

AM Matthew 1:1-16 Staying Salty, Shining Brightly

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Date: 21 August 2022

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[0 : 00] This morning is from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5. We'll read the first 16 verses, and if you're using the ESV, it's page 976.

So Matthew 5, the first 16 verses. Matthew 5, the first 16 verses.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely, on my account.

[1 : 30] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth.

But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand.

And it gives light to all the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Amen. God will add a blessing to this reading from his word. Let's pray together again, shall we? Amen. Amen. Our gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, how we thank you for these words.

[2 : 49] When we come to God's word, let's open your Bibles again at Matthew chapter 5. We're going to really be looking at verses 13 to 16 this morning, under the title, Staying Salty, Shining Brightly.

The late Reverend John Stott, who was one of the great evangelical leaders of the 20th century. He was the rector at All Souls Langham Place, one of the main Bible teaching churches in London. He once said, Don't ask what is wrong with the world, because that diagnosis has already been made. Instead, we should ask what has happened to the salt and light.

Because, only if we look at the way that our world is today, the way that our culture in particular has increasingly been abandoning in our own lifetimes over the past, well in my case, nearly 60 years. A little longer for some of you. Increasingly, in particular, year after year, decade after decade, our Christian heritage is being increasingly abandoned and rejected and actually viewed as harmful and bad for progress, bad for society.

[4 : 19] And if we want to ask ourselves why it is this has happened, then sadly, the weakness of the church of the Lord Jesus, the weakness of its leadership, especially at a national level, really has been very much to blame.

So what I want us to think together this morning is really to take us back to the Lord Jesus and this first and probably most famous sermon of his that we have recorded, certainly parts of it recorded, in the Gospel of Matthew.

And a couple of things I want to just say by way of introduction, that our view of the Sermon on the Mount has perhaps been coloured by some of the great films that have been made about the life of Christ, where we often find the Lord Jesus addressing the crowds, addressing the hundreds if not thousands that had come to hear him.

But if we look more carefully at what the passage says here, we find that it was not the crowds he was addressing at all. When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain away from them, and

it was only his disciples who came to him.

And the Gospel writers often make that distinction between the crowds and those who were Jesus' disciples. Now we can't be altogether sure, but it's possible that there were only four of Jesus' disciples that existed at this time.

[5 : 55] Simon and Andrew, James and John. So rather than this being a sermon to a huge crowd, it's almost really a small group retreat. Now you may be thinking, but surely we read at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that the crowds marvelled at Jesus' teaching.

Well, he was so popular that no doubt they followed him up the mountain to hear what he was saying. But the crucial thing for us to realise is that this is a message not for the crowds, but this is a message for Jesus' disciples, for God's people, that this is something very much for Christians. It is not a message for the crowds in general. Because Jesus could not say of the crowds in general that they were the salt of the earth, that they were the light of the world.

That is something that he can only say of those of us who know him. Those of us who, as we were saying to the children earlier, have the light of Christ in our own lives, because he has come to take residence in our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

And that is how he can say of his people, you are the light of the world. And yet at the same time in John 8 verse 12, that he is in a unique way the light of the world.

[7 : 19] And one of the things that has struck me increasingly as I've preached on this passage, is that we would expect perhaps in this glorious sermon, for the Lord Jesus' focus to be on himself, who he is and what he has come to do.

But instead the focus is actually on us, his people. And that really is quite a surprise. But in his perfect wisdom, he has chosen to preach the sermon with that emphasis.

So that's the emphasis that I will be bringing this morning, because I believe that this is what God's Word would have to say to us this day.

I think it was Calvin that said that the two greatest responsibilities we have are to know God aright and to know ourselves aright as well.

And along with knowing ourselves aright, knowing our responsibilities before God as those who would seek to know the Lord Jesus and to follow him. So I want to just focus just briefly this morning on four points from these verses 13 to 16.

[8 : 39] And the first point really is to think a little bit about why it is Jesus uses these very rich metaphors to describe his followers as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus is often referred to by the disciples as teacher, as rabbi, and of course he was the ultimate perfect teacher of God's Word. But he teaches, he taught in the rabbinic tradition, which we find so often, for example, in Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, where the teacher, the rabbi, is making one particular point very often in two slightly different ways.

