

The Character and the Culture

by Dick Woodward

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christian character and its impact on the culture, encouraging listeners to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Duration: 22:09

Scripture: Matthew 5:3-5, Matthew 5:11, Matthew 5:13-14, Matthew 5:16

Topics: "Character"

Description

In this sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives four illustrations to challenge his followers. He tells them that they are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a candle on a candlestick, and a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Jesus emphasizes the importance of having the right attitudes and character, as represented by the beatitudes. He urges his followers to be part of the solution and to be transformed by him into the salt of the earth and his answers to the world's problems.

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to the Mini-Bible College. I am so glad that you have chosen to be with us as we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount. Our teacher continues in our series and provides very practical application of the deep teachings of our Lord and Savior to our lives.

Our prayer is that these lessons will help you to get into God's Word and allow God's Word to get into you. Let us join our teacher now. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely.

For my sake, rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A lamp is not put under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

I just read Matthew 5, verses 11-16. We are considering the Sermon on the Mount, the teaching of Jesus on the mountainside, which was intended to turn disciples into the salt of the earth and the light of the world, a candle on a candlestick and a city built on a hill that could not be hidden. We have said in our

previous studies of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus begins this teaching with a checklist for us about our spiritual health.

He begins by teaching us about attitudes. He told us about these eight beautiful attitudes. He has told us in describing each attitude that the people with these attitudes are in a state of grace, or spiritually prosperous, or happy, or blessed, fulfilled disciples you might call them.

He has given us the focus on the attitude and the promise that goes with each attitude, and many scholars feel that when he concludes the eighth beatitude, the teaching really has ended, and now the application is going to begin. When I teach the scripture, and when we study the scripture, we should always address these three questions. What does it say? What does it mean, and what does it mean to me? Or, if you are teaching, what does it mean to those who you are teaching? The first question, what does it say, they call observation.

This is where we need to do our homework. What does it really say? What does it not say? This is where you need to ask the Holy Spirit to give you spiritual discernment. When you study the Bible, the first question you should ask yourself is, what does it say? That is observation.

The question, what does it mean, is interpretation. The scripture does always mean what it says. However, you may have to work very hard to discover and understand what it says.

But then the important part of Bible study is the application. The Bible becomes a power in our lives when we apply it to our lives. So the important question when you are studying the Bible for yourself is, what does it mean to me? If you are teaching, after you have answered that question for yourself, the important question is, what does it mean to those I am teaching? The application is the part that people appreciate when you are teaching the scripture.

Jesus teaches these eight beautiful attitudes and then beginning at verse 11, he begins to apply them. Notice the pronouns in the eight beatitudes. Blessed are those, blessed are they.

This is rather impersonal. But when he gets to verse 11, it is blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Now that is application.

He is turning to those sitting around him and he is making it personal now. He is applying it. Many scholars think at verse 11 of Matthew 5, the application begins and the teaching of these beatitudes is then applied throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, one of my favorite Bible scholars who wrote that fine book simply called the Sermon on the Mount, is the one who tells us that the context of this teaching tells us three things. First, it describes to us and for us the crises involved in becoming a Christian. This is the way Matthew presents it.

The crises involved in becoming a Christian is a matter of becoming a subject in this kingdom of the Lord. These beatitudes will tell us about the values of this kingdom. Now the first thing this teaching tells us is the crises involved in becoming a Christian.

It is not a matter of saying to Jesus, what are you going to do for me? As Matthew presents it, it is really a matter of saying, God, what would you have me to do for you? The second thing this teaching shows us in the beatitudes according to Martin Lloyd-Jones is the character involved in being Christian. Jesus is so practical. What he is saying is that those people at the bottom of the hill with all their problems do not need

religious talk, nor do they need a lot of theology.

What they need to see is people who are real. They need to see people whose character is Christian, whose character is Christ-like. Now when a human being has a Christ-like character, what kind of character do they have by the grace of God? That is what is profiled for us in these eight beatitudes.

The beatitudes present to us the character involved in being Christian. There has never been a time like now when the world needed to see people who are not only professing to be Christians, but also people who are acting as Christians. The word Christian is an interesting word.

Literally, it means Christ-like ones or like little Christ. This word Christian is the word the unbelievers use to describe the followers of Jesus. It is only found three times in the Bible.

Twice it is used by unbelievers referring to the followers of Jesus. It is the unbelievers who are saying, you know what? Those people are Christ-like. It was only used once by a believer.

In 1 Peter 4 12-19, Peter says, if anyone suffers as a Christian, it is a calling when he was telling us how we could expect to suffer for following Christ. He used the same word, Christian. Actually the word Christian is not the word the Holy Spirit chose to describe the followers of Jesus.

For instance, Jesus never called anybody a Christian. He never asked anyone to become a Christian. The Apostle Paul never called anyone a Christian and he never asked anyone else to become a Christian.

