

Sunday – July 10, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon – **Sermon on the Mount II**  
**(Salt and Light)**

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**Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20**

Let's start with a thought from John Wesley:

**“Religion is not a private matter.”**

This is what the first section of this reading is all about. Jesus uses examples of salt and light because both of those are very valuable, but only as they are useful to someone.

Let's start with salt: Salt is used to preserve meat, for one thing. In the old days, before refrigeration, salt was the only thing that kept meat from rotting and becoming worse than useless. And, of course, we use salt to flavor food. It doesn't just make it taste salty, it also brings out the natural flavor of the food, often food that would otherwise be too bland to enjoy at all.

So, Christians are salt in that we can stand in the way of increasing moral decay in our world. Where do we see rot? Christians can be there to preserve what is good in society. And, we can give dull, unwholesome, unpleasant souls the vitality and flavor of the Good News.

How does salt lose its saltiness? How does it lose its entire identity, its purpose? Chemically speaking, salt is always salt. It is sodium chloride, period. So, how does it lose its nature? It loses its saltiness when it is mixed with other elements, when it becomes lost in the things around it. It becomes diluted, impure.

Christians lose their saltiness when we become too thoroughly mixed up in our culture. Jesus calls us to be **in** the world, but not **of** the world. We are to be among the people who are not Christians, but we aren't supposed to let them rub off on us too much. We can learn many things from all kinds of people, but we need to remember that Jesus blesses “the pure in heart.” Our single-minded determination to seek God and God's will must not be compromised, regardless of where we are and who we are with. Otherwise, we won't be salt anymore, possibly worse than useless if we continue to think of ourselves as salt, and claim that for ourselves.

So, what does light do? It allows people who would otherwise be in darkness, virtually blind, to see around them clearly. How do we shine out into the world? We have to shine beyond our church building's walls. *We* are the church, wherever we go. We choose to be a good church, a light to the world, or a bad church, hiding our identity in darkness, as if we were ashamed to be Christians.

Please notice that Jesus, who says, "*I am* the light of the world," in John, says here that *we* are the light of the world. *You* are the light of the world.

So, how we are light? Our good works, the things we do that are selfless, that serve others without expectation of reward or repayment; that is our light, the light of Christ burning in our lives and shining out into the world. We may do things that draw public recognition, and when that happens, we need to remember that the light we want people to recognize originates not with us, but with God. We are not doing things to glorify ourselves or our church. We are doing good works to point directly to God, to glorify God.

Consider how many ways Jesus Christ points us outward in this Sermon on the Mount. Being **meek** involves being kind, gentle and patient; all qualities that shape our relationships with others. Being **merciful** is entirely about how we relate to others as Christ would. Being **peacemakers** is all about doing good to others, and helping them do good, as well. And now, we are called to be salt and light.

One more emphasis on the outwardness of true Christianity: Christ has illuminated our souls, we've all felt that at one time or other. But, Christ did not illuminate our souls for us to cover it up and keep it to ourselves. We are illuminated so we can illuminate others. We are the light of the world when we accept the call from Christ and live the Beatitudes, as well as the entire Sermon on the Mount.

I opened the sermon with a quote from John Wesley. Here is one more to close this section:

**"Sure it is that a secret, unobserved religion cannot be the religion of Jesus Christ. Whatever religion can be concealed is not Christianity."**

Jesus then smoothly changes the subject to the Law. He is talking about the Jewish Law that we find in our Old Testament. While he says he didn't come to abolish the Law and the prophets, his idea of life in God's service looks

very different from the life required by the laws all the Jews lived with for hundreds of years. He manages to avoid abolishing the Law while, at the very same time, crushing the status quo. (Jesus is almost universally against the status quo, regardless of what that status quo might be. Just something to think about.)

How does Jesus fulfill the Law? It's not just doing what is required (he will occasionally NOT do what is required). It's not just interpreting the Law, looking at it from a different angle. It's not just summing it up. We can see pretty clearly that his teachings are not a summary of the Law.

Stay with me. The entire Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, points to the coming of the Messiah, the Messianic Age, the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus fulfills the Law and the prophets by being the Messiah who comes to usher in the Kingdom, although in an unexpected way.

He confirms and incorporates the Law into his own teachings, which are much more comprehensive: mercy, love, justice and covenant loyalty. These are the transcendent aspects of his teaching, of his life, by which the rest of the Law must be judged.

The OT Prophets, writing hundreds of years before Christ, were already expressing God's displeasure at His people's meticulous attention to the form and structure of worship while ignoring the needs of the poor.

**“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” - Hosea 6:6**

**“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But, let *justice* roll down like waters, and *righteousness* like an ever-flowing stream.” – Amos 5:21-24**

**“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of**

**thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? – Micah 6:6-8**

I used to be amazed that the Jews would preserve the words of the prophets in their Bible, but ignore them completely. Then I realized Christians do the same thing. We revere the words of Jesus, but don't practice his teachings, at least not all of them. Knowing his teachings is a good thing, but it's only the beginning of the Christian life.

See what the prophets and Jesus are talking about. It's the difference between an upright life and a holy heart. It's form vs. substance, appearances vs. inner truth, how we look to the world vs. how we are inside.

If we are going to live the Beatitudes, if we are going to be salt and light for the world, who we are inside matters tremendously. Are we loving and forgiving and merciful? That's what God is looking for, and what Christ has tried to teach us as disciples.

Don't get hung up on rules, and don't try to keep everything under control. Pay attention to God, and His rules for your life will become clear. And, relinquish control, and allow the Holy Spirit to take control. This is how we serve God. This is how we live the Christian life. And, we can do this only with the help of Jesus Christ. Let's let him into our hearts. Let's let him drive the bus. It can be scary at first, but is wonderful in the long run.