

The Distinctive Disciple

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[0 : 00] Turn back with me then in your Bibles this evening to Matthew's Gospel in chapter 5. I'm looking just for a short time following on from our studies this morning in the Beatitudes to the next 6 in there verses 13 to 16 entitled Salt and Light.

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. I'm sure many of you have applied for jobs down through the years and as part of your lives at different seasons, you may have applied for a new job.

And part of applying for a job is knowing what that job is and reckoning whether or not you have the requisite skills to be able to fulfil that role that is being advertised.

[1 : 11] And a big part of that is a good advert, obviously, that tells you what the job is, but particularly the job description. The job description tells you what is expected of the person who will fill that role is a list that delineates the particular responsibilities that that role entails.

And the reason that some people become frustrated in their work so often is when expectations are not communicated and therefore they are not met and then there is tension.

It's so important to know what it is that you're doing and what it is that you're expected to be doing.

And you know, it's no different when it comes to faith.

We need to know what is expected and we need to know what it is that we're meant to be doing.

And in some ways what we have in these three verses here is just that.

We have a job description of the Christian, a Christian's job description. What Jesus expects from his followers.

[2 : 20] It's important that we know that if we are going to one, seek to follow him, if we're going to surrender our lives to him in faith and in trust. It's very important that we know what it is that is expected of us.

We must walk into that with our eyes wide open. Now, this is a general description. If you continue to look through this sermon on the mount, we don't have time to go through all this evening, but if you take time to read these two chapters, it'll take you 10, 15 minutes maximum.

You will see more specifics that come out from that. But there is this general description that we have before us and they're familiar words, I'm sure to many of us.

These are statements that have been used in different arenas of life so very often. And in some ways Jesus is saying the same thing, but he's saying it in two different ways.

He's saying that the Christians should have an impact on the world around about them, both negatively and positively, if you want to put it that way.

[3 : 27] Now, Jesus, we know, was always one who chose his words and his illustrations, particularly carefully. He always employed things that were known, that were familiar to his audience so that they would be able to grasp what it is that he is saying.

And he does that again here at this point. Let's remember that he's up a hill. His disciples have come to him. It's not just the 12 because he hasn't yet called all of the 12, but it is those who are following him.

It's those who have listened to his words in chapter 4 and verse 17. And that time Jesus began to preach saying, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

People had repented, people had turned from their sin and they were following him. And so at the hill they follow him. They're listening to his teaching. He's already spoken about the kingdom of

heaven and the expectations for those in the kingdom of heaven to have an acknowledgement of their spiritual poverty before him, a grief over that sin, a willingness to yield their lives to him, a willingness to pursue holiness.

And then of course in the latter half of the Beatitudes, the willingness to love and show mercy and seek purity of mind and heart and to be peacemakers in the world, recognising that we may face persecution through all of these things, but there is blessing.

[4 : 55] And he sort of carries on that theme now as he goes into this section entitled salt and light. And that's just really what I'd like to look at this evening. Very simply, very quickly.

Let's just look at these two things. The first thing he says here is, you are the salt of the earth. Now that's, I'm sure, a statement that probably many of us have used in the past talking about different people.

Oh, they're the salt of the earth. Great people. Down to earth, normal people, good folk to be around. Is that what Jesus meant?

Not, in some ways, you could argue yes, but not particularly. Let's think first of all about the common uses of salt, particularly in the first century first and most common.

Salt was used as a preservative, wasn't it? At a time when you walk down the high street in Galilee, you didn't see many shops with fridges in the windows. There was no electricity.

[5 : 55] There were no fridges. There was no freezers. So what did they do? They used salt to keep things from going bad, to slow the rate at which the food would begin to go off and to rot, particularly meat.

Salt slowed the rate of spoilage, you could say. And that's the way in which Jesus is employing this word.

He's saying, as a Christian, you are to slow the rate of decomposition. You are to slow the rate of the rot. One writer says, slowly but surely, our world is rotting from within.

Not only are civilizations in the process of decaying, but morals are as well. As Rip Van Winkle, who is still sleeping, awoke from his nap today, he would be shocked at the eroding standards of our time.

