



Sermon Transcript November 5, 2017

Living Sent Lives A City on a Hill Matthew 5:13-16

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 5, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Matthew 5:13-16

¹³ “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.

Introduction

Jesus said to his disciples: *“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.” “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.”*

This is a helpful passage as we think about living “sent” lives. On one hand, this passage lays out something for us to do. Jesus ends the passage by saying, *“let your light shine before others.”* But before Jesus tells them what to do, he affirms who they are. He says, *“You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world.”* Where there is light, it cannot be hidden. Light always dispels darkness. So before we sing, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine,” I think it is helpful to ask, “how does it shine?” I think it shines in very normal ways and we just need to be more conscious of it.

This passage also has something to say to us regarding church planting. Tim Keller said this about church planting. “The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any region, and the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in that region. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study at all, it is not even controversial.”¹ Church planting is the best way to shine our light as a church.

I want us to think about this passage from two perspectives this morning. To make his point about being light, Jesus uses two images. He refers to the city that is on a hill and a lamp that is in a room. I liken the lamp in the room to us as individuals. We want the light of Christ to shine through each of us wherever we go. So as we look at this passage, there is reason for us to pause and look at our own lives. Are we “putting a basket” over the light of our lives or are we letting the light of Jesus shine through us? But there is also reference to a light that is coming from a city to a region. *“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”* And so, as we look at this passage, I also want us to be thinking beyond our individual selves and think corporately and regionally. This morning we want to consider how the light of Jesus shines into a region and a community through the local church. How bright is that light in this region?

You Are Salt and Light

The first thing I want to do is simply take Jesus at his word. Jesus said, “*You are the salt of the earth.*” He said, “*You are the light of the world.*” These are statements of being. This is who we are as citizens of the kingdom of God. So what is Jesus saying about us by calling us “salt” and “light”?

First of all, Jesus uses the metaphor of salt to describe our place in the world. Salt was a valuable commodity in the ancient world. It was so valuable that often it was used as a medium of exchange in the trading business throughout the Mediterranean Sea. It was also used as a preservative on meat to keep it from spoiling. They didn’t have refrigerators and so the salt rubbed into the meat or fish would slow down the decaying process and preserve it. Salt is also necessary to our diets. It was also used for fertilizer when applied to certain types of soil. And so the question we face when we come to this statement is “which use for salt did Jesus have in mind when he called us “*salt of the earth.*” Is he saying that we act like a preservative, keeping this world from being as bad as it could be? That is how D. A. Carson interprets this verse. He writes, “apart from his disciples the world turns even more rotten: Christians have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual putrefaction.”² That may be the point. Let me suggest something else.

There was a prolific Roman writer who lived during the time of Jesus and his name was Pliny. In one of his writings he made the comment that “there is nothing more useful than salt or sunshine.”⁴³ Now whether Jesus had this common saying in mind when he said that we are “salt and light” we don’t know. But I wonder, if instead of trying to narrow down this metaphor to one specific use of salt if Jesus didn’t have a more broader meaning in mind when he called us “*salt of the earth.*” And so the point, I think, Jesus is making here is that just as salt is generally necessary and useful for life, so we are to the welfare of this world. Michael Wilkins puts it this way, “We are now different from the people of this earth, and our presence is necessary as God’s means of influencing the world for good.”⁴ As “salt” in this world, we are necessary to what God is doing in this world. I don’t use the word “necessary” lightly. I don’t mean to imply that God can’t get along without us. He can. But nonetheless it is a strong word that indicates that we are the means God has chosen to bring good to this world. We are “*salt of the earth.*” We are necessary to the work God is doing to bring his kingdom to this world. I affirm what Jesus says. We are of influence for good in this world.

The second metaphor Jesus uses to describe his disciples and the influence we have in this world is the word “*light.*” Jesus said of us, “*You are the light of the world.*” On one

hand, I think Jesus is making the same point with “*light*” that he did with “*salt*.” It is another way of asserting the claim that we have influence for good in this world. But I wonder with the word “*light*” if he isn’t using even a stronger picture to talk about the kind of influence we have in this world as people of the kingdom.

