

Matthew 5:13-16
(Isaiah 42:5-9; Philippians 2:12-18)
“You Are the Light of the World”

Introduction

If Jesus has entrusted his mission to us, then how are we to live in the world as his followers? The question has been answered in a variety of different ways: some see our role as prophets condemning the surrounding culture and calling it to repent, others see us as the culture’s priests performing its religious ceremonies and being there to comfort and encourage in times of distress, still others see our aim as taking charge of the culture and seeking to capture the instruments of government and power in order to legislate the law of God as the law of the land. Certainly arguments can be made for aspects of each of these views, while historical examples – both positive and negative – could be presented to support or critique each view.

But in our text, Jesus provides two pictures of what is to be our role in the midst of the cultures that surround us, of what it means for us to be in the world but not of the world. This morning we will focus on four lessons that emerge as we reflect upon these two linked pictures of the Christian as salt and as light.

Body

1. We are to be distinct and different from the world.

Salt is salt, light is light. Not everything is salt or light. For salt to be salt, it must not lose its savor, and for light to be light it must be seen. Salt is extremely stable but it loses its savor by being polluted with other substances. Light is of no use if it is hidden, like a light covered with a bushel. So, too, we should be what we are meant to be: God’s people, shining, flavorful, unpolluted. The way that we do this is to live the Beatitudes: this countercultural gallery of pictures that we looked at last week. The reason that the church has so little affect at present upon our culture is that we have lost our distinctiveness: in our desire to be relevant, we have become too much like the world. But God means for us to be a distinct and countercultural picture of his coming kingdom in the midst of this present age.

2. We are to be distinct and different from the world *for the sake of the world.*

Here’s the crucial point: We aren’t to be pure merely for the sake of purity or different merely for the sake of being different. Jesus does not call us the salt of heaven or the light of heaven. We are the salt of *the earth*, the light of *the*

world. In other words, we are to be distinct because the world needs us to be what we are meant to be. We are to be distinct and different from the world for the sake of the world around us.

3. We are to be in the world – like salt – to cleanse, preserve and enhance.

Salt cleanses and aids in the debridement of dead tissue, just as salt helps preserve meat and even serves as a spice in bringing out the flavor of food. It can be caustic – it burns if placed in a wound, yet it helps the healing process. We, too, are to preserve, cleanse and yet enhance the flavor of the culture.

4. We are to be in the world – like light – to dispel darkness and show the way.

Darkness is not a substance, but rather the absence of light. We don't darken a room by increasing the amount of darkness in the room, but by extinguishing the light. Banishing darkness does not involve searching out the darkness, collecting it and removing it. It is as simple as turning on a light. So, too, the world can only be dark if the light is not present or has hidden itself. In the presence of light, darkness disappears. Jesus, who is the light of the world, says to us across the centuries what he said to those first disciples: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:14f).

Conclusion

Do you love the world, not in the lustful, grasping way that John warns us about when he says, "Do not love the world – the lust of the flesh and the eye and the pride of life" (1 John 2:15-17), but rather do you love it as God so loved the world that he sent his Son to redeem it? That is what we are to be about: Your life and mine are to be part of the great drama of God's setting the world free from bondage to sin and death and opening the way to new life in Christ. This should be behind our decisions as individuals and families and as a community of faith. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine in your home, in your neighborhood, at work, at school and at play so that people will see your life and glorify your Father in heaven.