

The Call to be Salt and Light
January 4, 2009 - Matthew 5:13-16

You thought you were just going to hear a good speaker. You settle in for some good teaching about life in general. But then He turns and looks directly at you. Suddenly you are no longer a spectator but a participant as He makes some very direct statements about your identity. In fact He redefines your life purpose. You're not only a businessman, student, nurse, farmer, soldier, parent, office worker or skilled tradesperson. You have a new identity that He commands you to embrace. Instead of a comfortable time listening to a stimulating speaker, you're life direction has changed.

That's what happened to a group of Jesus' disciples 2000 years ago. Surrounded by large crowds, they settled in for some good teaching by their Master as He sat on a mountainside. But instead of addressing the whole crowd, He turns to them. He proclaims two characteristics that would identify and authenticate His true disciples.

If you claim to be a Christian today, you are one of Jesus' disciples. The same message He delivered to His disciples then applies to us. Jesus comes today looking for 2 pieces of ID from His true followers. He asks for 2 pieces of ID to verify His disciple's

identify. But He doesn't want our passport or driver's license. He wants the same 2 pieces He gave to His disciples of 2000 years ago. Today, we're going to find out what they are and what it means to embrace them.

We return to our series on prayer as we enter into 2009. We started last fall by "looking in" at internal issues in prayer. We considered simple prayer and the need to see prayer as an intimate love relationship with God, (rather than some boring obligation). We looked at the prayer of confession to deal with that ever present problem of sin in our lives. We considered the prayer of giving up control and declaring our willingness to change when God says no. Then we looked up to the One we pray to. We examined praising God in prayer and asking of God through prayer. We looked at God's great help in prayer through the Holy Spirit and Jesus' intercessory prayer. Lastly, we considered the reality of the spiritual forces of evil and the need to struggle against them in prayer.

So we looked in and looked up. Now it is time to look out. We want to consider what's involved in prayer for and ministry to those

around us especially those outside of Christ. We need to pray as we charge further into the community,

Because if we don't pray, **we'll get slaughtered.** Without a covering of prayer and closeness to God, we will be easy pickings for the enemy.

Prayer will focus our dependence on the Lord and not on resources. Sturgeon Valley is blessed with a lot of resources (Finances, people, spiritual gifts, wonderful facilities, lots of "can do" people). However, they can become a snare if we depend more on them than on the Lord. Concentration on prayer can direct these resources to God honoring uses. Why else must we pray as we look out?

We do not live in a praying culture. Though we spent 10 messages on prayer this fall, you probably received very little or no encouragement to pray over the Christmas season. Even within the North American Christian community, we are collectively very weak in prayer compared to believers in other parts of the world. One author writes *"North American Christians lag far behind their counterparts in Korea, Argentina, India and other countries, where*

believers often start their prayer commitment at one hour per day and increase as they grow spiritually. Many groups meet daily for an hour or more of prayer in addition to their individual prayer time. In contrast, we (North Americans) average 4 minutes a day in prayer. Giving prayer our top priority in our often hectic schedules is perhaps the greatest challenge we face in bringing God's kingdom to our neighborhood and nation." (Alvin J. Vander Griend, *The Praying Church Sourcebook*, (Grand Rapids: Church Development Resources, 1997), 230.

So friends, we can talk about going into the community all we want. We can start outreach initiatives and pump ourselves up to reach our neighbors. But the enemy will not give up ground easily. Yet in dependence upon the Lord through prayer, there is no telling what God's people can do through His strength.

Now we might think outreach and community focus is for the pastors, the Missions Committee, or people with the spiritual gift of outreach. But Jesus offers some very different ideas in one of the most famous messages known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus begins this message with the beatitudes or blessings.

These describe the new kingdom perspective that should dominate the mind of the His disciples. From a general description of the disciple's character, the Sermon now turns to a direct address to Jesus' disciples.

Jesus launches into these two pieces of id that verify true disciples.

It's like He's saying, "As my disciples, this is your new identity.

Embrace it and live it out." So by the time we leave today, I hope you can identify the two pieces of identity; what they mean, how you

embrace them and something to guard against with each. I trust the

Lord to use this message to provide some great focus for our upcoming looking out series. Matthew 5:13-16 is our text today.

