

Disciples in the World: Salt and Light
Matthew 5:10-16

Turn to Matthew 5 please. Right after the beatitudes, Jesus talked about our position in the world, “us” and “them,” beatitude people in the world. Most of the Sermon on the Mount is just about “us,” the beatitude people, how we live before God, and how we live with one another.

The sermon begins, “Good news from God for you who are poor in spirit, yours is the kingdom of heaven, you get God.” It’s hard to believe anyone would turn that down, isn’t it? But for one reason or another, there are already people walking away. And by the time he’s finished the beatitudes, quite a few walk away. And of course, many have not heard the good news at all.

So in this section, Jesus shows beatitude people what kind of relationship we have with the world around us. There is uncertainty among God’s people on this, so it’s worth while paying attention. This short section clears up some confusion.

First, though, listen to the offer again. Imagine the Lord Jesus standing in front of our church, when we are all together, and saying this just for us. That is what’s he’s doing. He’s explaining a new way to live, a way that brings us into God’s kingdom, and actually brings us God himself.

Good news from God for the poor in spirit, and those who mourn. Good news from God for the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Good news from God for the merciful, and the pure in heart. Good news from God for the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Yours is the kingdom of heaven, and you will see God.

This is the new way to live, and this way of living brings us the kingdom of heaven, and it brings us God himself. That much we said last week.

There are nine beatitudes. We went over the first eight last week. We will repeat the eighth, in v10, and read the ninth as well, because they help us understand what Jesus says right after that.

Good news from God for those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Good news from God when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and celebrate, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The last two beatitudes are about persecution. And as Jesus speaks about persecution, insults and false accusations are definitely a part of persecution. These two persecution beatitudes give two reasons why we are persecuted, “because of righteousness” and “because of me.”

“Righteousness” here is being a beatitude person. That can get us in trouble in the world. We can also get in trouble because people know Jesus is our the Lord.

That will also put people off. Some will not mind that we are beatitude people, but they are offended that we make Jesus our Lord, that we think he's the Lord of heaven and earth, and that all authority has been given to him. Jesus assumes we will not hide that. We are beatitude people because Jesus is Lord.

The world around us will be offended and unkind because of this. How should we respond? Rejoice and celebrate! Is Canada offended that we love the God of the Bible, and we obey Jesus? Good news from God. Rejoice and celebrate. Do they say bad things about us that are not true?

Rejoice and celebrate! Good news from God for you, for great is your reward! That happened to the best of God's people. That's the core response that Jesus taught us. Let's try that on. No more wringing our hands. Be glad, be honoured. Shame in the world is honour in the kingdom.

You are the salt of the earth.

Salt and light are both basic human necessities. We must have salt. Salt flavours food, and it was used also to preserve meat, no fridges or freezers remember, and no ice there either. Salt and salt water can purify and cleanse.

Salt of the earth, light of the world. "The earth" here means the same as "the world." Beatitude people are the salt of the earth. The world must have us, we are good for the world. Don't press any one of the uses of salt too hard, Jesus probably means all of them generally. The world badly needs to have beatitude people in it, it is very good for the world that we're here.

Jesus is correcting what we might wrongly learn from the persecution. Yes, the world will sometimes be offended at your righteousness, and that you worship me. But don't be fooled by the insults and lies. You are not a nuisance, you are the salt of the earth. The world badly needs you to be just what you are, beatitude people who worship and obey me.

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.

It's not clear how salt would lose its flavour, its saltiness. It's not clear that Jesus had a particular process in mind. What he does have in mind is how his people might respond to insults and lies and persecution. We will stop being beatitude people, we'll stop following the Lord.

In the early days of this church, one of our women did something generous and kind for a neighbour she did not know very well. She showed mercy.

But the neighbour was upset, got angry. The merciful woman was hurt, and said afterward, "I learned my lesson, I'm never doing anything like that again." Jesus would say, "No, no, no! Don't quit! Don't stop being salt!"

This is a fine woman, and she honours the Lord. She said that, I assume, in a weak moment. But that's what Jesus has in mind about the salt losing its saltiness. You are not a nuisance, you are the salt of the earth. Jesus said that if we lose our saltiness, then we're a nuisance.

You are the light of the world.

Wow. The light of the world. Beatitude people are not trying to be the light of the world. We just want the good news from God, we want his kingdom, we want him. The beatitudes are good news from God for spiritual beggars who want God. And, the beatitudes include that we will treat others with the same undeserved kindness and generosity as we got from God.

We're not trying to be light. But we are, that's the thing. Beatitude people are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. In the sermon on the mount, what the world needs is not a sermon, it needs to see people who live like this because they love and serve Jesus.

