

Matthew 5:13-16 | “Salt & Light”

*Preached on May 21, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5, verses 13-16, as we continue back in our series on discipleship in the book of Matthew. *[pause]*

*This series is really meant to get us back to the basics of what it actually means to be a disciple. [pause]*

We should continually keep going back to what Jesus has called us to be and to do.

*For it is by going back to the basics that we are once again set on a solid foundation to stand on and to live in the way that Jesus wants and to be on mission for Him. [pause]*

So most recently, we learned in the Beatitudes about the foundational qualities that a disciple should display.

*Now we will once again see how disciples ought to live, as we look at the well-known passage about being salt and light in the world. [pauseeee]*

Recently, my wife and I were watching a movie in which there was an old man, who was a curmudgeon.

*Do you know what a curmudgeon is?*

According to the dictionary, a curmudgeon is, “a bad-tempered, difficult, [and] cantankerous person.”<sup>1</sup>

*It’s sort of that person who is a continual grouch - they are cranky, a grumbler, and a complainer. [pause]*

That’s exactly what this guy was like in the movie that we watched.

*He was always grumbling under his breath, and complaining about every little thing.*

He seemed to have no joy, kindness, or contentment. *[pause]*

*He was not a pleasant person to be around, as the way he would talk to others was very unkind.*

Coming into contact with this man didn’t make someone’s day better, but worse.

*He would bring people down, treat them badly, and complain about what they were doing, even if it was something innocently done. [pauseeee]*

As I thought about that man, I thought to myself: I sure hope that as Christians we aren’t the curmudgeons of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/curmudgeon>.

We shouldn't be people who have no joy and complain all the time.

Yet how often are we like that? *[pause]*

We shouldn't be people who treat others meanly or harshly.

So are we being attentive to *the way* that we talk to others? *[pause]*

And we shouldn't be people who make the world worse, but who make it better. *[pause]*

That's what we see in this passage on being salt and light...

We are to be people who bring great beneficial impact to the world, and not the opposite. *[pause]*

Let me READ OUR PASSAGE for this morning. *[READ]*

*In this text, we first see...*

### **I. Our identity & purpose: distinct and impactful.**

As we go through life, what happens is that different groups of people end up being characterized by certain distinctives. *[pause]*

We can usually tell when someone is a football or basketball player by their size.

We can usually tell the difference between a person from the city and a person from the sticks. *[pause]*

When we think of politicians there are certain characteristics that instantly come to our minds.

When we think of businessmen or businesswomen, we think of specific distinctives that they have compared to a general laborer. *[pause]*

Typically any group of people that is brought up immediately causes particular characteristics to come to our minds.

And we not only think of some distinctives of that group, but we also think of certain things that they are all about. *[pause]*

Usually if you hear of a pastor, you know that they are concerned with the things of God.

(At least I sure hope they are!) *[pause]*

Usually when you hear of a sports player, you know that they are passionate about sports.

Usually when you hear of a librarian, you know that they are very much interested in books.

Or when you hear of some sort of activist, you know that they are purposeful about raising awareness about something important to them. *[pauseeee]*

So what should characterize Christians?

There are many things, but according to our passage, we see that we should be distinct and impactful. *[pauseeee]*

In this passage, Jesus says that we as His followers are salt and light. *[pause]*

He starts out by saying, “You are the salt of the earth.”

Unlike our day, where salt is kind of important for adding to our meals, salt was highly valued in that day. *[pause]*

Salt was used to bring flavor to food.

It wasn't like our day, where we have myriads and myriads of flavoring we could add to our food. *[pause]*

Salt was also used as a preservative in order to keep food from spoiling before they had refrigeration. *[pause]*

Both of these purposes may be at play here when Jesus calls His disciples the salt of the earth.

We bring flavor to the world, making it better, and we preserve the world from decay. *[pauseeee]*

So we are salt, but also light. *[pause]*

He says, “You are the light of the world.”

We are supposed to be like a city set on a hill, or like a lamp giving light to a house. *[pause]*

Think about how important light is.

It helps us to see so that we don't stumble and get hurt.

Just think of how many things you could step on or bump into while you wander through your house in the dark.

Or imagine walking through a forest in pitch black darkness - it wouldn't go well, would it? *[pause]*

Or think of the importance of a lighthouse for a ship in the dark.

Without that lighthouse, they are unable to see that danger and death are ahead, but with the light shining, it shows them reality, and provides the way to life. *[pause]*

So as the light of the world, that's what we are for the world.

