

**Matthew 5:13-16 (1984 NIV)**  
***Salt & Light***

**Introduction**

We have done a short pulpit series on the beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12). Collectively, the beatitudes speak of the traits/characteristics of one who belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven. Put in another way, it speaks of how one who is a disciple of Jesus Christ should live.

As we continue our emphasis to be more Christlike as His disciples, we will pick up from where we have left off. So we will begin a series expounding on Matt 5:13-7:29, traditionally called "Sermon on the Mount".

Many years before Abraham Lincoln was elected president, he was a store-keeper. Abe had an extremely fine rifle displayed in his store. The barrel was made from the finest steel; the stock from the best walnut wood; and a world-famous gunsmith had assembled the gun. The price was extremely reasonable. Displayed next to this attractive gun was a rack of ordinary rifles. These were made from ordinary steel and plain wooden stocks. Yet, the price was higher.

A customer entered the store looking for a new rifle. He was impressed by the fine-looking gun, but was confused as to why it was priced much lower than the less attractive rifles. Abe explained that the good-looking rifle was for show, while the others were for shooting. The customer finally bought one of the ordinary rifles.

Sometime later a rich farmer, wanting to decorate a room in his country mansion with a rifle next to his big-game trophies, came to the store. Abe's fancy gun was exactly what he needed. The fact that it would not shoot was irrelevant. For this man, the purpose of the gun was not for shooting, but for show.

(<https://sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-rodelio-mallari-stories-godbringspurpose-77859?+ref=TextIllustrationSerps>)

Christ has given us as His people a purpose here on earth. When we are true to this purpose, we stand as disciples for Christ. When we are not true to this purpose, we at best sit as decorations in the church.

In Matt 5:13-16, Jesus declares this purpose for us as salt and light here on earth. These verses are connected to the Beatitudes (vv. 1-12) in that God's people are reminded here that they cannot live as citizens of His Kingdom in a purely private manner. They have to live in a way that will attract attention, even if it takes the form of opposition.

In other words, the Christian is NOT poor in spirit, mournful over sin, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker—all in complete isolation from the world they live in. Instead, these Kingdom traits/norms are to be lived out by them as their Christian witness in a sinful world.

So in Matt 5:13-16, Jesus reminds His people that their purpose here on earth is to be the Lord's salt and light.

What does Jesus mean when He says that we are the salt of the earth?

### **I. Salt of the Earth (v. 13)**

Matt 5:13 - "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

These words are so well known that they have become a proverb in the English language. If someone is genuine, honest, straightforward, and without hypocrisy, we say he is a "salt of the earth" type of person.

In the ancient world, Roman soldiers were paid in salt. Indeed, our English word "salary" comes from the Latin *salarium* which literally means "salt-money". And our expression, "That man is not worth his salt," is a reminder of the high value that salt had in biblical times.

In the ancient world, salt was used primarily as a preservative (no refrigerators then). People used salt to preserve their food to retard the process of decay. Salt doesn't eradicate the process of decay, but it slows it down and prevents its spread. Meat left to its own will spoil. Cure the meat with salt and it will last a much longer time. Jesus likens us (His people) to salt.

What does it take to arrest the spread of decay? Salt—that's what Jesus was talking about. Salt stops the spread of moral decay and preserves society from total corruption. Christians are to have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual corruption in this world, to be an influence for good in society. And it doesn't take much salt to do the job. Just a little bit in the right place will do the trick ... IF you and I are to do our job in where the Lord has placed us.

Do you remember the story of Abraham praying for God to spare Sodom because his nephew Lot lived there?

He said, "Lord, if I can find fifty righteous people, will you spare the city?" And the Lord said yes. So Abraham said, "Well, Lord, if I can find forty-five righteous people in the city, will you spare it?" The Lord said yes again. So, he tried forty, and the Lord said yes. Then he tried thirty, and the Lord said yes again. The problem was, Abraham didn't think there were thirty righteous

people in the whole city. So he tried again, “How about for twenty?” And God said, “I will spare it for twenty.” Then Abraham took a deep breath and said, “Lord, what if I can only find ten?” “I will spare it for the sake of ten righteous people.”

Remember, Sodom was a thoroughly wicked place. It was evil through and through. Yet God would have spared it for ten righteous people. As it turned out, Abraham couldn’t even find ten people who were righteous.

