

“Tasteless Salt and Invisible Light? (Part One)” – Matthew 5:13-16

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
February 8, 2015

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.sobc.net.]

Take your Bible and turn with me to Matthew 5. We took a tangent last week, but today we will be back in the Sermon on the Mount, focusing again on what Jesus says about salt and light.

This is a really important set of verses, in my opinion. They help us, on the one hand, to understand our role in the world as a church—What does God intend to do through us? And then, on the other hand, Jesus’ words here help us to understand the rest of the teaching that we will encounter in the Sermon on the Mount—How does the ethic described here relate to His purposes for His people in the world? It should be immediately obvious that these are important questions. Very important questions. Questions that individual churches must understand lest they wither and die off with the present generation because they failed to grasp why they existed in the first place.

Given then the relevance of what Jesus has to say here to our time and situation, I believe we should linger here a bit. And we will. If we can grasp what Jesus is saying to us here, it will set our church on the course for which it was made and the net result will be the glory of God. Can we agree that is important?

So with that in mind, let’s look at what Jesus says here. We will pick things up in verse 13. This is God’s Word...

“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.”
(Matthew 5:13-16)

Let’s pray...

Father, as Charles Spurgeon prayed each time as he entered the pulpit, I say, “have mercy on me a sinner.” We believe that you have something to say to us through your Word today, so we ask that you would speak clearly to our hearts. Humble our hearts to receive your truth. Strengthen our resolve to apply the wisdom you have offered us through the words of Christ. We acknowledge the relevance of your Word. Help us now to understand it. For your glory we ask these things. Amen.

Now then, there are two things that Jesus compares His followers to in these verses—salt and light. So we’re meant to ask, in what sense are we to be like salt and light? What characteristics do we have in common with salt and light that Jesus is alluding to?

This is a question that has been answered in a variety of ways because, particularly with salt, there are several first-century uses and characteristics that Jesus may have in mind. We itemized several of those a couple of weeks ago. Salt adds flavor. Salt is used as a preservative. Salt purifies. Salt was valuable back then. Salt makes you thirsty. And so on...Jesus could have been alluding to any one of those things.

I'm not sure we can say with absolute certainty which one of these or which combination of these Jesus had in mind, though some do seem more likely than others. But I also don't think it's necessary for us to narrow it down so precisely or dogmatically. Jesus' was a brilliant teacher and He has chosen metaphors that work on a number of levels. But we can detect a thread or two that these uses and characteristics have in common. What are they?

First, both salt and light are known for their *distinctiveness*. And, second, both salt and light by their nature have an *impact* on what they come into contact with. *Distinctiveness* and *influence*. All those other characteristics we have seen are related to these two in some way.

If you have taste buds, then you have no trouble telling the difference between a piece of unseasoned meat and a piece that is covered in salt. Why? Because salt has a distinctive taste. It stands out. There's nothing else like it. It's unique. Likewise, if you have eyesight, then you have no trouble telling the difference between light and darkness. Why? Because light and darkness are very different from one another. Light is distinct from darkness.

Similarly, salt influences what it comes in contact with. It can have a flavoring influence, a purifying influence, a preserving influence, a thirst-creating influence. But the point is that it effects what it comes into contact with. Likewise, light has an effect on darkness. Its impact on darkness is so strong that darkness only exists in the absence of light.

Do you see then? Salt and light are two things that possess a certain distinctiveness and influence. If this is correct, then Jesus is saying that those who follow Him in the world should possess a certain distinctiveness and have a certain influence in the world (and I think those two aspects are related).

So that gets us to the relevant questions: What kind of distinctiveness? What kind of influence? That's what we will spend the next couple weeks addressing. Today we will consider the church's distinctiveness and next time her influence.

So then, clearly, Jesus is saying that his followers should be distinct from the world. It seems like every church gets that. There is not a Christian church in this city that wouldn't throw their "amen!" behind the statement that the Christians should be distinct from the world. We get that. That's easy enough to say, but it raises a new question. In what way are we supposed to be distinct? That is a really important question. How we answer this question will account for some of the differences that exist among churches and will account for the decline in the health of some churches.

What do I mean? Well, everyone agrees that Christians should be distinct. But if we were to make a list of the specific ways that Christians should be distinct what would you put on the list? Chances are some of our lists would be different. Maybe our church's list would differ from some of the other churches in Tyler. Your lists would look different than the list made by your grandparents. Some of your great, great, great grandparents, if they were alive today, would probably be pretty disappointed in you because there was a drum set and guitar and piano used in worship today. Or women in the choir. Or by the fact that we don't want to have anything to do with segregation in the church. Or the Scriptures today were not read in Latin. Or that during our greeting time most of you didn't greet with a "holy kiss" (anyone get a "holy kiss" today?) Or that all you ladies forgot to wear your bonnet today and you men your wigs. Or the fact that there are puppets teaching our children right now!

