

Salt & Light

The Everyday Disciple: Following Jesus One Step at a Time Sermon 9

Matthew 5:13-16

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¹³ “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.¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16, ESV)

Recently I purchased a single serving of yogurt while on a layover in an airport. I looked down at the label to see what flavor I was getting when a litany of information bombarded me:

“non-GMO; no artificial sweeteners; no artificial flavors; no preservatives; no rBST+ ... Our products don't contain any of those dreadful artificial sweeteners. We only use milk from family farms that do not use growth hormones.”

Well, I thought, now I not only have a snack but can also feel better about myself! I don't share this because paying attention to the food that goes into our stomachs is bad (praise the Lord we have enough food that we can be picky—that has not been the norm in the history of humankind). I mention this because it got me thinking about something while I sat in that airport. The messaging on the yogurt was different than the typical ingredients list you see. This wasn't stating something neutral; it was conveying something moral. The message wasn't, *“buy this if you're a hungry person.”* It was saying, *“this is what you buy if you're a good person.”*

We live in a moment when morality has gone mainstream. Things that used to be neutral now require a moral dimension. From the food we eat, to the college majors we choose, to where we work and live, to the newspaper we read—all these parts of life now require moral measuring. And everyone is anxious to be counted righteous—judged by others to be on the right side of whatever current issue.

Wanting to look moral is hardly new. And much of our heightened moral awareness is welcome—especially when it comes to condemning forms of prejudice previously winked at. However, there's

something deeper going on. Shifts in how organizations brand themselves, companies sell products, and universities describe the curriculum, suggest that a form of morality has spread abroad impacting everything. It's not enough to sell yogurt; a company needs also to sell how much they care.

I was thinking about all this as I ate my tiny serving of fermented milk—about the fact that everyone, everywhere, was concerned and committed to the care of others and our world. I didn't necessarily have an opinion about this—I was just making the observation: morality has gone mainstream. As I did so, a question began to surface in my head that I keep coming back to. It's a question we'll address in today's sermon. *In a world where morality is mainstream, what, if anything, is unique about the Christian calling to be salt and light?*

To put the question another way:

If you removed Jesus from the story of the world—if God never came as Christ, never lived a perfect life, teaching and healing, never died on the cross for our sins, never rose from the dead, never ascended into heaven and sent His Holy Spirit upon His followers calling and empowering them to be salt and light—if you removed Christ from the Cosmos—would anything be different about the moral state of the world?

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus teaches that His disciples are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. **This, therefore, is our ninth mark of a disciple—a disciple is salt and light.** And this clearly signals that Jesus' disciples are meant to have an impact, and influence, on the society and world around them. Salt preserves and purifies; light dispels darkness and guides towards truth.

And Jesus seems emphatic that there is a uniqueness to His disciples' moral role—to their calling as salt and light. His teaching here suggests that without them, the world would be without salt and light. He says emphatically, "You are the salt" (5:13); "you are the light" (5:14). He further emphasizes their unique role by warning of how tragic their abdication would be: "...if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?" (5:13). "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket" (5:14b-15a).

According to Jesus, His disciples are not just another brand of salt, or shade of light—they are *the* salt and light. They are what will preserve, purify, enlighten and guide a world that's grown corrupt and lies under a cloak of darkness. We need to look carefully, now, and ask just what it is that makes the

disciples' engagement with the world as salt and light so unique. We'll highlight four ways this engagement is unique.

I. The Disciple's Engagement is Unique in Scope

We take for granted our world of charities and non-for-profits. We're not surprised when Samaritan's Purse shows up after a hurricane, or when the cashier asks if we'd like to donate a dollar to support children with cancer. We assume these arenas of compassion and care: doctors, nurses, chaplains, pastors, social workers. We assume structures of care, compassion to care, and even a moral obligation to care. But as Kavin Rowe—professor of New Testament at Duke—points out,

We've forgotten how [these structures of care] came into the world in the first place.... [W]e forgotten how they are not simply a given in human history, and how it was that the Christians generated the forerunners of the kind of care we now hope for—and why they did so.¹

Rowe goes on,

It was the vision Jesus gave people about the human—the other—which “spurred the early church to create systems and institutions of care—provision for the poor, nursing the sick during plagues, the development of the hospital, and the invention of the orphanage.”²

Jesus turned “the other,” whether the foreigner or downtrodden—formerly dismissed by many—, into a human being—someone to whom we are obligated. During the enlightenment period, people were moving beyond the superstition of religion. But they didn't want to lose all the moral structures religion had bequeathed. Certain clear-eyed thinkers, however, were not fooled. Without Jesus' worldview, there were no grounds for caring about the world as Jesus did. Writing in the late 18th century, Marquis de Sade put things bluntly,

God was a sham. There was only Nature. The weak existed to be enslaved and exploited by the strong. Charity was a cold and pointless process, and talk of human brotherhood a fraud.... The doctrine of loving one's neighbor is a fantasy that we owe to Christianity and not to Nature.³

The moral assumptions of our day, especially about human rights and caring for the oppressed, are deeply Christian—rooted in Jesus' teachings and view of the world.⁴ What Jesus revealed to His

disciples about the nature of human beings meant that the scope of their care would be broader and deeper than other disputations towards others.

