

What Is Our Role in this World as Christians?

A Study of Matthew 5:13-16

Characteristic of Completeness: World

Big Idea: We give the world a taste and a glimpse of who Christ is.

Related Scriptures: Job 6:6; 12:11; Mark 9:49-50; Luke 14:34-35; John 12:46; 13:35; 15:6-8; 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; Colossians 4:5-6; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:14-15

Introduction

1. The question I'd like to address this morning could scarcely be more important: What is our role in this world as Christians? What are we to do here on earth? What is God's job description for us?

Our Characteristic of Completeness for the week is ► the World. We're going to be considering our relationship to the world around us—our place in this world as believers.

2. In our study through the gospel of Matthew, we come today to a passage in which Jesus gives an answer. He tells us what our role is in this world as Christians, using two metaphors: salt and light. Salt and light are two word pictures that explain what God wants believers to be on earth.

The text we're going to study this morning is Matthew 5:13-16. I invite you to turn there. It's Matthew 5:13-16.

Notice in ► Verse 13, Jesus says to His followers:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth . . ."

Then in ► Verse 14, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:14 "You are the light of the world. . ."

There are the two metaphors: salt and light. That's what we are to be. In fact, we could rightly rename our church the Moon Valley Salt and Light Company.¹ It's who we are. It's what we do.

3. That's the easy part. The harder part is to figure out what this means. What does it mean to be salt and light? What would that look like in everyday life? This morning, I want to try to figure this out. We're going to tackle one word picture at a time.

¹ I'm borrowing this from Haddon W. Robinson, *The Christian Salt and Light Company: A Contemporary Study of the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1988).

I. First, ► the salt. What does it mean to be salt?

Let me read Jesus' entire salt metaphor. In ► Verse 13, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:13 "You are 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.

A. To discover the meaning of the salt metaphor, we need to understand the function of salt as it would be understood by Jesus' original audience: mostly first-century Jews.

Only one problem. Scholars have identified no less than eleven different uses of salt in the ancient world.² It had so many uses that it was highly valued. In fact, salt was so valuable that the Romans sometimes paid their soldiers in salt.³ If a soldier did not do his duty, he was said to be not worth his salt. That's where we get the expression, "worth his salt."

So, we can safely say that the salt metaphor carries a general idea of value. Christ followers add value to the world in a broad sense. But, we are left to figure out specifically which of the many valuable functions of salt Jesus has in mind.

B. Probably the most prevalent use of salt in the ancient world was as a preservative.⁴ They didn't have refrigerators back then, so people used salt to help preserve food—to keep it from going bad.

For this reason, perhaps the most common interpretation of the salt metaphor is that Christians serve as a kind of preservative in the world. The idea is that our role is to keep society from rotting, to prevent moral decay, to preserve goodness. Many and perhaps most commentators take this position, including one very fine scholar whom I respect. In commenting on our text, he ► explains:

... we Christians should be more courageous, more outspoken in condemning evil. Condemnation is negative, to be sure, but the action of salt is negative. Sometimes standards slip and slide in a community for want of a clear Christian protest.⁵

² W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew, The International Critical Commentary*, vol. I, eds. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, G.N. Stanton, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd, 1988), 472-473.

³ Robinson, 97.

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: And His Confrontation with the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978, 1987, 1999, 2005), 31.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 66-67, quoted by Tom Minnery, *Why You Can't Stay Silent: A Biblical Mandate to Shape Our Culture*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 63.

The idea is that, just as one function of salt is negative—negating decay—so the function of Christians in the world should be negative: to speak out against evil, to condemn moral decay, to protest immorality.

C. This ► interpretation of salt as a preservative is certainly plausible. But with all due respect, I don't think it's probable. Let me offer my reasoning, and you can judge the merits of it for yourself.

1. Whenever you're considering a particular interpretation, it's always wise to ask the question: Does this interpretation carry an idea that can be corroborated elsewhere in Scripture? Does this interpretation reflect a clear theme woven through the Bible? Could we defend the same idea from other passages in the Word of God, particularly the New Testament?

One problem with the preservation view of salt is that I am hard-pressed to find in the life of Jesus or in the New Testament a clear and corroborating mandate for Christians to keep pagan society from rotting. In His earthly ministry, Jesus' priority does not seem to be on making pagans behave better. He doesn't seem to expect non-Christians to act like Christians. He seems to be more concerned with the inner transformation of individuals who first become Christians by believing in Him for eternal life, and *then*, are empowered to follow His ways as they abide in Him.⁶

To be sure, it can be argued that the internal transformation of individuals ultimately leads to the external preservation of goodness in culture as more and more people become more and more like Christ. But the biblical emphasis is on the root: internal transformation, not external conformity.

