

Shining Lights in a World of Darkness

In this most recent series we're looking at what it means for Christians to be reminded that we're "salt and light" in the world around us. Initially, we looked at the fact that salt has two primary functions. Salt is a preserving influence and a flavor enhancer. That being true, Christians want to be a preserving influence in a world of decay, spoil and rot. We also want to add a pleasing "flavor" in all our relationships and in all that we say and do. The Sermon on the Mount is a masterful sermon in which each portion flows out of and builds on the previous one. That being true, this section in Matthew 5:13-16 connects to and builds on the Beatitudes that are found in verses 3-12. For example, the Christian who seeks to be a preserving influence wherever God has placed him or her will be "poor in Spirit." (5:3) This person will recognize that we're bankrupt; we're beggars with nothing to commend us to a holy God in and of ourselves. A person who is "poor in Spirit" is not looking to condemn others or busy themselves with pointing out their shortcomings; they're not eager to complain about their situation but rather they're filled with humility and gratitude for God's grace.

These same people will regularly mourn over their sin (5:4). Mourning over our own sin keeps us from an unhealthy and unbiblical focus on the sins of others. Those who are salt in the culture are also those who are "meek." (5:5) A truly meek person is genuinely amazed that God and man can think of him and treat him as well as they do. As you read this you can begin to see how radical this teaching truly is. And yet, this is what Jesus calls us to be as Christians. Looking further at how this section of the passage flows out of the Beatitudes, the man or woman who seeks to be a preserving influence on the world around them will be those who are "hungering and thirsting after righteousness." (5:6) Loving God, by grace, overflows in desiring and obeying the teaching of Holy Scripture which is where we find our true, flavor-filled joy (Psalm 16:11). In addition, one who shows "mercy" (5:7) is a preserving influence as is the person whose heart is pure (5:8). This person also seeks to be a genuine "peacemaker" (5:9) in each and every situation in which peace is lacking. As this section draws to a close, Jesus comforts us with blessings for those who are wrongly persecuted (5:10-12). This leads us to Christians as "light" in the world.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." (5:14) Once again we see the same emphatic verb form which could be translated: "You and you alone are the light of the world." Jesus is presenting these metaphors of salt and light in such a way

that we see a clear contrast. Christians are called to add palatable flavor to things that are distasteful, as well as being a preservative in a society of decay and rot. Jesus now says that Christians are “light,” i.e., we’re to shine into the darkness all around us. Before we look at the Christian as light, it will serve us well to see the biblical teaching of Christ as light. In the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah we’re told of the coming “Servant of the LORD” who will be, “...a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Is. 49:6) This is an important prophecy, not least because it speaks of the Servant whose salvation will reach—not merely within the realm of the Jewish nation—but to all the nations and to the ends of the earth.

Clearly, Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. I could mention Matthew 4:16 (see Isaiah 9:1, 2; 42:7) as well as John 8:12 where Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness” (see Isaiah 42:6). Therefore it’s only Christians who can ever truly be said to be light. To support this teaching further, in Ephesians 5:8 Paul writes to Christians: “...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” In Philippians 2:14-15 Paul writes that Christians are, “...children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” In summary, just as the moon’s light is a reflection of the light of the sun, Christians are lights in the world as we seek to reflect the light of Jesus Christ.

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