

Lesson 3: Accepting Jesus' Call to be Salt and Light

Lesson Theme: By living lives of mercy, purity, peacemaking, and accepting persecution; we demonstrate Jesus' teachings to the world.

Text: Matthew 5:7-16

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Introduction

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out a vision for the type of life He is calling His followers to lead. He said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10). However, the attributes He espouses are often very different from what the world views as "the good life."

In the first part of the beatitudes (covered last week), we reflected on our own sinfulness and need for salvation. We confess our sins to ourselves and to God, and we mourn our sinfulness. Acknowledging our own sinfulness and focusing on God's holiness brings about a response of humility, since we finally understand our utter helplessness to save ourselves. Finally, we yearn for righteousness that comes not from our actions but by the grace of God.

In the second section of the beatitudes, we shift our focus from God to others. Jesus did not want His followers to be isolated from the world; instead, He wants us to become instruments for demonstrating His teachings to the unbelieving world. In so doing we become "salt" and "light" in our culture. Salt's primary use is to preserve, to keep meat

from rotting. Light's primary use is to enable us to see the dangers along the way – to show us a “safer” way to walk.

Teacher's Note: This lesson consists of two important parts. Please cover both! There are many more discussion questions in the first section; therefore, you will need to be selective.

Part 1. The Beatitudes

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Discussion: What is mercy?

Possible definitions—compassion, pity, forgiveness, unearned favor, empathy

Discussion: Consider Jesus' life and teachings. To whom did Jesus show mercy?

(woman at the well, woman caught in adultery, thief on the cross)

Discussion: Does sharing mercy put us at risk?

Stott writes: “Nothing moves us to forgive like the wondering knowledge that we ourselves have been forgiven. Nothing proves more clearly that we have been forgiven than our own readiness to forgive” Stott 1, p. 38.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Discussion: What is the difference in “pure in heart” and pure in outward behavior? How can you tell if a person is “pure in heart”?

Discussion: Only Jesus is absolutely pure in heart. So, what gives us hope that we will see God?

Stott writes: “This emphasis on the inward and moral, whether contrasted with the outward and ceremonial or with the outward and physical, is certainly consistent with the whole Sermon on the Mount which requires heart-righteousness rather than mere rule-righteousness. It is single-mindedness, having a single heart. More precisely, the primary reference is to sincerity. The pure in heart have their whole lives, public and private, transparent before others. Their very heart—including their thoughts and motives—is pure, unmixed with anything devious, ulterior or base” Stott 1, p. 42.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Stott writes: “One of the most frequent causes of conflict is intrigue, while openness and

sincerity are essential to all true reconciliation. It is the devil who is a troublemaker; it is God who loves reconciliation and who now through his children, as formerly through his only begotten Son, is bent on making peace. Every Christian, according to Jesus, is meant to be a peacemaker both in the community and in the church. Stott 1, p. 46.

Discussion: What are some characteristics of peacemakers?

Discussion: What is the difference in being a peacemaker and being tolerant or appeasing or conciliatory of others?

Discussion: What relationships in your life need reconciliation?

Stott writes: "Peacemaking is a divine work. For peace means reconciliation, and God is the author of peace and of reconciliation. True peace and true forgiveness are costly treasures. The same verb which is used in this beatitude of us is applied by the apostle Paul to what God has done through Christ. Through Christ God was pleased "to reconcile to himself all things . . . making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:20). Stott 1, p. 48.

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In spite of our efforts to live at peace with others in the world, it is inevitable that people who live as Christians face the threat of persecution. Here Jesus warns us of persecution.

Discussion: What are some worldly responses to persecution?
(seek revenge, retaliate, remain silent, change beliefs)

Discussion: How are Christians to respond to persecution?

Stott writes: "When we undergo persecution we are to rejoice as a Christian should rejoice and even 'leap for joy' (Luke 6:23). Why? Partly because "great is your reward in heaven." We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven, not as a reward for merit, but freely. We also rejoice partly because persecution is a token of genuineness, a certificate of Christian authenticity, since the prophets before us were persecuted. But the major reason why we should rejoice is because we are suffering 'because of me' (v. 11), on account of our loyalty to Jesus and to His standards of truth and righteousness" Stott 1, p. 55.

Part 2. Being Salt and Light in our world

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.

15 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.

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

The “good news” of Jesus isn't just something that happens to us. Rather than being passive beneficiaries of the gospel, we instead participate in it as salt and as light. We are to be his emissaries in the world that desperately needs Him.

Yes, our salvation and the gifts of the Spirit and of eternal life are just that – unearned gifts. We don't earn God's favor through good deeds. But Jesus does expect his followers to infiltrate the world just as salt infiltrates a recipe and light infiltrates a dark room and to transform it for the glory of God. True, James the brother of Jesus writes we are to keep ourselves unpolluted by the world and its values, and Paul says we should not conform to the world but be transformed by the work of the Spirit. But we also cannot simply retreat from the world. Jesus specifically prays before His crucifixion (in John 17) that the Father not remove His followers from the world. In fact, Jesus says He has sent them (us) into the world just as he was sent into the world, and He prays for protection from the evil one.

So, while we guard our hearts from corruption and evil, let's also joyfully be salt and light in a fallen world waiting anxiously for the redemption to come. [Kenneth Pybus, “Finding Good News in the Sermon on the Mount”, p. 2].

Elaboration of the text.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that we are **like** “salt and light”, instead He says that we **are** “salt and light”.

Salt is both a condiment and a preservative. In this context, Jesus is emphasizing the role His followers will play in arresting social decay. However, this requires that we don't “remain in the salt shaker with unused potential” and that we don't lose our distinctive “saltiness”.

Stott elaborates on this concept. “Now strictly speaking, salt can never lose its saltiness. Nevertheless, it can become contaminated by mixture with impurities, and then it becomes useless, even dangerous.It has been suggested to me that what was then commonly called ‘salt’ was in fact a white powder (perhaps from around the Dead Sea) which, while containing sodium chloride, also contained much else. Of this dust the sodium chloride was the most soluble compound and so the most easily washed out. The

residue of white powder still looked like salt, and was doubtless still called salt, but it neither tasted or acted like salt. It was just road dust.” Stott 2, p. 60.

In a similar way, light is only useful if it is allowed to illuminate a darkened area. It isn't useful otherwise. Our “light” is the good works done before men that bring honor to God, not to us!

Discussion: In your experience, are Christians so separate from the world that they can't make any difference in the world? Or have Christians become so much like the world that they're not different enough to make an impact on the world? (Another variation of the question – “Is there too much world in the church or is there too little church in the world?”)

Discussion: How can you be “in the world” and not become contaminated by it? (Matthew 9:11-14; 11:18-19)

For Additional Reading

1. Stott, John. *Developing Spiritual Character*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
2. Stott, John. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985.