



Matthew 5:13-20
 What If Jesus Was Serious?
 (A Series on The Sermon On The Mount)
 “Christians and Culture”

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(Read Passage) Last week we dove into Jesus’ famous teaching called the Sermon on the Mount. And what we saw is that the people who are blessed, who have God’s presence with them, includes those who often feel like God is not with them, or worse, who other people judgmentally and often self-righteously assume that God is not with. And this would have been a comfort to the people there because Jesus is speaking to average, every-day kinds of folks, who do not necessarily have a privileged life.

We can deduce this because Matthew tells us in 5:1 that Jesus is teaching “the crowds.” This is a normal, common word – it occurs over 170 times in the New Testament. **Matthew is letting us know that these are typical, everyday folks.** This is not a crowd of religious leaders (they’re identified when Jesus speaks with them elsewhere) or government officials or some other group of people that were privileged and therefore assumed to be blessed. These are everyday people.

Now, the first verse does also say that his disciples came to him, and then Jesus began to teach. Perhaps the entire crowd *is* his disciples. But more likely there’s a mixture of Jesus’ followers (who mostly were fishermen and other ordinary kinds of people, themselves) and others who are there out of curiosity. Regardless, the people there are mostly typical kinds of people.

This helps us to connect Jesus’ teaching in the first 12 verses to what we read today. Because in today’s passage we see that Jesus uses basic, common elements to teach spiritual truth; and he teaches on the Torah, which was the basic, common thing that kept them together as a faith community. So: **In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching everyday stuff to an everyday crowd.** And he’s using everyday things to teach these truths. So, what we see is that it’s the regular, everyday people – common, regular Jane and John Does – who God usually works through.

Right here is good news, because it means that in order to live into the rest of what Jesus teaches, you don't need to be a world-changing, big-name, headlining person. In fact, truth be told, those people often times end up making things more difficult for the gospel message, because their lives are under the microscope. And because bad news sells – as we talked about a couple weeks ago – every time a famous Christian messes up, it makes the headlines and everyone cries out “hypocrite” and associates all Jesus followers with that person. This isn't to blame “famous Christians” because we all mess up...but the point is that people like you and me (I'm presuming there isn't anyone particularly famous here this morning) are who God mostly works through. **The everyday, common person – people like you and me – we are the ones who God will work through to change the world and change lives for eternity.**

So Jesus says to the crowds that they are the salt of the earth. Salt is a basic foundational element of earth and life. It does a few things that we may or may not really think about too frequently. For instance, it brings out the flavors of food – I have even said previously that we should put salt on our ice cream to make it more flavorful. And wouldn't you know it: Salted caramel ice cream is now a thing. All I have to say is: You're welcome. 😊

Another thing salt does that we especially don't think about much today because we have refrigerators and freezers, is that salt preserves and protects. This was huge for them. **In particular, salt would help keep meat from getting polluted and turning bad.** It wasn't perfect, of course, but it slowed down the deteriorating process. Because of this, salt was highly valuable in their day.

So, Jesus is saying that every day people like you and me, who follow Jesus, are to be salt-like. And one of those things, therefore, is to preserve and protect ourselves, the church, the people around us, and the world more broadly, from evil. We are called to stand up against the evil that pollutes our world, and stand for justice, and Biblical morals/ethics, to stand up for what is right – whether that's standing up for just treatment of blacks, Asians, the unborn, the mentally ill, those who don't have access to clean water, the homeless, standing up for sexual morals, or ethics around telling the

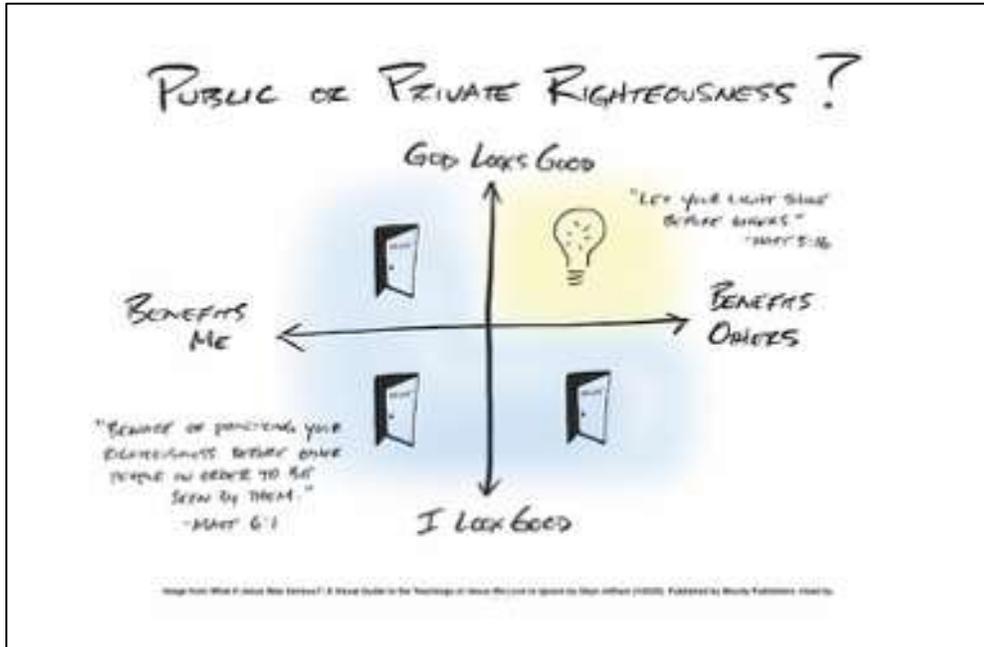
truth...justice and morals along these lines is a big deal. You can't read the Bible with an open mind and come away with a different viewpoint: that Biblical morality and justice – doing what's right and aiding those who need it – matters to Jesus. This is one side of the coin.