Jesus declares:

Salt and Light

¹³"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.

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither 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. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

What is id piece #1?

Jesus starts with Identification piece #1 in verse 13. "You are the salt of the earth." **Identity #1: All Christians are the salt of the earth.** But what does it mean to be the salt of the earth?

There are several possibilities. The ancients used salt to **preserve** their food. Remember fridges are relatively recent inventions in world history. So they used salt as a preservative. So "you are the salt of the earth" could mean "Christians, hinder corruption. Preserve that which is good. Battle against the rot."

Salt was also used to **season** food like we use it today. So "salt of the earth" could mean influence the world just as salt influences the taste of food. Some used salt to **purify** or cleanse wounds. So perhaps "you are the salt of the earth" could mean "serve as agents to proclaim the message that would cleanse the earth from sin."

Salt had a significant place in Hebrew worship. It was included in the grain offering (Lev. 2:13), the burnt offering (Ezek. 43:24), and the incense (Ex. 30:35). Part of the Temple offering included salt (Ezra 6:9). It was also used to ratify covenants (Num. 18:19; 2 Chr. 13:5). According to Ezekiel 16:4, newborn babies were rubbed with salt in

the belief that this promoted good health. Salt also creates thirst so the metaphor could mean “create thirst for the things of God.”

Perhaps these multiple ways in which salt benefited the world reveal the point of the metaphor. Just as salt serves many useful purposes in life, disciples can serve many useful purposes in the earth. So what does it mean to be salt of the earth? To make a positive impact for Christ on others.

How do we embrace Id piece #1? by making a positive impact on others. **When we influence others for God, we act as salt of the earth.** One great opportunity for this comes when we talk to people. In Colossians 4, the Apostle Paul gives some instructions for disciples about their interaction with outsiders. Listen to Colossians 4:5-6. “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

Did you catch that? God gives us opportunities with outsiders; those outside the community of faith in Christ to talk about spiritual things. So when those opportunities come, we need to be wise. That means we must be especially careful in conversation. Paul says “let

your conversation be always full of grace.” Then season it with salt. Inject some preservation of Godly principles into the conversation. Offer something that will build up and benefit. Create thirst for the God and the Gospel.

God gave me an opportunity in a recent conversation with a lawyer who claimed to be a Christian. He told me that if some News Channel announced that they found Jesus’ body, it wouldn’t matter one bit to his faith. Jesus’ example and good life are all that really mattered.

I said, “It would definitely matter to me.” Since he was a lawyer, I thought he would be interested in the legal aspects of the Gospel. God required payment for our sin. Jesus offered Himself on the cross as a substitution to atone or pay for our sin. God accepted that sacrifice and through Jesus we are forgiven. But if Jesus just lived a good life to imitate, we are still in our sins.” Then he just shut down the conversation.

“That’s for you Bible Scholars and clergy to figure out” he said, “as long as you live a good life, that’s all that matters.” He went on to other things. I wondered why a lawyer would not want to consider a

good argument. In one sense, the conversation was a failure. But on the other hand, who knows what salt fell during our talk? Who knows what seeds might have been planted?

Think about the “outsiders” in and around your life. Maybe you live with them; work with them; go to class with them. You’re related to them. Ask the Lord for wisdom to see the opportunities He gives you with them. Then we must ask Him to help our conversation with them to be full of grace while seasoned with salt. That’s one way we can start embracing our identity as “the salt of the earth.”

What must we guard against to preserve Id piece #1?

Let’s go back to the second half of Matthew 5:13. “But if 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.” **We must guard against losing our distinctiveness as Christians in the world.** Now pure salt is chemically stable and can’t really lose its saltiness. We need to remember Jesus is not teaching chemistry here. Jesus likely referred to salt from the Dead Sea. It was not pure salt. Other minerals like gypsum mixed in with that salt. If the salt dissolved leaving only the gypsum, it was no longer salty. Then people would

throw it on their paths to kill a few plants. But it would no longer serve salty purposes.

The image is striking for the Christian. If we lose our distinctiveness from the world, we lose our salty effectiveness. If we are not different in our lifestyles than the world around us, we won’t be adding something different to the world’s way. So that means you and I need to guard against losing our saltiness.

