

The Purpose of Believers in the World (Matt. 5:11–16)

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In the Beatitudes, Jesus offers some of the most beautiful teaching in the entire Bible about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus does not want us to misunderstand what he is teaching, though. While he stated all of the beatitudes as timeless principles, he does not want us to think that the kingdom of heaven is little more than a set of platitudes. In this next section, then, Jesus begins to turn the attention of the disciples away from an external admiration for the kingdom of heaven, to an internal motivation to lay hold of the kingdom of heaven by faith, regardless of the consequences. Here, Jesus is beginning to draw the disciples in to understand their own role in the kingdom, since *discipleship bears witness to Jesus in the world*.

The Persecution from the World (Matt. 5:11–12)

While v. 11–12 include another “blessed” statement, there are three important reasons to separate these two verses from the Beatitudes, which run from Matt. 5:3–10. First, the eight Beatitudes are all “objective,” stated in the third person: “Blessed are they/those/the...”), whereas v. 11 points the “blessed” statement in the second person, directly at “you”: “Blessed are *you*...”¹ Second, taking v. 11 as a ninth beatitude statement disrupts the perfect symmetry within the Beatitudes that we observed in the last study. So, we observed that the first and last Beatitudes are marked by the repetition of the promise, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3, 10). Also, we saw that the first four beatitudes deal with blessedness in our relationship to God, while the second four beatitudes deal with blessedness in our relationship with others, especially in the ways that we come to resemble God through repentance and faith. Taking v. 11 as a ninth beatitude would obscure Jesus’ careful construction of his Beatitudes.

The third reason to see v. 11 as something falling outside the Beatitudes is to observe that each of the three sections in our current passage all begin with the phrase εἰστε (*este*), meaning “[you] are” (v. 11, 13, 14). In v. 13 and 14, Jesus includes the emphatic word “you” (“you are”), while here in v. 11 the word “you” is simply implied. This is important, since it helps us to understand what Jesus is doing in this passage overall. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by teaching in the Beatitudes about the *character* of the Christian, but he now transitions into teaching about the *connection* between Christians and the wider world.²

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 198.

² “We pass, therefore, from the contemplation of the character of the Christian to a consideration of the function and purpose of the Christian in this world in the mind and the purpose of God. In other words, in these verses that immediately follow, we are told very clearly the relationship of the Christian to the world in

Still, we must recognize that v. 11–12 is “a repetition and expansion of v. 10.”³ This is perhaps not surprising, since v. 10 is clearly the most surprising of the Beatitudes. In what sense can we consider *persecution* a blessed experience? Despite the shock of this assertion, Jesus redoubles his teaching by applying this particular beatitude directly to his hearers. It is as though he is saying, “Yes, you heard that right! Furthermore, don’t take this as a general platitude for others—blessed are *you* when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. In fact, rejoice and be glad over it!”

Even so, Jesus offers two other comforting factors for our consideration as we digest this hard truth about the blessedness of persecution. First, Jesus intensifies the promise he made in v. 10: “for your reward is great in heaven” (v. 12b). Jesus will have much more to say about rewards in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:46; 6:1–6, 16–18) and through the rest of the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., Matt. 10:41–42; 20:1–16). For now, it is important to note that Jesus does not here speak of rewards that we *earn* by merit, since our “imperfections and faults” corrupt even the best things that we do.⁴ Rather, God’s rewards come to us as grace upon grace. Second, Jesus ties our own persecution to the persecution of the faithful prophets of the past: “for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (v. 12c).

The Preservation of the World (Matt. 5:13)

Immediately, Jesus combats any misunderstanding or misapplication of what he is teaching. By warning his disciples about the persecution that will face them, he does not mean for them to withdraw entirely from the world for their own protection. Quite the contrary, Jesus now begins to teach about how he intends for his disciples to “permeate society.”⁵ As we will see, the metaphors that Jesus uses in this section are effective only insofar as they portray how Jesus’ disciples must come in contact with the rest of the world: “Salt is of no use as long as it stays in the salt cellar. Light is of no use under a bowl. It is the town conspicuously sited on the hill which people notice.”⁶

As mentioned earlier, this section begins with not only a pointed *ἐστε* (*este*; “[you] are”), but with an emphatic *ὑμεῖς* (*humeis*; “you”). Jesus puts these words in strong, insistent, demanding terms, which “has the force of ‘you—you alone.’”⁷ Who does Jesus mean, though, when he says “you”? We should remember that it is the *disciples* who have come to Jesus to hear his teaching (Matt. 5:1).

general” (Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:149). Lloyd-Jones writes this about v. 13; however, on the transitional character of v. 11, see Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 282.

