

# **The Witness of the Kingdom Dweller – Matthew 5:13-16**

## **Scripture Reading: 1Corinthians 1:26-31**

### **Introduction**

Back when I was a child and the time for report cards came around, one of the things I most dreaded was the comment section on the back of the card

Because no matter how well I had done and what grade I had received on the front of the card it seemed to be inevitable that one or more of my teachers would write, “Billy is not working to his potential” in the comments

And that drove me crazy because I would have to listen to another lecture from my folks on the need to apply myself

Looking back now at my elementary and high school years I have to admit that I rarely, if ever, worked to my potential when it came to academics even though someone looking at my grades alone would have thought I had done well

And when we took those career path assessment tests in high school I fully expected them to reveal that my life’s path would be “underachiever” because of those comments

**That’s the problem with potential isn’t it, because while it describes being endowed with power or energy, it only exists as a possibility and not a functional reality if it isn’t put to use**

To be useful, the potential must be released toward a purpose – **the abstract must function**

### **I. The Abstract Must Function**

In our study of the Beatitudes over the past two Sundays, we looked at how they describe the character of the kingdom

But that description, as real as it is, describes a kind of abstract or potential reality

Since the Beatitudes describe internal attitudes of the heart one could easily be tempted to view life in the kingdom to be rather passive

We might, therefore, come to the conclusion that life in the kingdom is a personal matter and that it can be lived in isolation away from the corrupting influence of the world that is contrary to the things of God

But in the section of Scripture before us today, Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus takes away that possibility

And what we will see in these four verses is that **the characteristics of the kingdom cannot possibly be lived in private**

Their potential must be released outwardly into the world around us

I used to be a Boy Scout and I still remember the Boy Scout Law that every scout was supposed to live up to:

A scout is: Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent

Clearly, all of those characteristics require an outward expression for them to be “real” – a boy could not be said to live up to the Boy Scout Law in a purely internal way and the same is true of the Beatitudes

**That’s why we have to consider Matthew 5:13-16 in conjunction with the Beatitudes**

What we see in these verses completes the Beatitudes and makes them “real”

While the Beatitudes describe the inward character of the kingdom dweller the two metaphors Jesus uses tell us how the person who is living out the character of the Beatitudes must relate to the world

To simply stop with the character of the kingdom describes would be to stop short and leave us with only an abstract understanding of the kingdom but, in God’s world, the kingdom has a purpose and the abstract must actually function

So, if you haven’t done so already, let me encourage you to open your Bible and follow along as I read **Matthew 5:13-16**

*“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.”*

Before we look at the functions of the two metaphors of salt and light that Jesus uses we need to recognize that what he describes isn't optional

He says, “You are...” not “You might be” or “If you choose to be” – what he says is definite

And we need to recognize that Jesus was making a bold statement of supreme confidence in his followers who were few in number, poor, and uneducated – especially at this early point in his public ministry

Jesus was telling this rag-tag collective that they would have a profound impact not just in the surrounding area but on the entire world

He was describing the mission of the kingdom dweller in this fallen world – that, as citizens of the kingdom, they were to have a profound witness

And, as we know, those earliest followers and those who came along later were profoundly successful in accomplishing just that despite all their shortcomings

So let's begin by taking a look at **the function of salt** as those early followers would have understood it

## **II. The Function of Salt**

The salt Jesus spoke of is a chemical compound made up of two very unstable elements, sodium and chlorine, that, when combined, make up a substance known as sodium chloride – one of the most common household chemicals

Salt is a naturally occurring compound and it can be mined in the form of the mineral halite, known as rock salt, or it may be formed by evaporating seawater

And, while salt has gotten a bad reputation of late having been linked to high blood pressure and heart disease, salt was a highly prized commodity in the ancient world – in fact, it was one of the ancient world's greatest treasures

It's estimated that there are somewhere around 14,000 different uses for salt today from making our food taste better to de-icing our roads to producing certain chemicals

**But in the ancient world, the number one use of salt and the use I want to focus on this morning was as a preservative**

In Jesus' day, there was no refrigeration so people had to find other ways to preserve foodstuffs to keep them from spoiling – that was particularly true of meat and particularly in the hot climate of the Mideast where meat spoils quickly

And they turned to salt for that purpose because its unique properties tend to purify and prevent most bacteria from being able to live in the environment it creates

So when Jesus told his followers, “You are the salt of the earth” they would have understood him to mean that their function was to preserve the earth

And **the natural implication is that the earth tends toward decay and decomposition**

That's the consistent teaching of the Bible, isn't it?

