

“A Witness to Grace”
Matthew 5:13-16
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Do you consider yourself a Christian?
How long since you shared the gospel with someone?
How many people have you led to Christ?

We are supposed to be salt and light. Are you?
If you aren't sharing your faith with others then maybe you are
as worthless as diluted salt or a covered light.

If you are a Christian don't you have an obligation to be salt in your
place of work and light in your neighborhood?
Do people stop their swearing and dirty stories when you are
around?
Do people hear the gospel when you show up?

If you are uncomfortable hearing those words, I can assure you I am
much more uncomfortable saying them.
Is this just another sermon about how we ought to be better
witnesses, better evangelists, getting more converts?

I started the sermon the way I did because I wanted to make a point:
Maybe some of you are feeling strong about your faith and you
are filled with a desire or at least obligation to tell others the
truth about Christianity.

But many of you know yourselves well enough to know
that you are barely certain you are a Christian much less
feeling like you have anything to offer anyone else.

Initiating a spiritual conversation with your neighbor
or co-worker is as foreign to you as being called on
to preach a sermon in a televised Billy Graham
Evangelistic Crusade.

You say, “I'm facing a lay-off, my mother-in-law is sick, my kid is
messing up, I can't get everything done at work and I can't keep
everybody happy at home and I'm supposed to be an evangelist? –
What a joke!

How many times have you heard sermons about evangelism or witnessing and have come away feeling like a failure?

How many times have you heard about one more thing that you must be doing if you are a good Christian?

I am preaching again today from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew.

I am more and more certain that Jesus' words here have often been misunderstood and misapplied to the detriment of individuals and the church.

What was supposed to be "good news" somehow got turned into bad news.

Imagine if you had been in the crowd the day Jesus was speaking and you heard these words – Matthew 5:11-16

Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. 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 by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 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 men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Being bold, you stick up your hand and say, "Wait a minute Jesus!"
"Salt of the earth", "Light of the world" – that's pretty lofty stuff.

You can't possibly be serious when you say that's me.

I can't do that.

That's for people who "have their act together"
– we're just novices, barely certain of our own relationship to you and very certain we don't have anything to offer anyone else.

Jesus, when you started your sermon with the beatitudes, the "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn", and the rest, we identified but you jumped to us being the salt of the earth and the light of the world and that seems way beyond us.

“Would you start again, go back over that first part again!”

That may not have happened then, but let us do that here, now:

Matthew 4:23-25

“Jesus went throughout Galilee...preaching **the good news** of the kingdom...”

He said, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand”.

The “good news” was that God’s “kingdom”, his presence and power had invaded our world and was available to us, individually and corporately – life could be different – God had come to our world.

Jesus claimed that the “kingdom of heaven”, the presence and power of God to truly affect and change our lives, was available through him.

A true connection with God, (not a God who is distant and disconnected, not a God who is largely irrelevant to my life) but a relationship here and now with God is made possible through Jesus - as we embrace him.

But most amazing of all was that this “kingdom” presence and power of God, this “God in the flesh” Jesus was available to **all of us - me**.

Our old beliefs were disintegrating fast.

We had thought that the religious leaders were the most likely to have access to God.

We assumed that the wealthy had God’s blessing.

We thought God was reached only by those who knew the most and were the most religious.

But here among us God, in Jesus, seemed to be touching the least, the lowest, the slowest.

He didn’t come first to the “most-likely-to-succeed” of Jerusalem; he started first among the blue-collar residents of the back-water towns of Galilee.

Or to put it in the vernacular of Dallas Willard as I did three weeks ago: God came to “The flunk-outs, the drop-outs, and burned-outs. The broke and broken. The drug-heads and the divorced. The HIV-

positive and herpes-ridden. The brain-damaged , the incurably ill. The barren and the pregnant too-many-times or at the wrong time.

The overemployed, the underemployed, the unemployed. The unemployable. The swindled, the shoved aside, the replaced... The lonely, the incompetent, the stupid. The emotionally starved or emotionally dead. Is it true that earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal? It is true. That is precisely the gospel, the good news, of heaven's availability that comes to us through the beatitudes. That is the heart of God. God is available to us, God's grubby people".

Willard 123-5

It is not the high-born, the powerful, the religiously trained, who are in possession of God.

Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is not more open to them than others but in fact their privileged position may blind them to their need.

The kingdom of heaven, the presence and love of God is open to every one of us.

And most amazingly of all, he doesn't say we have to measure up to some standard of behavior to have this relationship.

Contrary to popular opinion, in what we call the "Beatitudes", Jesus doesn't describe what we have to do to be blessed.

He describes what we already are – "grubby people", spiritual losers – and says that by accepting him, by embracing Jesus, we are given the benefits of the kingdom of heaven – the very presence of God.

