

Matthew 5:13

by W.F. Anderson

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, preserving society from corruption and darkness, and shining our light to illuminate the world.

Scripture: Matthew 5:3-6

Topics: "Christian Service", "Godly Love"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal story about a Vietnamese family he welcomed into his home. Despite initial hesitations, he put them to work and discovered that they had gone above and beyond in their tasks. This act of kindness and hard work melted the speaker's heart and made him realize the power of forgiveness and love. Inspired by this experience, the speaker went on to help numerous Vietnamese families and even started a service to provide medication to those in need. The sermon emphasizes the importance of being a light in the world and doing good deeds to bring glory to God.

Transcript

I'm not going to say anything, but I'm hoping a few people would be. I'm delighted to see you. Of course, there are a lot of tremendously good memories of our years in Florence.

I don't think Jenny ever forgave me for moving away. She's very forgiving of me, but I think that's one sin I committed that she was not able to forgive. That I left South Carolina, but I'm glad to be back.

I just wish you were here with me, of course, but I'm glad to be back. I'd like to turn to Matthew chapter 5, please. Matthew chapter 5, verses 13 through 16.

In the adult class, we started some studies in the Sermon on the Mount, and I want to pick up this passage. You were the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You were the light of the world.

A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. It was a tremendous compliment that Jesus gave to his disciples. I just want to talk with you about all this this morning, all right, instead of preach.

Is that okay? But it was a tremendous compliment that Jesus gave his disciples. He said to them, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He didn't tell them they should be.

He didn't urge them to become that. He said, that's what you are. By virtue of being his disciples, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And he didn't say the light of Palestine. He said the light of the world. And this small group of people who had gathered around Jesus, he sees, this is how he sees them.

He sees them as the light of the whole world. And he himself would not cover the whole world. But he sees his disciples as the light of the whole world.

That's how Jesus sees his disciples. I don't know how you see yourself. I have a good idea of where your view of yourself came from.

Same place my view of myself came from. A lot of it from family of origin, etc. I don't know how you see yourself.

But if you're a disciple of Jesus, this is how Jesus sees you. He sees you, in the company of his disciples, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That's how he sees you.

And that's a tremendous compliment. There's a contrast, of course, between the elements and where they are placed. You're the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Salt is completely different from the earth. Light is completely different from the world. Their value lies in being different.

Salt is no good if it's just like the element in which you place it. It's not only no good, it's unnecessary. Light is no good if it becomes darkness, if it's like everything around it.

Salt and light are of value only as they are different from the element in which they're placed. Let me take those two elements that Jesus uses to describe us. First of all, salt.

It's a statement Jesus makes about his disciples simply because they are his disciples. And they, as salt, have to be different from the society around them, but they must equally be in contact with that society to be of any use. There's a primary use of salt in the first century where there's a preservative.

Oh yeah, it makes food taste better, etc. It'll create virtue and say all those things about it. But the primary, I think I'm right in saying that, the primary use of salt was as a preservative of meat.

You had no refrigeration. If you were going to keep meat for any time at all, you had to salt it. And unless the salt was different from the meat, it was of no good.

Unless the salt came in contact with the meat, it was of no good. And the disciples of Jesus, as the salt of the earth, must be different from their society, but they must be in contact with their society to be of any use. Clear? With me so far? All right.

And Jesus says of his disciples, they, and he puts the emphasis there, you. And he needn't emphasize that to make sense in the sentence, but he does. He pulls in that pronoun, you are the salt of the earth.

And it's as though he were saying you, not anybody else. You are the salt of the earth. And its value lies in its nature and in its being in contact with the earth.

In the scriptures, the earth speaks of what is mortal, temporal, not eternal. And it's what's on its way to death and corruption. And what preserves that kind of a society? It's salt.

It's the presence of the disciples of Jesus. As bad as you may think our country is, what would it be like if somehow you took all the Christians out of it? There weren't any Christians in our society. In a very real way, the disciples of Jesus are the salt of the earth.