It doesn’t take much salt to do the job. We should not underestimate the significant impact of a small group of people who have devoted themselves faithfully to witness for God in where they are. To be “salty” is to be like Christ and live out His life. As we do so, we help those around us develop a thirst for Jesus and experience a taste of Him.

Salt makes one thirsty. Are you making anyone in your life thirsty to know more about Christ? Is there anyone who is curious about your life because you showcase the life of Christ?

In the real world we need to accept that people often don’t understand or applaud our salty nature. They may pressure us to be more tolerant and understanding, or they may accuse us of being judgmental or opinionated.

But remember, Jesus calls His disciples “salt of the earth” and not “sugar of the earth”. Some Christians prefer to sugar-coat the Bible and the claims of Christ. This makes life a whole lot easier. Yet, you and I are called to be “salt of the earth”. And sometimes, no matter how gracious and sensitive we attempt to be, the truth of God will still hit home with a sting. After all, salt has a bite to it, but it brings healing as well.

I remember this story way back in 2012. A 70-year-old taxi driver (Sia Ka Tian) returned SG\$1 million in cash to a vacationing Thai couple who left the money in his taxi.

He was shocked to find the money in a paper bag on the back seat after he dropped the couple off at a shopping centre.

When he brought the money to the taxi company’s lost-and-found office, his stunned colleagues counted \$1 million in \$1,000 bills.

“The money is unimportant to me,” the taxi driver said, “It doesn’t belong to me, so how can I use it?”

The Thai couple reported the loss to the taxi company, and the taxi driver was waiting for them when they arrived to claim the money.

The spokesperson of the taxi company said, "Finding \$1 million in cash is not an everyday affair and in fact, we wonder how many people would have possibly been tempted."

If we are to conduct a survey to ascertain what people think of this act, what do you think the findings will reveal? I believe there will be people who will vote to give this man a President's Medal for Honesty. Yet, I also suspect that there will be many who will vote to give him a President's Medal for Stupidity. After all, he's already 70 ... just take some and enjoy his retirement!

Honesty may have become an old-fashioned idea that seems rare and foolish this day. But living with a moral compass like returning \$1 million to its rightful owners is a biblical and timeless principle that people who are salt of the earth should uphold.

Yes, the times change, but God's timeless principles remain constant. As Christ's disciples, He still calls us to be salt in this world.

([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sia-ka-tian-singapore-taxi-driver-returns-money\\_n\\_2165455](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sia-ka-tian-singapore-taxi-driver-returns-money_n_2165455))

Salt that loses its saltiness is a contradiction in terms like water that loses its wetness. Strictly speaking, salt cannot lose its saltiness; sodium chloride is a stable compound. As God's people we are the salt of the earth. We are not told to become salty; we are challenged to stay salty and not be adulterated!

Jesus states that salt that loses its flavour "is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot". This metaphor does not mean that such people lose their salvation. Instead, it means they are not fulfilling the purpose for which Jesus called them. And because they are "tasteless", they lose their testimony and influence.

Salt serves its purpose not by remaining in the salt shaker, but by leaving it and reaching the meat. We must get out of our comfy (churchy) zone, go into our world, and impact it with the life of Christ.

Moving on, what does Jesus mean when He says that we are the light of the world?

## **II. Light of the World (vv. 14-16)**

Matt 5:14-16 - "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

What do these words mean? To be light of the world means illuminating the darkness so that others may see reality. One of the most frightening things in the world is to be alone in the darkness. Darkness distorts reality. It is only when you turn on the light that you see things as they really are.

Notice the simple application in verse 16 - "Let your light shine before others." The key is in the phrase "before others". You can turn on a light in an empty room. It will dispel the darkness but no one will see it. Likewise you can live the Christian life in secret, but no one is going to be influenced. If your light is going to shine, it's going to shine before others. Somebody has to see it before it will do any good.

Jesus says two things will happen when we let our light shine:

- One, people will see our good deeds. The word for "good" (*kalos*) means attractive or beautiful or lovely. It is that which is pleasing to the eye. Jesus is saying that people will be attracted by the beauty of your life. Others will be drawn to you by the way you live.

When you say a good word for Jesus; when you stop, smile, and greet someone; when you cook something and share it with a neighbour; when you stop by the hospital to see how someone is doing; when you are transparent in your honesty and genuine in your concern—all these are good deeds for they are beautiful, attractive, and lovely.

Jesus said, "When they see your good deeds." He could have said, "When they hear your great preachers, or when they sit in your lovely sanctuaries, or when they hear your wonderful choirs, or when they read your Statements of Faith." He could have said that. But he didn't. He simply said, "When they see your good deeds (i.e. the way you live)."

