

“Salt and Light: The Outer Life of a Christian”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Theme: Witness, Christian lifestyle

Occasion: Epiphany 5, Year A

A Chinese Christian came to a missionary one time and said, “I have learned to quote the entire Sermon on the Mount by memory.” He stood before the missionary and perfectly quoted the sermon, word-for-word. The missionary said, “That is wonderful. How did you do it?” the Chinese Christian said, “I spent the last year trying to live it.”

Dr. James Stewart, a great British preacher once said, “The greatest threat to Christianity is not communism, it’s not atheism, it’s not materialism, it’s not humanism. The greatest threat to Christianity is Christians trying to sneak into Heaven, incognito, without ever sharing their faith, without ever living out the Christian life, without ever becoming involved in the most significant work God is doing on planet Earth.”

This is exactly the problem Jesus was trying to remedy with His Sermon on the Mount. Think about the crowd to whom Jesus was speaking. It wasn’t a gathering of the United Nations, it wasn’t Congress, it wasn’t a classroom of students at Harvard or Yale. Jesus was talking to a group of common people living ordinary lives.

And yet, Jesus said to them, “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” You may think you are insignificant, but I can tell you that if you are a Christian, you can make an incredible difference in this world.

I heard about a man that was walking through a county fair when he met a tiny girl, who was carrying a gigantic fluff of cotton candy on a stick, which was

almost as big as she was. He said to her, “How can a little girl like you eat all of that cotton candy?” She looked up at him and said, “Well, I’m really much bigger on the inside than I am on the outside.”

That is so true of all of us who are Christians. Last week we spent some time talking about the beatitudes. And I shared with you *that who we are matters*. In my devotion with the staff at our monthly meeting, on Tuesday, I shared this quote with them: “What we do for Christ grows out of who we are in Christ.”

And now today, as we continue with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that “we are the salt of the earth, and we are the light of the world.” In essence, Jesus continues to tell us that who we are matters. But now the focus is turned outward. How does being a Christian influence the way that we interact with the world, how we treat people, how we respond to the hurts and the needs of others?

“My followers,” said Jesus, “are to be like salt and light.” Now, that should be clear enough. Everyone knows what the purpose and function of salt and light are. The everyday purpose of salt is to preserve, flavor and purify. Jesus was saying that his followers should preserve that which is good in the world, flavor with love the lives of others, and purify that which has gone sour.

That’s who we are as followers of Jesus. We are a people who have a salt-like quality, which adds to the lives of others. The way we function in the world enhances or enriches the flavor of life. You and I are the salt of the earth.

You need to understand how valuable salt was in the days of Jesus. What we take for granted today was like pure gold to them. You see, salt is a preservative, and 2,000 years ago people did not have refrigeration. Salt was so valuable in Bible days that it was often traded ounce-for-ounce for gold.

Roman soldiers were paid in salt. In fact, the word *salary* is derived from the

word for salt. If a Roman soldier didn't do his job, he wouldn't get all of his salt. That's where we get the phrase, "He's not worth his salt," if someone doesn't do a good day's work.

Our world is decaying, our world is rotting. And it is our job, as salt, to preserve the holiness of God, and the goodness of Jesus as much as we can. Who we are matters, because who we are affects the way we treat others. As bad as things are, can you imagine how bad things would be if there were no churches, no Bibles, no Christians in the world? You and I are the salt of the earth, and by our witness to others we share the love of Jesus Christ, and so we help to preserve the holiness of God.

But Jesus also said that we are the light of the world. Everyone knows the purpose of light. Light casts out darkness, enables others to see, and makes things visible. The worst thing that we can do with light is to hide it. If hidden, a light cannot push back the shadows, nor can it enable others to see.

Jesus is urging us to turn on the light in our lives. Each of us is supposed to shine for Christ's sake. But our light is not like that of the sun. Our light resembles that of the moon; it is a reflected light, from the Christ-light that lives within us. We are supposed to shine so that others might see *that* light and give glory, not to us, but to the Lord who illuminates us.