We reflect Christ, who is the true light.<sup>2</sup>

We are the ones pointing people to the way, the truth, and the life, who is Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

We are the ones sharing the message of Jesus, who brings sight and life amidst a dark world.  
[pause]

That's what Jesus calls us, put very succinctly, but I want to think further about salt and light.  
[pause]

First, to be salt and light, you have to be *distinct*. [pause]

**Salt is salt because it's not meat, it's not water, it's not dirt - it's salt!**

If it loses its saltiness then it no longer becomes a distinct, essential ingredient anymore. [pause]

**Or think of light.**

Light is distinct from darkness, isn't it?

It shines *in* the darkness.

If it becomes darkness then it's not light and it's not effective anymore. [pause]

**So as Christians, Christ says that we ARE salt and that we ARE light.**

This is who we are.

We don't have to become salty or become light, but we *are* salt and light by being Christ's followers. [pauseeee]

So the key is that we must remain distinct from the world because we ARE distinct from the world. [pause]

Many Christians do not think this way.

They do not cherish and celebrate that we are different from the world. [pause]

**The reason is because they do not want to be seen as weird.**

In fact to some Christians being seen as weird, different, or irrelevant by the world is considered one of the biggest things to avoid.

**But Christ is showing us that we should embrace our distinctiveness because He has made us distinct.** [pause]

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to John 1:9.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to John 14:6.

This is why Jesus says, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”<sup>4</sup> *[pause]*

We have different values and pursuits.

We have different beliefs and mindsets.

We have different ways of living. *[pauseeee]*

I’ll talk more about why this distinctiveness is so important a little later, but let’s move on to the *impact* of salt and light. *[pause]*

What impact do Christians make on the world by being salt and light?

Think of a bland piece of chicken with absolutely no seasoning.

What does adding salt do?

It brings flavor and makes it better, so we make the world a better place. *[pause]*

We are very used to a society that has many of its laws and ways influenced by Christian principles.

In fact, many of America’s values and laws came from Christian beliefs.

But just think of what would happen if absolutely no Christian values or principles were used in society.

It turns into a pagan, secular society of survival of the fittest. *[pauseeee]*

Hitler’s atrocities in many ways grew out of a strong belief in Darwin’s natural selection, and Stalin’s murderous ways stem in many ways from his ardent atheism. *[pause]*

Like I said, many of us are used to a world greatly impacted by Christian truths of people each having value, and the need for compassion and love.

But just think of what many societies were like before Christ came. *[pause]*

There was constant fighting among tribes and nations.

It was a brutal time to be alive.

Paganism was everywhere with human and child sacrifices being regular practice. *[pause]*

Imagine the outrage in today’s world if we heard of a whole nation conducting human sacrifices regularly. *[pauseeee]*

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<sup>4</sup> John 15:19.

So while some people try to say the world is worse off with Christians in it, and blame every war on religion, the world is a far better place with Christians in it than not. *[pause]*

This is not to say that Christians throughout history haven't done anything wrong, for many Christians have done horrendous things.

But that's one of the points of this passage: Christians can either live as salt or not.

But when we are living as salt, it is our compassion, love, justice, and kindness that brings great benefit to the world. *[pauseeee]*

Yet I wonder if we live this way?

Do we live in ways that demonstrate more mercy than revenge?

Do we live in ways that demonstrate more reconciliation than division?

Do we live in ways that display more love and compassion than animosity and hostility?

What about more gratitude than complaints?

What about more joy than despondency?

Do we live distinctive, Christ-honoring, salt and light displaying lives? *[pauseeee]*

One commentator made this challenging point, when he said...

“If the only visible difference between Christians and secular people is that we go to church on Sunday and give money away more regularly, why would they want to join us?

If we divorce, alienate our children, tell lies, and make dirty deals like everyone else, why not play golf on Sunday and spend our money on exotic vacations?”<sup>5</sup> *[pauseeee]*

We should be the ones on the front lines of kindness, mercy, and compassion.

We should be joy-filled, hope-filled people who bring joy and hope to a joyless, hopeless society. *[pauseeee]*

Also, like salt, we are to preserve the world from decay. *[pause]*

Left to itself, the world would go downwards in decay and corruption fast.

But when we are being salt in the world, we help slow down and prevent it from degrading at a more rapid pace. *[pause]*

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 1, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 136.

So if you think about it, we are supposed to be the antiseptic of the world, pointing people towards truth, and to ways of peace, order, and reconciliation. *[pauseeee]*

But here's the thing with that role: preservatives are *irritants* for those set on decay.

By being salt, preserving society from more decay, we irritate the devil, who seeks to destroy. *[pause]*

So many in the world will not like our preserving function, for it will hinder their desire to break down God-given order in society.

This is one of the reasons why we face persecution, for Jesus just said that people will persecute us, uttering all kinds of evil against us. *[pauseeee]*

This irritant nature of our role also relates to being light.

Those who love the darkness are irritated by the light shining, so they will do what they can to extinguish it.

But we don't give up or lose heart, for this is what Christ has called us to be and do.

