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Salt & Light

We're studying the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is really not what most people consider a sermon, which is three points and a poem. It is more of a discourse which is a formal and orderly extended presentation of thought on a subject. This discourse is the most extensive record we have of Jesus' thoughts on the subject.

What's the subject? The most vital thing to remember is the subject matter inside of which Jesus presents these thoughts. What's the subject of Matthew's gospel up to this time? The kingdom is 'at hand.' This was a unique time. The kingdom is not always 'at hand.' The kingdom is only 'at hand' when the kingdom is near. It had drawn near at this time because the King of the kingdom had come and He was offering Himself to the nation Israel. What was the definition of the kingdom at that time? How would an Israelite understand the expression 'kingdom of heaven?' As the earthly kingdom from heaven as defined by the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants. That kingdom was near to arriving if only the nation Israel would receive Jesus as their King then that kingdom would actually come. John was the prophet that prepared the way for Jesus. He told the people to repent. He pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Was John's message well-received by the leadership? No. The leadership couldn't get rid of John fast enough. John was encroaching on their territory, drawing aside many of the followers of Judaism. So they had John arrested and when Jesus heard of it, since His message was identical to John's and it was not His time to be arrested, He retreated into the Galilee. There His public ministry formally began and He began to proclaim to the people repent, for the kingdom of heaven is 'at hand.' As the Master He chose his first four disciples; Peter, Andrew, James and John and they agreed to sit at their Master's feet and learn His theology and live His lifestyle. In the Galilee

they traveled with Him as he taught in the synagogues, proclaimed the kingdom message and did many authenticating miracles. What was the result? He became immensely popular with the people. People from all points of the compass were coming to the Galilee to hear and see Him.

It's in that context we find Jesus' inaugural discourse. He begins with "the Beatitudes," which is Latin for "the Blessings," in Matthew 5:1-10. What is Jesus doing here? He's instructing His believing disciples how to live in order to enjoy rewards in the coming kingdom. He's not addressing the crowds in general. Sure, the crowds come into the picture during the discourse but His initial words are no doubt directed towards the four believing disciples that He chose in chapter 4. This is not the same occasion as the Luke 6 discourse. Similar but not identical. There he is addressing a mixed crowd of disciples. But here He is addressing only the four believing disciples. How do we know? Because what is the sense you get in verse 1? He's trying to escape the crowds. Note that He sees the crowds but He goes away from the crowds, up on a mountain. Presumably this occurred very near Capernaum on the northern shores of the Lake of Galilee and so if you are going with us to Israel next year we will visit the traditional site of the discourse. What happens when Jesus gets up on the mountain? He sits down like a rabbi preparing to teach. Then what happens? His disciples came to Him. They knew His sitting posture was preparatory for a training session. Then what did He do in verse 2? He opened His mouth. Signifying what? They should shut their mouth because He is ready to teach. How does He begin the teaching? With a pronouncement of blessings upon His disciples who manifest certain spiritual qualities. Someone mentioned last week whether these were all different people or the same person that manifest these spiritual qualities. They're all characteristics of the same person. The person who is poor in spirit also mourns, also is meek, also hungers and thirsts for righteousness and so forth. It's not a pick and choose. They all describe a certain kind of person. Jesus Himself was the epitome of this Person. Why did Jesus choose these specific character qualities? Because these are what the Pharisees did not have and what He is doing is contrasting Himself and the spiritual movement He is leading with that of the Pharisees. You have to understand that the Pharisees ruled Israel. They dominated the religious landscape and so the people basically cow towed to the Pharisees. So Jesus has to contrast Himself and His ministry and followers with the Pharisees and their followers. They were not at all the same thing. So we find these