When God created the world and everything in it he declared that it was “very good” but when sin came into the world, the world became rotten and we now continue to live in a world that is constantly trending to falling apart due to decay

But Jesus says here that his true followers, those who by their character as demonstrated by living out the Beatitudes, act as a preventative to decay and a preservative of good in the world

But here's the thing,

**Salt cannot act as a preservative unless it comes into contact with the thing it is meant to preserve**

There is a tendency within Christian circles to recognize the putrefying state of the world and to retreat from it – to try to remain pure by remaining apart from the decay

But the reality is that it does no good to put a slab of meat on one shelf and a pile of salt on another – the meat cannot be preserved in that way

**The salt must be applied to and even rubbed into the meat if it is going to have a preserving effect**

Very often the mere presence of a true Christ-follower will slow down the rot simply because their life is a reproach to sin and, without having to say a word or scowling in disapproval, coarse language and dirty jokes simply aren't uttered. Again, it's not that the Christian is actively condemning anyone's behavior – it's just that the way they live and conduct themselves reveals the shabbiness and inappropriateness of such talk.

But for that to happen, the Christian must be in the world.

In **John 17:15** we see that Jesus could have seen to it that people would be whisked away to heaven at the moment they were saved but he didn't ask the Father to do that.

Instead, we see that he sent his followers into the world while asking the Father to sanctify them in the truth and to protect them from the evil one.

Salt that remains in the shaker does no good – it has to be poured out and spread around.

The role of the kingdom dweller is to penetrate society and to be salt in the world.

**But Jesus also issued the warning that it was possible to be a salt-free Christian**

He says, *"...but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?"*

And he issues a sobering verdict upon un-salty salt, *"It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."*

I don't know of anything more worthless than salt-free popcorn or salt-free potato chips or salt-free French fries.

Now I know some folks have to minimize their sodium intake and I have pity for you because those things are capital-B bland.

But, in reality, although it is made up of two very volatile elements, salt is a very stable compound and it cannot actually lose its taste – pure salt will always be salty because it can't be otherwise.

So Jesus may well be using a bit of hyperbole here or, more likely, he is speaking about **salt that has become adulterated or diluted by other things**.

The table salt we typically find in use in the United States is typically 97-99% pure sodium chloride with the remaining percentage made up of trace minerals and additives like iodine and anti-clumping agents.

But as I was studying this passage and doing some research I became aware that adulterated salt is a really big problem in India and China and today as salt is mixed with chalk and very fine sand and other things.

And, obviously, salt that isn't pure salt has lost some of its saltiness.

And I think that's likely what Jesus was referring to here and it remains a problem in the church today.

While many believers remain tangy and salty, others are virtually indistinguishable from the culture at large – they are un-salty salt because they've become contaminated by the world they are supposed to be preserving.

And Jesus says that salt that isn't salty is basically sand that is useful for casting out into the road where at least it might fill in a crack or two for a while.

**Now, of course, Jesus isn't saying that a Christian can lose their salvation – that's not what he means**

**But a Christian can lose their effectiveness – to no longer function as salt to a decaying world**

And when he asks, "how shall its saltiness be restored?" I don't believe Jesus is saying it's impossible – just that it's very difficult and requires supernatural activity.

After all, we didn't get our saltiness from ourselves in the first place so we cannot in and of ourselves re-generate it.

Our saltiness is a gift from God and only God can restore it – and in certain circumstances, God does restore it

I know of too many instances where a believer's life had become bland and tasteless but after repentance, restoration occurred and they were revitalized to become salty and effective once more

It can happen but the danger is real that adulteration will become the norm and repentance will not be sought and then that Christian life will, in fact, remain lifeless and useless

**I think we see that today in many churches that have become so contaminated by the world that they are decaying right alongside it – the believers there, if indeed they are believers, have ceased to be salt**

But I don't want to end this section on a down note because Jesus made his proclamation in complete confidence that his followers would indeed have a preserving influence on the world

If you are a true Christ-follower, you are salt – Jesus said so

When you cultivate the character of the Beatitudes by communing with the Lord and live them out in your daily life, even if you do so less than perfectly – you will be salty and you will have a preserving effect on the world around you

At least to the degree you allow God to shake you out of the saltshaker and into the world

Next, Jesus told his followers, "You are the light of the world..." in verse 15 [**Matthew 5:15**]

### **III. The Function of Light**

Just as Christians being salt implies a world in decay, so Christ-followers being light implies a world that is in darkness

One of the very first things God created was light as we read in **Genesis 1:1-4**

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.*

And while physical light continues to exist, we know that since Adam's fall, the world has been in spiritual darkness

Spiritual darkness is a terrible state but the real horror is that sinful man prefers it – actually, **John 3:19** tells us that the people of earth love the darkness rather than the light because their works are evil

Now Jesus tells his followers, "You are the light of the world," and he followed up that statement with two examples of physical sources of light to illustrate his point – **light from a city on a hill and a lamp on a stand**

