

July 7, 2019

Lesson 6: Jesus Teaches About Fulfilling the Law

Scripture: Matthew 5: 13-20

Context:

This week continues with Jesus's sermon on the mount. Following the beatitudes, Jesus moves to giving the why for blessings bestowed upon the crowds and the disciples. He continues to encourage them by using allusions and also referencing the covenant started with the Israelites.

Jesus starts to drive home his point about the power of their blessings by using allusions about how the people are to live. The first allusion is that the people are to "be the salt of the earth." We may not understand the radical nature of this allusion unless we examine the context of the phrase. There was a Palestinian proverb concerning the uselessness of impure salt from which the sodium chloride has been leached, meaning there needed to be some refining.¹ Thus, we learn that any church that functions like the secular world will have lost its calling and render itself useless.

The second allusion is one that makes more sense for those in an ancient context. In the religion of ancient Israel, it was assumed that God was not only the source of light for daily life, but light itself.² Thus, it makes sense that the people who belong to God would become the light of the world. Yet, the church needs to remember that it is not the light itself, but only the window through the light is to be seen.³ The church is to do everything to bring honor to God and give praise to the heavens.

Jesus builds upon the allusions by then explaining his own ministry and the place from which he comes. He reminds the hearers that his own ministry comes from the Law and the prophets, who gave the instructions for the people. His embodiment fulfills those laws and also gives credence to Jesus's high views of the scripture. This does not mean that Jesus sees the scriptures as infallible, but more as so life giving that to try and make it cut and dry actually strips it of its reverence. Whenever a holy text is used as a checklist or even as something to exclude others, it dismisses the Law itself as well as the prophets who came to repeat the Law in their own contexts.

Jesus goes on to commend to the people that they examine the commandments and teachings so that they can be that light of the world and the salt of the earth. No amount of memorizing the words or studying it will pay off if they do not live out its exhortations. The theoretical understanding should inform a practical application of the text. If the people do not become the salt of the earth or shine like the light of a city on a hill, then they miss out on God's kingdom.

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1993), 45.

² Ibid., 45.

³ Ibid., 45.

Application

I love this part of Jesus's teaching because it is not only theoretical as it is very practical and relevant to today's world. When reading this passage, we are reminded that the church is given a role in God's creation. It is not to be a consumer that receives gift after gift for existing, but is instead called to be window through which God shines. The church is to be the salt that enriches the land and is different than the culture around them.

If there was ever a sermon that the church needed to hear today straight from Jesus's gospel teachings, this is the one that hits home the clearest. To a degree, the church has become very much like the secular culture in which we find ourselves. There is constant bickering, entitlement from church members, scapegoating of clergy for shifts in the culture, and a lack of compassion for those who may not fit the mold for what a Christian should "look" like when walking into a congregation. We don't need to watch CNN or Fox News or even grieve the finale of Game of Thrones. We have those things in our church with people snapping at each other and constant rival groups "going after" people to get their way.

I have heard of reports from laity and clergy alike across the United States about the constant anxiety that is sweeping our churches and leading to pain, hurt, and confusion to multiple parties. We have become the very things that we bemoan of in the culture at large. We have lost our saltiness and we have become a boarded up window through which no light comes.

But we are not lost and it is not too late to wake up and hear what Jesus says to us today. We are reminded that we are the salt of the earth, with enough saltiness to say to the culture at large that we offer something different. One of the phrases I've loved growing up has been "they are the salt of the earth." In lower Alabama, it conjures up images of hard working church people who are kind, generous, and are committed Christians. They love the Lord and the church and it shows in every day that they live their lives. They are fair to all and are transparent in their interactions with people. I hope that you know someone who is "the salt of the earth." And if you do, that's the person you should emulate.

We are also reminded that we are to be the city on the hill. Think about the cities that maybe you've visited and which ones were your favorites, and which ones left something to be desired. Hopefully, you can think of a city that has inspired you. Maybe it had to do with the people who were there and the hospitality they showed. I will never forget that when I visited Edinburgh, Scotland, the people there were some of the friendliest and quickest to help a stranger or tourist. Your favorite tourist city should help you think of the light upon the hill. Those are the people to emulate and that is the kind of city your church should be.

Finally, we are reminded that we are to be the light of the world. Jesus does not say that you are to "like the flashy lights." He says you are to be the light of the world. We are reminded that being Christians is about being servants and letting our lives shine. We cannot pay someone else to do it and we cannot just assume that someone else will take up the slack. We are called to be part of God's light that shines in the world.

Who is your salt of the earth person that inspires you? What city has been your favorite and how can you take what you loved there and bring it to your church and your community? Do you radiate light, or do you expect someone to radiate light for you?

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