

THE NOT-SO-SECRET INGREDIENT

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:13–16
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Matthew 5:13–16

Do you know that feeling when you get to the end of the day and have to figure out what to do for dinner? I know it well. We have four teenagers at home now. We can't seem to make enough food to make them full.

This has given me a greater appreciation for something my parents used to do when we were growing up. My father would make “daddy-burgers.” As far as I understand it, here's the basic approach for making a daddy-burger: look through the pantry and refrigerator and pull out anything that wouldn't taste absolutely terrible mixed into ground beef. It's a very low bar—anything that might conceivably be put into meat.

Add these ingredients to a bowl of ground beef, form patties, and grill them. Voila: daddy-burgers, with all sorts of secret ingredients.

We're in our third week of our series on the Sermon on the Mount. This is probably the most famous sermon Jesus ever gave. It's recorded for us in chapters 5-7 of the book of Matthew. The overall idea of the sermon is how to be blessed; how to live the good life. Or as Scott Grant put it two weeks ago: How to be in a good place. That's why we've called the series *Blessed Are*.

Are you living the good life? Are you in a good place?

Jesus says that for his followers, the kingdom of the heavens is near. It is available. He seems to think that our lives can be lived in this spiritual kingdom, even as we go about normal life on the kingdom of earth. It's a radical suggestion. Our lives can be different.

But they don't always feel different. I look around and sometimes it's hard to tell that someone is a follower of Jesus. I look at my own life, and it seems like I'm struggling with a lot of the same things that everyone else is. But Jesus gives us a path forward. He gives us a way to unlock the life of the Spirit and live in his kingdom.

If I were giving his sermon, I'd start with how to live that way. That seems to be the big idea. But he doesn't

begin there. Two weeks ago we heard the introduction — his description of who can live the blessed life. As Jesus delves into the first part of his message, his first topic doesn't have to do with the heavenly kingdom.

Instead, he begins with life on earth. Before he talks about how his followers live in the heavens, he tells them what role they play on earth. This is a really important way to start his sermon. Jesus wants his followers to know that living in his heavenly kingdom doesn't mean you disregard the down here. You don't pull away, and you aren't disengaged.

When my dad would make daddy-burgers, my family would try and guess the ingredients. It became a game. Other times we decided it would be better not to know. But people shouldn't have to guess what makes this earth different. It should be clear. Followers of Jesus are supposed to be the not-so-secret ingredient here on earth.

We need to hear this. For many of us, this is what makes holding onto faith in Jesus difficult. Things may be clear when we're gathered here on a Sunday morning, but it's in the rest of our lives where things get confusing. There are questions we don't have answers for. We face pain we can't understand or explain. Our culture tells us that all religions are just the same thing. When we look around, it can be hard to see what role Jesus-followers have in the world.

More than ever before, this message is critical. We live at a time in history and in a part of the world where Christianity is increasingly misunderstood, misrepresented, and mistaken for ideas and values which have nothing to do with Christ. Many followers of Jesus can't articulate what makes following Jesus different from anyone else in the world. And very few Christians can tell you how their presence on earth is supposed to affect life on this planet.

Because it's all so confusing, so many of us are tempted to shrink back, to make whatever we believe a private thing, not to be shared with anyone else. Jesus begins his sermon by saying that this cannot be the case.

Even before we get the details about what life in the kingdom of heaven looks like, we get a picture of how kingdom-of-heaven-dwellers relate to earth.

I'm excited for us to understand this, and I'm eager for us to live this out.

We'll look at this passage by first trying to understand the situation that these words are spoken into. What was happening in the first century? What is happening today? Then we'll look at two metaphors that Jesus gives us to help us understand our identity. Finally, we'll read his instruction and figure out what it means to us today.

I hope we'll find some guidance in being God's not-so-secret ingredient here on earth.

The Situation

If this passage speaks of the role we're supposed to play on earth, let's begin by looking around us and considering the situation in which we live.