Simply put, that means we must constantly battle sin in our lives. We must depend on the Holy Spirit to put to death sin in us. Ongoing sin in the life of a Christian washes out that believer’s ability to salt the earth. This is a daily, weekly, yearly, lifelong challenge. Puritan author John Owen, in his 1656 work “The Mortification of Sin” writes “*Always keep killing sin, or sin will be killing you.*” (John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, (Carlisle PA, Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), originally written in 1656, 5). To emphasize why we need to take up this fight, he describes sin’s influence this way. “*Sin darkens the soul. It is a cloud, a thick cloud, that spreads itself over the face of the soul, and intercepts all beams of God’s love and favor.*” (Owen, 24).

Friends, if we are not depending on the Holy Spirit to battle the sins in our lives, we're likely losing our saltiness. We are more like the earth and less like salt. If we are not regularly coming before the Lord to let Him examine us through His word and prayer, we can easily drift away from Christlikeness. Yet Christians who take up the fight against their sins maintain their saltiness.

One of the most effective ways to fight sin is to fill our minds with God. When we go deep with God and discover the unfathomable satisfaction that can be found in Him, the One who wrapped Himself in light, we discover a mighty weapon in our battle against sin. Joni Eareckson Tada has a wonderful little prayer that takes up this fight. It goes like this: *Draw me deeper, Lord, into your presence, and draw me higher into your great joy. Let the star-bright radiance of your life within me chase away the shadows of lesser desires.* When we pursue the Lord this way and put to death sin in our lives by the Holy Spirit, we won't be losing any saltiness. We will be salt of the earth embracing our identity as Christ followers.

Jesus calls for two pieces of ID to verify our Christianity in this passage. First, He asks for our "salt of the earth" identification.

What is identification piece #2?

Identification piece #2 is founding verse 14. "You are the light of the world." All Christ's followers are Light of the World. **The second piece of identification Jesus seeks to verify His followers is "Light of the world."**

What does it mean to be id #2?

To be the light of the world means to bring/insert God's light into a world of spiritual darkness. Jesus identifies His disciples as the ones commissioned to bring God's light into the world. This was not a new development in the lives of God's people. Old Testament prophets reminded the Israelites that their mission included being lights to the Gentiles or non-Jews.

Isaiah 60:1-3 (NKJV)

1 Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.

2 For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you.

3 The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of

*your rising.*¹ It was God’s intention to shine His light through a people into the world. Then God sent His own Son. In the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies Himself as the Light of the world - John 8:12 states “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*” Here in Matthew 5, Jesus’ projects that “light of the world” responsibility back on to His followers.

How do we embrace our identity as Light of the world?

First we must know the essential parts of the Gospel or Good News and share it with others. Remember the Gospel series we did last Easter? I encourage you to go back and review the basics of the Gospel on the website message. We learned the Gospel is found in Scripture Alone. The Gospel itself is Justification Alone By Grace Alone Through Faith Alone in Christ Alone. As we grow and learn all God has done for us through His Gospel, we share that with others inviting them to accept God’s gift for them. Then we engage in world wide witness of the Gospel; making disciples, planting churches; sharing Christ with our neighbors and friends. We proclaim Jesus

Christ everywhere as God incarnate, Lord and Savior we announce God’s invitation to enter life through turning to Christ in repentance and faith.

Second we embrace our identity as light of the world by doing good works in our neighborhood and community with no strings attached. – Jesus explains how to live as light of the world 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.” All Christians are called to do works of mercy and compassion. God commanded us to love our neighbor, so Christians should respond with generosity and compassion to all forms of human need. Jesus healed the sick; fed the hungry and taught the ignorant. Those who are new creatures in Christ must practice the same compassion. In doing so, we make credible the gospel we preach, about a Savior, whose love transforms sinners into those who love God and other people. (Matt. 5:16, 1 Peter 2:11-12).

Many of you already engage in works like these. You help serve a meal at Mustard Seed. You prepare food for Kindred House.

¹ *The New King James Version*. 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

You support a specific charity or project that reaches out to needy in another part of the world. You support a child in Honduras or give to support missions. You babysit your neighbor's kids.

