



Lesson 3 – Setting the Example

Matthew 5:13-16

In this next section we are coming once again to familiar words worth studying in depth. Jesus’ teachings on the Sermon on the Mount, as we have seen and will continue to see, are both simple yet profound. They are simple in that it’s not that hard to understand what Jesus is saying; they are profound in that the more we meditate on Christ’s teachings the clearer their meaning becomes and the more we grasp what they mean for our lives. Jesus is taking the role of a wisdom teacher, using gripping images and surprising twists to get his listeners to think about truth and the role it should play in their lives.

Why do you think Christ follows up the beatitudes (especially the last couple of verses) with this section? _____

What role does this section have in relationship to the rest of the sermon? _____

A Dark and Tasteless World

If we want to understand the impact of these metaphors on Christ’s listeners, we need to understand a little about the culture in which he lived. In a world of high sodium foods and electric lighting, the power of these metaphors, while not lost, isn’t as impactful as it would have been in Christ’s day.

For example, let’s think about salt. Today salt is so common that we don’t think of it as valuable. We hear Jesus call us salt and we’re not quite sure how to take that. We see someone putting salt on a dish, any dish, and we wonder what’s wrong with them because that dish is probably already loaded with salt. Our culture is constantly concerned with high sodium and bad blood pressure. I randomly pulled three items from our kitchen cupboards to check the salt content: ½ cup of diced tomatoes – 180mg; one package of Ramen Noodles – 760mg; and one cup of Chicken broth – 860mg. We have all the salt we could want.

In the ancient world, however, salt was a hugely important commodity. The value of salt in the ancient world has several holdovers even today. A slightly dated expression says that someone is “not worth their salt.” Roman soldiers were actually given a stipend for buying salt, called a *salarium*, the forerunner of our English salary. Nowadays you can buy Morton’s iodized salt for less than a \$1.50, and that will last most people several

months. Imagine having a \$1.50 salt salary put onto your paycheck once a month. Things have certainly changed.

Light is very different as well. The ability to flip a switch and flood a room with light is a modern comfort the ancients didn't have. Instead, they would often have smaller lamps with a flame at the end (think Aladdin) that would give a little light. To get the most out of them, people would put them up on a stand so that the light would better fill the room.

Why do you think that Christ picked these two metaphors? _____

How are these images similar? _____

What Does It Mean to be Salt?

Christ's statement that we are salt has caused much ink to be spilt, because the natural follow up question is "In what way are we like salt?" Jesus doesn't give a definitive answer (perhaps on purpose?) and so we are left to fill in the gaps a little. Functions of salt included: preservation of food, so are we supposed to hold back corruption? flavor, so are we supposed to bring joy to the world? used in sacrifices to God, so are we supposed to be a living sacrifice? seen as a metaphor for wisdom (cf Col 4:6), so are we supposed to wise?

Whenever we study a saying like this, we need to step back and ask, “What was Christ’s main point?” Too often we get lost in the weeds if we don’t ask what the main point of a metaphor is.

Based on what Christ said in this verse, what do you think the main point of this metaphor is? _____

Another problem that arises is what exactly it means for “salt to lose its saltiness.” After all, NaCl (sodium chloride, the technical scientific term for salt) can never cease having the properties that NaCl has. Salt can never be anything other than salt. But let’s not forget, when Christ was speaking his audience wasn’t thinking of NaCl, they were thinking of the rock that was mined from the Dead Sea area. What ancient people thought of as “salt” were crystals that could become mixed with impurities and thus lose their saltiness because there wasn’t enough NaCl.

What would it look like for a Christian to “lose their saltiness?”

What Does It Mean to be Light?

Light is a slightly more common image in Scripture. Christ's point here is very similar to the point he made about salt, but there does seem to be some slight differences between the two.

Where else in Scripture does this theme of light show up? _____

How could a Christian hide their light? _____

In what ways are the images of salt and light different? _____

What is the ultimate purpose of letting our light shine before men, and how does doing good works accomplish this? _____

There is an irony in these illustrations. What makes the world hate us is exactly what the world needs, they just don't know it. By living according to Jesus' kingdom ethic, we become agents of change in a corrupted culture. A believer under persecution will be tempted to give in to the wrong culture around him or her or to hide what makes their lifestyle distinctive. When they do, they fail in their mission of living a life of good works that points this world to God and become "good for nothing."

What does this passage teach or reminded us about the character of God? _____

What is one practical thing that needs to change in your life as a result of this study? _____