What our culture accepts as the norm would have been considered scandalous back when he went to sleep. That book was published in 1991, I'm sure Charles Swindle wouldn't have imagined the change or the moral erosion that would have occurred in the ensuing 28 years since the publication of that book.

[7 : 14] I would imagine that if we spoke to our ancestors even from 50 years ago, perhaps some of you were even present 50 or 60 years ago, and you can see the massive slide, the massive spoil that there has been in the morals of a society.

Well Jesus says that if you're a Christian, the world needs to know that. And the world needs for you to make an impact.

The world needs you to make an impact, to be distinct from a rotting world, and be one who seeks to slow the rate at which that world is spoiling.

Because let's be honest, the communities that we are a part of, even an island like this which is remote from some of the realities of modern western living, is not immune.

Values are decaying, families are crumbling, ethics are questionable. When we get to a point in the world where the extermination of babies is lauded and applauded, we've got to begin asking the question, how did we get here?

[8 : 29] You see, what the world desperately needs, is not a preacher like me to come and preach at them. What the world desperately needs is Christians to be Christians.

Not difficult, not a tricky concept to comprehend. What the world around about us needs is for us to be salt.

For us to live in a way that is distinct from and has an effect upon the decay that is all around about us.

What the world needs desperately is for the Christian church to bring a good dose of salt to the table.

Some Christians believe that the only way forward is to withdraw from modern life, from modern society, from the decay that ensues all around. Back in the day, people would become monks and go off and spend their time in monasteries.

[9 : 32] But you know, if we remove ourselves from the world, if we remove ourselves from society, if we merely hang about with other people who think like us, who look like us, who share what we believe, then how will the world around about us hear about the life-giving power of Jesus?

How will they hear about the gospel? Because they cannot hear unless they are told. We cannot be salt in the world if we never leave the salt shaker.

We have to be salt in the world to make an impact and to make a difference. There are those in the world who think that Christians are the problem.

In our society, those who believe in Jesus and follow Jesus are actually the problem. They are the divisive ones, and let's be honest, we have given them ammunition for that as the church has fought its battles one with another inside the halls of ecclesiastical power.

But you know, they will never neutralise the church. The apostle Paul at one time tried to stamp out the Christian witness, and what happened he met with Jesus and was changed.

[10 : 49] R.C. Sproul saw a parallel with Native Americans. Let me just read this to you. It's a lengthy quote, but I think it's helpful. When the settlers came to this country and were met by Native Americans, a war broke out.

The Indians were subdued, and they were allowed to live in America, but only under restriction, and they were relegated to reservations, which isolated them from the mainstream of cultural life.

I fear that is similar to the lot of the Christian church in our day. We are allowed to exist as long as we stay on our reservation.

If we were like salt, if we were salt like the disciples were salt, if we ventured as boldly into the public square as Paul did in the early church, we would experience jail and beatings and persecutions.

But we have been taught to keep the salt in the shaker, where it will do no harm. Despite the resistance of a decaying culture, that same culture is kept from self-destruction by the influence of Christ and his people.

[12 : 00] We are called not to wring our hands and groan about how bad things are becoming. We are called to preserve what is worth preserving in the world around us.

Our job is to live in the way that God has called us to live through His Word by the express teaching of Jesus himself.

And He says that if we do that, if we live in light of the profession that we have made, a life worthy of the calling that we have received, then we will impact the world positively.

And you see that, don't you? You know, I especially ask a minister, I suppose, will have a conversation with people and people can just be very much themselves until they find out what I do for a living.

And immediately the conversation changes and it will either stop at that point in the person will get very embarrassed perhaps about the language that they've been employing or the things that they've been saying, or the hardness that they have towards the gospel will become apparent.

[13 : 14] But you know, the reality is that if we are Christians and if we uphold a standard, if we seek to be salt in the world, then people will adjust their lifestyle when they are around us.

That is just a fact. Without salt, left to its own devices, the world in which we live decays and it rots. So here's the message for us as a church and as a people, as a Christian, we are to arrest societal decline functioning as salt in the world, to preserve that which is good and to battle against that which is rotten.

