

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Called to Live With a Purpose

by Dan Trygg

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Matthew 5:13-16

The most common error in Biblical interpretation is to fail to see a passage in its context. If we lose the setting, we can easily misperceive what was originally meant in a verse. Even if we grasp the nugget of truth that was intended, we can miss out on the thrust which was in the mind of the original writer/speaker. **It is a valuable discipline to refresh our memory of the setting before proceeding to interpret the verses under scrutiny.**

Here, in Matt. 5, Jesus had been preaching that the Kingdom of God was “*at hand*”, meaning either that it was right on the verge of coming, or that it was, in fact, here. He had also been *demonstrating* the Kingdom by the miraculous healing of every kind of sickness and disease, and by the casting out of demons. Great crowds were following Him, to see these incredible works of power, and to hear His teachings. As He saw these crowds, **Jesus went up on a mountainside and began to speak to those who were His followers concerning what it meant to be a “Kingdom person”.** This message has been traditionally referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, and continues through chapter 7 of Matthew. Verses 3-11 are “declarations of happiness”, descriptions of people who are in a “fortunate place”, ...in that the Kingdom of God was either *operating* in their lives, or soon *would be*.

Jesus said that people who were spiritually impoverished, hurting, meek, and desperate for God's righteousness were in a good place. Unlike the arrogance and high-mindedness of many religious leaders of their day, the brokenness of Kingdom people would open the way for God to work to address the longings of their hearts. **Unlike the holier-than-thou religious notables of their day, Kingdom people were merciful, pure-hearted people, people whose compassion for others and strong desire for God compelled them to treat others with concern, respect and honesty.** Instead of “sweeping things under the rug”, or pretending things were OK when they were not, Kingdom people would respectfully seek to make peace by addressing things openly. **If they were true followers of the King, the radically different way in which they lived would be noticed by others,** and would probably bring persecution from those who loved the darkness rather than the light (Jn. 3:19,20). Although persecution is nothing to glory in for itself, it *may* be an indication of an effective life of godliness.

In the two brief parables, or word-pictures, under consideration today, **Jesus fortifies the notion that those who follow God are to be noticeably different than others. In fact, this difference is critical to the fulfillment of God's purposes in our lives.** Furthermore, this difference is not to be seen merely in religious activities, but in positive acts, which *all* people (religious or not) will acknowledge as good and beneficial, ...acts which gladden their hearts and move them to even give thanks and praise to God.

Faith leads to character change...

Character change leads to action on behalf of others...

Good deeds on behalf of others produces good will toward God...

Good will toward God opens the heart toward the good message of His Kingdom.

Jesus said, “**You are the salt of the earth.**” There are several possibilities for the meaning of this phrase. Salt can serve as a *preservative*, to keep things from spoiling or deteriorating. It can also be an *antiseptic*, killing micro-organisms that can infect a wound. The most common use, however, and the one which Jesus seems to specifically mention here, is for *flavoring* food. Salt does two things in flavoring. It reduces the bitter taste of things, and it also accentuates or “brings out” the positive flavors of desirable taste sensations. If we interpret this verse in light of the flavoring properties of salt, then **the presence of God-followers in the world is to reduce the bitter experiences of life and to accentuate the positive experiences of life.** Their presence in peoples' lives is to keep hurting hearts from being crushed by despair. **The flavor of their lives should serve to renew hope, and draw people to God.**

This makes the dilemma Jesus introduces next all the more pertinent. **What happens if the salt has lost its saltiness? What can you do for salt that is not salty?** In the natural world, there is nothing that can be done to

restore the flavor to salt that has had its flavor leached away. This may be hard for us to relate to, since the salt we have is so purified most of us have never experienced this phenomenon. In NT times, however, salt was mined at the Dead Sea. Blocks of mined salt had numerous other impurities in it, and, if it was not fresh, the salty taste could become dulled. **What do you do with unsalty salt? It is good for nothing.** You can't put it in the garden or the manure pile, because it would poison your plants. The only thing you could use it for was to spread it on the walkway, where it would kill the weeds. Jesus' description of this was, "It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men." Not a very positive word picture. **Unsalty salt certainly cannot fulfill the main purpose of salt. In the same way, so-called "God-followers" who are not really following God are not going to be effective at doing what they are supposed to do.** Interestingly enough, the word translated as "has become tasteless" is the Greek word, *mōrainō*, a verb whose primary meaning is "to become foolish". We derive the English word "moron" from this same Greek word. So, **a God-follower who is walking foolishly is one who is losing his or her flavor. The one who walks wisely, or consistently, is the one who is "flavorful".** Jesus asks the question, "...how can it be made salty again?" In the natural world, this would be impossible. For us, however, **if we acknowledge our foolishness, and return to God in obedience, we can be made flavorful once again.** With repentance and obedience, we *can* begin to fulfill our God-intended purpose in this world.