What that means, I think, in the scriptures, is the presence of the disciples of Jesus keeps society from going totally to destruction. Corruption and destruction. The Jews had a saying that as long as there were 36 righteous people in the world, they said 36 righteous men, as long as there were 36 righteous men in the world, the world would not be destroyed by God.

Their recognition was the presence of the righteous preserved the society from God's destruction, God's judgment. And they got that, of course, from the story of Abraham and Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah. Where God lets Abram know, I'm going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

The cry of it has come up to heaven. I'm coming down to see if what I heard is true. And if it's true, I'm going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

And then Abram begins this long prayer of intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah. If there are 50 righteous in it, will you destroy the righteous with the wicked? And he comes right down to 10, if there are 10 righteous in it. And God says, no, I will not destroy the city if there are 10 righteous in it.

Now, it's an aside, but there's no use saying Abraham should have kept on praying because he didn't break it off, God did. God went up from Abram at that point. But the gist of it is, the presence of 10 righteous people would have kept Sodom and Gomorrah from being destroyed.

Those 10 righteous would have been salt in the earth of Sodom and Gomorrah. And they would have kept God from destroying the city. And what preserves, and I know it's laughable in our society, but what preserves our society is your presence in it.

That's what keeps our society from coming under the judgment of God. During the communist rule in Hungary, when the dictatorship there was going to ban Christians, drive them out of the country, a very prominent evangelical physician known in all the country of Hungary went to the government and said, if you do, you are going to destroy Hungary. And he based it on this passage, that Christians are the salt of the earth.

And the only thing, he said, that keeps our society from coming apart totally is the presence of the very people you want to drive out. And he so convinced the government that they rescinded the order. Recognition, the presence of the people of God.

Just by being here, we preserve society from its total corruption. Same thing in the book of Ezekiel, though God progressed beyond that. And God says in chapter 14 that as far as Jerusalem is concerned, it's bound for destruction, there's nothing that can save it.

Even if Daniel or Job were present, they could save only themselves. And God is showing by that extreme statement that normally, the presence of people like Daniel and Job, the presence of people like that keep a society from going totally to corruption and coming under the judgment of God. And when Jesus talks about his disciples being the salt of the earth, you see what he's saying.

Our presence keeps that society from going to corruption. Let me push it a little bit further. That works not only in society, but in individuals whom we meet.

As we share, and I'll come to the idea of saltiness in a moment, and they see what that means. That's the possibility of their becoming disciples of Jesus. But that means we have to be in contact with those who are only of the earth.

You may find that as difficult as I do. I just moved into a community of seniors. People 55 and older can live here.

And I always said I will never move in with all these old people. But there I am in this community. And we each have our individual units.

They're like townhomes. And I'm way down. Mine is the last townhome at the end of this street.

And my door doesn't face any other door. When I come out my door, there's no neighbor on that side that I can say hello to. And being as introverted as I am, I am perfectly content to stay inside, stay at my computer, do my study, and go visit my grandkids.

I'm perfectly content to do that. They have stuff going on in the community center. I never go.

I'm not being very good salt, am I? I'm not in contact with these people around me. I don't know anything about them. I don't know who's a Christian and who isn't a Christian.

I have no idea. I know the managers are Christian. I know that.

That's all I know. And there's no way I can be salt or light in that community until I get in contact with those people. Because they don't know anything about me.

Well, they know he's a preacher down there, but that's all they know. I'm not a very good one, evidently. And it's only as we as salt are in contact with the people of the earth that our saltiness is going to do what it should do.

Jesus gives his disciples as salt an exhortation. And it has to do with losing their saltiness. Now, pure salt, sodium chloride, doesn't lose its taste.

It doesn't lose its saltiness. But the salt of the first century wasn't that pure kind of salt. It was mixed in with a lot of other ingredients.

And if you kept that, the salt could leach out. And all you had were these other elements from the ground. And they were useless.

