

## *Pass the Salt*

2<sup>nd</sup> Weekend after Pentecost – May 28/29, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

Matthew 5:1-2, 13-16 (NRSV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

[What follows are known as the Beatitudes, e.g., “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God . . .”]

<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

*Each of us has chosen to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. But what sort of disciple will we be? In today's passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges his disciples to be the salt that seasons and the light that illuminates.*

*Salt?*

Salt has many uses. Some positive, some negative. A swim in the ocean is always good for healing small nicks and scrapes. All animals need a certain amount of salt in their diet to live. What guy doesn't crave salty snacks! Of course, salt also kills. The Dead Sea is sometimes referred to as the Salt Sea. Photographs of its shore reveal rocks and gravel covered with layers of dried, white salts. Nothing can live there. The salts have squeezed all life out of the environment.

Drawing on the contrasting properties, the biblical writers generously used images of salt. Sometimes it was used as an image of seasoning, preserving, or purifying. But salt is also used as an image of death, desolation, or even a curse. God's covenant with his people is occasionally referred to as a covenant of salt, drawing upon the preserving qualities of salt (Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5). Newborn babies were rubbed with salt as a symbol of new beginnings. Paul urged the Christians to speak with “grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). Yet, more than a millennia before Paul, Abilmelech spread salt across the ground of a razed city as a sign of a curse (Judges 9:45).<sup>1</sup>

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, a very moving reversal of

#### The Sermon on the Mount

How often we return to the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel, as we should. This is the largest single block of Jesus' teaching in the New Testament, spanning chapters 5-7 in Matthew's Gospel.

The teachings spell out, often very directly, what it means to live a life under the rule of God. Jesus had more to say about the kingdom of God than any other subject and, in these three chapters, we have the fullest statement of what life in the kingdom is really like. And it is profoundly counter-cultural.

The Sermon on the Mount turns the world on its head. Up becomes down. In becomes out. Power becomes weakness. Jesus is not laying out some idealized picture of what life might be like someday when he returns. No . . . Jesus is setting out his expectations of his disciples. They are a community formed by God and empowered by God's Spirit. The Sermon on the Mount is a sort of guidebook to life in this community. It is always helpful to remember how Jesus closes the sermon. He tells the story of two people who build homes (see Matthew 7:24-27). One builds the house on rock so that it could withstand the storms. The other built on a foundation of sand that was easily washed away. The one who builds on rock is the one who hears Jesus' words and does them. The one who builds on sand is the one who hears Jesus' words but does not do them. The choice is clear and ours to make.

<sup>1</sup>One of my more fun biblical reference books (if such a book can be fun!), is the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, published by InterVarsity Press. It is a large encyclopedic look at the Bible's many images, metaphors, symbols, figures of speech, etc. To help prepare for today's study, I simply opened the volume to “salt” and discovered the many biblical uses of salt as a metaphor, some of which I used in this study. You can imagine how helpful this volume was when I was working on my Bible Academy class on Revelation a couple of years ago!

the world's value systems. Then he immediately speaks to the disciples about their own vocation, their own call to actually be God's people, a community grounded firmly in the kingdom of God. Jesus uses three metaphors to make his point. The first is salt; the second is light; the third is the city.<sup>2</sup>

### Contrasts and choices

Jesus calls upon the contrasting uses of salt. On the one hand, salt gives life, but on the other, it can be rendered useless. Which sort of disciple will John, Andrew, Peter and the rest be? Will they be good for something, or, like the tasteless salt, will they be good for nothing? The choice is stark and clear. It is one way or the other. Up or down. No shades of gray or ambiguity. This is certainly in keeping with the

demands for submission and loyalty to Jesus that we considered in the past two weeks.

#### "Give Glory to your Father"

"Glory" is one of those words that we use in church all the time. It is strewn throughout the Bible. We know that giving glory to God is a good thing, but what does "giving glory" really mean?

To get at this, we need to begin by understanding a little more about Jesus' world. Mediterranean societies, including Roman and Jewish, were built around a strong sense of community and family. People's lives were driven by the ambition to accumulate honor and to avoid shame – both social concepts. Money was helpful only to the extent that it might enable you to acquire prestige and reputation by, for example, extending favors to others.

Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes *plus* the person's value in the eyes of others. So honor, the most important commodity in these societies, is the *claim* to worth along with the *social acknowledgement* of one's worth. It is who you are plus who other people say you are.

Giving glory to a person (*glorifying* them) is to lift them up so that everyone can see that they are who they say they are. It is ascribing worth and honor to another. Thus, in the context of today's passage, the disciples' good works will enable everyone to see that God is who God says he is – a good and loving God. The lives of the disciples are to be a witness to others. My point is that "glory" is a social term, like honor and shame and prestige and reputation. Here's another example. Jesus' death on the cross is as shameful a death as any Jew or Roman could imagine (see Philippians 2:5-11). Yet, by raising Jesus from the dead for everyone to see, God glorified Jesus. God ascribed to him worth and honor.