That's why we find these couplets in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in particular, and elsewhere in the Old Testament. So let's ask ourselves, what is it? What is the point that Jesus is making when he says, you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world?

Salt and light are very different things. So what is it that they have in common? Well, the first point really I wanted to bring across is that they are very different and very distinctive.

Different from other things around them and very distinctive too. You can't get much more of a contrast than light and darkness.

[10 : 06] Light is very different from the darkness that is around it. And indeed salt as well is a very distinctive mineral with many properties, some of which we actually find in Scripture itself.

At this time of year we're not thinking of the roads being covered in ice, but I'm sure very thankful for the gritters that the Vries and Galway Council put out on the roads during the winter months, spreading the rock salt to ensure that the roads are not dangerous for cars and the pavements are not dangerous for us to walk on.

Because rock salt has that property of thawing ice. We know as well if we've had to go to hospital and have a saline solution, a saline drip that we're put on, or maybe we have an elderly relative that needs to go on a saline drip, we know that the salt in that saline solution has antiseptic properties. And the passage I'm thinking of from the Old Testament is in 2 Kings 2, where Elisha puts the salt in a wooden bowl and he throws it at the source of the polluted water, at the spring, which is polluted and has caused all sorts of difficulties, crops failing, young mums miscarrying.

The land was completely polluted by this poisoned water. So what Elisha does is he takes the salt and throws it at the source of the problem, the source of the polluted spring, and the land is cleansed.

[11 : 53] And there's rich, rich metaphoric truth from that of the cleansing and transforming, transforming and transformative effect that God's people, and we have seen this throughout human history, have had that transformative impact on society, on the culture.

We think of where Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels, have salt among yourselves and be at peace.

And that perhaps is reflecting when he says there in the Beatitudes, blessed are the peacemakers, that if we are living, we could say, salty lives, then that helps bring harmony and peace, takes the frostiness, we could say, out of relationships between people and would help to thaw them if we are those that are involved in bringing folks together and settling different difficulties and problems.

Of course, salt is a flavouring, isn't it? Of course, and we don't need a great deal of salt to flavour our meal. We think of what Paul says in Colossians 4 when he says there, let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.

And that speaks there really of how we are to conduct ourselves, what our conversation should be like. There should be something attractive, tasteful, we could say, rather than tasteless conversation.

[13 : 32] So there are many uses of salt throughout Scripture as a metaphor for Christian living. All sorts of applications that we find there, what it means to be the salt of the world, but the light of the world as well.

Remembering, as we were saying to the children, that by nature none of us is salt or light. Jesus didn't pick these disciples because they were particularly godly or particular qualities, quite the opposite.

Indeed, as Paul says in Ephesians 5, each one of us was once darkness. Not just a bit of darkness, but actually our whole lives were characterised by darkness.

Once you were darkness, he says. But now you are light in the Lord. Very much the same truth that Jesus is bringing forward here, that he can call those of us who are the followers of Jesus, those who know and love the Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world.

Because, as again Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, that the same God who called light out of darkness when creation happened, with the new creation in each of our lives, when we become new creatures in Christ, he has shone into our hearts the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, taking us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

[15 : 09] So we find these themes of light and darkness and salt are really throughout the whole of Scripture. And we could maybe take the metaphor a little bit further, although we have that spelled out for us in Ephesians 5, that we once were dark, darkness, and now we are light in the Lord.

If we weren't salt by nature, well, could we find an opposite or a contrast to that? Well, of course, at the time of the fall in Genesis chapter 3, when God pronounces the curse on this earth, and he says to Adam and Eve, dust you are, and to dust you will return.

So it's fascinating that God pronounces, once sin had come into the world, to Adam as our federal head, you are dust.

But now when the dawn of the new creation and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with the gospel and the kingdom of God, coming in part now, fully when Christ returns, he doesn't say you are dust.