³ “I therefore think it more appropriate, despite the repetition of the opening *makarioi* [‘blessed’], to treat the ‘ninth beatitude’ not as a part of the Beatitudes as such but as the linking introduction to this following section which comments on the effect of living the good life on the rest of the society.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 171.)

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:267.

⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 102.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 172.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 198.

While it is true that Jesus' words would have a special significance for officers in the church,⁸ it is probably better to understand this statement in a more general sense as referring to *all* Jesus' disciples.⁹ This is particularly clear when we remember that Jesus has not yet even called all of the Twelve (Matt. 10:1–4). Jesus is teaching about the saltiness of all his disciples within the world. Nevertheless, we should see how Jesus' point has a sharpened edge, since by identifying his *disciples* as the salt of the earth, he is excluding others (especially the Pharisees) from qualifying for this purpose.¹⁰

What, then, does this *saltiness* symbolize? While many options have been suggested, it seems best to understand Jesus' statement as playing on the way that salt was rubbed into meat to slow its decay and corruption.¹¹ Even so, we should not overlook corresponding qualities of salt in adding seasoning flavor,¹² and of its working "secretly," so that we "know that it combats decay, though we cannot see it perform its task. Its influence is very real nonetheless."¹³ Accordingly, Jesus is teaching that the presence of his disciples in this world is a preservative against the world's overall decay, but also a seasoning agent as an aroma of life (see 2 Cor. 2:14–27), even when we cannot see any positive effect we are having on the world.¹⁴

What, then, does it mean for such saltiness to have "lost its taste"? The word that Jesus uses here is interesting, since it does not usually mean "to lose taste," and, in fact, as John Nolland observes, "There is no documented use of the term in the sense clearly required here ('because insipid/lose [its] saltiness')." ¹⁵ Instead, this word is the word that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 1 to describe the "foolishness" of the wisdom of the world (see 1 Cor. 1:20). When a Christian withdraws from the wider world, or when a Christian becomes passive and uninvolved in bearing witness to the gospel, that Christian has "lost his taste" in the sense of become as a "fool'...who no longer has any value."¹⁶

Now, as many commentators have observed, it is impossible for sodium chloride to lose its taste;¹⁷ however, the "salt" gathered in the ancient world was mined from areas like the Dead Sea, through evaporation, where sodium chloride was combined with other tasteless minerals like gypsum.¹⁸ So, if the sodium chloride was leached out of the "salt," then only tasteless—and useless—minerals would remain behind.¹⁹ William Hendriksen draws out the point: "Jesus, as he walked on earth, saw many Pharisees and scribes, people who advocated a formalistic, legalistic religion in the

⁸ "When Christ calls the apostles the salt of the earth, he means, that it is their office to salt the earth: because men have nothing in them but what is tasteless, till they have been seasoned with the salt of heavenly doctrine." (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:270.)

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 198.

¹⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 101–02.

¹¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 282–83.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:271.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 282.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 199.

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 213.

¹⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 178.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 174–75.

¹⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 99.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 104.

place of the true religion proclaimed by the ancient prophets in the name of the Lord. Thus by and large the salt had lost its flavor in the religious life of Israel. Many ‘sons of the kingdom’ would be cast out (Matt. 8:12).²⁰ Such legalism was *moronic* by trying to tame the living word of God according to the dead, tasteless, foolish, and worthless wisdom of the world.²¹

The Protection for the World (Matt. 5:14–16)

In the next metaphor, Jesus uses parallel phrases: “the salt of the earth” (τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς; *to halas tēs gēs*) is the same construction as “the light of the world” (τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου; *to phōs tou kosmou*).²² These two metaphors get at the same general idea, but in strikingly different ways: “Salt is for corruption, light is for darkness. Substantially both are the same, but formally one points to foulness (I John 5:19; Gal. 5:19–21; Rom. 1:23–32), the other to ignorance, blindness, and folly (Eph. 4:18; II Thess. 2:10; Matt. 24:11).”²³ In both cases, Jesus is teaching that his disciples are the agents through whom God will communicate his goodness to the world: “In the salt metaphor the world will taste the goodness of God; here they will see his goodness”²⁴ This is the logic of the two-part structure of the Beatitudes coming into its fruition: through *repentance*, God creates in us *resemblance* to him in our relationship with others. The point of transforming us through repentance into resemblance, then, is to lead still more people into discipleship to Jesus through their own repentance and resemblance. Earlier, Matthew quoted Isaiah 9:1–2 to portray *Jesus* as the great light seen by those dwelling in darkness (Matt. 4:15–16), and now Jesus says that his disciples also are the light of the world.²⁵