"Congratulations you who are **Poor in spirit**: you who are so desperate you will accept my favor, **God's presence and gracious rule have come to your life.**"

"Congratulations you who **Mourn**: you who grieve over how helpless and hopeless you are on your own, you who mourn some of the things you've done, **God has invaded your life with real strength for the present and hope for the future.**

“Congratulations you **Meek**: who know you have nothing to offer, who know you have no rights, who are intimidated by life, who expect nothing from life, **by God’s grace you will one day rule on earth.**

“Congratulations you who **Hunger and thirst for righteousness**, you who have an insatiable desire for things to be different, knowing it can’t go on the way it has, **you will be satisfied, life will change – now in part and, by God’s promise, fully in the future.**

“Congratulations, you **Pure in heart**: you who have no pretense about your condition, who stand openly, nakedly, honestly, transparently before God, seeking no deals, just grace, looking to him alone for any hope, you are **fully accepted into his presence.**

Not by right living,
 not by religious knowledge,
 not by institutional loyalty to a church
 but simply by trusting Jesus,
 the kingdom of heaven - the presence and
 power and rule of God - invades our lives.

Someone says, “Didn’t Jesus say we had to repent?”

Yes, he did: “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

But “repent” is not a demand to confess our individual sins and live a better life in order to earn a relationship with God.

“Repent” is to change our minds – to reconsider, to rethink the way we relate to God.

At root, the problem is not that we do wrong things but that we have a wrong relationship.

We think of God as remote and disconnected from our everyday lives and we treat him that way – as a concept to believe but not someone to engage.

But Jesus came and said the Kingdom of heaven is at hand – God is here and he is available to us just as we are, especially as we are!

God has come in Jesus and asks only that we accept him, reach out to him, embrace him, engage him, trust him.

That is the good news.

And when we embrace him, when we trust him, when we enter into a relationship with him, we become “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”

Please notice Jesus doesn't say, “You **ought to be** the salt of the earth.” “You **ought to be** the light of the world.”

He says “You are!”

In fact the word Jesus used is emphatic – “You, yourselves are”.

Or in my paraphrase – “Yes, you!” Surprised? It's true.

- Not you in 5 years when you understand more.
 - Not you in 10 years when you can defend your beliefs.
 - Not you in 15 years when you are more mature in your faith.
- But “You, now, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world”

Jesus is not, in this statement, indicting anyone for failure.

I think it is simply wrong to suggest that Jesus is here commanding spiritual sluggards to get busy in evangelism.

Think again about the people he is talking to – these people are not schooled, they are not trained, they are not veteran Christians.

Jesus is simply stating a fact – “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.”

When he says “You are the salt of the earth”, what does he mean?

I am really put off by many attempts to make this complicated by describing many characteristics of salt (such as it cleanses, preserves, seasons, etc) and how we should be like that.

Jesus is simply saying that just as salt is an essential commodity in everyday life so you are vitally important in the world.

Then Jesus proceeds to tell a little parable – the point of which is frankly rather difficult to discern.

He basically says that if salt loses its effectiveness, it's not good for anything except to be thrown out.

Someone could really “go off” on this, suggesting that Jesus is saying that a Christian can cease to be a Christian or that a Christian who doesn’t witness is worthless and will “be thrown out and trampled by men”.

I confess I don’t know all that Jesus meant here but in the context of the good news that he is declaring, it seems incongruous to suggest such a negative meaning.

In the light of the following parallel metaphor and parable about light it seems more likely that Jesus is using the negative to emphasize the positive - you **aren’t** saltless and worthless, you **ARE** the real thing, the salt of the earth – your presence, your life makes a difference in your world.

Elihu Burrit wrote, “No human being can come into this world without increasing or diminishing the sum total of human happiness, not only of the present but of every subsequent age of humanity. No one can detach himself from this connection. There is no sequestered spot in the universe, no dark niche along the disc of nonexistence to which he can retreat from his relations with others, where he can withdraw the influence of his existence upon the moral destiny of the world. Everywhere his presence or absence will be felt. Everywhere he will have companions who will be better off or worse because of him... (Our lives) are forming characters for eternity. (from MacArthur Matthew p236)

Then Matthew changes the metaphor but only to make the same point: You are vital in this world – “You are the light of the world.”

Jesus had said that of himself, “I am the light of the world”.

In Matthew 4:13-17, the text just before the Sermon on the Mount, we read,

“Leaving Nazareth, (Jesus) went and lived in Capernaum...to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:.. ‘The people living in darkness have seen **a great light**; on those living in the land of the shadow of death **a light** has dawned.’ From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

Jesus is the light of God's presence that was promised.

God has drawn near to human beings through the person of Jesus.

And now Jesus turns to God's grubby people, all of us with our failings and insecurities, and says **we** are the light of the world.

We reflect to those around us what it means for God to come – for God to invade our very real personal worlds.

Then using two short parables Jesus makes the point that light is for a purpose – to give light.

A city on a hill will give light and a lamp is lit for the purpose of giving the most light possible.

One of the purposes Jesus had for coming into the world is now **our** purpose in the world – to be light, to demonstrate the truth of God's real presence in our lives – His kingdom has come to us.

And so Jesus says in Matthew 5:16:

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

How do we let our light shine?

What “good deeds” are others supposed to see?

This message is not a call to join the evangelism team of SGC.

In fact I suspect there are very few who can be part of an evangelistic team with the right motive and in that capacity act in a way consistent with the gospel.