eight contrasts in the blessings. By contrast were the Pharisees to be blessed? No way. What's the first blessing? Jesus' disciples were to be poor in spirit. The Pharisees were not poor in spirit. That quality admits one's lack of righteousness before God but the Pharisees considered themselves to be righteous before God. Jesus' disciples were to mourn. The Pharisees did not mourn. This quality is sorrowful over sin and its deleterious effects but the Pharisees considered themselves to be without sin. Jesus' disciples were to be meek. The Pharisees were not meek. This quality is strength of character when personally attacked as sinful but the Pharisees were unrelentingly vindictive. Jesus' disciples were to hunger and thirst for righteousness. The Pharisees did not hunger and thirst for righteousness. This quality is a painful desire for the kingdom of righteousness to come but the Pharisees only wanted a political kingdom. Jesus' disciples were to be merciful. The Pharisees were not merciful. This quality prohibits one from exacting the punishment that is due but the Pharisees rigorously exacted punishment that was due. Jesus' disciples were to be pure in heart. The Pharisees were not pure in heart. This quality was a longing to be close to God but the Pharisees longed to be close to their traditions. Jesus' disciples were to be peacemakers. The Pharisees were not peacemakers. This quality was one of carrying the good news to others but the Pharisees considered all Jews to already be children of God and therefore not in need of good news. Finally, Jesus' disciples were to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The Pharisees were not persecuted for righteousness. This quality was to stand up for righteousness despite serious costs to self but the Pharisees stood against righteousness. Thus, as Barbieri says, "These qualities contrast sharply with Pharisaic "righteousness.""ⁱ Jesus' entire point with the Beatitudes was to demonstrate He was not a part of the Pharisaic system but was coming against it as the leader of a new spiritual movement. Those who stood against the Pharisaic system by following Him would be blessed.

When or where were these blessings to be enjoyed? In the kingdom. Verse 3 and 10 describe the blessing as fundamentally possessing "the kingdom of heaven." What does Matthew mean when He uses the expression kingdom of heaven? Is he referring to the location of the kingdom? No. What's he referring to then? The source of the kingdom. The kingdom is to come from heaven. This is what Daniel was saying with the dream of the stone coming from heaven and smashing the four metal statue and then growing. Where then is the actual kingdom coming to? Verse 5, to the earth. The stone in

Daniel's dream grew to fill the whole earth. The blessed ones would inherit the earth. So the kingdom of heaven would be understood by any Jew who understood the OT to be an earthly kingdom established by the God of heaven.

Did the Pharisee look forward to an earthly kingdom? Yes. So what was the difference between Jesus' conception of the kingdom and the Pharisees conception? Both agreed it was earthly and political in nature but what element were the Pharisees missing? Righteous! Righteousness is the key! The kingdom was to be one of righteousness. Of course, the Pharisees thought they were righteous, they were seeking to establish their own righteousness with God, but it was a righteousness according to human standards not God's standards, it was all external and not internal. What was the standard the nation was to be living by at the time? The Mosaic Covenant. Was the Mosaic Covenant supposed to be only external standards? Ritual? No. That is what the Pharisees had distorted it into but the original intent was internal, that the Law would be in their hearts. What did the Psalmist say, "I will hide Your word" where? "In my heart." The Mosaic Law was designed to be internalized. And all the Beatitudes are internal characteristics. So that's how this gets back to the Mosaic Law and the internalization of that Law and the blessing upon those who followed that Law in the kingdom to come.

Today we come to verse 11 and he continues to elaborate on verse 10 and being a recipient of persecution. But there is a clear departure from vv 3-10. Note that verses 3-10 are addressed in the 3rd person, "Blessed are those...for they..." but verses 11ff are addressed in the 2nd person, "Blessed are you..." The first verses seem to be general and I would say they refer to the OT remnant; the later verses are personal and I would say they refer directly to Jesus' disciples. Glasscock says, "Jesus now changed the format of His lecture. He appears to have become concerned with a more personal exhortation. Even though speaking to these same men and beginning with the rather universal proclamation of third-person "those who" to identify the blessed ones, now He moved to the direct address of second-person "you." Perhaps He wanted to make sure they understood the necessity of personal application because of the persecutions awaiting them."ⁱⁱ What unique period was to come just prior to the kingdom's arrival? A period of judgment. This judgment would separate the remnant from the non-remnant as well as the

sheep from the goats. That period, known in the OT as the day of the Lord and the 70th week of Daniel, would be characterized by intense persecution on the followers of Jesus. Toussaint agrees saying, “This, of course, is in accordance with the prophecy of Daniel’s seventieth week of years (Daniel 9:24-27).”ⁱⁱⁱ If the nation repented then they would enter into this very troubling time. They should be prepared to rejoice in being persecuted in light of the heavenly rewards in the kingdom on the other side.