He says you are salt. Instead of having that emptiness and futility, as Paul says in Romans 8, of being dust, yet there is so much usefulness, there is so much purpose, there is so much that is good about salt, and therefore our transformed lives with Christ at the heart, having been saved by grace through faith for the good works which God has planned in advance for each and every one of us.

[16 : 57] Living distinctive lives that are so different from the world around us. So that brings us on to our second point, really, which is, well, if we've got an idea of what it is Jesus is referring to here, thinking in particular, actually, as well with salt as a preservative, that was the one point, really the main point, actually, which I omitted to mention there.

And it was probably what came to mind first when the disciples, especially as fishermen, they would know that as soon as the fish had been brought on board the boat, there would no doubt be salt on

the boat, actually, for the fish to be put in in order to preserve it, in order to keep it fresh, in order to slow down the decaying process.

And that was one of the main purposes of salt in the ancient world. And Christians are to have that preserving effect on our society, on our culture, preserving whatever is good in our society, and indeed seeking to slow down the decaying process of the world around us.

As we're coming to the second point there, what is it that Jesus is referring to when he speaks about the need for salt and light? Well, if salt and light are different and distinctive, then that is because the great need for them is that our world is marked by decay and darkness, moral decay and spiritual darkness.

And it's into that world that, left to its own devices, will increasingly turn away from God with horrific immorality and increasing moral decay and also increasing spiritual darkness.

[18 : 45] The more people reject the truth, the less of the truth there is around, the truth of the gospel, the truth of God's word. If that is ignored, neglected, or rejected, then society will increasingly turn to greater and greater spiritual darkness.

And we do see that, and I'll be saying something about that after the service this morning. I do believe that we are living in a day, it's perhaps 300 years or more since our society has known so much moral decay and spiritual darkness.

The time in the 18th century before the Great Awakening was such a time that there have been great, great darkness before that. Indeed, I think that the state of our nation, morally and spiritually now, in many ways, is we have to go back to pagan times to find things quite as evil, quite as depraved as what we are living in just now.

But of course, with the advancement in science, technology, and medicine, on the surface, things look much better than in those days. But we only need to scratch the surface to see great wickedness, great evil in our society and in our culture.

So, that is the world in which Christians have always been placed. It is a world that is marked by darkness, spiritual darkness, and moral decay.

[20 : 18] What is interesting in these verses is that Jesus doesn't expand or expound what that darkness and decay would look like because it takes different shapes and forms depending on what age that we live in.

So, for example, in the late 18th century, slavery was the great social evil. I would say that abortion is the great social evil, the greatest social evil in our own day and generation.

of course, we have seen moves across the Atlantic to push back against that. But of course, there has been the horrific counter-reaction to that where people have so devalued the life of unborn children that you are finding big businesses now funding people to move to a different state to have mothers to have an abortion if their state doesn't have that legislation.

Truly, truly shocking what is happening in our own nation as well. I think the number has passed 10 million, 10 million lives that have been lost due to abortion legislation since the late 1960s.

But as I said, although the Lord Jesus really leaves, I think, each of us to think through what salt and light will look like in our own day and generation, what particular moral decay, what particular spiritual darkness needs to be addressed.

[21 : 52] Again, borrowing John Stott's language here, he says that in order for salt to be effective, it needed to be rubbed into meat and fish in order for light to be effective, it needs to be taken where there is greatest darkness to dispel that darkness.

We need to roll up our sleeves and be involved and engaged in our culture as Christians, having that. I guess we could say if we wanted to sum up the single truth that the Lord Jesus is bringing with these metaphors is both salt and light have a disproportionate transformative impact on their environment.

You don't need much salt to flavour your meal, don't need much rock salt to thaw the roads, you don't need much light. Just a little torch, just a little candle will dispel darkness.

But what Jesus does focus here, most of his message here in these four verses is actually a warning of a double danger, a double danger that we fix, you could say a twofold temptation. And that is the danger of dilution and disengagement or, to change the letter for alliteration, compromise and concealment.

[23 : 14] Because I think that's what Jesus, when he speaks here about losing his saltiness, he speaks of us compromising our beliefs, compromising our lifestyle. going along with the world, going along with the immoral society marked by spiritual darkness, to somehow accommodate it or

to make life easier for ourselves.