When the Bible talks about “*light*” and “*darkness*” it speaks to the realm of good and evil, the realm of God and Satan. In Acts 26:18, Paul is telling his story of conversion and his calling into ministry and he tells King Agrippa what Jesus said to him. Jesus said to Paul, “*I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.*” It is the same thing we read in Colossians 1:13, “*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*” Again we see it in 1 Peter 2:9, “*that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.*”

We know Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world. He said in John 8:12, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*” I have no problem giving Jesus the title of “Light of the World.” We believe that Jesus is the answer to life. We believe you will never fully be satisfied in the inner parts of your life until you come to peace with God through Jesus. There is no other way to atone for your sin than through Jesus. It is through Jesus that one moves from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. There is no other way to be reconciled to God than through Jesus. But now notice what Jesus says about us. He didn’t say we were “carriers of the light.” He said, we too “*are the light of the world.*” It is what Paul said of us in Ephesians 4:8-9, “*Walk as children of the light, for the fruit in life is found in all that is good and right and true.*” Paul said in Philippians 2:14-15, “*Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.*”

We are not just good for this world. We are the presence of Christ in this world. “*You are the light of the world.*” God is using us to bring light to this world and to move people from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. It may seem at times that we have very little influence. You may say under your breath, somewhat exasperated, “I have been trying to be a light at work or in my family but it doesn’t seem like it is making any difference.” But don’t doubt what Jesus has declared to be true about us. We are the light of the world. God is dispelling darkness in this world through the people of his kingdom. We are salt! We are light!

Savory Salt and Bright Lights

Now that we have established the fact that we are “salt and light” in this world, the question is how? How do we become “savory salt” and how do we shine as “bright lights” in this world? What we are really asking is this. How do we become people of influence for the kingdom of God in this world?

You can't answer this question without noticing what these words are attached to. The claim that we are “salt” and “light” flows out of what comes before this passage, the Beatitudes. In fact, most commentaries view these two passages as one complete package statement. I think appropriately so. It helps us understand what Jesus means when he calls us “salt” and “light.” When the Beatitudes begin to shape who you are on the inside and when the Spirit of God begins to change your life, you become “savory salt” and “bright lights” in this world. People can't help but notice. I like the way Piper puts it, “Here is a kind of identity that is very unusual in the world. It is like savory salt when things are tasteless and flat, and it is like hope-filled light when people are stumbling around in the dark.”⁵ That is what you are like in this world when the Beatitudes shine through your life.

Consider the Beatitudes with me this morning.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” I am no better than anyone else.

“Blessed are those who mourn.” I am truly sorry for my own sin.

“Blessed are the meek.” I put others before myself.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” I know and love God.

“Blessed are the merciful.” I have compassion for others and for justice.

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” I do what is right.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” I maintain and promote unity and peace.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness.” I stand for what is right even it cost me something.

As these kingdom norms are formed to your heart, it is inevitable. You will be “savory salt” and you will be “bright lights” in this world. That is the point Jesus is getting at when he says, *“but if salt has lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored?”* It is kind of a tricky statement because salt never actually loses its saltiness.

There was a rabbi by the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Haninia who lived close to the time of Jesus. When he was asked a trick question, he would rebuff it by using a common proverbial statement, “Can salt lose its flavor?” He would couple it with “Does the mule

bear young?”⁶ A mule was sterile and so the obvious answer was “no.” So it was with salt. It cannot lose its flavor. So what is Jesus saying when he says, “*if salt has lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored?*” He is saying that if God’s kingdom has broken into your life and is changing you from the inside out, then it is impossible for you to lose your saltiness in this world. If there is an internal reality to your faith, you are of influence in this world because people can’t escape who you are and what you are becoming. Your changed life is having an impact on those around you. True salt never ceases to be “savory salt.”