2. This is significant, but not the most compelling argument for rejecting the preservation view of salt. The most compelling argument comes directly from our text. Notice in ► Verse 13, Jesus says that salt becomes worthless for the function He has in mind when it becomes ► “tasteless.” There's nothing terribly tricky about the original Greek word for becoming tasteless. It means to become tasteless, to become insipid, to be without sufficient flavor to be pleasing, to be bland or flavorless.⁷

Jesus' mention of the *taste* of salt has no connection with its function as a preservative; rather, it points directly to another function of salt: as a seasoning agent. Salt imparts flavor. It makes food more attractive. This is not a negative function, but a positive one.

⁶ To be sure, it can be argued that inner transformation ultimately leads to external cultural preservation of goodness as more and more people become more and more like Christ.

⁷ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “μωραίνω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

This use of salt as a flavor enhancer is very ancient. In one of the oldest books in the Bible, Job ► says,

^{NAU} Job 6:6 “Can something tasteless be eaten without salt, Or is there any taste in the white of an egg?”

3. Salt ► makes bland food flavorful. If that’s the function of salt Jesus has in mind, then how are believers to be salty? Here’s the idea. Just as salt makes food more palatable, our Christlikeness makes the claims of Christ more palatable to the world. To be salty is to be like Christ. To be salty is to live as Jesus lived. People are attracted to Christ as they see Christ in us. We help people develop a taste for Jesus.
4. Are there other Scriptures to support this interpretation? Yes there are.
 - a. Colossians ► 4:5-6 says:

^{NAU} Colossians 4:5 Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. 6 Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

Here, being salty in relationship to the world of “outsiders” is associated with ► “grace,” not condemnation. It’s positive, not negative. The *New Living Translation* renders the ► same verses this way:

^{NLT} Colossians 4:5 Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.

- b. Elsewhere, ► Christian slaves or employees are urged to be Christlike as a means of being salty or making the Lord attractive to unbelievers. Titus ► 2:9-10 says,

^{NLT} Titus 2:9 Slaves must always obey their masters and do their best to please them. They must not talk back ¹⁰ or steal, but must show themselves to be entirely trustworthy and good. Then they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive in every way.

When we live as Jesus lived, we attractively show how good He is.

c. Also, ► the immediately preceding context of our text is supportive of the flavor-enhancement view of salt. Being salty is the culmination of all the Beatitudes that come before. It's the result of being poor in spirit, and being one who mourns, and being gentle, and being one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, and being merciful, and being pure in heart, and being a peacemaker.⁸ These are positive elements of Christlikeness. If you live them out, you will stand out, and you will make Christ attractive.

D. So, it seems reasonably clear to me that to be salty is to be Christlike. Just as salt makes food more palatable, our Christlikeness makes the claims of Christ more palatable to the world.

But what if we as believers are not Christlike? What if we become tasteless? What if we are not distinctive at all? What if we add nothing to the world? What if we are no different?

Jesus presents this as a real possibility. And He says, when we become tasteless, we become worthless as representatives of Christ, worthless at making Christ attractive. That's what Jesus is saying in the last part of ► Verse 13, where He describes tasteless salt this way:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:13 “. . . It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”

In the first century, when salt became worthless for anything else, people would throw it on the ground where they wanted a hard path because it had a hardening effect on the soil.⁹ People would then walk right over it and ignore it.

Jesus makes a similar point in John 15:6-8 using yet another metaphor. He is the vine; we believers are the branches. When we do *not* abide in Him, when we're *not* loving or Christlike, then unbelievers in the world gather us up and throw us into the fire; that is, they consider us worthless. But when we *do* abide in Him, when we *are* Christlike, our fruitfulness glorifies God and we prove to the world that we are followers of Christ.

Well, ► we've touched on the salt metaphor. Just as salt makes food more palatable, our Christlikeness makes the claims of Christ more palatable to the world.

II. Now, what about the light metaphor? What does it mean to be light?

In ► Verses 14-16, Jesus says:

⁸ The parallel account of our text in Mark 9:50 ties being salty directly to one of the Beatitudes (peacemaking).