We are lights shining in a dark world, so that the world will see the truth and experience true life. *[pauseeee]*

The ultimate goal of living this way is not merely to make society a better place so that we can live in a better situation.

That's certainly a benefit, but Jesus shows us that living this way has a greater and grander purpose...

Living as salt and light in the world brings God glory. *[pauseeee]*

Look at verse 16, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." *[pause]*

Some Christians are only focused on the betterment of society.

But they are being too near-sighted, aiming too shallowly and temporarily. *[pause]*

The betterment of society is good, but we must look with higher, grander, and more eternal eyes.

We are salt and light in the world for the glory of God! *[pauseeee]*

Jesus says that when we shine as lights in this world, they will *see* our good works.

That highlights once again that our lives should be distinctive and our lives should be characterized by good works.

And these shining lives of good works will lead others to give glory to our Father who is in Heaven. *[pauseeee]*

As I thought about this idea, I thought deeply about the question “*why?*”.

Why would our good-work shining lives cause people to give glory to the Father? *[pause]*

There are at least 2 ways...

When Christians shine as lights, we act as mirrors and arrows. *[pause]*

As a mirror reflects an image, so we reflect God’s character through our good works. *[pause]*

We are to live with love, compassion, and kindness towards others and that reflects God’s perfect love, compassion, and kindness.

So they see our lives and they realize that we are merely reflecting our Lord. *[pause]*

But we are also arrows.

What does an arrow do? It points towards something.

So our good works point to the *source* of our good works. *[pause]*

When we shine as lights, they see our good works, and they start to realize the true source of our lifestyle.

It’s not that we just thought it up one day.

It’s not that we just use all of our effort and do it.

No, they realize that we can only live this way because God empowers us to live this way. *[pauseeee]*

You see, when weak, sinful people like us live in such a way that we shine as lights in this world, people get to see the power of God on display. *[pause]*

That we could not be self-seeking in a world that promotes self-seeking is radical and radiates brightly in this dark world.

That we could not seek revenge, but readily forgive is counter-cultural and glows in a gloomy world.

That we could not be mean and nasty, but loving and compassionate beams brightly.

And when they see the light, they think, “Where does this light come from?! There has to be a reason! What’s the source?!”

And our reason is because the Lord has done it. *[pause]*

The Lord has taken sinners, living for themselves, and transformed them into shining lights, and many people who see that can't help but say, "Only God can do that with a life!" *[pauseeeee]*

Now not everyone will respond this way, for we just learned that there will be those who persecute us due to following Christ.

*But there will be others, who are led to the Father because we live for Him in this world. [pauseeee]*

Do you live in such a way as to be a mirror and an arrow, reflecting and pointing up to the Father?

*Or do you live only so that you will get the glory? [pauseeeee]*

So we are to be salt and light, but as Jesus shows us, there's a certain possibility for us.

*We could be saltless salt or hidden light, both of which don't do any good.*

*And so what we see is that there are certain temptations that can come, and they are this...*

## **II. Our temptations: dilution and seclusion.**

When talking about salt, Jesus says, "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."

*And then when talking about light, he states, "Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house." [pauseee]*

There are certain similarities between the two illustrations here...

*Salt and light are both beneficial and needed.*

But here's the thing, if salt loses its property of being salty, then it becomes useless.

*And if light is hidden, it also becomes useless and ineffective. [pause]*

Salt and light each have a role and purpose, but they could be used in such a way that it won't be helpful.

*Their great potential can be squandered. [pause]*

Saltless salt isn't helpful and hidden light isn't helpful, but they are both useless. *[pause]*

*By saying these things, Jesus is showing us that there are temptations for us that could waste our impact in the world.*

And the temptations could be put this way: dilution and seclusion. *[pause]*

First, let's think of the temptation of *dilution*.

I get dilution from the image of salt losing its saltiness. *[pause]*

**Have you ever had weak coffee? I hate weak coffee.**

What's the problem with it?

It's diluted by having too much water for the coffee grounds that were added.

So it loses its strength, flavor, and potency. *[pause]*

Well that's what can happen with us as salt, we could be so diluted that we lose our saltiness.

And the way we become saltless salt is by blending in with the world. *[pauseeee]*

**This is so important!**

So many Christians try to blend in with the world to win them to Christ, but they are only working against themselves.

**By blending in with the world, they lose their distinctiveness and therefore lose their impact.**  
*[pauseeee]*

We cannot become like the world.

**We cannot look like them, but we must realize that by being distinct, we bring something needful.**

So do not see being considered weird or different by the world as the worst thing, for that's what we are. *[pauseeeee]*

**Can people tell the difference between you and the world around you?**

Do they think, "There's something different about how they live, what they value, what they pursue, and what they talk about.?" *[pause]*

**We must embrace our distinctiveness!**

Remember who it is that makes you distinct, Jesus, and how it is your distinctiveness that actually makes you salt and not dirt.