It is the same thing Jesus is saying about being light in this world. “*A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.*” Obviously, when Jesus made this statement he was speaking to a people who never experienced the power of electricity! Bonnie and I grew up in rural Pennsylvania and when it would get dark at night, it would really get dark. We didn’t have street lights that lit up the night sky. I have shared before of how Bonnie grew up along the mountains and when you came over the road toward her house during the dark of night, you could literally see the light from the doorbell dispelling the darkness while still a good distance away. Light dispels darkness. In fact, there is no purpose to covering light. This is especially true in a culture where light in the home was simply a small clay lamp with a wick on it. You would elevate it just to give light throughout the room. So it is with these Beatitudes. If you are marked by these qualities, you can’t keep it from shining through your life.

So how do I become “salt” and “light” to this world? I am “salt” and “light” in this world as God changes me on the inside. When that internal change happens, I can’t help it. I am “salt” and I am “light.” Paul says in Ephesians 4:8-9, “*Walk as children of the light, for the fruit in life is found in all that is good and right and true.*” Paul said in Philippians 2:14-15, “*Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.*” How do I “shine” here? I don’t grumble like everyone else. We shine as lights through the change God is forming in our hearts by his grace.

I heard the story this week of an elderly man who was finishing out his days in a convalescent home. He grew up in a small town and attended the same small church all of his life. All of his life was lived within an eleven mile radius. As the days slowly passed, he found himself becoming more and more withdrawn. He began to wonder if his life ever amounted to anything. He questioned whether or not he fully lived up to his

potential. But then, by God's grace, the faces of individuals he had prayed for down through his life began to flood his mind's eye. He saw the face of his departed wife, the face of a coworker, a troubled teen from long ago, a business woman who came through the train station where he worked had finally stopped drinking and found new purpose in life, a police officer who recommitted his life to Christ and became a deacon at his church, a special needs child of a relative who now uses her handicap to minister to other special needs people. The faces kept coming. The lung cancer patient, the adopted son of a friend seriously hurt in a car accident. All these faces came to him and he saw how their lives had been lifted up. The bank teller, the insurance salesman, the pastor's wife who finally forgave those who hurt her. Consequently, his body was enlivened as God reminded him what prayer can do.⁷ It is those quiet "good works" that no one sees you do, but God uses them for good. You are savory salt. You are bright lights.

A City on a Hill

We have made much of the fact that we are living in a post-Christian culture. I mentioned a few weeks ago that New England is located on the frontier of the mission field. In his book on the church, Philip Ryken asks, "what does this post-Christian culture need?" Do you know what his answer is? It needs churches. From the model we get in Acts 2:42-47 that describes the priorities of the early church, Ryken says that this culture needs teaching, worshiping and caring churches. Here is what he said, "Here in America, as we enter our first post-Christian century, some churches will do the simple things that churches have always done. And as they do so, they will discover that what God has given in the church is exactly what a post-Christian culture needs."⁸ The church is "salt" and "light" to a community, a city, a region and a country. In the book of Revelation, churches are called "*lampstands*."

I think sometimes when we read the Great Commission we read it from an individual perspective. When we hear Jesus say, "*Go and make disciples of all nations*" we think of individuals going. But this is a call for the church. The next thing Jesus says in the Great Commission is "*baptizing them . . . teaching them.*" Those are functions of the church. The church is "salt" and "light" in this world.

Missiologists say that people who live in Utah and in the Northeast corridor of the country can be classified as "an unreached people group" because less than 2% of the population there claim to be born again.⁹ They also say that in order to penetrate a region with the gospel, you need 1 church for every 1,000 people. In New England, there

is 1 church for every 8,000 people.¹⁰ So what is the best way to let our light shine in New England? It is through church planting.

New churches are best able to reach the unchurched. Lyle Schaller says, “Dozens of denominational studies have confirmed that the average new church gains most of its members (60-80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over 10 to 15 years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations.”¹¹ Keller adds, “this means that the average new congregation will bring in 6 to 8 times more new people into the life of the Body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size.”¹²

This does not mean that we have to make a choice between church planting and church renewal. A Ph.D. dissertation studied 624 Southern Baptist Convention churches that planted a church. According to their study, the average mother church witnessed a 21.5% increase in attendance during the first 5 years of the church plant. Why? “When a church plants a church, it renews their missional heart and passion and it brings the church back to the Great Commission.”¹³ I am convinced that the best way to let our light shine to this region of the country is through church planting.