Verse 11, **Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.** There are several significant things said or implied here. First, there is blessing for Jesus’ disciples when three things happen because of their association with Him. One of the three things they will face due to their association with Jesus is **insults**. The Greek word refers to “finding fault with “and therefore “heaping reproach” upon them. If they followed what Jesus taught then they would not be following what the Pharisees taught. This would result in the Pharisees finding fault with them and heaping reproach upon them. Numerous times in the Gospels the Pharisees reproach Jesus’s followers for not following Pharisaic tradition. Jesus is promising them here that the reproach is worth enduring because their reward in heaven is great. A second thing they will face due to their association with Jesus is **persecution**. The Greek word refers to being harassed because of their beliefs and often to plots being hatched to destroy. Again, if they followed what Jesus taught then they would not be following what the Pharisees taught. This would result in the Pharisees harassing them for their beliefs and ultimately plotting to do away with them. Jesus is promising them that the harassment is worth enduring because their reward in heaven is great. A third thing they will face due to their association with Jesus is **falsely saying all kinds of evil against you**. This refers to the accusations that the unrighteous Pharisees would fling at the righteous disciples of Jesus. People have and always will find fault with, harass and falsely accuse those who are righteous. These should not be taken as personal attacks. As Jesus says, they are **because of Me**. The ultimate person hated and attacked is Jesus. Those who attack those associated with Him are being attacked because they are internalizing Jesus’ theology and lifestyle. Their hatred is not really against the disciple but against the Master Himself.

Verse 12, how are the disciples to respond to persecution? **Rejoice and be glad.** Is that the normal response to difficulty? The normal response is frustration, bitterness and anger. So how are they to **rejoice and be glad?** By remembering that the command is followed by a promise. The promise provides the motive to follow the command. What are the two promises that will enable them to **rejoice and be glad** when they are insulted, persecuted and falsely accused? First, **reward in heaven.** Your **reward in heaven is great.** People debate what **heaven** is referring to here. Some hold that it looks forward to where Church age believers will go at the judgment seat of Christ. However, there was no revelation of a Church or a judgment seat of Christ at this time so that is highly unlikely. Others hold that it refers to the NH and NE that follows the millennium. This would mean that their reward would follow them from the millennium into the NH and NE. This is a better possibility but still not likely what is meant. Finally, some hold that **heaven** here refers clearly to the kingdom of heaven and therefore to the earthly kingdom. This is the best option and may include the new heaven and new earth which follows. Either way, by having a joyful attitude through persecution because of Christ there will be great reward for them. The adjective **great** emphasizes that the reward then will far outweigh the difficulties of persecution now. It gives the proper perspective on time and eternity. What typically happens is we get so focused on our present circumstances that we are not able to respond properly in light of eternity. What Jesus is trying to do is get them to focus on the future reward so that they are able to respond to the persecution with joy and gladness now. There are lessons here galore but for them we remember that it was a genuine possibility that these rewards were just around the corner. If the nation Israel repented then the kingdom would come and so would the rewards. So the first promise given to motivate them to rejoice and be glad was great reward. What's the second promise? Association with the prophets. **For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.** By being persecuted for their association with Jesus they were following the same path as the prophets of old. The prophets of old are the greatest names in Israel. Such high acclaim and adoration was not known among any other class of men in Israel. By following Jesus they would be highly acclaimed and adored along with the prophets. But these two promises would give them the ability to rejoice and be glad. Still today these modes of reasoning are used to

motivate us to endure whatever hostility may come our way because of Christ. The important thing to observe is that it is because of Him.

Three significant revelations regarding the greatness of the person of Jesus are given here. “First, the persecution is to be on account of Him.”^{iv} If someone is persecuted merely because they are a disciple of Jesus then Jesus must have some sort of greatness in the eyes of men. Usually Jesus is a threat to some other group and their following, as with the Pharisees; or Jesus is a threat to some other group and their agenda, as with Marxist Socialism. In either case Jesus’ greatness is seen in that He is perceived as a threat and therefore His followers who embody His theology and lifestyle are considered a threat. “Second, the fact that endurance of unjust persecution for the sake of Jesus will bring reward in heaven emphasizes His greatness in the eyes of God.”^v If Jesus was not great in the eyes of God then God would not reward those who were unjustly persecuted for His sake. For example, if someone endured unjust persecution for Mohammed or Joseph Smith he would not be rewarded by God in heaven because God does not view these men as great. God views these men as sinners. God will not reward them. They may be sincere in their efforts but they are simply misdirected in their allegiance and enduring persecution for no ultimate benefit. But for those who endure persecution for the sake of Jesus they will receive great reward because Jesus is great in the eyes of God. “A third indication of the greatness of Jesus is found in the comparison between the disciples and the prophets in verse twelve.”^{vi} The prophets were persecuted because they were representatives of God; the disciples were persecuted because they were representatives of Jesus. God’s prophets and Jesus’ disciples are put on the same par and both would be rewarded in heaven for their persecution. Therefore the indication is that Jesus is God. Toussaint says, “The analogy is clear. Jesus, by making this parallel identifies Himself with God.” Therefore, Jesus’ greatness is revealed in a tri-fold fashion in verses 11-12, in that the persecution is because of Him, the persecution will result in reward and the persecution is parallel to that of the OT prophets. His disciples should therefore stay the rigorous course of enduring hostility.