The next word picture comes at our responsibility as God-followers from a little different angle. The idea of salt losing its saltiness was about compromising the integrity of our spiritual walk, ...of being no different than those who do not follow God. **This word picture gets at a different problem, "What if you would rather just live a quiet life within your own little comfort zone?"** Jesus' parable here addresses that. Note that He starts out with the simple declaration, "You *are* the light of the world." He didn't say, "You *ought to be* the light of the world," as though that was some goal we should strive for. No. It is a *fact*. **We are the light of the world. In other words, our purpose, our role, our very identity is that we are God's revelatory light to this dark world.** When people are watching to see what God is like, they are watching *us*. Where does this light come from? Wasn't Jesus the Light of the World? Yes, He was (cf. Jn. 1:9-13; 8:12). But the revelatory outshining of His life was limited to the time He was here (Heb. 1:3; Jn. 9:5; 12:35,36). We have a record of that in the scriptures, and we can still see the heart of God expressed through Him, if we read them, but **God wants to use us as present-day living lamps of His glory** (II Cor. 4:6,7). In a very real sense, Jesus "passed the torch" on to us (Jn. 16:7). **It is our job to display God's character, and the nature of His Kingdom by our lives and behavior.** We *are* the light of the world. However dim or bright we may be, *we are it*. In this parable, however, Jesus' focus is not on the issue of making us brighter, clearer lights. That would be a topic for another discussion (cf. Phil. 2:12-16). Here, however, Jesus is addressing the problem of *fear*, or possibly *laziness*.

Jesus affirms that we *are* the light of the world, and points out that a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. In other words, **in a world of darkness, a light that is out in the open will be seen.** In fact, it *cannot* be missed. If the life of God in us is really as radically different from common human life as light is from darkness, then, whenever that kind of life, that "God-life", is uncovered and expressed, it cannot *help* but stand out. It is *supposed to*. **It is only if we purposely hide or cover up the light of God's Holy Spirit that it will not be seen.** The word picture Jesus uses is that of someone lighting a lamp in their home. No one lights a lamp, only to cover it with a basket. No. You light a lamp and put it on a lampstand, so that its radiance can fill the entire room. In the same way, Jesus implies that **the Father filled us with His radiant glory so that He would be seen in us. He wants people to see who He is. We are to be living lanterns, carrying the radiance of His inner fire into the lives of those who we meet.** "Let your light shine before men *in such a way* that...". The Greek actually says, "*In the same way*, let your light shine before men...". In other words, **Jesus is drawing a direct parallel to the lampstand. What He is saying is "Get out there where people can see you."** This may seem to run contrary to what He repeatedly confronts in the next chapter, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them..." (Matt. 6:1). Actually, there is no conflict, at all. The *purpose* is what is important. In Matthew 5, the purpose is, "... so they may see your good works, and *glorify your Father* in Heaven." **This is not for self-glory, but for God to get the glory.** Note that there is also a need to be visible, ...to do things that are tangible, hands-on, practical, useful, beneficial. Without the "visible" connection being established, credit to God will not be clearly established. **It is through good works that God's light is made visible, not religious rituals.** Good works. We have been created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10). We are to be zealous for good works (Tit. 2:12-14; 3:4-8). **Good works don't save us; but we are saved to do good works** to reveal God to people who don't know Him.

Human beings were created in God's image (Gen. 1:26,27). Apart from Christ, we lack the glory or radiance of God (Rom. 3:23). The Spirit came to fill us with His glory, once again (II Cor. 3:7-18). **It is central to our very being to express the image and character of God in what we do.** Don't let selfishness or fear keep you from your calling!