First Steps

When we mention church planting, I am sure there are many different perceptions running through our mind as to what it looks like. There are many different models of church planting. A traditional model involves sending a large group of people off to a community and simply reproducing everything we have here. This model tends to be very costly and often is not sustainable. We envision a more organic approach of raising up a church planter and with a small group of people, begin developing relationships among a target group of people. From the very beginning, the focus of the church is going to be reaching the harvest. The church planter will be bi-vocational and with a core team will look for ways to be missional.

WEFC began that way. In 1888, this church began as an outreach to Danish sailors. That is the same things we envision here. There are different people groups and demographics where churches are needed. We have a large Indian population in our area. Generationally, there are more and more people who have no church orientation. How do you reach them? How do we best connect with them relationally?

In a couple of weeks, the house at 547 Maple St. will be completed and we want to house residents with the potential of raising up church planters. We have a lot of ministry experience on our pastoral staff to offer. We have a great church family where potential church planters can grow and learn. We have a passion to “cross the bridge” and see the kingdom of God expand in this region. In January, we hope to come to the next congregational meeting to ask for minimal financial resources to help us take the first step in training residents to this end.

In the meantime, here is what you can do. Over and over again during this series, we have heard Jesus calling us to pray for God to raise up laborers for the harvest. Why? It is because the harvest is plentiful. So pray to this end!

The second thing you can do is “learn.” We are learning. This whole process will be one of learning. This coming Saturday, from 9:00—Noon, you have an opportunity to learn more. We will have Dave Baer with us. Dave has been all over the world and he is coming to tell us that what we are endeavoring to do is “the norm” for the church biblically and around the world. And then, we will have close to ten church planters from our district in New England. You will get to hear from them what God is doing. With them, will also be two leaders from a sending church that has planted two churches in New Hampshire and is in process of planting two more. So come and learn,

Conclusion

“You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world.”

Through each one of us, in rather normal ways, God’s light is shining through us. We just need to be more conscious of it and intentional in how we live as sent people no matter where we happen to go.

But this is also a message for the church. There are exciting days ahead for us as we embrace the call to be “a city on a hill” shining the light of Jesus to a region that needs the light of Jesus. Remember, “vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to renew existing churches as well as the best single way to grow the whole Body of Christ in a region.” *“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.”*

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- ¹Tim Keller “Why Plant Churches” http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Why_Plant_Churches-Keller.pdf February, 2002
- ²D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978) 30
- ³Michael Wilkins *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 213
- ⁴Ibid., 213
- ⁵John Piper *What Jesus Demands From the World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006) 357
- ⁶Wilkins, 214
- ⁷Father John Oliver “The Benefits of Prayer” www.ancientfaith.com podcast Oct. 30, 2017
- ⁸Philip Graham Ryken *City on a Hill* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003) 31
- ⁹Aaron Coe “The Value of Church Planting” www.lifeway.com
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Lyle Schaller, quoted in D. McGavran and G. Hunter *Church Growth: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) 100
- ¹²Keller, 3
- ¹³Portable Church Blog “7 Statistics Every Church Planter Needs to Know” www.portablechurch.com May 16, 2016

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**COMMUNITY
GROUPS**

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Do you prefer spicy food? Describe your idea of a “savory” meal.
2. When you think of being “in the dark” what image or experience comes to mind? How did you feel when “light” came into that setting?
3. Share something you got from the sermon this week.

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Matthew 5:13-16. What encouragement do you gain from these verses? What does it mean to be “salt” and “light?”
5. Read Matthew 5:1-12 and discuss how the Beatitudes help you understand what it means to “let your light shine.” Which of the Beatitudes do you want to see formed more in you and how might that help you shine your light? (See also Phil. 2:14-15)
6. Read Acts 2:42-47. Identify the important aspects of church life from this passage and discuss how each element contributes to a church shining the light of Jesus.
7. Read Matthew 28:19-20 with the church in mind. What did you learn about church planting from the sermon?

Taking It Home

8. What is one step you can take to learn more about church planting?
9. Spend some time praying for church planting and the role WEFC can play in church planting. Also, consider adding this to your regular prayers.