Verses 13-16 describe His disciple’s purpose and role in light of the kingdom’s nearness and has secondary application to us today. Two metaphors are used; salt and light. There are a number of questions raised here. What is the meaning of the salt metaphor? There are several uses of salt. Which one is

Jesus referring to? What is the meaning of the light metaphor? The light metaphor is easier to decipher. If we can decipher it should we assume that the salt metaphor should be interpreted essentially the same? Or are the two metaphors teaching something essentially different? I tend to think they are teaching the same essential lesson. Let's start with the salt. Jesus says directly to His disciples in verse 13, **You are the salt of the earth;** that's a statement of fact; an indicative. He had chosen them and they were **the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.** Now this strange saying, before we look at it and the salt itself, we need to correct the translation which is misleading. The Greek does not say **if the salt has become tasteless.** It says, "if the salt has become foolish," meaning useless for the purpose for which salt was designed. The problem with the translation **tasteless** is that it leads you to an interpretation of the purpose of the salt and while that interpretation may be right, it may be wrong.

So what are the purposes of salt? What is salt used for? There are three uses. First, it's a seasoning, it flavors food; that would be the interpretation you are led to by the translation **tasteless.** We mainly use salt in the West to make food that is tasteless, tasty! That is a valid use of salt (Job 6:6). What would Jesus be saying if that was His intent with the salt metaphor? That the disciples were to bring flavor to the world; that they were to spice up the world; that the world is a tasteless place and they bring taste to it. But is that the primary use of salt among 1st century Jews? No. What was another use of salt? Second, as a preservative of food. What kind of food were these four men involved with? Fish. They were wealthy fishermen! They sold fresh fish in the Galilee but how did they transport their fish to Judea and elsewhere? They had to pack it and ship it along the major trade routes. How did they preserve the fish for shipping? They didn't have refrigerators. Salt. They would rub the fish with salt as a preservative. The early forefathers of our country also preserved food with salt. What would Jesus be saying about His disciples by metaphor? That they were the preservative of the world, in the sense that they would slow down the decay of the world. By their spiritual character they would keep the world from heading in to utter ruin. That might be a good view. What other uses of salt? Third, as a fertilizer for soil. Luke 14:34-35 mentions that if salt loses its saltiness then "it is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile," implying that in small amounts salt

improves the soil so that it can produce more fruit. What would Jesus be saying about His disciples by this metaphor? That they were in the world to make the world produce more fruit; that is, to bring men to repentance and glorification of God. This seems to be the best view because verse 16, though it's talking about the light, closes by saying "that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." In this view the salt and the light metaphors are basically teaching the same thing, that the disciple's purpose and role in light of the kingdom's nearness was to be a good influence upon the world in order to bring men into harmony with God. They were to be fishers of men and the salt and light metaphors are used to paint the picture of how to be a good influence upon the world in order to bring men into harmony with God in preparation for the kingdom.

So verse 13, Jesus, after stating that they are the salt of the earth, asks, how can salt, if it has become foolish, if it has become devoid of its fertilizing influence, **how can it be made salty again?** That is, how can that fertilizing influence be restored? The critics of the Bible love to point out that **salt** cannot lose its saltiness. Salt is a chemical element they say, NaCl, sodium chloride, and sodium chloride does not lose its taste, it is part of the chemical composition! Therefore Jesus made a scientific error. Did Jesus make a scientific error? No, they made a historic error in the charge. The salt of the ancient world was not made as it is today, by evaporating out the water so that you had pure NaCl; it contained impurities and the salt was often more soluble and would leach out leaving only a tasteless residue behind. Carson says, "Most salt in the ancient world derived from salt marshes or the like, rather than by evaporation of salt water, and therefore contained impurities. The actual salt, being more soluble than the impurities, could be leached out, leaving a residue so dilute it was of little worth."^{vii} Jesus is saying that if His disciples failed to fulfill their purpose of being effective agents in changing the world then what good would their life have been? It would all be a waste!

As Jesus says, **It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.** As the salt leached out leaving the residue it was often thrown out into the streets. There it was trampled under foot by men. What good would their lives be, if they, as the fertilizing agents of the world to bring men into harmony with God failed to do so? It would be a waste of a life. Certainly the pressures of persecution might deter them

from openly being fertilizing agents but the point is they should resist the temptation to be deterred. Why? Because on the other side of living to bring men into harmony with God are great rewards and a status on par with the prophets of old!