They were thrown out on the path, and people walked over them. So Jesus' exhortation to his disciples is for the salt to keep its saltiness. If that salt loses its saltiness, what good is it? It isn't any good.

So he's urging them to keep their saltiness. My understanding, as I look at the Sermon on the Mount, is the saltiness is the character that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes. That's what makes us salt, the kind of people we are.

We got started on those Beatitudes in the Bible class this morning. But take a quick look at them. There are those who are poor in spirit, verse 2 of chapter 5. What we were looking at this morning is the word here.

There are two primary words for poor in the New Testament. Two primary words in the Old Testament that parallel to each other. There's a word that simply means you're between poverty-stricken and rich.

You have enough to get by on, but there are no reserves. But this is not that word. This word is the word that describes abject poverty.

And it's the poverty of spirit. And in a day of self-identity, self-fulfillment, obviously people who are poor in spirit are going to be different from the society around them. Now being, well I do want to go back over those Beatitudes.

But being poor in spirit, or being meek, another term Jesus uses here, is not to be a doormat. It's not that I am so weak I can't help but let people run all over me. It's one recognizing my spiritual poverty before God.

There's nothing I can bring Him. There's no merit. I have to come to God just as I am without one plea.

There aren't even any words that I can use to get God to look on me favorably. I can't manipulate Him. I can't change Him.

I can't argue my case before Him because I don't have one. And that's not being humiliated. That's facing the truth.

The truth about me is there isn't anything I can give to God in order to get His salvation. The only thing I can do is allow God to give me His salvation. And with my empty, poverty-stricken hands I can receive what He gives.

But that's a position of strength. That's not a position of weakness. Because in that realization of my poverty I'm dealing with truth.

And that's always a strengthening thing. I'm dealing with truth. And it opens up the door for God to give me the riches of His grace.

And you live in the security of being spiritually poverty-stricken. Until I recognize that poverty-strickeness of my inward spirit, I'm going to be constantly frustrated, trying to be fulfilled, when the only thing that can fulfill me is God Himself. See that? So being poor in spirit or being meek is not a position of being a doormat.

In the security of the grace of God, that He has given me all His riches in Jesus, and they are mine, not because of who I am, but because of who He is, and therefore they can never be taken away. They will not change unless God changes, and He won't. That no matter how I change, that's security.

And it's in the strength of that security that a disciple of Jesus can afford to be meek. Jesus did not wash His disciples' feet out of weakness. He was the only one secure enough and strong enough to do it.

And so we serve others as Saul, not because we are too weak to do anything else, but because out of the security we have in Jesus, out of that strength, we choose to serve. And when you are served by someone who is too weak to do anything else, you know how uncomfortable you are? How you refuse to serve because you don't want it? You haven't had that? Oh, sure, you've had that experience. But when someone who comes out of the security of knowing who He is in Christ, no Uriah Heep, if you remember David Copperfield, no Uriah Heep, but coming in the strength of Jesus the way Jesus did, serving other people, that's the position of strength.

And that is very attractive. Those are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn.

And that has to do not with relational losses, but in the whole setting of what is spiritual. It's that we treat sin seriously, in ourselves and in others. And like Jesus, with the grave of Lazarus from the Mount of Olives over the city of Jerusalem, we weep over what sin has done.

We're extreme realists. Society is not progressing in the way it's going. We weep over it.

We mourn. Or go down through the rest of them. Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Not people who are just peaceful in themselves, but people who make peace. Blessed are the peacemakers.

They will be called the sons of God. And blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. They are the people who live rightly.

To me, as I look at the Sermon on the Mount, that's our saltiness. That's what preserves from corruption. That's the hope of our society.

People who are like that. And I know I'm getting off track. But it seems to me what Jesus is doing is creating a community of people.

Not just individuals standing each by him or herself. Jesus is creating a community of people who are like that. In other words, church is that.

We are helping each other be that. Grow in that. Become more like that.

We don't work this out individually. And I too often have told people, you go home and you pray and you read your Bible. And that's good.