Jesus did use words like believer. He did ask people to believe. Jesus called those who followed him disciples, which is a beautiful word.

A disciple is a learner who is doing, a doer who is learning. It is like an apprenticeship. Jesus used that word a lot and he also used the word apostle.

From among his many, many disciples, Jesus commissioned 12 apostles, which means sent ones or set apart and sent. That is what the word really means, something like our word missionary today. The Apostle Paul used the words disciple and apostle and he also used the word saint, which means a set apart one.

One who is set apart to Christ and to following Christ. The word saint is a nickname for somebody who is sanctified. These are the words that Jesus and Paul used.

They did not use the word Christian. The word is only found three times in the scriptures. But if you are going to use the word, you should realize what it means.

It means Christ-like. It is not really very humble to say that you are Christ-like, but you can understand how many people, even unbelievers, would accuse you of being Christ-like. The question is, when you are accused of being Christ-like, is there enough evidence to convict you? The context of this great teaching presents the crises involved in becoming a Christian and then the Beatitudes presents the character involved in being Christian.

But then beginning in verse 11 through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Dr. Jones says what you have here is the challenge involved when Christian character impacts the culture. What is the culture? We use the word culture a lot today. Someone has said that the culture is a word meaning this is the way we do things.

When missionaries are sent to countries that are foreign to them, they are told to study the culture before they go so they can make adaptations and not offend people in the culture. To a great extent, that is a very wonderful thing for missionaries to do. There is a sense in which they should be very aware of and sensitive to what the culture is so that they do not offend even unintentionally.

But we should remember that Jesus came into the world to revolutionize culture, to change culture. His plan, his strategy was to change the culture by changing the hearts of men. There are many ways we could illustrate this.

Jesus Christ was a revolutionary. It was his strategy and his intent to revolutionize culture by revolutionizing the hearts of individual men and women. That is why he said, if you have these eight beautiful attitudes, you will be the salt of the earth and you will be the light of the world.

When he starts applying them to you, to the people that were there, when he starts using the personal pronoun you, what he is really suggesting is the challenge involved when Christian character impacts the culture. One missionary I respected a great deal said to me one day, you know the greatest enemy of faith is culture. Many will say when you begin expressing the faith of Christ and faith in Christ, the culture will not stand for that.

We do need to be sensitive to the culture, but we also need to remember that in many ways Christianity is supposed to revolutionize culture. That is what you have here in the Sermon on the Mount. The teaching representing the realities that will revolutionize culture.

That is what Jesus is getting to when he gives four illustrations in verses 13 through 16. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

You are like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. You are like a candle on a candlestick. If you really do understand these eight beautiful attitudes and if by the grace of God they are a reality in your life, then you are these four things.

In the words of Dr. Jones, these represent the challenge involved when this kind of character represented by the Beatitudes impacts the culture. Now let's take those four things one at a time. First, you are the salt of the earth.

The actual translation in the Greek is you and you alone are the salt of the earth. What did Jesus mean when he used this illustration? There are many answers to that question. Some may say that the chief meaning was that since there was no refrigeration back then, people preserved meat and fish by rubbing salt into it.

Salted fish would keep a long time until delivered to people who bought them from the fishermen. Everybody who heard this knew that salt preserves from corruption. Meat rubbed with salt is preserved for a long time.

If that's what Jesus meant, then he's making a statement here about his disciples and he's making a statement about the people at the bottom of the mountain. You might say he's making a statement about his disciples and he's making a statement about the world, the people who have not yet heard the gospel. The statement he is making about the world is that the world is like meat that is spoiling, that is corrupting, meat that's going bad unless you rub salt into it.

And then he's saying this about the disciple. You and you alone are the preserving influence that is going to keep the world from utter corruption. This says many, many things.

His illustrations, his metaphors are so profound that the more you think about them, the more you can go on and on making applications. If the disciple is not any different from the people at the bottom of the mountain, how in the world is that disciple going to have any preserving influence among those people? For instance, if the disciple is meat and the people at the bottom of the mountain are meat, you do not preserve meat by rubbing meat against meat. This is saying something about the disciple.

The disciple must be different. That is why Jesus says, but if the salt loses its flavor, it has been good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. Somebody has written a book called *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*.

Jesus gave us a lot of hard sayings and I believe this is one of them. Here you have these questions. Are you the salt of the earth? Are you the influence by the grace of God that is going to preserve other people from their tendency to corrupt and become sinful? Does your profession of faith in Christ say that you are salt? And is there enough evidence to convict you when you make that profession? If you profess to be a disciple of Jesus, but you are not in fact salt, then you know what you're good for.

Jesus said you're good for nothing. To be thrown out and to be trampled under the feet of men, that's all you're good for. Can you imagine as you study the values of Jesus, realizing that he placed that value upon some people? I heard about a pastor of a Methodist church in America.

