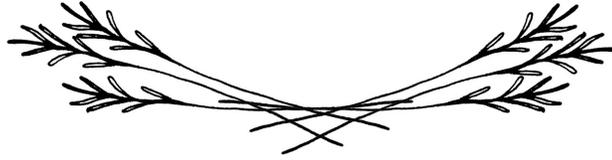


WEEK 3

# THE CHURCH AS SALT AND LIGHT



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We love Jesus' dynamic description of his church. It's not, "You should be the salt of the earth" or "You have the power to be the light of the world." Rather, the Lord called us to be what he has made us.

We think of salt as flavoring, enriching, and taste-enhancing. Colossians 4:6 comes to mind: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one". Just as Jesus "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), so do his disciples. Our conduct and our character enhance our communities. Our presence and examples bring out the best in others. Like Barnabas and Dorcas of old, we should impact those around us for good.

Were we to lose our flavor, our Christian impact, we would fall under the condemnation of Matthew 5:13: we would be good for nothing. Or perhaps, we'd be even worse. We could distract people from the gospel and give them excuse to live outside Christ. Just as Titus 2:10 calls on servants to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things," we know the importance of consistently walking "in the light as He is in the light" (1 John 1:7).

Though it is not the point of emphasis in Matthew 5:13, we also think of salt's preserving powers. Salt works against decay and corruption. Spiritual salt works against sin and death. Just as ten righteous souls would have spared Sodom and

Gomorrah (Genesis 18:32), we are blessed to contemplate the favor that God shows to all because of the presence of His people. It's the principle clearly taught in Genesis 12:1-3.

Fairness demands that we remember that salt also burns at times. Think of getting sweat in your eyes or into a cut as you do outside work on a hot summer's day. In this sin-damaged world, some will regard any spiritual salt as an irritant. They will object to how the presence of salt makes them feel. While it's never our aim to be irritating, sometimes it's a compliment to be considered a bother. It can speak of our distinctiveness in Christ and our faithfulness to Him (1 Peter 4:4; John 3:19-21).

The devil loves debilitating extremes. He will assert that you can't be salt without being salty, overly stout, disagreeable, and painful to others. He will invite some to embrace this model and to ignore John 13:34-35, Ephesians 4:31-32, and Colossians 3:12-17. He will claim that truth trumps grace, love, and kindness. To others, he will invite to purposefully avoid the redeeming qualities of salt, lest they be perceived as negative or judgmental. With them, he will claim that grace, love, and kindness trump truth. How blessed we are to recognize and reject his lies!

We love Jesus' description of us as "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). This sin-damaged world is plagued by darkness. We see countless examples of what Jesus described as "blind leaders of the blind" (Matthew 15:14). Life continually affirms the truth of Jeremiah 10:23 and Proverbs 16:25. Without guidance from above, things don't go well for us.

There's a huge compliment in Matthew 5:14 when Jesus says, "You are the light of the world." Think of John 1:4-5, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it." Think of John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness,

but have the light of life.” As long as Jesus was in this world in the flesh, he was the light of the world (John 9:5). Now, he describes his followers—his church—with the very same language! “You are the light of the world.”

Of course, this is a wonderful testimony of the humility of Jesus. It’s also a tremendous statement of his expectation for the church. We are to shine like a city set on a hill. We are to give light to all who are in the house. We are to let our lights so shine that men will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

The second fact about our role as light in this world from Mathew 5:13 is, “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Christianity was born in a challenging region during a challenging time. The church faced daunting persecution (Acts 8:14; Hebrews 10:32–34; Revelation 2:9–10). Still, Jesus describes his church as “a city set on a hill.” The church is, as it were, a lighthouse. It lives, honors, and offers the light of truth and righteousness. It calls people toward the gospel and toward heaven. To use the language of Philippians 2:15, we are “children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” That was true in the days of Jesus and Paul. God means for it to be just as true today.

Jesus moves from describing the Christian light as a city on a hill to speaking of it as a lampstand within a home. Its purpose is “to give light to all who are in the house” (Matthew 5:14). We give light as we teach and live God’s truth. We give light as we love and forgive one another. We give light as we “convince, rebuke, [and] exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). We give light as we “warn the unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, [and] be patient with all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). We certainly give light as we speak “the truth in love” and “grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ...” (Ephesians 4:15).

Matthew 5:16 is both intentional and encouraging. We embrace God's command to let our lights shine. Our good works are purposeful, designed to help others see and honor God. Of course we reject excess and self-centeredness as condemned in Matthew 6:1, 5, and 16. While rejecting pride and self-promotion, we acknowledge the tremendous teaching and motivational power of good works. Even secular people are inclined to believe what they see. It's tremendously challenging to ignore a consistently good and giving life.

The encouraging part of Matthew 5:16 is so easy to grasp. As the church is what the church should be, salt and light in this world, people will see our service in the name of Christ and will give glory to God. We know that a word of caution is needed. Not all will see, and not all who see will choose to glorify God. Some are very skilled at rejecting the Father. But, all will have the opportunity to see and give honor. And some will give God the level of honor that includes believing his word and obeying his gospel.

We stand amazed that God gives us the honor of living for him. What a gift to be able to help others recognize and appreciate the Creator, the Ruler of the universe, the Sustainer of all that is good, right, and holy.

We think of light as it enables and enhances vision. We see more clearly in the light. Psalm 119:105 celebrates the truth that, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Given human frailty, stumbling is a fact of life, but stumbling is lessened by adequate light. Stumbling is also lessened by staying on the path. And stumbling need not be fatal because our God is always there to lift us up.

Admittedly, light can sometimes challenge us. A car can look so clean in the garage, but sunlight shows all the spots and streaks. Our lives can look quite good when compared to the culture around us, but when we examine ourselves in the true

Light, what we learn can really scare us. What a joy to remember John 3:16–17, Romans 8, and Ephesians 2:1–10. God’s light is ultimate truth and purity. God’s light is also stunningly loving. He seeks our best and our salvation. He knows better than we do the dangers and costs of sin (Ephesians 6:12; Isaiah 59:1–2). He wants us to learn the joys of living as his church, his children (1 John 3:1–2).

Living as salt and light opens tremendous doors of spiritual opportunity. It’s a blessed life here, but the ultimate blessings are unspeakably greater. And those blessings are eternal. Forever. Everlasting. Infinite. Unfathomable.

### **Questions For Discussion**

1. What aspect of salt impresses you the most as you think about the church and each individual Christian as “the salt of the earth”?
2. What can we do together and individually to enhance our effectiveness as “the light of the world”?
3. Why would any church or Christian be tempted to hide his/her light?
4. How would a person go about hiding his/her light? What would this look like in practice?