

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Be What You Are**

Matthew 5:13-16

Soon after Jesus calls his disciples and begins instructing them, he works on nailing down their identity. "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." These aren't attempts to boost the disciples' sagging self-esteem. They're actually bold and confident declarations about who the disciples are, and what they are. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to attain the status of salt and light, then do this. . . ." Or, "Before I'll call you salt and light, you need to meet the following performance requirements. . . ." No, simply in view of the fact that the reign of God has arrived, and these individuals have responded to his summons, Jesus pronounces them salt and light. This is an identity that's given, not earned.

But this doesn't mean there are no expectations attached to this identity. On the contrary, according to Jesus, God's dominion is now on the scene, and that demands a radically different way of life. There is no such thing as entering the kingdom without also living a kingdom kind of life. But living a kingdom kind of life will bring you into collision with other values, other ways of being in the world. Remember that what the world considers blessed isn't always what God considers blessed.

In the Beatitudes, the section leading up to this morning's text, Jesus teaches about the blessedness of life in the kingdom, even if it doesn't look very blessed to the world's eyes. Walking humbly, identifying with the poor, showing mercy, working for peace, striving for purity, enduring persecution—these aren't the kinds of things that most people associate with living the good life. But they are the kinds of things that mark a disciple's life, the life of following Jesus. And when God brings the kingdom to completion, this way of life that looked so unattractive and unimpressive will be shown to have been the truly blessed life.

Until then, Jesus has to bolster our sense of purpose and direction. He has to continually call us back to our identity as kingdom people. In other words, Jesus has to keep reminding us of who we are, and what we are.

So Jesus says, "You who are in the kingdom, living a kingdom kind of life, remember that you're the salt of the earth." "Salt of the earth" is a phrase that we sometimes use to describe people we view as especially good, people whose values, integrity and way of life make them stand out in comparison to most other folks. But that's not the primary way Jesus is using the expression. To avoid that kind of association, one commentator has suggested substituting another seasoning, and saying something like, "You are red hot pepper for the whole earth!"<sup>1</sup> How does that sound?

When I eat at Popeyes, I often ask for a couple of those small packs of "Louisiana" brand hot sauce, which I especially enjoy on their catfish. I like the way this sauce bills itself on the front of the packaging: "One Drop Does It." Maybe there is something to the suggestion that we revise Jesus' statement, so that he says to us contemporary disciples: "You are red hot pepper for the whole earth!" But then again, I do note that there are three

ingredients in this sauce: peppers, vinegar, and, you guessed it, salt. So even this potent little packet wouldn't be what it is, wouldn't have the impact that it does on your tongue and your stomach, without salt.

"You are the salt of the earth," says Jesus. So he's not saying to us, "When it comes to good behavior, you all score higher than everyone else." Instead, he's saying, "Because you're kingdom people, you've got a special job in the world." In other words, it's not about our moral status in the world. It's about our function in the world.

According to Jesus, we're like salt. These days, we're probably more focused on the dangers of salt than its benefits. We're continually being warned about the risks of high salt intake. But in the ancient world, where folks weren't quite as health conscious, the focus was on salt's capacity to season, to preserve, and to purify. Whatever specific functions Jesus has in mind in today's Scripture, his focus is on the fact that salt isn't useful to itself. Salt's usefulness comes from how it's applied to other things. Salt that's just sitting in its container, safe and sound, taking up space in the cabinet, isn't really being salt. It's only salt, in the fullest sense of the word, when it's put on or put in something else. That's when it accomplishes its purpose.

So likewise, says Jesus, you who are my disciples, you who are kingdom people, are called to live not for yourselves but for others, for the world. "You are the salt *of the earth*." Your area of concern, your territory of influence, extends way beyond yourself as an individual, way beyond our life as a congregation. Your call isn't to turn inward; Your call is to turn outward.

In fact, turning inward, existing mainly for the sake of self-protection and self-preservation, is one of the surest ways of ceasing to be salt. Remember that Jesus' warns about salt that loses its saltiness. True, there are debates about whether salt can actually lose its flavor. It can certainly become impure or get diluted. In any case, Jesus' point still stands. He's not concerned with the chemical composition of salt. He's concerned with the possibility that his followers, then and now, will lose their flavor, their value, their effectiveness.