⁹ Robinson, 101.

^{NAU} Matthew 5:14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15 nor 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. 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.”

- A. A common interpretation of our role as light in the world, based on this passage, is that we believers are to shed light on, or to reveal the world’s sin. We are to point out that which is immoral among the pagans and take a stand for what is righteous and moral. The idea seems to be: Shine the light and the cockroaches will run. Much like the preservation view of salt, this exposing-evil view of light is negative. It focuses on what’s wrong. In this vein, I’ve heard some Christians say that our role, based on Matthew 5, is to expose the evil deeds of darkness in the world. This may seem to have a biblical ring to it inasmuch as it borrows some language from Ephesians 5:11.
- B. The only problem is that Ephesians 5:11 is talking about exposing evil among believers in the church. It’s not about exposing evil among pagans in the culture.

Moreover, elsewhere in the Bible, it says our primary role as believers is not to judge those outside the church. For example, in ► 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, the Apostle Paul says,

^{NLT} 1 Corinthians 5:12 It isn’t my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. 13 God will judge those on the outside . . .

In fact, I am once again hard-pressed to find in the life of Jesus or in the New Testament a clear and corroborating mandate for Christians to expose the evil deeds of unbelievers in our culture.

- C. Well then, ► what does being the light of the world mean? A careful look at our text reveals what the light is and what it’s for.

1. According to ► Verse 16, the light seems to be our good works. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:16 “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works . . .”

Like light, good works shine that others may see. We are to shine by doing good works.

This may seem like God is calling us to be self-righteous show-offs. But that notion is dashed when we consider that the good works are represented by the preceding context. Being a light of the world is the result the good works of being poor in spirit, and being one who mourns, and being gentle, and being

one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, and being merciful, and being pure in heart, and being a peacemaker. These are unmistakable qualities, but not self-promoting or showy.

2. And Verse 16 also gives the purpose of shining the light of our good works. It's not so that we'll get the applause. Our good works are to be made visible so that the world will glorify our Father—so that people will praise Him for how good He is. Verse ► 16 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:16 “Let your light shine before men in such a way [now here's the purpose] that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

- a. The light of our good deeds lets people see how good God is. It lifts Him up where people can see. It's unmistakable. In ► Verse 14, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden . . .”

Ancient cities in the area were often set on hill for a number of reasons.¹⁰ It was cooler on a hill. In that arid, middle-eastern land, the only air conditioning they had was a breeze. A city on a hill was also easier to defend. And at night, a city on a hill would glow for miles in the dark, making it easier for travelers to find their way to the city. Similarly, our light makes it easier for people to find their way to God.

- b. In ► Verse 15, Jesus zooms in, from the glow of a city, to the glow of a household. He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:15 “nor 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.”

Our light helps people see. It helps them find their way to God.

- III. So, what is our role in this world as Christians? What are we to do here on earth? What is God's job description for us?

We are to be salt and light. That is, we are to give the world a taste and a glimpse of who Christ is. To be salt and light is to give a taste and a glimpse. In fact, that is the ► big idea of this

¹⁰ Robinson, 104.

sermon: We give the world a taste and a glimpse of who Christ is. Some salt and light. A taste and a glimpse.

Which raises the question: How do we taste? How do we look? Irresistible influence, or insipid irrelevance? Salty, or tasteless? On a lampstand, or under a basket?

Remember the elements of salt and light. They include the character qualities we've been studying for the past couple of months. The Beatitudes. Would it be good to review them this week, quietly, reflectively, prayerfully, interactively before God? Would it be good to ask Him to show you where He'd like you to become saltier and brighter? Would it be good to ask Him this week for the specific opportunities and power to do it?

My friend, Carla Crossman did that. And she wrote to tell about it, in a way that's distinctive, in a way that stands out—a tasteful way to help see and remember the elements of Christlikeness, to help give the world a taste and a glimpse of who Christ is. Just listen.