1. Jesus' scope of caring is broader

First, Jesus' scope of care broadened because Jesus taught both that all were created in the image of God, and also called His disciples to "care for the least of these"—whether or not they were kin. This was a much broader calling than others had given. In His first major recorded sermon in Luke, Jesus opens with these words: "I have come to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18/Isaiah 61:1). Moreover, Jesus had gone on to teach that the human being was the place to see Christ Himself and serve Him:

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.... Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?"...I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:31-40 NIV).

Jesus taught His disciples that the place to encounter Him was in the face of the other—Jesus humanized the other.

2. Jesus' scope of caring is deeper

Secondly, Jesus' teaching about the human deepened the scope of care. Jesus taught that our problems were not just without, but within. To truly care for a person was to seek the transformation of their heart. People needed to be reconciled to God. They needed to repent and taste the grace of forgiveness. They needed justice now, not merely socially, but spiritually—they needed to be justified before God.

Although modern notions of altruism were not part of Jesus' day, He was not speaking into a vacuum. There were other groups offering ways of being in the world—there were other groups who would have seen themselves as the salt and light. The Pharisees, for example, were the traditionalists who said the key to being in the world was keeping the law perfectly. The Sadducees, we might call them the modernists, believed the thing to do was to keep changing with the times. The Essenes were the ascetics, who said that what we needed was a lifestyle of simplicity. And the zealots said we need revolt.

But Jesus said something deeper: we need conversion. The human being is spiritual and physical and is dead in their current state. They need to be made alive by the Spirit of God Almighty flooding into them and changing them. A disciple's engagement with the world as salt and light is unique in scope—it is uniquely broad and uniquely deep.

II. The Disciple's Engagement is Holy

A second uniqueness lies in the quality of Jesus' disciples—they are called to be holy. Their engagement with the world in word and deed brings with it an aroma of God. Salt is a purifying substance; in the ancient world, it was associated with both preserving and purifying food. Salt helps clean wounds. The purifying aspect of the disciples is demonstrated in the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount—Matthew 5-7. In this sermon, Jesus teaches that salt is salt, and light is light because they have been marked by a unique humility, righteousness, radical love, and total trust in God.

Jesus' reference to "good works," in verse 16—when He says that others in the world will "see your good works/deeds," cannot be separated from His call to a godly life. Good works and good character are inseparable for the disciple. Woodrow Wilson told the story of being in a barbershop once:

A man had come quietly in upon the same errand as myself, and sat in the next chair to me. Every word that he uttered, though it was not in the least didactic, showed a personal and vital interest in the man who was serving him; and before I got through with what was being done to me, I was aware that I had attended an evangelistic service, because Mr. Moody was in the next chair. I purposely lingered after he left, and noted the singular effect his visit had upon the barbers in that shop I felt that I left that place as I should have left a place of worship.⁵

Often the efforts of caring for others are undermined by a lack of character in the parties giving the care. How awful this is when that party is Christian. When we consider that Jesus' calling to us to be salt and light is part of the Sermon on the Mount, we must recognize that our character—our holiness and the life of God in us—is as important to our engagement with society as our deeds. A disciple's engagement with the world as salt and light is unique because her acts of care or works of justice are never separated from her personal holiness.

III: The Disciple's Engagement is Wise

In verse 13 Jesus warns, “if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” The phrase “lost its taste” translates a Greek word that more literally means foolish (μωραίνω⁶). We could say Jesus warns, “if you become foolish, insipid, simpletons.” Jesus’ disciples engage society not out of pressure or mere sentimentality—they are not just driven by emotion. Rather, they engage out of a healthy blend of compassion and wisdom.

T. S. Elliot once wrote, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”⁷ Today, however, we are doused with more so-called reality than ever. We know about things happening across the world instantly. This can make it hard to know where God is calling us, specifically, to engage. Moreover, issues presented to us are often tangled up in the agendas of others. It’s hard, sometimes, to know exactly what the issues are and how best to engage them. To cite T. S. Elliot again, this time from his essay, “The Perfect Critic,”

When there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when everyone knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about.” And, in such circumstances, “when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts.

Friends, there are many issues Jesus wants us to be big-hearted and open-handed about. We don’t want to miss these because they become caught up in the agendas of others. We need to be wise and discerning—we need to study the world around us and do our best to see it honestly and clearly—as Jesus does. It seems that a wise engagement with the world, as Christians, would include the following two qualities:

1. Compassion

We need to be careful that the agendas of others and the larger power structures at work in the world are not dictating where and how we feel compassion. Jesus cares about the people around us—and we want to share His heart for this.