Lots of things can cause us to lose our saltiness. Conforming to values from the surrounding culture instead of persevering in kingdom values. Resistance or hostility from others who don't share your commitment to Christ. Failing to live in community with other Christians through worship and fellowship. Neglecting to study God's Word and spend time in prayer. Not getting involved in service and ministry to others. Becoming cynical or apathetic about the issues and needs of our society. Getting burned out in the life of the church. Strife or division within the congregation. All these things can contribute to declining saltiness.

And more than anything else, losing sight of our identity as Christ's people called to mission in and for the world. We, the people of God called Grace Baptist Church, don't exist for ourselves, but for others. Our community isn't here to serve this church. Our church is here to serve this community. Sometimes we get it backwards. We think the surrounding community exists as a resource from which we can get church members. But it's actually the other way around. The church exists as God's way for the community to get Christ, and recognize and receive the kingdom.

Now this doesn't mean that the growth and expansion of our congregation are unimportant. The Jesus who tells us that we're the salt of the earth also tells us, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, to go and make disciples (28:19-20). But as we spread the gospel, and make these disciples, they're entering a kingdom community which is distinctive and different from the

world. Not better than the world. Not above the world. Not superior to the world. But in the world, penetrating the world, for the redemption of the world. Christ has called us to live outward, not inward, which means that forgetting our identity as Christ's people, on mission in Christ's world, is the greatest threat to our saltiness.

To drive this home even further, Jesus tells us that we're not just salt. We're also light. And again, not just light for one another, but the light *of the world*. Jesus spells this out further by holding two metaphors in fruitful tension with each other. In one respect, we're light, and the primary purpose of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are. But in another respect, we're like a city on a hill. We're inevitably and unavoidably being seen. So our job is to make the kingdom of God visible, without drawing primary attention to ourselves. Thus Jesus' concluding emphasis: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

Remember that our heavenly Father is in the business of dispelling the darkness in his world, and in our lives. And as long as we live on this side of the final resurrection, the light of God's presence comes primarily in the form of the church, the community of disciples. Granted, we often don't shine as God intends. Our light of witness may appear dim or flickering. But that doesn't change who we are, and what we are. Jesus' pronouncement about our identity still stands.

In his idiomatic translation of the Bible, Eugene Peterson renders Jesus' words this way: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!"<sup>2</sup>

We as a church are called to visibility. Our physical location certainly contributes to that. Here we sit on a major highway that leads to and from our nation's capital. Earlier this week, when I went for my follow-up appointment with my surgeon, a member of his staff, who lives in Indian Head, learned that I was a pastor and asked me where my church is. For folks who are already somewhat familiar with the area, my response is pretty automatic. "When you're in the Bryans Road area, look for three churches in row. We're the one in the middle." We've each got our church sign message boards. We've got our spotlights and floodlights, our landscaping and our steeples. It's hard to miss us, even if you're going way over the speed limit.

But that's visibility in a geographical, architectural sense. What about in a deeper, salt and light sense? How does the community know we're here beyond the fact that we have some prime acreage and a brick building with a cross on top? In what ways does the community know that we're here through our ministry and our mission? If we took down our church sign, removed the cross from its tower, and turned off all our lights, inside and outside, how would the people of our area still know that this congregation is here? I like the way that pastor Tim Keller put it in a Tweet from several years ago: "If you & your church were to disappear off the face of the earth tomorrow, would anyone in the community around you notice that you were gone?"

With all our modern comforts and conveniences, it's easy for us to take things like salt and light for granted. But in Jesus' time, salt and light were precious commodities. They were essential to sustain life. That's what Jesus summons and sends us to be, a source of life, kingdom life, in the Father's world. You're salt and light, in the community, in business, in education, in real estate, in government, in the military, in law enforcement, in

construction, in science, in technology, in the arts, and so on. You're salt and light at home, in your family, at school, on the soccer field, at the office, in the store, and in your neighborhood.

All these places, and the lives of the people there with you, are different, because you are there, in the name of Christ. This community is different because this church, and other congregations of believers, are here, in the name of Christ. By being who Jesus tells us we are, here where we are, we call forth worship. We generate praise and thanks, not for ourselves but for God. "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1993) n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 16.