Do you see my point? We laugh at some of these things, but it should instill in us a certain measure of humility because what it shows us is that each generation of the past has had too many things on the list of *required* Christian distinctives than they should have. And, chances are, your list is too long as well. There are likely things on your list that are not as "core" as you imagine them. That goes for my list as well.

What might Jesus have on his list? Well, believe it or not, in this context I think it is pretty clear what Jesus has in mind when He is discussing Christian distinctiveness. The kind of distinctiveness that His followers should have in this world is the kind of distinctiveness that he is describing in the Sermon on the Mount. Read the Matthew 5 through 7. That's what Christian distinctiveness should look like. Read the rest of the New Testament that elaborates that same ethic. That's what Christian distinctiveness should look like. That's the list. It's not a list of dos and don'ts to earn salvation. We can't earn salvation. It's a list of dos and don'ts that manifests in the lives of those whom God has freely saved in Christ, by grace and through faith.

So Christians should be distinct from the world in any way that the Bible prescribes for them. If we are commanded to do something or avoid something, that's a picture of the Christian's distinctiveness. If the Bible tells us to believe certain things or not believe other things, then that is part of the Christian's distinctiveness. That's what we might call the "core" matters of our lifestyle. The things we ought not to budge on. The things that we should never compromise on.

On the other hand, those things *not* prescribed in God's Word and *not* necessitated by the principles of God's Word, should never be considered "core" and therefore mandated distinctives. When we elevate "non-core" things to the status of "core" things, we end up with legalism. We accidentally become Pharisees. We become the thing we criticize. We just change the list.

So what do we do when we are trying to figure out the behavior the Christian should aspire to? We ask, does the Bible prescribe "behavior X"? If so, then we should do it. Does the Bible call "behavior Y" sin? If so, then we should avoid doing it. What about those things that the Bible doesn't call sinful? Does that mean we can automatically do them? Not necessarily. Then we have to ask, is it beneficial? We answer that in consultation with the principles of God's word and with an eye toward mission. That's exactly what was going on in 1 Corinthians 10. Turn with me there.

Paul planted the church in the city of Corinth and then left. Months passed and now he was writing them to describe God's work among them and to warn them against trading the wisdom of the gospel for the passing trends of the wisdom of the world. This is a very nuanced letter. He argues against legalism *and* against licentious self-indulgence. In this particular section, Paul is addressing one of the struggles that the Corinthians were having regarding whether or not certain actions were suitable for Christians. Particularly, they were trying to figure out if it was permissible for them to eat certain kinds of meats that had previously been sacrificed to idols. In the section beginning in verse 14, Paul lays out five principles/instructions to help them answer that question.

His first principle is that they must, in all things, avoid idolatry. Look at 10:14—"*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*" He then offers two illustrations—the first taken from the observance of the Lord's Supper and the second from the Old Testament practice of sacrifice—to demonstrate that they should not eat in pagan temples or participate in the pagan public feasts. Why? Because these folks are practicing idolatry there and your presence there could be seen as participation in idolatry. So don't do it. Flee from idolatry.

It's worth noting that this is not the answer some of the Corinthians wanted to hear from Paul. It's puts them in a difficult position. As one writer explains:

"Paul's exhortation would have been a hard teaching for the Corinthians to bear because so much of the social and political life had to do with great public feasts. Such feasts were held in pagan temples, and much of the available food in Corinth came from the animals that had been publically offered to the gods. Paul was cutting close to the bone here with his instruction."ⁱ

In other words, not participating in these feasts would have cost these Christians something socially, culturally, and economically in the marketplace. But they are not first and foremost seeking their own good, but the good of others.

That's actually Paul's second instruction here—seek the good of others. Look at verses 23 and 24. *“All things are lawful...”* Notice that the first part of the verse is in quotes. Why? Because evidently that is what many of these Corinthians were arguing: *“All things are lawful.”* They're saying that all these things, regarding their diet, are matters of Christian freedom. And, actually, they are right. That was a lesson Peter had to learn in the book of Acts. But Paul is trying to keep things balanced. Look again at the verse—*“‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”* That's the second principle here—seek the good of others.