We are to be salt. But salt's not just a preservative, salt also added flavour. There are times in life where we have to reach for the salt shaker and good Highland Hebridean people usually reach for the salt shaker before we've even tasted what's on the plate.

Nevertheless, sometimes we have to add a little bit of salt. I'd like to say that I didn't have to add any salt to my lunch today, it was just seasoned to perfection. But there are times where we have to reach for the salt shaker.

Sometimes people even carry little sachets of salt in their cars in the centre console so that they're picking up some to eat. They can add a little bit of salt and pepper to it.

[14 : 40] And Jesus is also saying that the role of the believer, the role of the Christian is to bring flavour to the society that we live in, in the way that we live, in the joy that we possess, to show people how dull life is without the gospel so that they may see, wow, look at the joy they have.

You all look like a joyful bunch tonight. Look at the joy they have. Look how much fun they have. Look at the love that they have for one another. See the concern with which they live for their community and for their families and for their friends.

Look at that. I want some of that. Is that what the community says about you or says about me or says about our church, if not, why not?

We are to preserve that which is good, but we are also to bring flavour. If you look down through the annals of history, you will see that the church, more than any other institution, has been responsible for the most good that has been done within our communities, responsible for the institution of higher education and healthcare.

Some of the earliest and most famous schools were started by churches, initially led by ministers. That is a scary thought. Many of the world's greatest artists have been Christian.

[16:04] Mendelssohn, Handel, Vivaldi, some of the most famous composers, Anabatic Lee Christian, who wrote and who produced this marvellous, stirring music.

It was the church that started hospitals and established orphanages. I read an article in The Times recently and this is a quote from it says, the contribution of the Christian faith to civilisation, culture and philosophy is so immense that it is impossible to conceive of a world history without it.

Not often you hear a secular newspaper writing things like that. It is hard to believe what the world would be like without the flavour of Christianity, without the salt of the Christian in the world.

Thank you. Even if the impact our own denomination has made since 1843, a quick history lesson, there was the disruption where the Free Church of Scotland came out from the Church of Scotland where 450 ministers out of the 1200 broke away and formed the Free Church of Scotland and the Church of Scotland kept all of the buildings, kept all of the mansions, kept everything and these 450 ministers and congregations created a voluntary fund in 1843 of over 400,000 to build 700 new churches, 400 mansions.

Flavour, desire, hunger for the Gospel to spread.

[18:06] Salt is a preservative. Salt brings flavour. Salt produces thirst, doesn't it? Maybe the soup today was a wee bit salty so I might have to reach down for a wee bit of water to wet the whistle.

But if you're trying to make money, say at a concession stand, what you're going to do, you're going to maybe add a wee bit more salt into the chips or onto the popcorn, hoping that the person tweets it, it's going to get a wee bit thirsty and come back and get a drink.

That's good business. But our job as Christians, as those who are salt, is to live in such a way that it produces assault and thirst in other people, but the joy and the grace and the way in which we live will produce within others that desire.

I want what it is that they have. My faith should lead other people to say, I want to find out about this. I want to know about this.

I want some of that. Whatever he's having, I'll have. Not everybody will want that, but some will.

[19:20] Salt is a preservative. Salt adds flavour. Salt produces thirst. Are we preserving that which is good?

Are we bringing flavour into our spheres of influence? Is our life producing thirst in other people? And then there's a warning, isn't there, from Jesus?

But if salt has lost its taste, how shall saltiness be restored? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under food.

Jesus warns us here about losing our saltiness. If we're not acting in a way that is consistent with the profession that we make, if we're not living in light of the calling that we have received, Jesus says we're not fit for purpose.

That's solemn, isn't it? That forces us to take stock and to wonder and to look at where we're at tonight in our walk with Christ.

[20:33] Are we preserving? Are we flavouring? Are we producing thirst? Or have we lost our saltiness? Are we not fit for purpose?

He says if it's not fulfilling its role, then what's it good for? It's good for nothing. It's to be thrown out. Now what you've got to remember is salt in the first century was impure. There wasn't a factory where they had machines that could separate the salt from the grit and the seaweed and the sand that might contaminate it.