Think for a moment how Jesus's audience in the first century would have understood his words. The typical home in Palestine was very dark, with only one circular window, perhaps not more than 18 inches across. Lamps were essential. The typical lamp was nothing more than a bowl of oil with a wick floating in it. It was not easy to light lamps; remember this was before the age of matches.

Therefore the lamps were kept burning continuously. And, when the family

was sleeping or was out, an earthen bushel container was placed over the lamp so that nothing would catch on fire. But when the family was at home and awake, the lamp was placed high on a stand, so that all corners of the room would have some light.

The essential message this Scripture has for us today is this: A Christian must reflect Christ as surely as the moon reflects the sun. Our task is to illuminate a dark world with the reflected light of Christ, always giving him the glory.

Let me suggest, very briefly, three ways that we can let our light shine for Christ. **First**, we can let our light shine by setting a good example. I refer to the way that we run our businesses, rear our children, conduct our social lives. I mean our personal habits and our social attitudes.

What about your personal example? Does it shine the light of Christ into the world? Does your language, your personal habits, your choice of movies, the jokes you tell or laugh at, your family life - do all of these reflect the light of Christ in the world?

Second, we can let our light shine for Christ by sharing our time, our talent and our treasure. The gift of our time, given for others, shows the world that we do not live just for ourselves. The gift of our talent, especially when used to witness for Jesus, speaks volumes about what is most important in our lives. The gift of our money - do we hoard it selfishly, or fearfully? Or do we let the light of Christ shine through our extravagant generosity?

Third, you can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world by your witness. I refer to your daily conversations with countless people, and the part that Jesus Christ has in those conversations. There are countless opportunities in a typical day for you to say something positive about the Lord, something that fits

naturally into the conversation. The key is to be alert and willing.

To say that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world is to understand ourselves in a certain way. Our faith is meant to be seen. Our faith is meant to make a difference in the world, in a positive way. But remember who gets the credit. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works, and do what? Give glory to God because of what they see. To God be the glory! Amen? Amen!

“Pastoral Prayer”

Gracious God, we thank you for the light that shone in Jesus, revealing to us your holiness and our righteousness. Holy God, we deplore this gap, between your holiness and our own righteousness. And yet we rejoice that you chased the darkness away that kept it hidden from our eyes. By your light, the light of Jesus, we are both encouraged and condemned. How comforting to see your face turned in our direction, bidding us to come unto you. How frightening it is to realize how often we turn our backs on you, resisting the light could mirror your glory. Forgive us, we pray.

We thank you, merciful God, for leaving your light in the world, even though we have not always heeded your call to become the light of the world. Instead of illuminating your character, we have blurred it. You have commanded us to love you with all of our being, but we have put you in the box of our religion, which we take off the shelf when it is convenient. You have commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we have been too preoccupied with ourselves to find them. O Lord, we have seen the light, but we have refused to walk in it. Forgive us, we pray.

We ask forgiveness, Holy God, for our rebellion. Keep ever before us the needs of the world. Let us feel its pain as our own, seek its good as our own, and work for its transformation in the name and in the spirit of Him who came into the world, not to condemn it, but to redeem it, even Jesus.

As forgiven and redeemed people, we turn our prayers away from ourselves, and we pray for the needs of this fallen world. Send your light, O God into the dark corners of this world. Where there is sickness, let there be health and wholeness.

Where there is violence, let there be peace. Where there is hatred and conflict, let there be reconciliation. Where there is poverty, let there be abundant life. O God, we believe in miracles, and we know that you can do these things. We know that you can use even flawed vessels such as ourselves to carry the message of hope to a hurting world. O God, let us be the miracle.

Hear our prayers, which we offer in the name of Jesus, who is the Light, and who commands us to be the light of world, we pray. And as He taught us, we are bold to say these words, together: “Our Father.....”