We live in what most people call a "post-Christian" culture which means that Christianity is no longer the dominant religion in civic life. There's no question this is true in Silicon Valley. Last week I saw a bumper sticker of a dinosaur eating the Christian fish. Our schools do not present historical Christian beliefs as legitimate worldviews.

In 2017, the Barna Research Group reported that the San Francisco Bay Area is the most unchurched region in the country with 60% of people not having attended a church service in the past six months. We also topped the list as the highest de-churched area in the country. That means 47% of people here used to be at least somewhat active in church but no longer are.¹

I know many of us struggle with even being associated with Christianity. I met with the mayor of Palo Alto a few years ago. She asked me hesitantly whether we would describe ourselves as evangelical. That word has such strong negative associations in our culture, and many of us aren't sure we're comfortable using it.

Philip Yancey addresses this problem in his recent book *Vanishing Grace*. He quotes research group in Phoenix studying public opinion toward Christians. The president of that group said, "Evangelicals were called illiterate, greedy, psychos, racist, stupid, narrow-minded, bigots, idiots, fanatics, not cases, screaming loons,

delusional, simpletons, pompous, morons, cruel, nitwits, and freaks, and that's just a partial list..." *Vanishing Grace*, page 17).²

This is particularly hard for our young people. It's hard enough to figure out what you believe as you grow up, but our environment with so many voices makes it much harder. When a blogger in 2013 wrote a post entitled "Top 10 Reasons our Kids Leave Church", it went viral with over 500 thousand hits. He writes, "There's no easy way to say this. The American Evangelical church has lost, is losing, and will almost certainly continue to lose our youth." (*Vanishing Grace*, page 17-18).

Maybe it makes sense that Jesus begins his sermon with how we relate to the world. There is no harder time to be a follower of Jesus than today. When we look at the world we live in, it's easy to conclude that things don't look good.

So we need these words from the Sermon on the Mount. But let's go back and think about the original people Jesus delivered this sermon to. There is no harder time to be a Christian than today. But maybe there is no easier time either.

Jesus is speaking to a group of fisherman, shepherds, and farmers in the hills of Galilee who had come to a remote place to hear him speak. These people lived under the constant shadow of the Roman Empire, who occupied their land, taxed their meager resources, and ruled with an iron fist.

I'd like to remind us of the passage we heard two weeks ago. This sermon begins with the beatitudes — a list of people who can be blessed. Scott suggested that as Jesus spoke, people would have identified themselves in the kinds of people that he mentioned.

As best you can, put yourself on that hillside, listening to Jesus, and finding yourself in the categories that he lists. Then listen to how his statement about salt and light fit into that. I've been reciting this passage every morning for the past two weeks. And I feel like every time I say it, another little bit of understanding falls into place. If you've been memorizing it too, I hope you've had a similar experience.

For now, read to who Jesus is talking to and what he says about them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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. 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 in the house.

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.

Jesus tells this group of people that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. If you had taken a survey of the people in the Roman Empire, these people, living in the backwaters of nowhere would be very low on your list of influential people. They did not look likely. They could barely live their lives. They could barely feed their children.

How could it be remotely possible for them to be salt and light?

If things don't look good for us, they certainly didn't look good for them. Following Jesus may be difficult in the Silicon Valley, but I think it might have been just as hard in the hills of Galilee. So how could Jesus say this? How could it possibly be true?

The identity of kingdom-dwellers

To this collection of unlikely people, Jesus gives two metaphors that represent their identity in the world.

Matthew 5:13-14:

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

He uses these images in parallel. This was a very common way of communicating in Hebrew literature. You see it everywhere in the Old Testament. The speaker says the same thing in two different ways. These two images that Jesus uses are identically structured. First, he presents an image, and then he makes an observation.

So it's likely that Jesus means one thing through these two statements. On the most simple level, it's easy to understand what Jesus was meant.

Jesus picks two ideas which are universal in every culture, across every time in the world. Salt is used by literally everyone. The human body is almost 0.5% salt³ and if you live on the planet earth, you've seen light. So everyone, everywhere for all time is familiar with salt and light.