Then Jesus gets to the other side of the coin when he talks about “light.” **Light is a very basic and essential element of life as well.** Light illumines things so we can see. This is good, as any parent will attest to who has gotten up in the middle of the night to care for a child. You get up to help a kid because he or she is crying, and it's like it's all a big plot against you...like the child, maybe even together with others, is scheming...because the living room, or their bedroom, is littered with Legos, like a minefield waiting to cause exploding pain in the bottom of your foot with every single step...and you can't see them because it's dark out. Light is good!

Spiritually, we tend to think of “letting our light shine” as sort of a metaphor for evangelism – shining the light in such a way that we would help others to see the truth. Jesus is the light of the world as he says in John 8:12. That is the light that we are called to shine. It's not really *our* light, but the light of Jesus. And Jesus says in verse 16 that he wants us to let it shine *so that* others would also glorify our father in heaven...so they would come to praise God and be in relationship with Him as well. So, there's this evangelistic aspect of “being light.”

There are a couple tensions that arise with this teaching. **The first tension is that later in the Sermon on the Mount, and elsewhere, Jesus tells us to do certain things in *private* – like praying, fasting, and tithing. That stands in contrast to shining the light of Christ or being salt in the world.** So we have this highly theological question to ask again that I mentioned a couple weeks ago: What's up with that? Is this a contradiction that invalidates Jesus' teaching and who he is? In a word: no. We have to discern what's for public and what isn't. We have to discern what benefits others, and what really is more about my relationship with God.

Now, when it comes to being salt and light in the world, Sky Jethani has a great **visual illustration** about this in his book:



The vertical axis is about whether the action we're taking or the thing we're saying makes *God* look good or makes *me/you/us* look good. We want to be in the upper half and make God look good. The horizontal axis is

about who benefits: me, the one doing whatever it is that's being done, or does it benefit others. It's not bad for ourselves to benefit – we need to grow in faith, too. But in terms of being salt and light: the place where they come together with glorifying God is in that upper right quadrant, where God looks good – “God is glorified” to use a more Biblical phrase – *and* other people benefit. This happens when Christians live rightly with God and rightly in the culture around them. We don't want to be removed from culture and live on the left half of the quadrant. We want to be engaged with God and with the world so God is glorified and the world is edified and would glorify Him as well.

A second tension is in the relationship between being salt and light. We Christians bring this tension. The reality is that salt and the light have gotten separated over the years. Justice and evangelism have been pulled apart from one another. Local and global missions efforts, for example, used to be a mixture of addressing some social justice issue – like lack of access to clean water in rural Africa – that was accompanied by evangelism and discipleship ministries. Now, however, both local and global missions endeavors are frequently one or the other (salt or light), but not both (not always, but frequently)

I first came to this realization ten or twelve years ago, and have had it reinforced several times since. Some Christians really get into justice and mercy causes – they’re great at being the salt of the earth – while others are all about evangelism and bringing people to faith in Jesus – they’re great at shining the light. But both are needed.

John Stott, one of the preeminent New Testament scholars of the last 50 years or so, puts it like this, **“We should never put our two vocations to be salt and light, our Christian social and evangelistic responsibilities, over against each other as if we had to choose between them. We should not exaggerate either, nor disparage either, at the expense of the other. Neither can be a substitute for the other. The world needs both. It [the world] is bad and needs salt; it is dark and needs light. Our Christian vocation is to be both. Jesus Christ said so, and that should be enough”** (John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 67). So, let’s be a church of both salt and light.

Now, Jesus continues on, and when we first read this stuff about the law and the prophets, and Jesus fulfilling them rather than abolishing them, and so forth, we say, “What does that have to do with what being salt and light?” And perhaps some of us are asking, “Why should I even care about that?” To non-Christian ears it sounds a little cryptic, and even for Christians it can be a little confusing. But let me briefly explain what’s going on here, because it *is* connected to the salt and light stuff, and it’s vitally important.