Jesus applies this general principle about the “light of the world” into two specific metaphorical applications, first dealing with a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. By this expression, Jesus brings together a couple of evocative ideas. First, the fact that Jesus speaks of a “city” gets at the corporate nature of Christianity. It is not that *you* (singular) are a city on a hill, but that *you* (plural) are that city.²⁶ Second, it is clear that Jesus means to communicate the way that the wider world will see Christians, for Christians are *light* and a *city on a hill that cannot be hidden*. Of course, the fact that the world is watching the disciples of Jesus carries risks: “the more eminent a person is, the more injury he does by a bad example, if he acts improperly.”²⁷ Even so, the fact that the world watches Jesus’ disciples is also the opportunity for bearing witness to Jesus and his gospel, as we will discuss more below.²⁸ Lenski brings out the particular significance that a well-lit city on a hill would have carried in the original context: “The figure is concise but it pictures a safe place which, with its protecting towers and walls, is visible for many miles around, to which men may flee from the

²⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 283.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:271.

²² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 98.

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 201.

²⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 176.

²⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 175.

²⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 171.

²⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:274.

²⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 100.

dangerous wilderness round about. Everybody can see it on top of its mountain; all can find refuge there.”²⁹

In the second application for the general metaphor of the “light of the world,” Jesus compares his disciples to a lamp in a house. So, Jesus points out that no one would be so foolish as to light a lamp for the sake of covering up. By this, Jesus is perhaps pointedly stating that *individual* Christians are not permitted to slip passively into the background of the wider “city on a hill,” letting others shine while he hides his individual light.³⁰ Instead, Jesus points out that people light a lamp for the opposite purpose: so that it “gives light to all in the house.” Notice how the lamp gives light to “all” in the house, a phrase that Donald Hagner observes is in parallel with “the people” who trample on unsalty salt and “the people” who see the good works of believers (v. 13, 16).³¹

What, then, is this light? Jesus clarifies that the light that shines before others is the “good works” that people see, leading them to “give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (v. 16). We need to read this statement with Jesus’ warnings against hypocritical displays of righteousness to gain the praise of others, as Jesus will condemn in Matthew 6:1–4).³² Here, Jesus encourages his disciples to let others see the light of their good deeds not to gain praise for themselves, but to gain praise and glory for God.³³ What are the good deeds that Jesus has in mind? As we will see in the next context, Jesus will teach us that the light of these good deeds are “nothing other than the faithful living out of the commandments, the righteousness of the Torah as interpreted by Jesus.”³⁴ The ethic of the kingdom of heaven is characterized by obedience to God’s moral law, especially as it is summarized in the Ten Commandments.

Discussion Questions

1. Why should we understand v. 11–12 as being distinct from the Beatitudes that are in Matthew 5:3–10? In what way does v. 11–12, then, function as a transition between the Beatitudes and the pointed teaching that Jesus brings to his disciples in the following verses? Why does Jesus state again in v. 11 that those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake are blessed? What was Jesus trying to accomplish in his disciples by teaching them this?
2. What do you think Jesus meant by telling his disciples that they were the “salt of the world” (v. 13)? What function did salt have in that society? What does Jesus mean when he speaks about salt that loses its taste? What significance is it that Jesus uses the word for “foolish” to describe the tasteless salt? Why is tasteless salt worthless? What spiritual situation does Jesus have in mind when he teaches all these things?
3. What do you think Jesus meant by telling his disciples that they were the “light of the world” (v.

²⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 202.

³⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 202.

³¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 100.

³² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 106.

³³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:274–75.

³⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 102.

14)? How do salt and light compare with one another? What kind of light is seen in a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden? What kind of light is offered by a lamp in a house? What are the good works that Jesus compares to light? How do we do good works in such a way that avoids seeking praise for ourselves but instead for God (v. 16; cf. Matt. 6:1–4)?

4. Why do you think Jesus connects the idea of persecution to the metaphors of salt and light? How does this relate to the Beatitudes that have come before, and the teaching on the law that will follow? How does your life restrain corruption within your sphere of influence, like salt? How does your life bring light to darkness among those you know? What is one area where Jesus' teaching challenges you to grow?