**It's your distinctiveness that makes you light and not darkness.**

And it is this peculiarity that makes you impactful. *[pauseeeee]*

Christians make the world a better place, as they make it more pleasant and preserve it from corruption, but we can only do this if we keep our distinctives, rather than being diluted!

If we become diluted we lose our beneficial contribution to society. *[pauseee]*

This broken, dark world doesn't need more copies of itself to fix its problems, it needs something different...

It needs the saving message of Christ, and God's powerful working through His people as salt and light. *[pauseee]*

So we can't let fear or the approval of the world dilute our effectiveness!

Yet that's exactly what drives us many times. *[pause]*

We want the approval of man, and we fear what they will do to us.

But this compromise isn't effective!

As one commentator put it, "Christianity may make its peace with the world and avoid persecution, but it is thereby rendered impotent to fulfill its divinely ordained role.

It will thus ultimately be rejected even by those with whom it has sought compromise."<sup>6</sup> *[pause]*

He's saying that if we compromise, we may avoid persecution, but we end up losing our effectiveness, and eventually the world will see us as useless and reject us anyway. *[pause]*

Don't give into the temptation of dilution by trying to be like the world, but remember that it's your distinctiveness as salt that allows you to make an impact in the world as a disciple of Jesus. *[pauseeee]*

The second temptation is *seclusion*.

I get this from the image of hiding a lamp under a basket.

The lamp is hidden away, being secluded away from where it's supposed to be: on the lampstand. *[pauseee]*

You see, when it comes to the church's relationship to the world, these two temptations are the most common ones.

Some try to blend in and become diluted, but others correctly don't become diluted, but their actions end up with the same result.

Instead of being diluted, they become secluded. *[pause]*

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 102.

They try to avoid the world by secluding themselves away from it.

Yet by doing this, they are like that lamp hidden under a bushel. *[pauseeee]*

Don't we understand though that a light that is hidden and unseen is useless?

We are supposed to be like a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden - the world should recognize that we are here and the effects should be felt. *[pauseeee]*

So Christianity is not to be idle or passive, but we are to be active in the world.

A church is not to seclude themselves from the world, but it is to have a light-giving presence in this dark world. *[pauseeee]*

We must get this: there's no place to just sit back and seclude ourselves away from the world.

Because by doing that, we have lost sight of our mission as lights.

We are being like hidden light, which has great potential, but no impact. *[pause]*

It is not by seclusion that we shine as lights, but by stepping up and actively living rightly that others may see our good works shine. *[pause]*

If we seclude ourselves, then we are hiding the light that the world is desperately in need of.

They are in darkness, and they need the message of Jesus, the light of the world.

They need the truth, they need eternal life, for they are walking in darkness and death, being separated from God. *[pauseeee]*

You see, these two illustrations that Jesus gives show us that it is actually our distinctiveness that gives us our effectiveness in the world.

So that means that if we lose our distinctiveness, we lose our effectiveness. *[pause]*

If salt loses its saltiness, it is no longer distinct and therefore it is no longer effective.

If light is hidden, it is no longer distinct and is therefore no longer impactful. *[pause]*

Salt that loses its saltiness becomes like dirt, thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

Light that's covered up becomes like darkness, and unable to help anyone. *[pauseeee]*

We are distinct from the world, and are supposed to make a huge impact on it, like salt and light.

So we must step up into what we are called to do: we must make a difference in the world. *[pause]*

*What we see here in this passage is that we are to...*

## **Impact the world as salt and light for the glory of God!**

In this passage, Jesus teaches us that as His disciples, we have a great purpose and function in the world that we must not neglect.

As both salt and light are beneficial and needed, so we bring great benefits and needed aspects to the world. *[pause]*

We bring foundational truths of God that provide for better societies, and we bring the saving message of Christ that brings hope and life to a dark and dying world. *[pauseeee]*

So if we are salt, why would we be unsalty?

And if we are light, why would we hide it?

Let's live as salt and light in this world, and not blend in nor seclude ourselves.

Our impact and effectiveness in the world is at stake. *[pause]*

Let's live for Christ, sharing Him with others, and doing good works, so that God the Father gets the glory.

For He deserves all the glory - just look at what He has done for us in Christ Jesus. *[pause]*

Though because of our sin, we deserved eternal death and separation from God forever, yet Christ came to this earth, lived a perfect life, and died in our place for our sins.

He then rose again, so that all those who place their faith in Him alone could be made right with God, and live with Him forever. *[pause]*

Remembering that life-altering, eternity-impacting reality shouldn't make us curmudgeons, hermits, or even worldly, but it should cause us to live distinct, impactful lives for the glory of God.