We need to do that. But it's as we come together, that together we look into the Scriptures. Together we pray.

Together we share our difficulties with each other. Together we tell how God is working in our lives. We encourage and help each other.

And to me, that's the saltiness of the disciples of Jesus. And Jesus is saying, don't lose that. Don't lose the saltiness.

And I need those kinds of relationships where other Christians can hold me accountable for what I'm doing in life outside of church. And when I come together with God's people, it ought to be that kind of strengthening, encouraging, rebuking, coming together that helps me increasingly be a disciple of Jesus. And we do that together.

He's creating community. The you's are all plural in here. The blessings are all plural.

They are people, not individuals. They are a community. The disciples, plural of Jesus, they are the salt of the earth.

He says they are the light of the world. And note again, that's a statement. That's a declarative statement.

It's not a command. It's not an exhortation. It's not an encouragement.

It's a statement. You are. That's what you are by virtue of being a disciple of Jesus.

You are the light of the world. Now note both salt and light are effective by just being what they are. Salt doesn't have to do anything but be salt in order to preserve me.

It doesn't have to do something else. Light naturally shines just because it's light. You don't turn on a light bulb and then exhort it to shine.

Where light is, by very nature of what it is, it shines. And Jesus says of his disciples, you are the light of the world. You are.

He's not saying become that. He's not saying do that. By virtue of being a disciple, you are the light of the world.

Wonderful. That's what you are. A light of the world.

What does he mean by that? Well, take up what he says. You are the light of the world. Isn't it fascinating he uses that term? You are the light of the world.

The world is a way of life. It's how people live without God as their father. It's just the way of life.

It can be different in different societies. Doesn't matter. It's a way of life of people who don't have God as their father.

It's a way of life, therefore, that has as its outer boundary birth and death. And that's all there is. There's nothing beyond death.

Everything of life is crammed into the years, however many there are, that we live here. That's the world. It's temporal, it's mortal, and it's without God as father.

And people who live like that are classified as the world. Now into that kind of society, which the scriptures call darkness, that's not light, that's darkness. Jesus' disciples are light.

And of course the purpose of light is to illuminate. It's show the way. I don't, not in my house anyhow, I'm not a good housekeeper, I don't turn on the light so I can see all the dirt.

Turning on the light makes it possible for me to do other things. And Jesus has turned on light in the world. Yes, we sang rightly, because Jesus says that in John's Gospel.

He's the light of the world. But he's not here. And his disciples are the light of the world.

If he's the light of the world, and he's not here, and we're the light of the world, then to the degree that we are like him, we are the light of the world. And every rabbi called disciples in order to make those disciples like himself. Jesus has called disciples to make those people, you and me, like him.

And so like him, we are light. Our light is dry. His was not.

He is light. We are not light because we receive light from him. But we are the light of the world.

Listen to what he says. He describes us in two ways. A city set on a hill, and a lamp lighted in a house.

And I think that's the outward light of community. The city set on a hill that everybody can see. And the inward light, or I would put it in the home.

The light lighted in that Palestinian one-room home. Once you light that lamp in that one-room home, most Palestinian normal people just had a house with one room. And you light a lamp in that room, it gives light to everybody that's in the house.

So there's light in the house, and there's light outside of that city set on a hill. And as you know, in the ancient Near East, cities were often built on hills for protection. They were often built on mounds of the destruction of previous cities.

And so you have these cities set on hills. And when you're out in the valley, you can't miss that. The whitewashed homes in the daylight reflecting the light of the sun.

You can't miss that. The lights in those individual homes shining out through the windows, the openings. Wouldn't have glass in them.

Shining out through those openings. You can't miss them. It's public.

It's there. It's not doing any advertising. There aren't any signs down on I-95 saying ten miles to this city, look at the lights.

It is. And by virtue of being, it is seen. And Jesus says that's the way his disciples are.

By virtue of being, his disciples. They are light. And people can see that.

When it comes to the house, or you light this individual lamp. He says there are certain things that no householder does. You don't come into the home or in the evening while you're there, light this one lamp.