The second metaphor is verse 14, 15 and 16, **You are the light of the world.** Again, indicative, statement of fact. He had chosen them as His disciples and they were **the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.**

Alright, what does a **light** do? The end of verse 15 tells us quite clearly, it illuminates. Things that are in the darkness cannot be seen clearly and therefore light is required to illuminate the darkness so that things can be seen clearly. The world is a dark place, under the power of the evil one. Jesus is the light of the world (John 1). His disciples are **the light of the world** in that they would perpetuate His light.

Now the thing about light is that in the darkness it can't be hidden too well. Jesus explains this next by the imagery of a city and its location on a hill. **A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.** We don't know for sure if Jesus had a particular city in mind but there are ruins of a city sitting very high on a hill only 3-4 miles from Nazareth. The city is called Sepphoris and we visited the site in 2008. There is much debate about whether Joseph was one of the major carpenters who built the city during Jesus' childhood. We think it was being built during Jesus' early years and if that is so then it is very likely that Joseph worked on the city and took Jesus along with him six days a week. Jesus would have studied in the synagogue at Sepphoris during His early years. Interestingly, there is evidence that Mary's father was the rabbi at the synagogue and Jesus would have been trained by Mary's father. We don't know for sure but what we do know is that the high location would allow the city of Sepphoris to be seen easily from many miles away. As Glasscock observes, "The reference to a city set on a hill, serving to illustrate how a light draws attention, is not as out of place as it may at first seem." These cities were often constructed of white marble or limestone. "At night the white marble mirrored both the moonlight and burning lamps, acting as a beacon for directing travelers toward the city."^{viii}

In verse 15 Jesus uses another analogy to make a similar point. **Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket.** The lamps of the ancient world were little clay pots with oil in them. You would put the oil in the lamp and the capillary action would draw the oil into the wick so you could light it. You did not cover it with a measuring cup to hide the light. Instead it would be placed on a lampstand so that it gave **light to all who were in the house.**

What was Jesus saying about His disciples by the light metaphor? That by point of fact they were **the light of the world.** As a city set on a hill could not be hidden so they could not be hidden. Who they were as His disciples would be plain to all. Though they could try to hide someone who lights a lamp does not cover it so as to hide it. Ultimately they should accept who Jesus called them to be, a light that gives light to all Israel in preparation for the kingdom.^{ix}

This very fact is what Jesus commands them to do in verse 16, **Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.** This was a choice they had to make. They could try to hide their light but what they should do was let their light shine before men. The manner in which this was to be done was by following Jesus' theology and lifestyle. The **good works** would essentially be the embodiment of the Beatitudes. These **good works** would provide a stark contrast to the Pharisees so that the people could see who the true men of God really were and be led to become followers of the Messiah as well. The good works were not to draw men's attention to themselves but to **glorify their Father in heaven.**

All in all the two metaphors of salt and light essentially come down to one thing; influencing men. Jesus is teaching that salt, as a fertilizer, stimulates responsive growth; and light, as a beacon, enables men to see the truth clearly. By being salt and light among the world their lives would influence the nation to respond properly to God in preparation for the kingdom and thereby be counted as valuable so that they would be rewarded greatly and exalted to the level of the prophets of old. Yet the road to get there would be one filled with persecution. Jesus was laying down the gauntlet; be who I have chosen you to be and live a valuable life that is to be rewarded, or, shrink in the face of difficulty and fail to live a treasured life.

The lessons apply to us today. Are you going to, as 2 Cor 4 commands, be a light that lets the gospel shine before men; or hide it under a peck-measure and in the end have very little to show for your life. What Jesus is saying is very serious. You can have a nice family and a nice job and a nice house but you live in a very dark place and if you don't let your light shine before men then you are simply contributing to the darkness. You're not going to have much to show for your life. It will not be a life well-lived, it will be a life well-lived by the world's standards but it will not be a life well-lived by God's standards. Will it be worth it if you let your light shine before men? Despite the opposition you face it will be very worth it. What your life is now in time pales in the light of eternity. Choose you this day whom you will serve!

ⁱ Barbieri, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

ⁱⁱ Glasscock, *Matthew*, p 110.

ⁱⁱⁱ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 97.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p 97.

^v *Ibid.*, p 97.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p 98.

^{vii} D. A. Carson quoted by Glasscock, *Commentary on Matthew*, p 113.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, Glasscock, p 114.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, Toussaint, p 98.

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