As you might know, the Methodist pastors are moved from church to church very frequently and the evaluation of the congregation has a lot to do with how frequently they are moved. The story was told of a Methodist pastor whose board of stewards announced to him that they had gone to see the bishop and that they wanted him to stay for another year. He thanked them and said, I'm glad to know that you appreciate my ministry.

And the men said, well, we didn't say that. As a matter of fact, we all agreed that the church would be better off if we didn't have a pastor at all. You are the closest thing to nothing that headquarters has ever sent us.

So we want you to continue for another year. Nobody wants to think they're good for nothing. Some people believe that one ought to get paid well for being good at his or her job and that preachers are people who must be good for nothing because they don't get paid so very much.

Well, it is awesome to think that Jesus said that there is such a thing as being good for nothing. If you profess to be salt, but you are in fact not salt, then you're good for nothing. As a child, I had a mischievous sense of humor.

We lived near a factory that made glass. There were great piles of white sand around that glass factory. One day I got some of that white sand and put it in my father's salt shaker and I joined him for breakfast and I thought it'd be really funny watching him shake that white sand out on his eggs.

Finally, he figured out what was going on and I got some discipline from my father. He ended up taking the sand out of the shaker and throwing it away. What was it good for? It wasn't salt.

It was good for nothing but to be thrown out. Imagine Jesus saying that about some of his followers. You see, this Sermon on the Mount begins with a challenge.

Are you part of the problem or are you part of the solution? Where are you? Are you still at the bottom of the hill? Still part of the problem? Or have you come to the top of the mountain? Are you there with Jesus? Is Jesus turning you into the salt of the earth? Is Jesus making you one of his solutions, one of his answers? That's the challenge that we're faced with when we consider the context of this teaching. When you get into the content of the teaching, you keep getting faced with this challenge. What kind of a solution are you? What kind of an answer are you? What kind of a disciple are you? Are you salty salt or are you good for nothing? It's an awesome challenge.

Some people say that when Jesus said you are the salt of the earth, he meant this. The Romans knew that a human being, a human organism, cannot live without salt and they wanted to control people, even their slaves. So they paid their slaves in cubes of salt.

That is where we get the word salary. The word salary comes from two words, salt money. Have you ever heard the expression he or she is not worth their salt? That expression goes way back to the time of the Romans when they paid their slaves in cubes of salt.

If that's what Jesus meant, then he was making a statement about his disciples and he was making a statement about the people at the bottom of the mountain or the people of this world. He was saying of his disciples, you and you alone are the life-giving principle that people in this world need. Those people at the bottom of the mountain do not really have life and they will never find life unless they find it from you.

You must go down there and be spread among them. To use the meat illustration, you must be rubbed up against them. You cannot preserve meat unless you are rubbed into the meat.

You cannot be the life-giving principle if you stay in the salt shaker. You've got to come out of the salt shaker and get out there where the people who do not have eternal life really live. The awesome possibility, if that is what he meant, is that these people do not have life.

The only way they are ever going to find life is through you. You are the life-giving principle. You and I, you and I alone are the only way that they are ever going to find this spiritual life.

There are other possible meanings. Salt makes you thirsty. Perhaps if you're really a salty believer you will make people thirsty for what you have and for the Lord Jesus Christ himself who is the water of life.

Perhaps he meant something like this. When you get salt in an open wound it hurts and maybe he's saying that if you are really salt in the sense that you are filled full of righteousness and you are by the grace of God righteous, when you get out there next to the open wounds of the moral sores of people it's going to hurt and that's why they're going to persecute you. The possible meanings are endless but I personally believe it's probably between these two or perhaps both of them.

You are the life-giving principle. Those people do not have the quality of life God wants them to have. That's what John said to us again and again in his gospel.

Eternal life is what God wants us to have and that is not simply life forever but that is a quality of life here and now. Those people do not have that quality of life Jesus is saying. If they're going to find it, it's going to have to be through you because you and you alone are the salt without which they cannot live

spiritually.

I think it's either that one or perhaps this one. Those people are corrupting. This world is corrupting.

We see it in so many ways in the rise of pornography, in the rise of AIDS, the rise of the no moral absolutes kind of thinking, the consequences of which are devastating. The world is corrupt and you and you alone are the salt that can be rubbed into them, rubbed up next to them to preserve them from corruption or perhaps like salt, we are to bring real flavor to life. I believe it is one of these interpretations.

Perhaps it is not either or but all. Perhaps Jesus meant both of these. Only you can give them the life they lack and once they have that life, perhaps only you can preserve them from the tendency that we all have toward moral corruption.

You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It's then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. The question we must ask ourselves is, am I salt or am I good for nothing? Jesus invites you to be one of his followers and to let him make you the salt of the earth. God bless you until next time.

We here at the Mini-Bible College trust that God has met you today and that he has filled you with his peace, joy, and encouragement to be the faithful disciple he has called you to be. Our prayer is that you will be more committed and available to be used by God as you grow closer to him. Now until we meet next time, may you be salty salt and a bright light to lead others to Jesus Christ our Lord.

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