And then put a measuring pot over it. Or you don't put it under the bed. The whole purpose of lighting that lamp is to give light to everybody in that room.

And you put it up in that niche in the wall or on the stand. So it gives light to the room. Jesus' exhortation here is to let your light shine.

God will not do to us what a householder would not do to his lamp. It's not our responsibility to become light. We are light.

It's our responsibility to make sure that nothing hides that light. Let your light shine. What is the light here? Let people see your good work and glorify your father in heaven.

He will say in chapter 6, there are things that need to be done in secret. Things we've got to hide from other people. But those things are the elements of our private relationship to the Father.

Prayer. Giving. Fasting.

Those are part of our inner life. Yes, giving is part of our inner life. So we're not calculating our giving.

I better not get off on that. The things that are hidden, that we don't display, are the inner things of our personal relationship with God. The things we are to display are our good work.

That's our light. Oh, I have no doubt that the light also involves sharing the gospel. But here Jesus is saying our good works, they open the way for people to inquire about the light.

Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven. So we let our light shine by the good works we do for the people around us. That's how we let our light shine.

If we do not do good works for the people around us, we are covering our light. So I want to suggest that instead of being worried about, well, I don't do a very good job of sharing the gospel. Begin with doing good for the people around you.

And then see what happens. If we did enough of that, people would start asking, why are we different? What's going on here? Then you've got the opportunity to share why you're doing what you're doing. But it begins with this good work.

So we let our light shine as the disciples of Jesus by doing good works for people around us. Alright? I'm going to stop there. Primarily because I said all I want to say.

But I want to close with this story about Bill Ferrell, who lives in Whitewater, Wisconsin. He's a Vietnam vet who stepped on a landmine in Vietnam, lost both his legs, came home bitter. His family urged him to buy a farm up there in Michigan, which he did.

And the church, of which he was a member but never attended because of his bitterness, was sponsoring Vietnam refugees and looking for housing for them. Bill's aunt came to him and suggested, since he lived in this big farmhouse out on this farm, that he open his farmhouse to Vietnamese refugees. In his bitterness, of course, he said no.

Then he rethought it and said yes, because he saw it as a way to get back at those people whom he held responsible for his crippled condition. So he said yes, he would sponsor, he would open his home to these Vietnamese refugees. He said, that turned me into a bitter zombie by the time I reentered civilian life.

So he saw this now as a chance to get back at the Vietnamese. So as Aunt Rose drove to the minister's house that day, I sat relishing my fiendish scheme. I would make the Vietnamese family my servants.

I would make them pay for the agony I had suffered. In my ancient hand-controlled GMC camper truck, I picked the family up at the Rock County airport a week later. They huddled in the terminal, Papa San, Mama San, and three young boys and a girl.

As I rode up, they stared at me in surprise, not prepared for my condition. But they quickly recovered, giving me hesitant smiles. Overly polite, we exchanged greetings in their limited English and my pidgin Vietnamese.

As I drove them to my farmhouse, they were quiet. I showed them around the house and the outbuildings, though I pointed out several large bedrooms. They seemed spooked by the big old house and wanted to sleep together in one room.

The next morning, I put my plan into action. I barked out orders, Papa San, you weed garden, Mama San, clean kitchen, scrub floor. I pointed to the youngsters, you go feed the pigs and chickens.

All of them smiled and hurried off. Mama San began filling a scrub bucket. As they labored, I briskly wheeled among them like a drill sergeant.

Don't spill that corn. Careful with the hole. Get the mop under the stove, Mama San.

They worked with alacrity. When they finished, I ordered Mama San to cook dinner. That evening, they went off to bed after wishing me good night.

I sat in my wheelchair feeling cheated. Instead of cowering in humiliation or seething in resentment, they had responded cheerfully. They even seemed eager to help and to please me.

Oh, well, I figured. Wait till they've been here a while. They'll find out.