In the most obvious sense, these are good things. Salt makes things better. It preserves food and brings out flavor. Light makes things better by letting you see. Imagine how much more important these things were to a culture without refrigeration or artificial light. Salt and light were critical aspects to life.

So on a very basic level, this is really clear. Anyone can understand that salt and life make things better.

But there is a deeper level to his statement as well. In the Old Testament, salt was used for many different things. One of those was as part of a covenant, or an agreement between two parties. There are several references to a "covenant of salt" in the Old Testament (Numbers 18:19, 2 Chronicles 13:5). Those references seem to indicate that a covenant of salt was an agreement which lasted forever. Scholars speculate that this was because salt was so often used as a preservative.

As far as being the light of the world, there is even more. The Old Testament frequently used light to refer to the revelation of God. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah has this to say about light, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." (Isaiah 9:2).

Isaiah was talking about the coming of the Messiah. In fact, Matthew quoted this verse from Isaiah in chapter 4, just before going into the sermon on the mount. He says that this verse was fulfilled by Jesus.

John, who wrote another one of the accounts of Jesus' life, quotes Jesus himself as saying, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). And the city on the hill is clearly a reference to Jerusalem. Here is where the Messiah would come to announce the arrival of the new world order.

So on a simple reading, salt and light are critical ingredients which make the world better. But on a deeper theological reading, they point to the promise that God will send someone to repair this broken world. That's the Old Testament expectation for a Messiah. Theologians would say that this is a Christological metaphor: these words have to do specifically with Jesus.

Jesus is telling this ragged bunch of outcasts that they have a role in announcing the Messiah to the world. Just like Moses told people about God's plans for them, these people would play a critical role in fixing this world. They were to be a symbol to the entire world—a proclamation and an example for everyone to see—that God is willing and able to fix this broken world.

Let's make that as simple as possible: followers of Jesus make things better.

Notice that at first, there is nothing to do. Jesus is not telling them to be salt and light. He's not saying that if they work hard and get it right, then maybe they could eventually be salt and light. Instead, Jesus tells them that this is already true. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

This is something that cannot be lost. Jesus tells these people that they have a new identity. They are salt and light.

I heard a comparison recently between Christianity and other world religions from a book by Ravi Zacharias. He pointed out that Jesus is the only religious leader who

wasn't just a messenger, but he was the message. Every other religious leaders shared ideas about how to live. Jesus came and said, "I am the way."

And now he does the same thing to his followers. Jesus does not say "the gospel is the light of the world." Or "the news that Jesus saves is the salt of the earth." He says to this group of unlikely people, "You are the salt. You are the light." He says that to us.

The good news about Jesus is not a message that we deliver. It is an identity that defines us. If you have encountered Jesus, you are a witness. We are it. We are the best shot that someone who doesn't know Jesus has at seeing firsthand what life in the kingdom of the heavens is like. You make the world a better place, just by being who you are.

We live in a world where the message about Christianity is confused, corrupt, and incriminating. What's the solution? We are—not with theological answers or perfect explanations of everything; just us, living in the kingdom of heaven, trying to follow Christ as best we can in this world.

Jesus' Instruction

Jesus focuses on the identity of these kingdom-dwellers; they are salt and light. He alludes to some possible problems; he talks about salt losing its saltiness and light being hidden. So even though he begins with identity, he follows that up with an instruction.

It's a simple instruction, and Jesus tells us the purpose behind it as well.

Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Two weeks ago, we heard about the list of unlikely people who were blessed. Then there was a simple instruction: rejoice and be glad. Because you are blessed, you can rejoice. Now we get the same pattern. Because we are salt and light, we can let our light shine before others.

It's possible to be the light of the world in a way that doesn't benefit anyone around you. Nobody does it because it's a stupid thing to do. You don't put a lamp in a basket. No one would benefit from the light, and the basket would probably catch fire—remember we're talking about lanterns here, not LED light bulbs.

Jesus tells this ragged group of outcasts that they should let their light shine. They are poor in spirit; they are mourning; they are meek and longing for justice. What light do they have?