Salt losing its distinctiveness, losing its saltiness, through contamination, because that did happen, or through dilution. I understand that if you lived near the sea, then you'd be able to have your carcass for your meat steeped in brine to keep it fresh.

But if you lived in land and you had to make your own brine, you need to have enough salt put in the fresh water. And if you didn't have enough, if it was too diluted, then it wouldn't have the right effect.

Or, again, with contamination for salt, if you were extracting salt, it would be close to, often close to another couple of minerals. One is gypsum.

And, of course, if you see the big blue British gypsum lorries, that's where we get our plaster from. You're certainly not going to be sprinkling plaster dust on your fish and chips, are you? Utterly bland, utterly tasteless.

[24 : 37] And another mineral that was next to salt would be carnalite. And it's extremely bitter to the taste. And I wonder if Jesus means us, since that would have been common knowledge, to see the distinctiveness of salt in contrast to the blandness or the bitterness of so many people's lives.

And we see that, don't we? That so many people just either have a completely bland lives where really nothing much is going on and it's quite difficult just to even strike up a conversation with them. There's nothing at all really to speak of in so many people's lives. Or there'll be other people that are eaten up with bitterness and resentment and anger because of difficulties they've had, because of disappointments, difficult circumstances they've had, that they've let fester.

And they really are, can often be such unpleasant company to deal with. But the warning that Jesus gives us here is that we, ourselves as Christians, can be subject to the temptation simply just to coast through life in a completely bland way, nothing distinctive, nothing different about us.

But also, there's such a temptation, isn't there, for us, like the carnalite, to have that bitterness taking root. That's what the writer to Hebrews says in Hebrews 12. We must not let bitterness take root in our lives because not only will it defile us, it will defile other Christians as well as discord is sown, as difficult relationships are so often the result of bitterness and resentment in our own lives.

[26 : 18] So we are to have nothing to do with that. We are not to lose our saltiness in these ways but to remain distinctive and to remain different. And he goes on here as well in terms of light to say that light must be hidden.

So that speaks of again, extending that metaphor it's so easy for us to feel that just simply if we can conceal who we are as Christians, conceal our beliefs, conceal what we really believe about matters, just keep quiet, not mention anything controversial and really to disengage from the great hot potato debates in our culture that I'll be mentioning just after the service this morning, one or two of them.

There is a great temptation for us to conceal what we believe, to conceal our faith, just to keep quiet about it. But the double danger of this here of either compromise on the one hand, where perhaps we are actually trying to engage with other non-Christians, with non-Christians, but in order to seem not too extreme, not too hardline, we just tone things down a bit.

We're in great danger actually of compromising the faith, compromising what we believe, compromising our lifestyle if we are too influenced by the world and by the culture.

But we mustn't go to the other extreme of just withdrawing completely in a pietistic way, really having no engagement whatsoever with society or the culture and really hiding the light of the truth of the gospel, the light of God's word, hiding that, concealing that from the world.

[28 : 05] And the warning that Jesus gives here is very, very striking because he says here that if salt loses its saltiness, it's useless.

If light is hidden, it's pointless because its purpose is to give light to the whole house and that really is a metaphor for absolutely everyone, everyone in society, everyone in the world.

But let's think, using a little bit of license here, as to how salt could become useless, thinking about the contamination, thinking as well of what we were just saying earlier about how, by nature, as fallen, sinful creatures, we're all going to die because of the fall, because of the curse, and God pronouncing, you are dust.

Let's imagine a situation in Judea where there's a family and mum's making the meal and she's got one of these bowls of salt and little Aaron comes in, runs in from playing and he bumps into mum and the salt bowl flies out of her hand and all the salt is mixed in with the dust on the floor.

Well, it's utterly useless, isn't it? It's lost its saltiness. It cannot be used again. All she can do is throw it out to be trampled under people's feet.

[29 : 37] And thinking that through, if we get, if our lives, if our thinking, if our behaviour gets contaminated by the dust of fallen humanity, dust of the sinful culture that we're living in, the lives of others, contaminating ours, then we will find that we will be good for nothing.