But the next few days saw no dampening of their enthusiasm. Despite my rantings and cursings, they finished their tasks with smiles and polite bows. Their attitude was getting my goat.

But nothing prepared me for what happened after I took Mama San and her daughter to the barn. Pointing to a stall, I made shoveling motions and barked, Muck it out good. One boy pushed me back toward the house where I got Papa San started on painting a shed.

As the day wore on, mother and daughter seemed to be taking an unusually long time. So I had one of the youngsters wheel me to the barn. As I reached it, the two emerged laughing and talking, flack smeared with manure and dirt, strands of black hair plastered to their foreheads.

I figured they'd been goofing off instead of working. I rolled into the barn to inspect their work and froze in surprise. The two had mucked out all seven stalls and had cleaned the ceiling.

What was their game? Rankled, I charged into the house, grabbed my bowling ball and drove into town. I came home at 2 a.m., banged on the family's bedroom door. Mama San, I roared, get up, fix me something to eat.

Soon she appeared bowing and smiling. I hunched grimly in my chair as she went to work at the stove. She set a steaming noodle dish before me.

My first impulse was to taste it, push it away, and berate her. But it was delicious, and I finished it in silence. That night I fell asleep wondering when these people would break.

Next morning I told the family to wash the dirty, crusted windows of the chicken coop. I believe the old shed hadn't been cleaned since the farm was built. After a few hours, I wheeled out to the coop.

I stuck my head through the door and caught my breath. Not only were the windows spotless, but so were the walls and ceiling. I pushed back into the house muttering.

They were trying to make a fool of me. Within several months, I had the cleanest farm in Walworth County. The children picked up English quickly, and through them, the family learned how I had lost my legs.

They expressed nothing but sympathy. Then one day, Papa San apologetically announced, We have family in California. They asked us to come help in their store.

So off they went. That's all right, I thought. I'll find some other servants who won't be so willing to please.

Another Vietnamese family soon moved in. They, too, labored under my despotism, and they, too, responded in the same smiling manner. By then, I was tired of yelling and cursing, as it seemed not to bother my guests, but I was still tough with work assignments.

After some months, the second family left for permanent locations, and in came Chau, his wife and two children. Chau spoke fairly good English, and one evening, when we were talking after supper, it became obvious he was reluctantly trying to tell me something. Finally, I wormed it out of him.

It's what the other family say about you, he said. I braced myself. Whatever it was, I knew I had it coming.

He continued, They say how nice you are. He blinked and coughed apologetically, but you just have a little problem with your voice. And angry all the time.

They don't know why you don't enjoy life. Chau cringed as if he expected me to strike him, but I could only stare down at my stumps, hot shame rising in me. I had tried so hard to hate these people, but it wasn't working anymore.

I was beginning to like them. Their kindness was wearing me down. And on his birthday, not to read the rest, on his birthday, all those families he had abused sent him presents and birthday cards and wished him the best.

I broke down crying. The gentle people I had so spitefully used were repaying me with love and understanding. In my anger, I had turned away from the Lord, but these people had exemplified a Christlike spirit.

They had done what Jesus urged his followers to do, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you. At that moment, something happened to me. Warmth began to melt the icy shell I had built around me, and for the first time since I had lost my legs, I felt like living again.

I couldn't hate anymore. I could only ask for forgiveness. What happened after that? He had more than 40 Vietnamese families stay with him.

He visited Vietnam. Seeing their lack of medications, he began a service going around, writing different hospitals, collecting medicines, taking them over to Vietnam. I don't know how many trips he's made in order to help the Vietnamese people.

I took refugees into my house, but they are the ones who made it a home. What were they? Salt and light, and by their good deeds, they melted the man's spirit. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, the scriptures say of you that you went about doing good. Help us to be like you, you, the light of the world, you who have given us light.

Help us to be the kind of people who go about doing good, and I pray that in our church life, we will nurture and strengthen the light that you have given us. I pray that people seeing the good works will come to know you. I pray in your name.

Amen.

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