- Two, people will give God the credit. Verse 16 says, "... they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." What begins on earth will end in heaven. That's how much influence we have. We can point people to God. We can lead them out of darkness into the light. We do the shining and God gets the credit. And here's why. Light does not call attention to itself. It provides illumination so that other things can be seen as they really are. When you see a beautiful house brightly lighted up, you don't talk about the lights but the architect who has designed that house. When you are served a delicious dinner, you don't talk about the light under which you eat but the person who has prepared that meal.

So it is that when our light shines to those around us, they see the beauty of our good works, the darkness falls away, they see spiritual reality, and God gets the credit.

So it is when we strive to do well in life—not for self glory but for the glory of God. When we rise and become successful, it is not so much for people to see us high up there and talk about us. Rather, it is for us to use the high place that God has given us to point people to Him and lead them to talk about Him.

You and I are given a high calling. We are the light of the world. We can make an eternal difference to the people around us. As they see the beauty of our lives, they will be attracted to the Jesus we know and share. As they see the light in us, they will see the One who gives us the light. They will be attracted to our Saviour and God will get the credit.

If you are a Christian, you are to be the Lord's light right where you are. So get out from under that bowl and let your light shine!

In 1999, I was in the city of Pretoria in South Africa for the first time to consult with the supervising professor regarding my PhD studies. I stayed in a guesthouse not too far from the university. There, I befriended a black man from the neighbouring country of Botswana. He's an engineer and was doing a short course in project management at the same university. I learned that he's also a Christian and we spent some good time fellowshiping with each other.

One night, I walked out of my room to catch a breather. And I saw this man walking around aimlessly. I asked him why. He replied that all the rooms had been occupied that night because many had come to watch the famous Three Tenors (Domingo, Carreras, and Pavarotti) in concert. Thus, the aged white couple who owned the guesthouse could not return to their own home that night, and had to sleep in their little car. And seeing their plight, he volunteered to let this couple sleep in his room. And since he had no room to spend the night, he decided to walk around.

On hearing that, I offered to share my room with him. He was thankful and grateful. But I think the ones most thankful and grateful must be that aged white couple. You see, South Africa was still in the early days of post-apartheid. And it was still quite counter-cultural for white and black people to be gracious to each other. But by the smiles on the faces of the couple when they greeted my friend from Botswana next morning, I believe they saw in this black man the light of Jesus Christ shining through to them. This is an example of what it means to be light to the world for the Lord.

There may be much compromise of morality going on all around us. It is precisely when the world is at its worst that the people of God should be at their best. We have been called for days like these.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is not enough to have private personal holiness; we must also have public exposure. Christianity is not a covert operation. We don't go sneaking around in the dark to get our work done. The people of God need to show up in public so that God can show off Himself in and through us. Our light is meant to make it easier for people to find their way to the Lord.

Jesus contrasts elevating a lamp on a lamp-stand to covering a lamp under a bowl. People don't light a lamp to hide its light under a bowl. Jesus says, "That's silly!" Rather, people light a lamp in order to shed light to everyone in the house. Lamps were placed under a bowl only to extinguish the light. Yet as God's people, we may tend to extinguish our light when we go to work or school or into our neighbourhood or community. We assume we need to blend in rather than bring out the light of Christ in us.

Sometimes Christians place a false dichotomy between words and deeds. They will say, "I testify to my faith in God by the way I live." That's true but inadequate. E.g. if you have your most spiritual day and your good works are clearly evident, people may just assume that you are just a good person who believes in some eternal being. But if you speak the name of Christ, people will know whose you are and where your works stem from.

## Conclusion

Jesus reminds us today that we are His salt and light here on earth. He has no illusions about this world. In fact, in spite of all the breakthroughs in technology, medicine, science, communications, and mass-production, this world is in danger of moving back to Roman times instead of moving forward to rosy times. What do I mean by that?

There is a popular saying: "Rome was not built in a day." Likewise, the Roman Empire did not fall in one night; its decline was gradual. As concluded by many scholars of classical history, several factors contributed to the empire's ultimate demise.<sup>1</sup>

- One, family. At the start of the Roman Empire, fathers took seriously their role in properly instructing, training and educating their sons, and mothers taught their daughters as well. The example of strong and active parents daily ingrained into children the importance of obedience, deference to civic authority and respect for the laws of the land. But as new generations came of age, the family weakened and fractured. Husbands and wives gave in to the pulls of human nature to engage in widespread adultery, inevitably leading to increasing rates of broken marriages. Over time, divorce became increasingly easy, and both husband and wife could initiate divorce. Also, parents moved from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rcg.org/realtruth/articles/070831-002-ssoafn.html>

guiding to giving way to their children in their role. The old paths of obedience and respect in the family became less and less travelled.