What we witness to is not just some abstract truth, not just a set of propositions that someone else is supposed to accept.

We aren't in a business where after showing someone the steps, the laws, or a diagram, we try to close the sale.

We don't reduce it to getting someone to saying a little prayer at the end of our monologue.

We aren't selling anything.

- Have you ever tried to evangelize someone?
- Ever been part of an evangelistic team visiting someone's home?

- Ever had a conversation at work or with a friend and you felt the requirement to “witness” at them?

We turned a normal conversation into something tense.

We felt ourselves choking up.

We felt threatened and then so did they.

All of the sudden we felt more like a soap or vitamin salesman than a friend.

I have been part of evangelistic teams as far back as college days - street evangelism, beach evangelism, door to door evangelism, survey evangelism, visitation evangelism, so-called “friendship” evangelism, and probably more.

As a pastor surely I should not only have a desire for these experiences but should be effective in them.

I should be able to teach others how to evangelize.

I can’t tell you how many times I have taken others with me to demonstrate how it’s done.

We learned how to make small talk: to break the ice by talking about their kids, their homes, their jobs and then we were supposed to look for a way to turn the conversation to spiritual things so we could tell them the truths they needed to believe to be “born again”.

We were taught how to bring it to a decision.

But it often felt so contrived.

I truly thank God for you who can make those visits out of genuine love and can establish genuine relationships – but usually I couldn’t.

I was too often just fulfilling a religious responsibility.

I wasn’t truly desiring to befriend that person whether they ever responded to my gospel or not.

I no longer want a “method” of evangelism.

I want to care for friends enough to want them to hear the good news that God, in Jesus, has invaded my life with mercy and grace and He will there’s too.

Matthew 4:23-25

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the **good news** of the kingdom...”

He said the “good news” was that God’s presence and power had invaded our world and was available to us (“The kingdom of heaven is near”), individually and corporately – life could be different.

We don’t have just a set of propositions to convince them of –
we have a **person** we want them to meet –
a person who loves them very much.

We don’t just represent a religion,
we don’t just represent a philosophy of life,
we experience a person, Jesus, and we tell about him!

We can know theology without knowing Jesus.

We can know and talk about “the four spiritual laws” and the “steps to peace with God” without knowing Jesus.

The good news is that the Kingdom of Heaven is here – it has arrived in Jesus – God is with us.

“Jesus’ enduring relevance is based on his historically proven ability to speak to, to heal and empower the individual human condition. **He** matters because of what he has brought and what he still brings to ordinary human beings, living their ordinary lives and coping daily with their surroundings. He promises wholeness for their lives. In sharing our weakness he gives us strength and imparts **through his companionship** a life that has the quality of eternity.” (Willard *The Divine Conspiracy* 13)

When Jesus was here, he was so attractive that people couldn’t be kept away.

- They came from all over to see and hear him.
- They ripped the roof off a building to get to him.
- They invited him to their homes.

- It's important to note that it was the prostitutes, tax collectors, those with whom the religious people would have nothing to do, that were most interested in being with Jesus.

Why? Not because his doctrine was correct but because his love was so evident.

Would it revolutionize our relationships with our neighbors and co-workers if we saw them not as potential converts, but as people – people God and we care about?

Bob Guelich wrote:

“The life of the disciple does not stand out by a greater obedience to the Law – either the Mosaic Law or Jesus’ “new law” – but by a conduct that reflects **the new relationship between the individual and God**... Just as Jesus’ life and teaching bore witness to God’s redemptive activity to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, so the disciple’s good deeds lead other to recognize **the presence of God’s transforming power in us**... Discipleship means living one’s life **in relationship to God and to others** so that God’s life-changing role might become evident to others.” Guelich 129,132

That makes me feel insecure.

“Life-change” in me is difficult for me to see.

I wonder if I’m really all that different from people who don’t know Jesus.

I’m still at times fearful, angry, impatient, unforgiving, lustful, jealous, prideful, and the dark list could go on.

What **has** happened in my life with Jesus?

What can I bear witness to?

I’m forgiven – the real guilt for my sins against God and others is removed. (I still **feel** guilty for the past, sometimes, but I know I’m forgiven).

I’m loved – I am not alone in the universe, God has chosen to love me.

And Jesus’ love for me won’t quit, won’t give up, won’t fail even when I do.

My everyday life, the days I feel great and the days I feel lousy about life are all in his hands.

Every circumstance of my life, missed appointments, flat tires, rebellious kids, unemployment, and all the rest is in his control and **given or allowed** because of his love for me.

That's hard to see sometimes but I know it's true.

- I bear witness to a relationship with God not by my effort or merit but solely by his grace.
- I bear witness to my unworthiness met by his mercy.
- I bear witness to my certain death overcome by his life.
- I bear witness to my darkness penetrated by his light.
- I bear witness to a person – Jesus - who has invaded my life.

If you are trusting Jesus, you ARE the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

God has invaded our lives with his love.

Our very existence now bears witness to God's presence in the world and his availability to any who will receive him.

How? By our loving others the way God loves us.