2. Prudence

Second, Christians need to act with prudence. “Prudence doesn’t mean being uncertain about what’s right; it means being scrupulous about finding the best means to get there.”⁸ It means doing the work to understand an issue accurately and doing the work to propose worthy solutions. A few decades ago,

in a paper detailing the complexity of problems that social policies aim to solve, Berkeley professors Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber found that

one of the most intractable problems is that of defining problems (of knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies). In turn, and equally intractable, is the problem of identifying the actions that might effectively narrow the gap between what-is and what-ought-to-be.⁹

Rittel and Webber describe such phenomena as “wicked problems”—problems that are difficult (even impossible) to solve because there is no single solution to them.¹⁰ Christians must resist pessimism that says problems can’t be solved. We believe in a God who raises the dead. But Christians also must resist oversimplification of problems and a utopian notion that we can put the world perfectly to right before Christ’s return.

Christian prudence means recognizing the complex amalgamation of spiritual, physical, psychological, and societal aspects that are part of the world’s problems. And it means working hard to address each aspect in light of God’s promises and in light of awaiting God’s return. As Solomon put it, “to search out a matter is the glory of kings” (Proverbs 25:2) A disciple’s engagement with the world as salt and light is unique, because it is both compassionate and wise.

IV. The Disciple’s Engagement is Ecclesial

A final unique aspect to being Jesus’ salt and light is this: a disciple’s engagement with the world is ecclesial. They maintain their saltiness and brightness through their new community—the Body of Christ. The word “you” in vs. 13, 14 is plural. Jesus is speaking to the new community. The city on the hill is bright, not because of one light, but because of the many.

It’s hard to face the darkness and brokenness of the world by yourself. This is why people typically jump into a group, or cause, with which they do their care. But these groups or causes do not abide very long, nor do they always nourish their adherents. Jesus does not envision us being salt and light by ourselves.

1. Pray and support each other

We pray for each other and encourage each other as we engage the world. This protects us from only engaging when the world likes us. Jesus says in Matthew 5.16 that in time the world will “see our good deeds and give glory to our father in heaven.” But just prior, in verse 11, he says to these same disciples, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” The community of Christ helps keep us salty and bright, irrespective of how the world is receiving us.

2. We do more together

It is also important to realize when we are overburdened by the sheer number of issues in the world, this truism for Christians: **The Body of Christ does in a day more than an individual Christian can do in a lifetime.** If you are a member of the Body of Christ, as one author recently put it, writing in the first person:

Today, I am caring for prisoners in jail; I am evangelizing the disenfranchised in Nepal; I am praying over the sick child in the hospital; I am serving the recovering victims of sex trafficking; I am standing against racial injustice; I am caring for widows. And I am doing so much more.... How? I am doing all this because I am part of the living body of Christ. God’s Spirit has united me to Christ and because of that union, to my sisters and brothers of the faith. We are one.¹¹

Morality has gone mainstream. And there is much to be thankful for about this—especially when we recognize that our culture’s moral assumptions about the value of the human are deeply Christian. However, for disciples of Christ, this cannot lead us into moral malaise—where we forgot that we, uniquely, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The impurities, the decaying, the brokenness, and darkness of our world are crying out for salt and light—may we be it.

Endnotes

1. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity’s Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*, (Abingdon Press, 2020) 68.
2. Ibid.
3. See Marquis de Sade, *Justine*, tr. John Phillips (Oxford, 2012) 142; 84; cited in Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, 407.

4. One of the most recent and thorough arguments for the Christian underpinnings of modern morality comes from historian Tom Holland's book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*
12. Daniel Koehler, "D.L. Moody in the memory of his contemporaries," *Moody Center*, <https://moodycenter.org/articles/d-l-moody-in-the-memory-of-his-contemporaries/> Accessed November 11, 2021.
6. "μωραίνω," BDAG, 663. 1. make foolish, show to be foolish οὐχὶ ἐμώρανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου; has not God shown that the wisdom of the world is foolish? 1 Cor 1:20. Pass. in act. sense become foolish (Sir 23:14) φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν although they claimed to be wise, they became fools Ro 1:22 (cp. Jer 10:14; Ar. 8, 2). 2. make tasteless pass. become tasteless, insipid, of salt (s. ἄναλος and FPerles, REJ 82, 1926, 122f; MBlack, Aramaic Approach3, '67, 166f) Mt 5:13; Lk 14:34.
7. T.S. Elliot, *Burnt Norton*
8. Alan Jacobs, *How to Think*, 69. As the proverb reads, "The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge" (Prov 14:18).
9. Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," in *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155–169.
10. Rittel and Webber.
11. Kelly Kapic, *You're Only Human*, 178.