- Two, education. The Roman Empire began with an educational system that emphasized developing character, morality, patriotism and social values in young lives. The goal was to develop the whole person. But this was eventually replaced by an emphasis almost exclusively on academics, with no moral or ethical absolutes defining right and wrong.
- Three, religion. The Romans were idol worshippers who took the gods of the Greeks and gave them Roman names. The worship of these gods was accompanied by various religious rituals and customs. Temple prostitution, drunkenness and other vices that appealed to the flesh were common across the empire. Similar to the Greeks, the Romans worshipped mythological figures who freely gave in to carnal desires—deceiving, stealing, getting drunk and committing fornication, adultery, even rape! Eventually, the religions of Rome, which encouraged and empowered the people to live a life of unrestrained excess and freedom, contributed to the empire's death.
- Four, pleasure. The Romans were masters of extreme pleasure-seeking. They entertained themselves with gladiators (rock stars of the day) and gambled on who would live or die. They enjoyed the sight of Christians, Jews and other enemies of the state being eaten alive by wild animals. People were proud of their opulent lifestyle. They thrilled themselves with plays, bathhouses, indoor pools and drunken parties held in honour of Bacchus, the false god of wine and sensual pleasures.
- Five, economy. Originally, agriculture and land ownership were Rome's chief sources of wealth. Over time, landowners who operated large farms using slaves undersold smaller farmers, forcing them out of business. Commercial trade in Rome created a massive consumer economy that focused largely on serving the wants of people. Slowly but surely, the strong belief in self-determination and self-reliance in every Roman was replaced with an attitude of expecting something for nothing. State-run benefits originally intended to assist those in real need are now considered an entitlement.

The year 476 marks the end of the Western Roman Empire and the fall of Ancient Rome. And this is also the start of the Dark Ages in Europe.

Now I am talking about Ancient Rome ... so long ago; so far away. But think about it, the things that led to the fall of Ancient Rome ... are these really so long ago; so far away?

The Lord has called His church to be His salt and light here on earth. But why has the church seemed to have lost its influence in society today? Perhaps,



we are doing things as the world is doing them; we are defining things as the world is defining them. Yes, the church needs to adjust and adapt to changes. But in trying to be relevant to contemporary situations, the church must not lose its biblical relevance.

Today, Jesus warns us that we can make ourselves irrelevant if we neglect to be His salt and light here on earth. The Lord calls us to be His salt and light. We should and we can when we commit ourselves to unchanging biblical truths and apply these practically (not dogmatically) to the changing situations in our world.

But it will not be easy. The world doesn't want salt and light, but it desperately needs these.

Two simple commitments:

- One, be an arresting agent to hinder the spread of human lostness as God gives the opportunity. We do this not so much by means of connecting with people so that we can correct them. But we do this by means of connecting with people with the unconditional love of God. The Lord doesn't demand that people change first before He loves them. Rather, He first loves people with His unconditional love, and then declares that He will help them change. We don't play God and try to fix people. But we bring people to God and let Him fix them.
- Two, be an illuminating agent by the beauty of your life. That certainly involves deeds of everyday kindness. But remember, the primary function of light is to reveal things as they really are. But when you've done your job, let people not talk about you. Let them talk about Jesus.

Do not share your faith with people obnoxiously or self-righteously. But work on adding value to the lives of people—encourage them, empower them, affirm them, inspire them, build them up. If they draw close to you, it makes it easier for you to lead them closer to God. But if they don't like you, they will not want to draw close to the God you believe in because they don't fancy going to heaven to be with God ... and see you there!

Most people are not attracted to the Lord not because they have anything against Him. It is largely because they don't have a right picture of Him. And that right picture of the Lord comes through you and me as His salt and light.

We aren't called to save the world. But we are called to make a difference. We can't do everything. But we can do something. And what we can do, we ought to do. That's what being salt and light is about.

*Pray that God will use us to bless others as His “salt and light” with our words and works so that they can have a glimpse of Jesus Christ and a taste of heaven.*

Amen!