We will be useless as well in God's service. So it's a very, very solemn warning here for us not to be contaminated by all the dust and dirt of the world around us.

But also, the other warning is about hiding, disengaging and concealing the light. How terrible it is that when we have the opportunity and there are, I believe, far more opportunities than we would realise simply to speak about our faith, to speak about the Lord, to speak about even the issues that we're finding in our culture because God's word has so much to say about them and we can get back to how we were created to be very easily from these discussions, from these issues and we can get God's plan of salvation and the explanation of why we are living in a fallen world with so much confusion, so much that is wrong, from simply discussing these matters with those who do not know the Lord Jesus.

But if we hide that, if we decide just not to engage, if we conceal what we believe, then really, what is the point of our living as Christians?

Because the purpose of light is to shine, the purpose of light is to give light and of course, we think of light as we'll be singing just shortly in Psalm 43, you know, send forth your light, send forth your truth.

[31 : 33] Light in scripture means truth so often. It means revelation of God's character, God's ways, God's truth. And if we keep that quiet and say nothing about that, then really, what is the point of us living as Christians if we will not shine as we are called to do?

But as well as that warning, as we so often find in scripture, let's close with the encouragement, the fourth point there. There's the double danger of dilution and disengagement or compromise and concealment.

But finally, we find there's a close, close connection between deeds and disciples. And this is so interesting because we often hear people saying, well, how is it that we can reach a lost world? How can we reach non-Christians? And there's all sorts of suggestions that have been given, but what Jesus says here is actually that simply living our lives as Christians, doing good works, doing good deeds, showing kindness and care and compassion to our neighbours, those that we get in touch with, is actually the best way of reaching them with the Gospel.

Now, in case any of you think that I'm going down the route of what St. Francis of Assisi was alleged to have said, but my understanding is he never did, which was always preach the Gospel if necessary, use words.

[33 : 13] Not at all. That's like saying, always feed the poor, if necessary, use food. Because we must remember that the message of the Gospel is words.

It is a message, what we find in the Bible, of what the Lord Jesus has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection. That is the Gospel.

The Gospel, there's a lifestyle that comes from that, but the message is not, first and foremost, a lifestyle. It is what God has done for us in Christ, and when we preach the Gospel, we must use words, we must use that message of how people can be saved.

But, if we read in verse 16, there, it says, in the same way, let your light shine before others. So, what does that look like? So that they may see your good works, not just hear your good words, but see your good works.

And I think that's in our own day and generation, where there is so much selfishness and self-interest and everyone looking after number one, that acts of kindness, even a word of concern about a neighbour or a friend's personal circumstances, really will shine out in the darkness because it is so uncommon.

[34 : 31] Sadly, so many people are failing to look out for each other in our own day and generation. it's remarkably easy for us as Christians to show that concern, to show that kindness.

And, it may well lead to the individual saying, why did you do that for me? Why did you take time to ask how I was? And we can say it once because we're Christians and we're called to love our neighbour and indeed we have our love from the Lord Jesus for the whole of humanity.

And that can so easily lead to a gospel conversation. And that ties in with the last bit there. I think Jesus is just speaking there of the kind of, he's jumping to the end result there with that sharing of the gospel in the middle.

But he says that when people see our good works, the ultimate outcome of that is for many of them, they will give glory to your Father who is in heaven. And who does that other than Christians? giving glory to God for salvation. And this is what Peter says as well in 1 Peter 2, very similar words, no doubt remembering what the Lord Jesus said to him on that day that we should live such good lives before those who are ungodly that even though they accuse us of wrongdoing, they're ashamed of their accusation.

[35 : 57] And actually in the day God visits us and I think that it's not just speaking about the end of time, I think it is speaking also for some of them of God visiting them with salvation and how our daily witness is a very, very crucial witness, a crucial aspect of what it means to share the gospel, what it means to live as witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our lives must match and reflect our message. So let's pray together. Father, our Heavenly Father, we thank you that in Christ you have made us the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And we do pray, Lord, that we would not lose our saltiness, that we would stay salty, that we would not hide our light but instead shine brightly for Jesus.

In his name we ask it. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.