If you would like to learn more about the social world of Jesus' day in order to gain a richer understanding of the NT, I suggest you begin with Bruce Malina's *The New Testament World*, now in its third edition. It is pretty eye-opening. For example, one chapter is titled, "Envy: The Most Grievous of all Evils." I doubt many of us think of envy that way, even when we read in Mark's Gospel that the chief priests turned Jesus over to Pilate out of envy.

To make the same point again, Jesus uses the image of light. Will his disciples hide their light or will they raise it up and let it shine so that the whole world can be seen in the light. Which will it be? And why are they to be a shining light? So that all people in all places can see, through the good works of the disciples, that God is God and that Jesus is Lord of all creation.

Likewise, a city that sits on a hill is going to be seen by everyone, whether the city wants to be seen or not. The world will be looking at the disciples whether they want to be seen or not. Our life is a witness to God whether we want it to be or not.

M. Eugene Boring writes, "The salt and light sayings picture mission as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is essential to light. For salt, being salty is not optional. With these three metaphors of salt, light, and city, the Matthean Jesus strikes a death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private. . . . The community that lives by the power of unostentatious prayer in the inner room (Matthew 6:6) is not an introverted secret society shielding itself from the world, but is a city set on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed."<sup>3</sup>

In these three brief metaphors Jesus appeals to our imaginations, helping us to grasp the radical, outwardly focused nature of the Christian life. Our lives, our good works, are to be like pictures of God's love that can be seen by all those who have not yet placed their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup>Jesus often uses multiple images or stories to make the same point. This was a very Jewish way of teaching. You see this even in Hebrew poetry, such as the Psalms. We tend to think of poetry as involving rhyming with sounds. The psalmists would often rhyme using parallel ways of expressing a single point. For example, Psalm 19:1 opens, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." The two lines together, like synonyms, express a single thought – all of creation points to the truth that is a creator. In the same way, Jesus uses salt, light, and city to make one point about the doing of discipleship.

<sup>3</sup>From Boring's commentary on Matthew in *the New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Thanks to a generous gift, the entire 12-volume *New Interpreter's Bible* is now available in the St. Andrew library.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(The Sermon on the Mount)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Day 1 Matthew 5:3-16 The disciples as the community formed by God in God's kingdom</b>	<b>Day 2 Matthew 5:12-28 Life in the community - the "Law"</b>
<b>Day 3 Matthew 6:1-18 Prayer</b>	<b>Day 4 Matthew 6:19 - 7:12 Living an authentically righteous life</b>
<b>Day 5 Matthew 7 Three warnings - notice the clarity of the choices. There are two ways, two harvests, two builders.</b>	<b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b>

## Sermon Notes

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### **St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series – begins Monday, June 13**

Each summer, we offer a casual summer series. This year, we'll meet on the *second Monday* in June, July, and August. There is no sign-up required. Just come down to Piro Hall around 6:45 or so. We'll have refreshments and spend a little time getting to know one another. Scott Engle's lecture will start at 7 pm.

We'll wrap up no later than 8:30. Our topics will be:

June 13: "The Surprising Truth about Sin"

July 11: "Amazing Grace"

August 8: "Being Right, Wrong, and Righteous"

### ***Our Times and the End-Times: A fresh look at biblical prophecy***

This Teaching Series with Scott Engle is underway  
Sundays at 9:30 in Wesley Hall through June 5

### **May Book Recommendation**

*In God's Time: The Bible and the Future*, by Craig Hill

This is the probably the best book on the subject currently available for laypeople. Few topics interest Christians more than speculation about the End-Times. And few topics are so rife with misconceptions and poor biblical interpretation. But Craig Hill's book is a great antidote. Hill tackles subjects ranging from our understanding of Scripture to the books of Daniel and Revelation to popular, but unbiblical, teachings about the so-called Rapture. You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Salt and Light. What sort of disciple will we be? What sort of disciple will other people see us to be? In today's passage, Jesus challenges his disciples to live lives that are a good witness to others, a good witness to God – lives that bring glory to God.

In my experience, non-Christians expect certain things of Christians. That we will somehow be kinder and more forgiving. Do you agree? Why do you think this is so? What do you think about it? Do you object to being a "role model" or having more expected of you? Do you think it is avoidable?

If we are a city on the hill that everyone can see, then others will judge our faith by our actions whether we want them to or not. Have you ever found that you've "hidden" the fact that you are a Christian so people don't set certain expectations of you? If you have, you might share the story with others. I'm sure that many of us have done so and that we've nearly all been tempted to do so.

How can we go about becoming more confident in having our lives be a witness to others? What are some steps we might take to ensure that our light shines brightly, that we don't lose our saltiness? What do you see as the biggest challenge in this?