

SERMON TITLE: “A City on a Hill”

TEXT: Matthew 5:13-16

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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We’ve spent the last two weeks looking at the Sermon on the Mount. There’s some tough stuff in there, as I’m sure you’re starting to realize if you’ve been reading along in Matthew 5-7 on your own.

Earlier in the week, if you would have looked on our church website, the title of this sermon series would have been “Practical Christianity” (this has since been changed to “Christianity Applied”). And if you thought about last week’s sermon—“you have heard it said, but I say to you...”—throughout this week you may, perhaps, have thought that of all the things the Sermon on the Mount may be, “practical” isn’t among them. You would not be the first to think this. Throughout history, many have given up even trying to follow Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5-7. Many have felt that they are simply an impossible ideal meant to highlight our inability to meet God’s requirements, and to show us our need for grace. And there is some truth to this—we *cannot* follow Jesus’ teachings perfectly, and we *do* need grace.

But Jesus was not trying to set up a new, even more difficult system of rules and requirements than those contained in the Old Testament. The kinds of behaviour and ideals described in the Sermon on the Mount have a very specific purpose and that’s what we’re going to look at this morning.

So we’re going to rewind a bit this morning, and go back near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Right after the Beatitudes, which we looked at last summer (Blessed are the *x, y, z...*), comes a passage that is kind of like a **gateway** for all that will follow in the Sermon on the Mount. All of the difficult sayings James talked about last week, and the teachings we will continue to explore as we move toward Easter can be looked at through the lens of these four short verses:

13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Jesus uses three metaphors to describe what his followers are to be and to do in this brief passage, each of which is worth unpacking a bit.

You are the Salt of the Earth

The first is that of salt: “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. What does that mean? We often use this phrase to refer to someone who is down-to-earth, hard working, humble, etc—“oh you know, so and so, he’s a real salt-of-the-earth kind of guy.” It’s certainly a positive description, but what does it actually mean?

For us, salt’s primary purpose is that of seasoning, or adding flavour to food that is, perhaps, a bit bland or tasteless. We use salt to make things taste better (we also use salt to help us get up a hill in Nanaimo during a snowstorm, but I digress!). But in the ancient world salt served a different, much more important purpose. It was a preservative. In a world without refrigeration, where food would go bad much more quickly and was less readily available, salt was crucial for survival. Salt was crucial to allow food to be stored longer and to hold off fungus and bacteria from destroying a family or village’s precious and often precarious food supply.

If we draw the analogy, Jesus seems to be saying that his followers are to play this same cleansing, preservative role in a world that can and does frequently go bad. We are crucial for the world’s survival! Have you ever thought of your role as a Christian in these terms? What does that look like?

Well, Jesus will lay this out in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Apparently, Jesus thinks that loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, controlling our anger and lust, practicing transparency and honesty, and giving generously of ourselves to others is part of how we will function like salt in the world. This is how we keep the world from “spoiling,” or “going bad.”

Interestingly, I think that we can embrace this understanding of the role of salt and how it relates to our mission in the world without getting rid of our own understanding of salt as primarily for adding flavour. The church is meant to be a preservative, as we’ve seen, but I think we are also meant to be a source of flavour and goodness as well.

We are meant to make things “taste better” in that we are the representatives and proclaimers of the *good news* that rescue and redemption are available through Jesus. As such, we ought to be the most hopeful people on the planet! We ought to be the most enthusiastic caretakers of God’s earth, the most creative patrons of art, music, and sport, the most committed and joyful servers of those who need help, for whom the world tastes bland and hopeless.

Have you ever heard someone speak of their experience with the church in general or this or that Christian as “leaving a bad taste in their mouth?” This should not be the case—or, at least not nearly as often! If people find us or our message “distasteful,” we need to be very careful that this is for the right reasons! The apostle Paul speaks of the “offense of the cross” and the “foolishness of the cross” and there are certainly times when our message or even our existence will be perceived in this way; but this does not give us permission to be offensive people!

We are called to be salt—to preserve what is good and true and hopeful, as well as to enhance the world God loves.

You are the Light of the World

Second, Jesus uses the metaphor of light. This metaphor is less context-specific in that we all know what light is and what it is for. We need light to make our way in dark places.

Naomi and I watched the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy again over the Christmas season. For those who don't know much about the films or the books, I won't go into a great deal of detail. Suffice to say that there are a lot of scenes that take place in caves and mountains and dark, dank, gloomy, frightening places. Even though I've seen these films and read the books several times now and know *exactly* what's going to happen and when it's going to happen, the darkness is still frightening (not so much for me, more for Naomi!). And the moments when the light comes, whether it's from Gandalf, the white wizard, or from an elfish lamp or huge torch-like beacons, are huge moments of relief and comfort. Clarity and direction are restored. We feel like there is hope for the story, that all is *not* lost, that good *will* conquer evil, that the darkness will *not* have the last word.

