

5:10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:11-12 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Christians who live righteously will be persecuted (5:10). Verses 11 and 12 expand upon this thought, but also function as an introduction to verses 13-16.

Together, verses 11-16 emphasize the distinctiveness of the Christian. In order for salt and light to function, they need to remain distinct from that which they effect. If light becomes darkness, it is no longer light. If salt loses its saltiness, it has no value. Although the Christian should have a positive effect on the world, in some cases, this visible distinctiveness arouses the hostility of the world.

In John 17 our Lord said that we “are not of the world” and, therefore, the world would hate us as it has hated Him. Nevertheless, it was not His prayer that we be taken out of the world (Jn. 17:15), for He has sent us into the world (Jn. 17:18) that through the testimony of our oneness, the world may believe that the Father sent the Son (Jn. 17:21). The sum of these verses is that we are sent to the world, but will be hated by it; we are to remain in the world, but not become a part of it; we are to be different from the world as a testimony to it.

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.

Verses 13-16 illustrate how Christ’s followers should be seen as different. The verbs that Jesus uses stress a state of being: We ARE salt; we ARE light. Salt is unlike the food it seasons. Light is unlike darkness. If we are salt and light, we should function as salt and light. These verses presuppose that the world is dark, deteriorating, and lacking the “flavor” (goodness?) that only Christians can provide.

In the ancient near east, salt had two functions. First, as a seasoning, it enhanced a food’s flavor; it made the food taste better. Secondly, without the aid of refrigeration, it was a preservative. Both meanings make sense. Like salt, the believer makes the world a better place (he enhances it, allowing the world to taste the goodness of God – Osborne, 176). Like a preservative, the believer also helps slow the moral and spiritual deterioration of the world. Both of these things are true.

The person who reflects the beatitudes is like salt. If he fails to act like salt, he becomes worthless in terms of the positive influence he has on the world.

Unsalty salt sounds like a contradiction of terms - like “dehydrated water”; however, Jesus was speaking of the salt of His day. Without refineries, the salt in ancient times was not pure sodium chloride as we find in supermarkets today. Rather, salt was collected from deposits around the dead sea that formed as water evaporated. It was a white powder that was contaminated with other substances (Stott). The sodium chloride was the most soluble component and could be easily washed out, leaving only the

impurities behind. Though this residual powder was no doubt still called “salt” it didn’t taste or function like it. In such cases, it was useless. Once it washed out it could not be added back in. It would be thrown in the street and trampled under foot (an oriental metaphor meaning it was “thrown out” – Osborne, 175).

5:14-16 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 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. 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.

Light is a common image in Scripture. God is light (Psa. 18:12; 104:2; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Jn. 1:5), Christ is light (Matt. 4:16; Jn. 1:7, 9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) and God’s people are light (Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5). Correspondingly, the world is often pictured in the Bible as spiritually dark (Jn. 1:4-8; 3:16-21; 8:12).

With the coming of Christ a light has dawned. Matthew 4:16 (quoting Isaiah 9:2) says, “THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED.” In John 8:12 Jesus said, ““I am the Light of the world; the one who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.” In John 12:36 Jesus said, "Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light". The meaning is plain – Jesus is the light of the world, who dwelled on this earth for a little while, and those who trust in Him become like Him; they become the sons of light. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 it says, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they will not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” But then in verse 6 it says, “God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” In other words, we were once blinded by Satan, but the God who at creation called light to shine in darkness, also created light to shine in our hearts so that we can see the glory of Christ in the gospel.

Light describes our nature as believers. In Matthew 5:14 Jesus says, “**You are the light of the world.**” Paul says, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (Eph.5:8). Notice, he doesn’t say you were once IN darkness, now you are IN light, rather it says you once WERE darkness, now you ARE light. But our light is derivative and reflective, and does not come in and of ourselves. Our light is “in the Lord.”

Because we are to behave in accordance with what we are, light is also an apt picture of the Christian's witness.

Light reveals things that cannot otherwise be seen in the darkness. Its presence is conspicuous. A Christian, like a lighted city on a black night, cannot be hidden. France makes an interesting observation. He says, “The metaphor of light, and of the need for it to be where it can be seen, will further be developed in vv. 15 -16, but first the apparently separate metaphor of the hilltop town intrudes. It is in itself another effective metaphor for visibility. . . the combined impact of the many lights which make up

a town at night illustrates more appropriately than the single lamp of verse 15 the corporate effect of the disciple community on the surrounding darkness” (France, 176).

