

Matthew 5:13-16

¹¹ *Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

¹³ *“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.* ¹⁴ *You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.* ¹⁵ *Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house.* ¹⁶ *Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.*

Context

Our very short gospel passage follows immediately after Matthew’s presentation of the Beatitudes (5:1-10) as part of the larger “Sermon on the Mount” as it is popularly known. It is a parallel text, in part, to Luke 6:20-49, the “Sermon on the Plain.” More importantly, this passage is part of the first of the five great discourses in the gospel. At a broad stroke, Matthew 5-7 are an expose of Jesus’ authoritative teaching; Chapters 8-9 are pericopes of his authoritative deeds.

With the chapters dealing with authoritative teaching, there are four primary themes that emerge:

- 5:3-16 distinctiveness of Christian discipleship
- 5:17-48 disciples: fulfilling the Law
- 6:1-18 disciples: true and false piety
- 6:19-34 disciples: trust in God over material security

Much of Chapter 7 is given to providing contrasting examples of these, with the culmination in Matthew 7:28-29: “*When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*”

Although crowds are described at the beginning of Mt 5, the focus of this larger discourse is for the disciples who have already responded to Jesus (*cf.* 4:18-22) and now need to learn what life in the Kingdom means. To understand the “Sermon on the Mount” as simply a general code of ethics, is to miss that Jesus is beginning to explicate the demands of the Kingdom that point towards a way of being in the world: “*So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Mt 5:48) This is held in contradistinction from a simplistic following of the Law (5:21-48).

One of the points, lost in translation, is that the meaning of “*Blessed are...*” in the Beatitudes are a bit more subtle than would appear at first glance. The Greek word used in *makarios*. This does not mean “blessed by God” (*bārûk* in Hebrews, translated into Greek as *eulogētos*). The word “happy” in today’s English carries too much connotation of emotional and psychological well-being – and that is off the mark. The word “fortunate” gets closer, while some scholars the most idiomatic English expression which captures the sense in the Australian “good on yer.” *Makarios* is a description of the circumstances of a good life; a life well lived – even if it proves to come at a cost.

Commentary

Verses 11-12 (not part of the Sunday gospel) are often called the 9th beatitude because of the opening phrase. But where vv.3-10 describe the good life, these verses bring it into contrast and begin to describe the cost (v.11) and remind the listener that you are simply joining a long tradition. The prophets who earlier proclaimed the kingdom and its demands were also persecuted.

Just as the prophets stood out and apart from “business as usual,” so too will the disciples who has committed themselves to Jesus. Here and in the next few verses the “you” that appears is always

plural. The concern here is that the Christian community stand out, appear different, and become an alternative to the larger society. In Matthew's account, the famous tune, "This Little Light of Mine" would read "This Little Light of Ours." The community of disciples are called to be collective light and salt.

The salt/light metaphors (and possibly 'city on the hill') are only effective signs of the Kingdom to the extent with which the community is willing to use them, to bring them to bear. Salt, no matter how pure and tasty, left in the cellar is not much use. A light locked away inside, will not illuminate anything in the world. In part, a goal of discipleship is to be noticed, to stand out, to be more than a curiosity, to be significant; in other words, to be distinctive and to be involved. The dangers of being a community too comfortable, too scared, or too closed off is seen in the *Book of Revelation's* letter to the community of Laodicea: "To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this: 'The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God's creation, says this: "I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.'"" (Rev 3:14-16)

Salt of the Earth. ¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

As Boring [181] notes, salt (cf. Mark 9:50; Luke 14:35) had several uses in the ancient world. In the OT, salt was added to sacrifices (Lev 2:13), connected with purity (Ex 30:35; 2 Kgs 2:19–22), symbolic of covenant loyalty (Num 18:19; Ezra 4:14), and used as a seasoning for food (Job 6:6). In the Mishnah salt is associated with wisdom (*m. Sotah* 9:15). As well, salt was used as a preservative. It is easy to see how all the OT usages of salt would be possible connotations.

The actual Greek is more emphatic than the translation we have in English. The pronoun *hymeis* (you) is unnecessary. Its presence in the sentence is to give emphasis to what follows. Contextually, it says, "It is you and not those others..." The understanding would not be one of misplaced pride for the hearer, but rather a warning. Salt serves mainly to give flavor, and to prevent corruption. Disciples, if they are true to their calling, make *the earth* a purer and a more palatable place. But they can do so only as long as they preserve their distinctive character: unsalty salt has no more value.