We have to first understand what Jesus means by “the law and the prophets.” “Prophets” is fairly straight-forward: the prophets of old such as those with books named after them in the Old Testament, and others we read about in the O.T. “Law” is more complex. For the Jewish person, “the Law” (Torah) meant one of four things, and they would know from context which one was meant. It could mean the 10 commandments, it could be the first five books of the Bible, it could be the entire Old Testament (so, first three are all Scripture), or it could mean the oral law. The oral law was developed over the centuries by Jewish religious leaders as a way of maintaining the law of the 10 Commandments or the first five books of the Bible. For instance, take the command that the Sabbath day should be kept as a day of holy rest. Jewish

legalists asked, “What is ‘rest?’ What is ‘work’? How do we know if we’re not actually resting? Can I carry my lamp from one room to the next? Can I milk my cow? Can I harvest grain? Can I cook food? Can I go for a walk? Can I throw a football with my kids and if so, is there a limit on how far or how many times I can throw it?” Seriously, these are the kinds of questions that were asked (not the football one, though).

To answer them, they came up with a whole laundry list of things that constituted work. You could lift a lamp, but only carry it so far. You couldn’t cook – meals had to be prepared the day before. You could only walk so far, and so forth. You could throw a football, but not actually play a game of football. Or something like that. It was like this for all 10 commandments in particular, with hundreds of little rules like that, and it was all passed on through an oral tradition until the 3rd Century AD, when they began to get written down in a document called the Mishnah.

Not everyone followed the legalism of this oral law, of course. But those who were particularly enamored with it were two groups of people called: The Scribes and the Pharisees. And they turned the Jewish faith into a laundry list of rules that was focused on “externals.” Maybe a person looked good on the outside, but inside it made for spiritual death. It polluted what the law was originally about – a right relationship with God and with people. Deuteronomy 29 and 30 have good instruction about this original intent.

And: Jesus wanted to correct that, and get things back on track. So, with this background about the law, we can better understand what Jesus says in verses 17 and 18 that he’s come “not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it and that none of it will pass away until all is accomplished.” And the law that he’s referring to is *not* the oral law of the Scribes and Pharisees. Rather he’s referring to what it originally was. He’s referring to the Biblical Law in Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments. Probably here he’s actually referring to all of the O.T. since he refers to it as “the Law [and] the prophets.”

And so, he doesn’t mean that the law of the Old Testament is now irrelevant – like he’s got it covered and so they and we can ignore it. Rather, he means

that: **He’s restoring God’s law to its proper place and intention: a governance of our hearts first, so that our actions (the exterior) would flow out of that...and it’s all done through Jesus Christ.** Jesus is returning righteousness to a relationship-based thing with God and with people. And relationships are about the heart. So, when Jesus says in verse 20, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes, you won’t see the Kingdom of Heaven,” it’s not that we need more rules than Scribes and Pharisees had. It’s that we need our heart in tune with our heavenly father more than theirs was. He wants us to get in a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. That’s where righteousness comes from.

Living in right relationship with God, having our hearts in tune with him, then merges with and gives shape to being salt by opposing injustice and standing for what’s right, and it merges with and gives shape to being light by being evangelistic and inviting people to join with you in following Jesus. And that leads people to glorify God, to put their faith in Jesus, as we’ll see Jesus specifically say later on. To summarize: **When we are centered on Jesus and in relationship with him...when we take him seriously and find our righteousness in him: First, our righteousness will exceed the Pharisees and the Scribes; and secondly, our “being salt and light” will flow out of that transformed heart, and people will glorify God.**

I want to close with a quote by Craig Keneer from his commentary on Matthew. I hope this might do two things. First, I hope it will challenge us Christians to take Jesus seriously and live in that place where we really are being salt and light...standing for justice and morals, and engaged in evangelism...and doing so in a way that benefits others and glorifies God. Second, I hope this quote might encourage anyone listening who *doesn’t* know Jesus and has maybe been turned away from Jesus because of Christians who haven’t taken Jesus seriously...that you might consider taking Jesus seriously, on his own terms. Here’s what he writes:

“Until my conversion in 1975 I professed to be an atheist in part because I looked at the roughly 85 percent of my fellow U.S. citizens who claimed to be Christians and could not see that their faith genuinely affected their lives. **I reasoned that if even Christians did not believe in Jesus’ teachings, why**

should I? My excuse for unbelief-and the excuse of many other secularists I knew-continued until God's Spirit confronted me with the reality that the truth of Christ does not rise or fall on the claims of his professed followers, but on Jesus himself” (Craig Keneer, IVP Commentary on Matthew).¹

“...if Christians did not believe in Jesus’ teachings, why should I?” Ouch. If you’re a follower of Jesus, that one ought to hurt. Lord have mercy if it describes me, and my life has turned someone away from Jesus. We Christians should be challenged by this to be salt and light, and live with Biblical righteousness that is based on our relationship with Jesus, so that we would glorify God and attract people to Jesus, and not the opposite. Let’s glorify God and benefit those around us. God wants to work through regular, everyday people like you and me to give the world a glimpse of what the kingdom of heaven is like. So, let’s take Jesus seriously. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ Craig Keneer, IVP Commentary on Matthew, in his comments on Matthew 5.