Do you see what his point is? He's saying, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with you eating that food that was previously dedicated to an idol by some pagan butcher or cook. That may be permissible, which is what many of the Corinthians were arguing, but Paul's point is that it may not be beneficial in every instance...particularly to the lost world's understanding of the gospel. In chapter 8, Paul talked about being a stumbling block to the weak. He says, *“if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?”* (i.e., to participate in those feasts). He goes on to describe how the resulting actions could be destructive to that individual. So he says, *“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”* And that's the response of someone driven by the principle Paul is getting at in chapter 10—*“Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”*

But then Paul offers another principle, which may seem in tension, but it has to do with a different scenario. Now he's dealing with what we eat at home. So Paul has said don't eat at the feasts and in the temples because people might mistake that for your participation in the idolatrous practices that go on there. But when those feasts are over and that meat is then taken to the market and sold (which was true for basically all the meat you could have bought in Corinth), then can you buy that meat and eat it even though they had offered it to idols? Paul says, yes. This is a matter of Christian freedom. That's the next principle. We must realize where Christians are given freedom.

Look at verses 25 to 27:

“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For ‘the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.’ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.”

In other words, it is not sinful for you to eat that meat that was previously sacrificed to idols. You are free to do that. You didn't participate in that idolatry. And on the basis of Psalm 24:1, which Paul quotes, *“The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.”* In other words, that meat belongs to the Lord ultimately. It's His meat, not some idols. So you are free to partake, giving that's to God for His provision. That won't defile you. Jesus made the same point when he said, *“‘Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean). And he said, ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles him...All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’”* (Mark 7:18-21, 23). The externals don't defile. So Paul is essentially agreeing with the Corinthians that eating the food is lawful and he tells them to go ahead and eat it even if they are eating a meal with unbelievers.

But that leads to another principle. Sometimes we should forgo our freedoms and preferences, for the good of others. He gives an example. Look at verse 28. *“But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in*

sacrifice [i.e., in sacrifice to an idol],’ *then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his*” (1 Corinthians 10:28-29).ⁱⁱ Do you see what Paul is saying? He’s saying, it’s not sinful for you to eat that meat in general. If you are having dinner with an unbeliever and he brings out the filet, eat it and enjoy it. But if he happens to tell you that the filet was sacrificed to idols, then go ahead and set aside your freedom to eat for the sake of your unbelieving friend, lest you act of eating confuse your friend about the gospel. How would it do that? Well, for instance, he might conclude that your God is just another face in the pantheon of pagan gods or that Christianity is compatible with the worship of those pagan gods. So since the act could confuse them about the Gospel, don’t do it. Though you are free, forego your freedom for their sake.

Mark Dever, who is the founder of *9Marks* Ministries and the pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church, explains Paul’s point this way:

“The correct response to such a situation is not the establishment of another law, nor is it the restriction of this freedom in an absolute sense. Because, as Paul has just argued, the meat itself is pure. It is from God and can therefore be eaten in thanks to God. However, the decision must be based on the needs of the dinner host and on the truth of the gospel; refraining is best if eating the meat might blur this truth. A legalistic response to such situations is to classify something as wrong in all situations; however, the answer Paul gives here is not legalistic. It is an answer springing from the loving use or nonuse of a Christian’s freedoms, always having in mind the good of the other...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Pastor Dever goes on to write this, which is absolutely on point in my view:

“We are called to modify how we behave in order to avoid confusing unbelievers about what it means to be a Christian. We desire others to understand the gospel by our words and lives, so we will work to try to be accurate messengers of the great news about Jesus Christ. We want our unbelieving friends to have a restored relationship with God, and we want them to know that this is our intention—something much more important than our comfort and convenience [and, I would add, preferences]. How can we use our freedoms for the gospel? Every situation you face comes with an opportunity. Are you willing to be flexible and to inconvenience yourself in order to help others to come to grasp the gospel? What freedoms are you unwilling to forgo in order to share the gospel with others? Do you have to be able to drink that, or wear this, or shop here, or own that? What if those things might confuse the Muslim or the Mormon or the backslidden Baptist with whom you are sharing the gospel? Is your priority the exercising of your freedoms or reaching the lost?”^{iv}

Do you see the point that he’s making? The point that Paul is making to the Corinthians? If something is sinful, avoid it. If it’s not, ask whether it is beneficial. Beneficial for whom? For the sake of those who you want to hear and understand the Gospel. Base the decision on when and how to exercise your freedoms on the whether or not it will make the Gospel more accessible or understandable for the unbelieving world. In other words, the decision on how to handle those “non-core” matters of Christian freedom should be driven by mission. What is better for Christian mission in the world? That’s what matters. Make sense?