The world is a dark place because people do *not* live like this, and because they do *not* love and serve the Lord. That is the darkness in the world. We come to God empty and he makes us rich, so we treat other empty people as well as we can. Because Jesus is our Lord. That makes us light.

It's impossible to hide a town set on a hill.

I changed the translation, because the first words in Greek are "it's impossible" and I wanted to put that first. This little line tells us several things.

One, beatitude people are a town. We are not just individuals, we are a town. Jesus always assumed his followers would hang around together. The town here is pretty close to a church, by which we do not mean the building, we mean a group of disciples.

Two, this town is set on a hill. That's a surprise. The Lord's followers don't usually feel like we're set on a hill, but we are. You could say a group of followers was like a little town, or in some cases not so little. People living together.

Brothers and sisters, we are on a hill, because God put us on a hill. Make no mistake. The world watches churches. They can't help it. God sees to it that the world watches churches. They can't not watch churches. God put groups of followers on a hill. We know he did, because the world certainly sees when we don't do well. That's because we're on a hill.

If you want your town to be hidden, you don't put it on a hill. You maybe put it in a valley. If you don't care one way or another, you put the town on level ground. But if you build the town on a hill, it's because you want people to see the town, you want to be the center of attention.

God set us on a hill, and we cannot be hidden. And we might say, "who sees us? No one knows about us." Don't you kid yourself. People are watching.

In Php 2, Paul says, “do everything without grumbling and complaining, this will make us children of God in a dark and twisted generation, and we will shine like stars in the sky.”

What does it take to shine like stars in the sky, in a dark and twisted world? Do everything without grumbling and complaining. How does that attract any attention at all? It’s the grumblers and complainers that get all the attention, isn’t it? Attention maybe, but no light from that.

Beatitude people are the salt of the earth, they are the light of the world, they are a town God placed on a hill that cannot be hidden. Who sees is not our business, and getting ourselves up on the hill is not our business. Our business is to live as Jesus taught. God takes it from there.

In John 16, Jesus said the Holy Spirit is out there in the world, convicting it of its sin, its righteousness, and its judgement, and that is apart from any human messengers. The Spirit is out in the world doing all kinds of things we don’t know about. That’s his work. Our role is to be beatitude people because we want God and we obey Jesus.

It is impossible to hide a town set on a hill.

Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.

Jesus described three unnatural things; salt that loses saltiness, hiding a town on a hill, lighting a lamp and then covering it. None of those make any sense.

He’s describing how we might respond to insults, false accusations, and persecutions. Don’t stop doing what you do, and don’t hide it. Jesus was looking at a dark and lost world, a world that badly needs salt and light.

It is unnatural for the world not to see our lives as beatitude people, and not to know we do this because we follow Christ. God has put us on a hill, God lit the lamp. All we’re doing is saying “yes” to the good news Jesus preached, but that itself makes us salt and light.

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 others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

So, Jesus is saying, in the same way, don’t be put off by insults, by false accusations, and by persecutions. Let your light shine, the world needs to see people who take my good news to themselves, and will live this way. God has been so good to us, who are miserable and spiritual beggars; we receive this from God, and then we treat others as God treats us.

They will glorify your Father in heaven. When the world sees beatitude people, they are tasting God and seeing God. They are tasting and seeing the glory of God.

We don't look that good to each other, and we sure don't look that good to ourselves. And the world usually does not know they are tasting and seeing the glory of God. But they are.

Some people this draws toward God, and some this puts off immensely. Either way, our lives bring glory to God, which means that the only way we are beatitude people is if we're getting a huge amount of help from God. But the beatitudes already covered that, didn't they.

Good news from God for you who hunger and thirst after righteousness, you will be filled and satisfied. God calls us to this. The one who calls us is faithful, and he will do it. He equips us with everything good for doing his will, and works in us what pleases him.

They will see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Peter quotes this very line, and puts a different light on it:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pt 2:12). They will insult you and false accuse you, but they are still watching how you live, even when they hate you.

And on the day God visits us, they will glorify him. God will say to them on that day, "Were my people not living in my ways, was I not helping them honour me, even though you accused them falsely?" And they will say "Yes, their lives showed your hand on them all along."

Being salt and light is not just so people now will come to God. It is also to bring God glory on that day. We are salt and light now to bring glory to God on that day, from our enemies.

Amen.

PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, and what a kind line *that* is, our Father in heaven, we want this. We are hungry and thirsty to be your kind of salt and light, to be a town you placed on a hill that cannot and should not be hidden. Equip with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. You have called us, please keep being faithful, and see it done. It will never happen without that, which we know very well. We would be delighted to bring glory to you, Father, now or on the Day when you come to earth, either way. Thank you for the good news. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, may that God equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.