In a similar vein by means of a different metaphor, 2 Corinthians 2:14-15 says, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us reveals the fragrance of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.” In other words, through us, God diffuses the knowledge of Christ in every place; we are the aroma of Christ. “When a man’s garments are full of the fragrance of incense, he fills with its fragrance every place he enters” (Hodge, 45). So, we, wherever we go, we emit the fragrance of Christ.

Although light cannot lose its essential nature like salt could, it can be hidden and become useless. But who would light a lamp if he was then going to hide it under a basket? Jesus’ point is easy to grasp. If someone lights a lamp, they do so to illumine the room and make it possible to see. No one lights a lamp and then covers it with a basket (μόδιος - a common bowl used for measuring grain) so that the room remains in darkness. Rather, they put it on a lampstand with the result that everyone in the house has light.

Whether we hide our light because we fear offending others, or because of indifference, or for any other reason, we demonstrate unfaithfulness to the Lord.

What is the light that shines from Christians?

In Mark 4:21-23 Jesus related light to His preaching the word. He said, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, or under a bed, is it? Is it not *brought* to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has *anything* been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” Likewise, in 1 Peter 2:9 light shines when we preach the word; we are to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” However, in Matthew 5:16 the light that shines is said to be good works: “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.” The same concept is echoed in 1 Peter 2:12: “Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God on the day of visitation.” Paul writes: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph. 5:8-10). To let our light shine includes displaying “all goodness, righteousness and truth,” and finding out and doing all that “pleases the Lord.” The “good works” Jesus is referring to in Matthew 5 include the Beatitudes in verses 3-10 and the content that follows - especially the righteousness of life that characterizes Christ’s disciples (France, 177). This is important to grasp. The people who have no innate spiritual power (the poor in spirit; 5:3) are the ones called upon to be the salt and light of the earth (Morris).

In short, the shining forth of light from the Christian takes place both by means of the verbal proclamation of the gospel and through our good deeds.

The result is the glory of God. Even though living according to the will of God benefits society, the proclamation of God calling us from darkness to light and the beatitude-like behavior we exhibit give God glory for they declare the radical change that He has wrought in us. Our life is not to be lived to impress other people and gain attention to ourselves; it is lived so that others recognize the hand of God at work in us.

Examples of compromise abound in the lives of contemporary Christians. Sometimes they conform their own thinking and behavior to the unbelieving culture around them, and sometimes they even compromise the gospel to please those who hear them. Sinclair Ferguson says it well:

Cease to be different, and we cease to be Christians. How slow we often are to learn this lesson. At times we fall into the trap of being blackmailed by a world that says, "Unless I find your life attractive on my own terms, I will not respond to the message of the gospel." But if we yield at that point, we become prisoners of perpetual blackmail. I have sometimes heard Christians witness to people in these terms: "You mustn't think being a Christian takes away your fun. I can enjoy doing the same things you do. Being a Christian isn't a series of don'ts!" Much of this may be true, but why should the church be so concerned to tell the world that it is not really very different from the world? The church then becomes both powerless and pointless.

Within a very short period of time, churches everywhere have embraced religious pluralism, moral relativism, political activism, and biological evolutionism. They have adopted secular and unbiblical theories on everything from psychology to cosmology, and from education to administration. They encourage abortionists to promote their cause, and ordain homosexuals to the ministry.

We live in a day when many churches are eagerly conforming to the beliefs and practices of this world, some even claiming to do this in the name of Christ. However, those who follow this trend cannot function as salt and light, because the metaphors themselves depend on making a distinction between the church and the world, and between believers and unbelievers. There are those who try to convince us that the church is to fulfill its mission by losing its flavor and hiding its light, as if we will convert the world by becoming non-Christians ourselves. (Cheung)

Whether we are portrayed as salt, light, or an aroma, if we could reduce Jesus' teachings in these verses to one word, it would be the word "influence." "Our Lord is saying that the Christian who lives according to the Beatitudes is going to influence the world as salt and light. In all that a person does and is (or is not), the sum total of our character, consciously or otherwise, affects other people" (MacArthur). The "job description" of the disciple is not fulfilled by private holiness but by public exposure (France, 176).