Readers' Theater – The Beatitudes (Readers 1 & 3 are women, 2 & 4 are men)

R1: One day, as the crowds were gathering
 R2: Jesus went up on the hillside with his disciples
 R3: He sat down and taught them there.
 R4: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 R1: Blessed, privileged,
 R2: Favored, fortunate,
 R3: Happy
 R4: Blessed are the poor in spirit.
 R2: Lord, I acknowledge my own spiritual poverty,
 R1: Bondage
 R3: And blindness.
 R4: I am totally dependent on your mercy and grace, Lord,
 R1: Not my health or financial security,
 R2: Not respect or job satisfaction,
 R3: Not comfort or companionship.
 All: I hold out an empty cup, Lord.
 R1: Only you can fill it.
 R4: Blessed are the poor in spirit,
 All: For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

R4: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
 R2: Those who grieve, and lament,
 R1 & 3: And weep.
 R2: Grieving over the damage of sin,
 R1: Moral failure,
 R3: Lack of faith.
 R4: Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from this body of death?
 All: Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!
 R1: The Lord is near to the brokenhearted.
 R3: He saves those who are crushed in spirit.
 R2: If we deaden the pain of sin,
 R4: We miss the grace of healing.
 R3: God calls us to his side,
 R2: To heal us with his grace,
 R1: Tenderly,
 R4: Compassionately,
 R2: And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.
 R4: Blessed are those who mourn,
 All: For they shall be comforted.

R4: Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.
 R1: Blessed, privileged,
 R2: Favored, fortunate,

R3: Happy
 R4: Blessed are those with strength under control,
 R2: With power restrained.
 R3: For you are better off not going off.
 R4: Blessed are those who surrender their will to the Master's reins.
 R2: We are to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called,
 R1: With all humility,
 R3: And gentleness,
 R4: With patience,
 R1: Showing forbearance to one another in love,
 R2: Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
 R4: Blessed are the gentle,
 All: For they shall inherit the earth.

R4: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
 R1: Blessed are those who rely completely on God's goodness,
 All: Not their own.
 R3: Self righteousness won't satisfy,
 R2: It is junk food.
 R4: Self righteousness leads to legalism,
 R1: Bigotry,
 R2: Pride.
 R3: Lord, I have no goodness apart from you.
 R4: True righteousness must be a gift before it can become a practice.
 R2: God, I surrender to your righteousness,
 R1: Only you can satisfy my hunger.
 R3: Help me to live out your righteousness,
 R2: By your direction and power.
 R4: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 All: For they shall be satisfied.

R4: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
 R1: Blessed, privileged,
 R2: Favored, fortunate,
 R3: Happy
 R1: Blessed are those who show compassion to people in need.
 R2: Blessed are those who take action,
 All: Those who provide.
 R3: As recipients of God's mercy,
 R4: We have an obligation to extend mercy to others;
 R1: To people who are in misery,
 R2: With physical and spiritual needs,
 R3: Mental and emotional needs,
 R4: Financial needs.
 R3: God takes our mercy toward others personally.

R1: When we show mercy to others,
 R2: God shows greater mercy to us.
 R3: Acts of mercy make this world tolerable,
 R1: Acts of mercy heal bitterness.
 R4: Blessed are the merciful,
 All: For they shall receive mercy.

R4: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
 R1: Lord, I have some bad neighborhoods in my heart.
 R3: I have mixed motives,
 R2: Impure thoughts and intentions;
 R4: My loyalties are divided,
 R2: I have one eye on you and one on my goals.
 R1 & R3: God, I have a heart condition!
 R4: I submit my heart for your examination,
 R1: I confess my sin to you.
 R3: Thank you for your gift of grace,
 R2: Which frees me from the penalty of my sin.
 R4: I want to see you, Lord.
 R3: Free me from the power of sin in my life.
 R1: Purify my heart.
 R2: Help me to obediently follow you.
 R4: Blessed are the pure in heart,
 All: For they shall see God.

R4: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
 R1: Blessed, privileged,
 R2: Favored, fortunate,
 R3: Happy
 R4: Blessed are those who make peace,
 R1: Those who try to reconcile men to God,
 R2 & R4: And men to each other.
 R3: Lord, help me not to be a peace faker,
 R1: To run from conflict,
 R2: To pretend there's not a problem.
 R4: Lord, help me not to be a peace breaker,
 R3: To seek revenge,
 R1: To slander.
 R2: Lord, help me to be a peace maker,
 R4: To know when to overlook an offense,
 R3: To lovingly confront when needed,
 R1: Without hypocrisy or acting self-righteously.
 R2: When we make peace, we display the character of God.
 R4: Blessed are the peacemakers,
 All: For they shall be called sons of God.

R1: The poor in spirit
R2: Those who mourn
R3: Those who are gentle
R4: Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
R3: The merciful
R2: The pure in heart
R1: The peacemakers
All: Blessed