So you have to be careful that your salt is salt. There's not contaminated, that it's not impure.

If you become indistinguishable from your society, are you salty? Or have you lost your saltiness?

[21 : 31] Saltiness brings a tang. It brings a reaction, doesn't it? If we become so contaminated by our society, we will lose our saltiness.

If we're not acting as salt, trying to preserve that which is good and produce a thirst within other people, he says we're not fit for purpose. Being salt is essential in the eyes of God himself. Now this is a message for you whether you like it or not. So this evening you may be tired, you may be even a wee bit bored, you may be disengaged completely.

But let me say this to you. What Jesus says here is you are the salt of the earth. Not somebody else, not so and so down the road, not the elder, not the deacon, he says you.

The emphasis in the original language is on the you, plural. Here he's speaking to a group of people. The first word is emphatic.

[22 : 38] You are the salt of the earth. Who's he talking to? He's up a hill and he's talking to a small band of Palestinian peasants, fishermen, farmers, men, women, children.

And he says you are the salt of the earth. You. Regardless of how insignificant we may feel, regardless of how ineffective we may feel that we are.

This is the message that we need to hear from Jesus tonight. He says you, whether you're in the workplace, in the school, on a boat, driving a lorry, you are the salt of the earth.

Be careful you're not being contaminated. Be careful you're not losing your saltiness.

We are the salt of the earth. We are to be distinctive. But not only are we the salt of the earth.

[23 : 47] Secondly, he says you are the light of the world, four things here. Firstly, the need of the light. Now the thing if you go and look and if you ask people if we did a pop quiz or a popular opinion poll, it would be amazing to see how positively people would speak of our society.

The West, in particular the UK, has an overblown sense of its own glory, you would say. Think about the terms that our society uses.

People say well we're enlightened. You know we are a progressive society. We are tolerant. As long as you agree with us. We are awesome. But is that really accurate?

What's the divine verdict? Well think about the logic of Matthew 5 here. Think about the logic of Jesus himself. He's saying that there needs to be light. What does that mean?

Then there is darkness. If there is a need for light, then there is an apparent darkness. Jesus says the world is in darkness.

[25 : 02] It's scrabbling around in the dark. And we need the Christian church and the Lord's people to come and to shine the light of the Gospel into a dark and a broken world.

A world that is lost. There is a great need for the light. Suddenly we see the nature of this light.

For the creation of the world, the Lord has identified us to be salt on this earth and indeed light in the world. How do we do that? We say, well verse 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.

For people to see the light of the Gospel in our lives. Now we caution, it's not about good works, it's not just about good works.

It's not just about mercy ministry. It's not just about manning a soup station. John Stott said, very often in scripture, light is a metaphor for truth.

[26 : 07] Light is a metaphor for truth, spoken truth. How will they know unless they are told?

If we are to fulfil the role of being light in the world, we are to serve, yeah, and speak of the glory of Jesus Christ.

To work and to witness to the glory of Golgotha. Think about the metaphor that Jesus uses here, a city on a hill, a lamp on a stand, he's talking about visibility.

And of all the things he said, is this not the most important? Taking us by the hand and showing us exactly what the job role is, is to be visible so that people can discern immediately who we are and whose we are.

We say, oh, but I don't know how did I do that. I'm not sure how to do it. He says, let your light shine. Stand up, stand out, stand up, be salt, stand out, be light.

[27 : 18] That's how a Christian should live in 21st century Carlyway and further afield, engage with a dark and rotting world and let your light shine into the brokenness.

And what do you see? As soon as you sign the light in all that is wicked and evil and disgusting, scuttles away and tries to find another dark recess.

You pull a bit of a stone up and you'll see all the beasties running for cover because the light exposes them.

I wonder if we're a follower of Jesus, do the people around you, do the people in your workplace know that? Do they know that you're a follower of Jesus? Because you're not much of a follower if nobody knows who it is that you're following.

If there was a trial, would there be enough evidence to condemn us, to find us guilty of being a follower of Jesus?

[28 : 23] We see the need for the light, we see the nature of the light, we see the nucleus of the light. We are to reflect the light of the gospel, we are to reflect the light of the sun.

