

## [Matthew 5:13-20](#)

Earlier this week I was at the Byfleet Tuesday Fellowship where over a series of meetings I have been telling them the story of my life and faith. Bit by bit, episode, by episode, this week we finally got to the point where my family and I arrived in this circuit in 2010 – which was probably a good point at which to end.

One of the hymns we sang on Tuesday was ‘Blessèd Assurance’, for its theme of testimony and those lines, ‘This is my story, this is my song.’ I hope that in hearing my story people heard how my story fits into the bigger story of Jesus.

We’ve been tracking the story of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel in recent weeks. A fortnight ago, we heard how Jesus came into Galilee of the Gentiles with a proclamation that was to begin forming his community of light, a community that forms through repentance. Last week (if you watched my video) you’ll know I preached on the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus shows us what the repentant life with him looks like.

This week, Jesus tells us what the community of light is meant to look like to the watching world.

**Firstly**, says Jesus, his people are ***the salt of the earth***.

<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Now before we think about the salt, I want us to think about the earth.<sup>1</sup> The word here could just mean the soil, or it could mean the land, be that the local land where they are or the land of the whole world.

If it’s the local land, then it would be an image of Israel. Remember that before Jesus ever said, ‘Blessèd are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5), the Psalmist had said that the meek will inherit the land (Psalm 37:11). The land was so crucial to Israel: it was, after all, the Promised Land. If that’s what we’re talking about here, then Jesus is seeing his people as a renewal movement within the people of Israel. And I guess initially that’s what Christ-followers were.

But I mentioned a fortnight ago that Matthew has the mission to the Gentiles in view. He emphasises that Jesus comes to ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’, and he ends his Gospel with the Great Commission. So in the long term the earth here

is surely the whole world. We are to be salt in the whole world. This is an image of the mission to which Jesus calls us.

So we need to know what the salt is. We know how salt had various uses, the main ones being as a seasoning, a preservative, and as a fertiliser. I am going to dismiss the first two of seasoning and preservative here, partly because they refer to food whereas Jesus is talking about salt of the earth, and that's where it was used as fertiliser. Besides, it makes little sense to talk of the Christian calling as merely seasoning the world or preserving it. We are not here simply to make the world more flavoursome, or to preserve it, when there is much wrong with it. It is not our calling to bless everything that goes on in the world.

No: if we are salt of the earth, then Jesus means that we are fertiliser. The kingdom community is divine fertiliser. We enable life and growth where there is death and despair. Ultimately, that life only comes in Jesus Christ. We point people to that by our words and deeds. Food banks and the like are signs and pointers to the life of Christ in the midst of death and hopelessness. We also need to speak about the life Christ brings.

This means a church community is meant to be fundamentally outward-looking. A fellowship that only looks inwards on itself is one where the salt has lost its saltiness. That may seem strange to us, who are used to our salt largely just being made up of one chemical compound. But in the days of Jesus salt was often found in a mixture with other minerals, and it could be dissolved out of it.

To us, salt losing its saltiness is absurd. Jesus would say to us, a church that only looks in on itself and does not make outreach a priority is equally absurd. Such a church cannot offer life, because it has dissolved the life out of itself.

**Secondly**, says Jesus, his people are *the light of the world*.

<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Go back two weeks again in our story. Jesus has come to Galilee of the Gentiles to bring light to those living in darkness. Now, he says, that's the ongoing task

of his people. While in John's Gospel Jesus owns the title 'Light of the world' for himself, here in Matthew he gives it to his kingdom community.

Sometimes we're happy at the thought that Jesus is the light of the world, but we baulk at the fact that he called his church to be that light, too. It would be easier and more comfortable for us if our faith were just a private thing. We wouldn't have to worry about being a good witness and what reaction we might get to that in society.

And there are factions in our society who would like us to adopt that attitude. Groups like the National Secular Society and others argue that faith has no place in public life. Either they don't understand what faith is, or they don't want to understand.

Jesus says, we are going to be seen – both as individual disciples and as a community of believers together. It will be our good deeds that shine light into a darkened world. We are not doing them so that people praise us, as Jesus condemned some religious leaders for doing: we are doing good deeds so that people may 'glorify [y]our Father in heaven.'

Do we want to make a first step in changing this world for the better, for the glory of God? Surely we do. Then we need to think, talk, and pray about what good deeds would show up as light in our dark world.

So let me remind you of some of John Wesley's most famous words:

Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.

I think Jesus would approve of those words.

**Thirdly** and finally, Jesus calls us to be *better than the Pharisees*.

Jesus says he hasn't come to abolish the Jewish Law but to fulfil it, that we should therefore not dilute it, and that in fact our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law (verses 17-20).

We need to hear this, and hear it carefully. Jesus is not saying that we should obey every Old Testament law, for he said that the food laws were no longer necessary (Mark 7:1-22) and the New Testament generally sees his death on the Cross as fulfilling the sacrificial laws.

Therefore, we need to read the Old Testament and its laws carefully. As Dr Ian Paul says,

... God looks on the heart as well as the hands. We must, in our reading of the Old Testament, always move from 'What does it say?' through 'What is the intention?' before we ask 'What is God saying to us now?'<sup>2</sup>

The bottom line is that we cannot be casual about our conduct. Just because we believe in grace, mercy, and forgiveness does not mean we can live carelessly. That will not shine light into darkness. That will simply make us hypocrites, just as Jesus often said the religious leaders of his day were.

No. In God's grace and mercy in Christ we do indeed find forgiveness and many a fresh start in life after we have messed up. But that grace then calls us to aspire to a higher standard. If all we are called to be as Christians is 'nice' then what makes us shine as the light of the world?

That's why the early church gave dignity to the dead by taking funerals for those not considered worthy of one in the Roman Empire. That's why they also took care of babies abandoned to die because they were the wrong sex or in some other way did not fit their parents' aspirations.

Friends, if we are called to bring life to our world and shine in the darkness, how is the Holy Spirit calling us to a higher standard than mere religion?

It's a question we need to ponder.

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<sup>1</sup> Here and in most of what follows I am dependent on Ian Paul's blog post '[Being distinctive as the people of God in Matthew 5](#)'.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*