And by the way, that was the point Paul made in the previous chapter. Flip back a page. Chapter 9, verse 19 and following. Paul says,

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

That’s our example. Paul was constantly adapting, not on the basis of his freedoms or preferences or rights, but on the basis of the group he was trying to reach with the Gospel. He never changed the message. He never compromised on the “core” matters of the faith. But he shifted the “non-core” stuff for the sake of mission in the world. Each of those groups he described had a different “list” of acceptable behaviors. They ate different diet. They wore different clothing. They made arguments in different ways. They congregated in different places. They had different hobbies. And Paul is saying that he was willing to adopt any of their cultural trends (as long as they didn’t compromise the Gospel or God’s instruction) if it meant that he “*might save some.*”

That’s a guy who had a heart for missions. In chapter 10, verse 33, he says that he was not seeking his own advantage in all of this, “*but that of many, that they might be saved.*” And then he concludes the section by saying, “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (11:1). In other words, we have to have the same heart for missions. We have to resolve to be uncompromising on the core matters that the Bible teaches. And when it comes to matters of personal freedom, things that are not sinful, we make our decision based on what seems most beneficial for our lost friends and neighbors, what makes the Gospel more accessible or understandable to them. The Gospel will be offensive enough on its own to some people, we don’t have to add a non-biblical list to it and make it more difficult to accept.

But Paul adds another thought. If these matters of personal freedom are evaluated in terms of the priority of Christian mission and the goal of missions is to see God glorified through worship in all the nations, then the decisions should be made for the glory of God. That’s Paul’s fifth and final principle here—live your life for the glory of God. Look at verse 31—“*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*”

Johann Sebastian Bach was a devout evangelical Christian and one of the world’s most famous composers. He used to sign his works with the initials, “S. D. G.,” which stood for Latin phrase, *Soli Deo Gloria*, meaning “to the only God be the glory.” The phrase comes from the Latin Vulgates translation of Romans 16:27. That became Bach’s motto. He was known for signing his works—both religious and secular—with those three letters. He understood that all works should be done for the glory of God.

That’s Paul’s point as well to the Corinthians. But it was also Jesus’ point in the salt and light passage. Turn back to Matthew 5. Remember the salt and light point, in part, to the distinctiveness of His followers in the world. That distinctiveness is defined by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the teachings of Jesus elsewhere, which are expanded in the New Testament. Obedience to Jesus is what makes us distinct.

But, listen, Jesus is not describing distinctiveness for the sake of itself. It’s distinctiveness for the sake of influence for the sake of the glory of God! Jesus ends his words on salt and light by commanding you, in verse 16, to “*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*” See? Distinctiveness for the sake of influence for the sake of the glory of God. That’s what drives us as Christians—the glory of God. That’s what motivates us—the glory of God. Distinctiveness for the sake of influence for the sake of the glory of God.

That’s what we will deal with next time. Among other things, we will address questions like: what kind of influence is Jesus referring to? Are we having it in our culture and society (both locally and nationally)? Why or why not? How do we lose our influence? And how do we get it back? These are all things we will address next week. So bring a friend with you next week and we will take this study to the next level.

Pray with me...

ⁱ Mark Dever, *Twelve Challenges Churches Face* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 99.

ⁱⁱ Dever explains the rest of verse 29 like this: “We come to the section that in one sense can be most difficult to understand, particularly verse 29. Verse 28 is straightforward: if your host tells you that the meat you are about to eat has been sacrificed to an idol, do not eat the meat, Paul says. In this way you serve as a witness to those in the home at which you are eating. To eat the meat would appear to be countenancing and approving of idolatry, either before non-Christians or before young Christians who might not yet have fully understood the implications of Psalm 24:1. Paul has just finished telling the Corinthians that they are free to eat such meat in their own homes and even at someone else’s home, but now he makes an exception. If your host tells you that the meat has been sacrificed to idols then you shouldn’t eat it. Okay, no problem. Then Paul says you should abstain for the sake of the conscience of the one who told you the origin of the meal. That still makes sense. But then comes the difficult part, where Paul asks, ‘Why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience?’ That sounds like an *objection* to his freedom that is being imposed by the conscience of the other. How can Paul write these words just after telling the Corinthian Christians to govern the use of their freedoms according to the conscience of another? Two basic explanations are given. The first is that verse 28 and the first half of verse 29 are a parenthesis expressing an exception to the exercise of Christian freedom. The statement is viewed as a disjunction, which it is meant to be. The other explanation is that Paul is thinking of the idea of being judged in the sense of being *controlled* by the conscience of another. He is not controlled by someone else; instead, he chooses to lay down his rights when those freedoms and rights are opposed to the good of someone else. Either way, Paul clearly makes an appeal to the Corinthians to forgo their freedom in the case of the man who informs them that this meat has been sacrificed to idols. Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to determine their actions by what would be the most help to their non-Christian friends. Eating the meat might confuse unbelievers about the gospel.” *Ibid.*, 104-105.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 105.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 105-106. Later he says, “In all of this concern about how to behave, we must remember that Christians are not to be legalists. We have been liberated to follow Christ. We have our liberty, and we curtail it not out of legalism, but out of love—love for our fellow Christian for the non-Christian with us. Ultimately we curtail it out of our love for God.” *Ibid.*, 108.