I don't know if you know this but the moon, well you know this, you live in Carlyway, the street lights go out, I'm sure the moon can be so bright. If you get a good clear night and a big moon, you can be outside and it can be virtually like daytime but here's the thing, the moon has no power source of its own.

So where does that light from the moon come from? Well, it reflects the light of the sun. So that in the darkness there is light, reflected from the power source which is not present.

That's the Christian isn't it? We are to be like the moon, though we have no power source of our own we can reflect the glorious light of the sun.

Finally new life in the light. All of these things are true if we're believers. He's given us a negative and he's given us a positive.

[29 : 45] We are to restrain society, we are to be light, we are to proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ, we are to be salt and we are to be light.

But what of those present this evening, what of you who have not professed Jesus, what of you have not trusted in him? Do you ever look around and think how has the Christian got joy?

Perhaps you look around and say no they've never got joy. How is the Christian able to stand firm in the storms of life? How is the Christian able to withstand the providence that they have been dealt? Why because of what Jesus has done? That in the darkness that engulfed Calvary, what Jesus has done for the people of God here for me and for them and will do for you is to bear your sin.

That's how the children can have joy even in the bleakest of times. Because the Son has borne the guilt and the shame of mankind that we may be free.

[30 : 50] And he says if you want that you have to repent, you have to turn from your sin, you have to turn and to him you have to seek Jesus and he will take you by the hand and he will give you new life and new hope.

And John 8, Jesus himself said I am the light of the world. If you follow me you won't have to walk in darkness because you will have the light that leads to life.

He doesn't tell us to become light. He says that we are the light of the world. What does light do? Light helps us to see, doesn't it?

The psalmist says that the Word of God is a lamp to my feet and a light into my eyes. The light of God helps us to see, the light of God exposes that which is hidden.

It's a double edged sword, isn't it? Peers us between joint and marrow. It exposes that which needs to be exposed, it clothes that which needs to be closed.

[31 : 54] But where does light shine the best? Well light shines most brightly when the night is at its darkest.

We can put a torch on during the day and it will make no difference but if we put it on in the dead of night it will make a massive difference. Where does this all leave us then?

Well firstly it tells us that there is no such thing as a secret Christian. Jesus was clear, you don't hide your light under a bushel, you don't put it under a bowl, you put it on a stand for everyone to see.

Jesus says if you're no longer salty then you've lost your saltiness, you've assimilated into the world, you've been contaminated by them, you're no longer salty, you're no longer worthwhile, you are not fit for purpose.

If you're trying to follow Jesus and at the same time follow the world you're fighting a losing battle. It's never going to work. You are called to be salt.

[33 : 00] You're called to be distinctive. You're called to be light, to shine light into the world. And that's the point isn't it?

Our role in the world is important. Because if we're not there and if we're not living as salt and light then how will the world know about Jesus?

The problems of the world are not going to be solved by electing certain individuals or establishing certain laws or endorsing particular political policies. They are irrelevant.

The big problem in the world is sin and the answer to the sin problem in the world is the Savior Christ. The problem is sin and the answer is Jesus.

But will we tell them? Will we be salt preserving that which is good and light exposing that which is wrong?

[34 : 03] We must not compromise. There's been too much compromise. People turning away from the word of God in order to become relevant.

In order to compromise with the world. No, we're not called to compromise. We're called to be salt and we're called to be light. We're called to put salt into the world.

To preserve and to bring flavor and to endorse thirst. We are to fulfill the job role that Jesus gives us here.

His opinion is the one that matters, not the world's. So let us be people who are salty, who are fit for purpose and who shine the glorious light of the gospel into a dark and a broken world.

Let us pray. Father God, we thank you for the gospel and for its light and for its saltiness and for its hope. And we pray that we would embody those things as your people.

[35 : 04] We pray for those who are outside your kingdom, Lord God, that they would come to know the salt and the light of the gospel and that they too would become those who are salt and light in this world pointing others to the king.

We are just a group of sinners pointing another group of sinners to the Savior. We pray that each one would see his beauty. This evening we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.