I'll bet they didn't feel like they had any light to shine. I know some of you don't either. You're just trying to make life work and you feel like you're constantly under threat. If you're a kingdom-dweller, it can seem like your life is constantly under threat from the power of the world around you. It doesn't even have to be persecution for being a Christian. Life is just hard in general. It's hard to make everything work.

With regards to our faith, when we feel threatened we tend toward one of two extremes. Brain scientists call it the fight or flight response. One option is to hide—shrink back to protect ourselves. Withdraw from the danger of the world around us. There's a recent book called *The Benedict Option* which suggests this is exactly what believers ought to do. Withdraw from society and let the culture run its course.

A lot of us have chosen this path. You come to church, and you believe in Jesus. You live your life as best you can in the kingdom. But it's a private thing. You don't know how to talk about it with anyone else. So you don't. You keep it to yourself because that's the easiest path.

That doesn't sound like "letting your light shine."

Another option when you feel threatened is to fight. Let's take control. Let's get Christians into positions of power. Let's take over our culture. Some Christians talk about a "culture war"—we need to wage war against the forces which threaten Christianity in our culture, and we need to win.

But that doesn't really sound like "letting your light shine" either.

If we don't flee and we don't fight, what are we supposed to do? Jesus says to "let your light shine."

We used have a pastor on staff who used the phrase "live your life out loud." I think that's a great way to describe what Jesus is talking about here.

Just be you so that others can know you. You don't have to hide, and you don't have to fight. There is a third option. It's dangerous and it's risky, and it might make

you feel vulnerable and exposed. That's why just before this Jesus assures us that when we are persecuted or reviled or people heap false accusations on us, we are still blessed in the kingdom of the heavens.

Just be who you are. Bring all of you into public. You may have doubts about your faith. Your marriage might be in a hard place. You may be lonely. You may be unsure about where to go with your job. Maybe you face chronic pain or depression or anxiety. Maybe you've made a lot of mistakes in life—big mistakes. Maybe God feels distant to you.

You can bring all of that. None of it disqualifies you from letting your light shine.

Several years ago in seminary, my wife and I went through a particularly difficult time in our marriage. At the time, one of the things that made it so difficult was because I thought my life had to work if I was going to be a pastor. I remember telling her one night, "I'm supposed to be training to be a pastor. That means my life has to work."

I'm glad I don't believe that's true anymore, because there are times my life doesn't seem to work. But I've learned (and I'm learning) that God is working in me and even through me, even when things seem to be falling apart. Sometimes it's being open about the pain or tension or confusion or anxiety that I'm experiencing that helps people to see the glory of God the clearest.

You don't have to do anything fancy. Just let your light shine—whatever light you have—in whatever way you can manage to let it shine. Live your life as you're living now out loud. Through our lives, the kingdom of heaven will grow.

Conclusion

Think again about my father collecting all sorts of random ingredients to put into daddy burgers. Who would think that peanut butter could taste good in a burger? Who would think to add leftover sausage or potatoes or salad dressing? Surprise! Some of those things actually taste good in a burger.

Think again the collection of rural peasants from Galilee who first heard these words from Jesus. Think about God, our Father who is in heaven, collecting those people. He gathered them and put them all on a hillside together in Galilee. Then his son told them that

they would be the not-so-secret ingredient who would change the world. Who would think that would have a chance of working?

What is the most surprising thing about this passage is that it worked. Those people were salt and light, and they let their light shine. And the world was changed as a result. Not overnight. Not even in many of their lifetimes. But we are only here today worshipping Jesus because they and other unlikely people from the first century became the message of the Gospel and watched it grow.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ spread through powerless people who let their light shine over hundreds of years.

You don't have to know the words. You don't have to hide and protect yourself. Neither do you have to fight a war with culture and come out victorious. Just be who you are. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. When you live as a kingdom-of-heaven-dweller, you make life on earth better. And through you, people encounter Jesus.

Endnotes

- 1 Len Fisher, "Church Attendance Trends Around the Country," *Barna* (May 26, 2017), <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>
- 2 Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014). p 17.
- 3 "How much salt is in a human body?," *BBC Science Focus*, <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/how-much-salt-is-in-a-human-body/>