

# Salt and Light

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Matthew 5:1-16**

*After he returned from being tested in the wilderness, Jesus set to work in Galilee, proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom, calling disciples, and healing the sick. People took notice, and they flocked to Jesus.*

When he saw the crowds, [Jesus] went up onto the hillside. After he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he opened his mouth and taught them.

The poor in spirit are fortunate, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Those who are grieving are fortunate, because they will be comforted.

The gentle are fortunate, because they will inherit the earth.

Those who are hungry and thirsting for justice are fortunate, because they will be satisfied.

Those who show mercy are fortunate, because they will receive mercy.

The pure-hearted are fortunate, because they will see God.

The peacemakers are fortunate, because they will be called God's children.

Those who are persecuted for the sake of justice are fortunate, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

You are fortunate whenever [people] insult you, persecute you, and speak all sorts of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice, be glad, because your reward in heaven is great; that is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its flavor, how will it be salted? It's good for nothing any longer, except to be thrown outside and trampled by people.

You are the light of the world. A city cannot be hidden when it lies on top of a hill. People don't light a lamp and put it under a bucket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Let your light shine before people in the same way, so that they will see the good things you do, and glorify your Father in heaven.

## **Children's Story**

Barb Aryan was helping her dad in the kitchen. They were making a big pot of chicken soup.

They started with water and chicken. They added onions and carrots, potatoes and green beans. But that wasn't all. They also added noodles and parsley and fresh thyme. And they let it all simmer together.

When the carrots were cooked and the noodles were soft, Barb and her dad tasted the soup. They could taste the chicken and potatoes. They could taste the parsley and thyme. But the soup didn't really taste all that good.

Something was missing. Something that would bring out all the flavors in the pot. Something that would bind all those flavors together.

That's when Barb spoke up. "Dad, do you think maybe the soup needs a little salt?"

Of course! Salt! Salt was the missing ingredient. So they added some salt, and let the soup simmer. Then they tasted it again. This time it was delicious! All the soup had needed was salt.

In a pot of soup, salt is like a little bit of magic. Salt makes every other ingredient in the soup taste better.

One day Jesus told a crowd of people, “You are the salt of the earth.” I wonder what he meant by that.

### **Sermon**

Don’t you hate it when you tell someone a story, a good story, a story about a personal struggle you’re going through or a story about some success you’ve achieved — you tell someone that story, and he misses the point! Don’t you hate it when that happens?

We often miss the point of stories and events in the Bible. The evidence for this is abundant. Take, for example, some of the songs we teach our children, whether the song is about Noah or David or Zacchaeus. Every week I sing songs with the children at the Child Care Center, and some of those songs make me cringe inside because they miss the point! Maybe some day I’ll write some new songs.

We often miss the point of stories and events in the Bible. I think that’s true when it comes to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. I’ve usually heard the Sermon on the Mount taken as Jesus’s message to the church. But that’s not what it is. That misses the point!

**The Sermon on the Mount is part of Jesus’s word and action message for Israel.** When Jesus climbs that hillside, he does so as a new Moses, and he sits in Moses’s seat. He doesn’t give ten commandments, though. Instead he begins with nine assurances, assurances of how things will be right in the coming kingdom. It will be a day of great good fortune for the people of God when the kingdom of God is fully come.

From that hillside, Jesus teaches the people gathered around him about anger and adultery, about promises and prayer, about fear and fruitfulness. In between he says this: “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.”

Jesus does not say that to the church, however. Nor does he say it to his disciples alone. He says it to the whole crowd gathered around him. In other words, he says it to Israel — to Jews from Galilee, from the Decapolis, from Judea and Jerusalem and elsewhere. That’s who is gathered around him, and Jesus is speaking to them all as Israel. (More than once he draws a contrast between the people gathered around him and the Gentiles.) Jesus’s message is for Israel. Israel is salt and light.

Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.” With those words he calls Israel back to covenant obedience. Israel is God’s salt for the world. The people Israel are the children of Abraham, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. Israel is God’s gift to the world, the people through whose obedience God will be present in the world for the blessing and renewal of the world. Just as Elisha’s salt transformed the waters of Jericho (cf. 2 Kings 2), so an obedient Israel would transform the world.

Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” With those words also he calls Israel back to covenant obedience. The families of the earth will be blessed when they recognize God as God and honor God as God. So when Israel, through a unique way of life, calls attention to God, God will be glorified and blessing will abound.

Salt and light, for the glory of God and for the blessing of the world. That is who Israel is. And that is what Jesus himself embodies in words and actions through his obedience, suffering, and death. And through his resurrection, blessing is turned loose!

**Now, what do we do with Jesus’s message?** What is the church to do with Jesus’s word and action message to Israel? I’ve most often heard that message applied directly to the church. “Church of Jesus, you are the salt of the earth. Church of Jesus, you are the light of the world.” I think that misses the point.

Here's why. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Jesus was sent by the Father to Israel. The church is sent by Jesus to the world. We don't merely absorb the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus's message to the church, to us. No! We transpose that message into another key. We translate that message into another language. We link that message to another covenant. Then, in words and actions, we bring that message to the world.

**The message we bring could look something like this.** Remember, Jesus called Israel to covenant faithfulness and obedience. The covenant had been made between God and Abraham. God said, "I will be your God; I will bless you; I will make you a blessing." That covenant had been given specific shape through Moses for Israel. God said, "You will be my holy people. You will be a royal nation. You will be a kingdom of priests." And there were obligations to keep. Jesus called Israel back to this covenant identity. And he himself embodied that covenant identity, with all it implied in terms of trials and suffering and obedience.

Our task in the church is to call all humanity back to covenant faithfulness and obedience. Here's the covenant in this case: God says, "I have made you in my image; I have given you dominion over all things; I have appointed you my stewards over all creation." That's the covenant. And here's the message, some of it at least — the message we bring to all humanity, to every nation, to our own community and its leaders.

We say, "You are made in God's image. You are made to reflect the character of God, as seen in Jesus, who is the image of God. Therefore, be wise, be compassionate, be honest and true, be merciful and forgiving, be humble."

We say, "You have been given dominion, to use your power and authority responsibly. If you're a leader, don't shirk your responsibility actually to lead. If you're a follower, don't demean or diminish your leaders. You have been given dominion, to be a means of God's common grace in the world, to restrain sin and evil, to establish institutions of learning and healing and peace, to shape your society justly, never abandoning the poor, the broken-down, the mentally ill, the elderly, the helpless — never abandoning them to cruel fate."

We say, "You are God's stewards. Perhaps no one in recorded history has ever washed a rental car. But you, take care of what has been entrusted to you. Look after air, water, and soil. Look after streets, homes, and schools. Support businesses, arts, and music. Leave the world and the community more beautiful than they were when you received them."

And this message is not exclusively for individuals. It's not even primarily for individuals. You recall the parable of the sheep and the goats? How there will be a time of judgment that reflects "whatever you did to the least of these, my brothers and sisters" — feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those who are sick and in prison? Do you recall who is being judged? It's the nations! It's the peoples! Not individuals, but people collectively. People and nations and communities will be judged according to the covenant standard, the covenant with all humanity: to display God's image, to exercise wise and responsible dominion, to be good stewards. Nations are called to be faithful to this covenant. So are states and counties and cities. The BREAD Assembly coming up a week from tomorrow evening will be a call to covenant faithfulness issued to state and community leaders. Issuing that call is part of our mission as the church. It's why Jesus sent us!

"You are made in God's image; you have been given dominion; you are God's stewards." That's some of the message, the word part. Then there are the actions. The actions are simple, and yet they are the hardest part. Church of Jesus, we ourselves are to do every bit of the message we proclaim. We are to display the image of God. We are to exercise wise and responsible dominion. We are to be faithful stewards. We are to embody the message, so that we will be able to say, "Look at us, we'll show you how to be faithful and obedient to our shared, human calling. Look at us, we'll show you how it's done!"

Now, there are two things to say about that, at least. First, when we lead the way, when we show the way, God will be glorified. That's because we know and we will make it clear — this is the second thing — that we can do nothing without Christ, that we have no power for good, that we have no inclination for good, even, without the Holy Spirit. But Christ has been raised and is with us. Christ has sent his Holy Spirit to us, so that we share his anointing (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, QA32), so that we are already now raised to a new life (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, QA45).

**We leave here today, sent by Jesus on a mission to the world.** We have a message, a message to proclaim, a message to live. May God help us to carry that message to the world, and to Columbus, every day.