John 3:19 also says that, "light has come into the world," and it is, of course, talking about Jesus

And Jesus made the declarative statement in **John 8:12** – "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

That last statement in John 8:12 tells us that the light a Christ-follower has that makes them the light of the world is a derived light – it comes from Christ

People like to use the illustration of the sun and the moon to explain how this works and it's a pretty good illustration as far as it goes

The moon has no light of its own and only reflects the light of the sun and it varies in the amount of light it reflects just as the light of the Christian waxes and wanes as the spiritual life of the Christian waxes and wanes

It's a good illustration but, like most illustrations, it has its limits

Because I believe Jesus is also saying that we don't merely reflect his light but that we actually become a source of light ourselves to some degree through our association with him

Look with me at **Ephesians 5:8** which says, "...for at one time you were darkness, **but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light...**"

See that? "...but now you are light in the Lord"

**That tells me that somehow, through our being joined together with Christ we become light to some extent – although our light is still derived from him**

When I was a kid, I had a pair of plastic vampire fangs that glowed in the dark

But, if I wanted them to glow in the dark, I first had to expose them to light – they didn't have any way to generate light of their own and if I kept them in the dark, they lost their ability to glow

They were a source of light but only if they had first absorbed the light from some other source

And the same is true with us as followers of Christ – if we want to shine we must be exposed to his light through spending quality time in and under God's Word and through communing with him in prayer

Then, like those plastic vampire teeth, we won't be able to not show forth the light of Christ and the fact that we have been in his presence can't help but show – like when Moses spent time with God and his face shone afterwards

**Like salt, light has many functions in the world but its main function is to illuminate and therefore to reveal**

Jesus said in verse 14 [Matthew 5:14] that his followers were like a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden

Unfortunately, this illustration loses some of its force today because of the ever-present artificial light that surrounds us

In Jesus' day, natural darkness was as pervasive as spiritual darkness and when night fell out in the countryside it got really dark

Nowadays, there are few places in the world where it gets really and truly dark because of light pollution

But if you have the opportunity to travel to a really remote area you will get a sense of how far light can be seen and how welcoming and comforting the light of a city is when you are surrounded by darkness

Although I can't vouch for the truth of the statement, it's widely reported that a single lit match can be seen for 50 miles under the right circumstances

So, when you think of an entire city with all of its lights set upon a hill you can easily imagine that it would be seen for miles around and how the city would be impossible to hide as long as the lights were shining

And that's the way Jesus says his followers are to be

It should be evident to the entire world that we are followers of Christ and our light should beckon them to safety

**There should be no such thing as a stealth or invisible believer**

And in the example of **the lamp**, Jesus further drives the point home by saying no one lights a lamp and then hides the lamp under a basket

That would be absurd because it completely negates the reason for lighting the lamp in the first place

Lamps are lit to illuminate and the same is true with those who are the light of the world

The Lord gives us his light so that we might illuminate the world around us

**And the one who lights the lamp determines how best to strategically place the lamp so that it illuminates best**

So not only are we meant to shine, we are to shine wherever God has placed us

And it shouldn't surprise us that it's the darkest corners where light is most needed – and that means we are going to have to go out into the dark in order to shine effectively – a lamp does little good in the sunshine

When Jesus came as the light of the world men hated him because his light revealed the darkness

He didn't create the darkness or make the darkness darker but he did make the darkness obvious and he caused it to be felt more keenly by revealing the sinful imperfection and impurity of the world

And the majority hated him for it – so the majority will likely hate us and persecute us as Jesus was persecuted but that doesn't negate our responsibility to shine

## Conclusion

When we looked at the Beatitudes I showed you how each of the statements Jesus made was a statement of exclusivity  
When he said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," for example, he meant the meek and only the meek would inherit the earth

The same is true here

When Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world" that is an exclusive statement

If the world is to have salt and light believers are the only source

There is no "Plan B"

As a follower of Jesus Christ, you and you alone are the salt of the earth and you and you alone are the light of the world

Your being salt and light is not optional

You are salt – the only question is how salty you are

You are light – the only question is how well you illuminate

And how well you do in your role of being salt and light is a direct result of how well you model the character of the kingdom as spelled out in the Beatitudes

In other words, the standards of the kingdom of heaven as they are established and lived out in the lives of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven, compose the witness of the kingdom

It's those standards that make us salt that acts to purify and preserve our world and light that pushes back the darkness

The world may have a negative view of the one who lives out the character of the kingdom but the kingdom dweller also has a positive effect on the world – that's the twin nature of our witness

God has made us to be salt and light and it's our role to do as Jesus instructed those who were present for the Sermon on the Mount and to let our *"light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

Let's pray