in our ministry to the world. Specifically, if our conduct or communication to unbelievers is compromised by sin or foolishness, we will become ineffective in our service.

Behaviors that are sinful will lead people to consider us hypocrites, saying one thing but practicing something else. The practice of sin will lead those who might otherwise have seen our good works and have glorified our Father who is in heaven to dismiss us. *"Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work"* (2 Timothy 2:21).

Words that are foolish will likewise lead the people of this world to dismiss us. Our words to the unbelieving world ought to be with gentleness and respect, not harshness and indignation. *"But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence"* (1 Peter 3:15). *"Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances"* (Proverbs 25:11).

In our initiative to go and make disciples of all nations, we must take initiative with the gospel since *“faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ”* (Romans 10:17). But Matthew 5:14-16 teaches that the ministry of the gospel is not limited to the words of the gospel but also involves good deeds. Our good deeds are clearly involved with the work of bringing people toward glorifying our Father in heaven.

These good deeds are left undefined. The reason they are undefined is because each of us is a unique individual, with unique giftedness, with unique circumstances, with unique relationships, and a unique plan of good works that has been prepared by God in advance for us. *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:10). It is therefore wrong to expect everyone to practice the same good works.

But one certain prerequisite for fulfilling Matthew 5:14-16 is that we are truly practicing good works. This is something we must develop as we seek to ministry for Christ’s sake to the world. *“Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful”* (Titus 3:14). Good works that meet pressing needs is a learned behavior in order to become fruitful in ministry.

In addition, another certain prerequisite for fulfilling Matthew 5:14-16 is that the good works that we practice are seen by those who are able to then glorify our Father who is in heaven. This presupposes that we have a relationship with some people who are not currently glorifying our Father but who will potentially glorify our Father when they see our good works.

The reason a relationship is presupposed is because the good works are “seen” not just heard about or reported. To actually encounter good works personally is not only necessary but communication about Jesus is also necessary in order for our Father to be truly glorified.

Another reason a relationship is assumed is that communication in addition to our good works is involved. If the purpose for our good works is for the people of the world to see them and to glorify our Father in heaven and we do nothing to inform them of our faith, then it will be us who they will glorify and not our Father in heaven. When they glory us for our good works, we rob our Father of the glory that is due Him. The good work that He does through us is for the purpose of bringing glory to the Father and this requires a knowledge about the One whom we are truly serving.

One very common obstacle to fulfilling Matthew 5:14-16 is not that we are unwilling to do good works but that we are unwilling to do good works for the unsaved people who

might be drawn to our Father through them. One way this occurs is that our good works are so focused upon the people of the church that we have effectively isolated ourselves from unbelievers. While we must do good especially to the household of faith, it certainly is not exclusive to the household of faith. *“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith”* (Galatians 6:10).

Another way that we may become unwilling to do good works in the context of unbelievers is that we view unbelievers as enemies that threaten us rather than with compassion and love (John 3:16; Matthew 9:36-38). We can view them as those who are sinfully against our way of life and we selfishly separate ourselves from unbelievers because we feel uncomfortable. There are currently many varieties of Christian organizations that promote physical separation from the world for reasons that include political, economic, familial, educational, sociological and ideological. To advocate active relational engagement with unbelievers is counter to the leadership of many respected conservative evangelical leaders.

Conclusion

We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. God called us as salt and light so that people may come to glorify our Father in heaven. We must live in such a way that does not render our testimony for Christ’s sake as worthless. We must also live in such a way that we produce good works that God can use to draw the people of this world to Himself.

To serve our fellow man with good works as the Lord has gifted us and given us opportunity may allow our testimony of Christ to be appreciated rather than ignored or rejected. To engage our fellow man in a respectfully gentle manner will increase the potential of our good works and good words to be used by God rather than dismissed by man. The last thing we should desire is to in any way become a difficulty for those who are interested in the Lord. We must instead serve mankind to provide them with reasons to become interested in our Lord.