This identity as light of the world is not an optional activity for Christians. It's not one of many things we do as a church. It's not reserved for those with the "gift of outreach." In fact, a willingness to engage in good deeds on behalf of others is a test of authenticity for faith. Author Tim Keller writes "Mercy to the full range of human needs is such an essential mark of being a Christian that it can be used as a test of true faith. A life poured out in deeds of mercy is an inevitable sign of true faith." (Tim Keller – *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, (P&R Publishing; Phillipsburg, NJ, 1997), 35). But more direct than that are Jesus' own words from Matthew 25. This passage describes Jesus' judgment of mankind on Judgment Day. He distinguishes those who have true faith from those who do not by examining their fruit, namely their concern for the poor, homeless, sick and prisoners. (Keller – 39). This does not mean that good works are the means to salvation. But these good works will be evidence of salvation.

So friends, if our hearts show no compassion for the needy, if we view helping others as an interruption in our schedules, Jesus says check your faith. Are you really my disciple or are you missing it? This brings us to what we must guard against when it comes to preserve id #2.

What must we guard against to preserve id piece #2?

We must guard against hiding our light. We must battle against being ashamed of Christ. Jesus identifies this in the second half of verse 14 and verse 15. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither 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.

He likens us to a city set on a hill. A city on a hill shines especially at night. It is obviously different from the darkness around it. It cannot be hidden. So our light of the world identity must not be hidden. Then we come to verse 15 where the kid's song "this little light of mine," comes from. In the era I learned that song, the second verse went like this: "Hide it under a bushel, No. I'm going to let it shine." A bushel is a basket. When people lit their oil lamps, they did not put them under baskets. They didn't try to hide the light they just lit. They needed the light to dispel the darkness.

In the same way, you and I are called to shine the light of Christ into our world and not hide it. So in an indirect way, Jesus lays before us the stark question. Are we ashamed of Him or not ashamed of being Christ followers? Are we willing to be identified as followers of Christ outside these walls? I've shared with you before one of my most shameful moments in my Christian life. It was Grade 11 English class. Somehow we got onto the question of faith. One girl in that class was openly Christian and often talked about joy of walking with Christ in her life. In the class discussion she made her case. Then she asked, "Is anyone else in this room a Christian?" Well in those days, the coolest thing was to have no faith. I already got teased. I didn't want to give my tormenters more reason. So my hand remained at my side. I didn't hear another thing in that class. As I walked out, I felt a little like Peter the night of Jesus' arrest. I acted like "I never knew the man."

But thankfully, God gave me more opportunities. Slowly but surely He did His work in me to change my life course so that I now regularly have to let my light shine. God knew that I might still want to hide my light if I got into some other profession. So He directed me

into the ministry. You kind of have to share the light if you're going to be faithful to your calling as a Pastor. Then a common question at any social gathering forces me to shine my light. "What do you do for a living?"

I love getting asked that question especially after some questionable jokes have been told. You should see their faces when I answer, "I'm a pastor." It only gets worse when they inquire what church I serve. They hope I'm part of one of those more tolerant churches. But I dash those hopes with "I'm a Baptist Pastor." But then comes to the opportunity to offer conversation full of grace and seasoned with salt. Then opportunities come to shine the light.

Similar opportunities present themselves for all of us when we get out and embrace the call Jesus sends out to us. Yes we are people living in or around St. Albert. Yes, we have our professions, roles, classes and home duties. But we Christians are salt and light. Embrace your identity today, through 2009 and for the rest of your life.

Maybe you're here today and you don't know Christ as your Lord and Savior. Maybe you are not a Christian. But would you stop

and consider the ways in which God has sent others into your life to pour salt on you and to shine God's light into your life? He calls you to respond to His call, turn from your sins and receive His Gospel into your life.

Maybe you came today just hoping for some general teaching about life. But now Jesus has delivered the same message to you through His Word that He gave to His disciples on that mountainside. He asks for those same two pieces of id: Salt of the Earth; Light of the World. My prayer is that on the first Sunday of 2010, we can look back at this year and offer up many examples verifying our identity as His disciples.