Jesus was using a proverbial image (it recurs in *Bekhoroth* 8b). The Rabbis commonly used salt as an image for wisdom (cf. Col. 4:6), which may explain why the Greek word represented by *lost its taste* actually means 'become foolish'. (Aramaic *tāpēl*, which conveys both meanings, was likely the word used by Jesus.) A foolish disciple has no influence on the world. (Boring, 181). To be a disciple and to have no influence in the world is a contradiction.

Light of the World. ¹⁴ *You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.*

Light, like salt, affects its environment by being distinctive. The disciple who is visibly different from other men will influence them. But the aim of his good works is not to parade his own virtue, but to direct attention to the God who inspired them. By so doing the disciple will *give light to all* (cf. Phil. 2:15). Jesus is pre-eminently *the light of the world* (John 8:12), as Isaiah had prophesied of the Servant (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), but this role passed to his disciples (cf. Acts 13:47). The *city set on a mountain* reinforces the importance of being conspicuously different. As well the image of the city also echoes Isaiah (2:2-5; 42:6; and 49:6) in which Israel's mission is to the world, to bring all nations to worship the one, true God – a task now given to the disciples. The church is like a candle, having been lit by God, not for the sake of the candle, but of the sake of the world. It needs to shine!

A *bushel* (grain measure of about 9 liters) put over an oil lamp would probably put it out, but the emphasis of the passage is on non-concealment (cf. Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16, ‘under a bed’). A secret disciple is no more use in the world than one who has lost his distinctiveness (v. 13). *Your Father who is in heaven* is a favorite expression in Matthew (cf. 5:45; 6:1, 9; 7:11; etc.), and reflects a major emphasis in Jesus’ teaching.

The admonition to let “... *your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds...*” (v.16) brings with it a certain tension. There are sources that will add comments to ensure it is understood that this is not “works salvation” – it is not necessary that one does actually does such. Yet they never address the tension that Jesus’ command has a certain directness about “*must shine.*” As Boring [183] notes, “The jagged edges of Jesus’ sayings should not be too quickly rounded off to make them consistent with other biblical teachings, or even with each other.” To which I would add, consistent with one’s already held theological suppositions.

Matthew 5:13-16 lives in tension with other parts of Matthew’s gospel. Where the very public display of belief and action is called out in our passage, consider passages such as 6:3-4, “*But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret.*”

As Boring [183] points out, there are numerous such tensions in Matthew (e.g., 5:4 vs. 9:15; 5:9 vs. 10:34; 6:34 vs. 25:1–13; 8:12 vs. 13:38; 9:13 vs. 10:41; 16:6 vs. 23:3). Such tensions should not be pounced upon as examples of “contradictions in the Bible”; neither should they be too readily harmonized into a bland consistency, since they represent a dimension of wisdom teaching (cf. e.g., Prov 26:4–5). This is the nature of proverbial wisdom in general: “look before you leap,” but “he who hesitates is lost”; “fools rush in where angels fear to tread,” but “damn the torpedoes—full speed ahead!” The charge of inconsistency may be an attack on one’s integrity, but “consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

The “salt and light” sayings function as a warning to disciples not to fail in their mission. The salt and light sayings picture mission as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is to light. For salt, being salty is not optional. With these three metaphors of salt, light, and city, the Matthean Jesus strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private. Just as the sermon is heard not only by the disciples but also by the “crowds” (7:28–29), so also the church is not an esoteric community of initiates. The community that lives by the power of unostentatious prayer in the inner room (6:6) is not an introverted secret society shielding itself from the world, but is a city set on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed.

Notes

5:13 *loses its taste*: *mōranthē* (from the verb *mōrainō*) to make foolish

5:14 *You are the light of the world*. Light is a much more prominent and univocal image in the Bible than salt. Matthew 4:16 (citing Isa 9:2) has already associated light with Jesus and the Kingdom ministry in dark Galilee. Isaiah 42:6 speaks of Israel’s role in the world as a “light to the Gentiles” (cf. Isa 49:6; 51:4–5; Dan 12:3; Rom 2:19).

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