In the same way, the church is to be this light for a world that so often finds itself in the dark. In the same way that salt preserves and enhances food, light preserves and enhances safety, courage, and the basic ability to make our way in the world. Without light, the darkness can seem overwhelming and fearful. When the light comes, our confidence, faith, and hope are restored.

As I've said before, one of my favourite passages in Scripture is John 1:1-5. I think it puts what we've been talking about wonderfully:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

As followers of Christ, we are to be this light—for the sake of a world that loves the darkness. We don't have to look very far to see examples of this: family breakdowns, the prevalence of mental, physical, and sexual abuse, global economic injustice that contributes to famine and disease, and on and on it goes.

We see examples in our own lives as well. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we have our own dark desires and tendencies. Much as we love the light, much as we are drawn to it, much as we would love to be characterized by light all the time, we know that this is not always the case.

Listen again to what John says a few chapters later (John 3:19-21):

19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

Without light, evil can gain a foothold. There is a reason that a lot of crime and other bad behaviour takes place under the cover of darkness. Light exposes us, it allows for our behaviour to be seen clearly, it removes from us the option of hiding or trying to keep our deeds from others. Light reveals our secrets, it tells the truth that can become obscured when we retreat to the darkness. Light can be a painful thing when we have something to hide!

But John goes on:

21 But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

We can come *into* the light and live by the truth. And if we live by the truth, the light transforms us and—in one of those wonderful gospel reversals—we become bearers of this light to a dark world.

We are to be open and transparent—as James said last week, what is on the inside is to match the outside. It's not enough to just avoid saying and doing the nasty things going on in our hearts (although this is an *excellent* start!). We need to get to the root of the problem and clean up how we think as well. And even if we never fully attain it, if this kind of transparency and honesty and willingness to come into the light is our constant goal, we are then in a position to be light for others as well.

A City on a Hill

The final metaphor Jesus uses is that of a city on a hill. Again, there is a level at which this is a fairly obvious picture: just as cities on hills are visible to all, so the church is to be a visible sign of God's mercy, forgiveness, and truth to the world.

For the first hearers of the Sermon on the Mount—most likely Jews—the phrase a “city on a hill” would likely have had a fairly specific connotation. Jerusalem. For a Jew, Jerusalem was the city on a hill that represented the hopes and aspirations of Israel, as God's chosen nation through whom the nations would be blessed. We see this hope in Isaiah 2:2-4:

*2 In the last days
the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.*

3 Many peoples will come and say,

*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

*4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

*5 Come, house of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD.*

This is a remarkable vision of a future of peace, safety, unity and worship. All the nations will stream to this city on a hill, their disputes will be settled, the knowledge of God and his ways will be evident, *shalom* will reign.

Most of our cities don't look much like this today, and they certainly didn't in Jesus' day either. In the ancient world, a city on a hill would have signified strength and protection. It was for the purpose of self-defense that cities were built on hills—it was easier to defend a city when attackers had to come up to you, than if you were in the middle of a wide open plain. It gave you a valuable tactical advantage.

In Jesus' time, Isaiah's vision of Jerusalem as the city of peace and unity likely seemed a distant memory, an impossible dream. Jerusalem was a city under Roman rule, and the site of much squabbling and disagreement about what it meant to be faithful to God under foreign occupation. Some preferred collaboration with Rome (the Sadducees), some preferred increased emphasis on keeping Torah (the Pharisees), and some preferred withdrawal (The Essenes).

Some also preferred violent resistance. And hills were good places to defend. King Herod, whom we meet just a few chapters earlier in Matthew, built this fortress on a hill just south of Jerusalem. Herod was a paranoid, violent, and delusional man (See Matthew 2, and his mass slaughter of all boys under two in the Bethlehem area)—a puppet king under the Roman emperor who was desperate to retain power. He built this palace on a hill as a refuge for himself in the event of a revolt.

Jesus would have been familiar with Herod's "city on a hill" as well as its purposes. Jesus did not use this metaphor in ignorance—he knew that cities on hills were often the sites of violent power struggles. He knew that they were often built as monuments to the egos of crazy and dangerous men.

Decades after Jesus left the scene, violence was still the most commonly chosen option. The hill where Herod built his fortress would eventually become the fortress of Masada, which was captured by a group of armed Jewish revolutionaries in 66 AD and held for a number of years until Rome destroyed their temple in 70 AD. In the end, they committed mass suicide rather than giving in to the Romans. Both before Jesus and after, cities on hills were violent and dangerous places.

Jesus knew all about cities on hills. And yet... he chooses this picture to describe his followers. We are to be a different kind of a city on a hill, one like the world has never seen, one that will help the world to see in new and better ways.

Jesus knew that we would sometimes find the challenge of being *this* kind of a city on a hill an overwhelming one. He knew how tightly human beings cling to defensiveness and power, and how unnatural his kind of city on a hill would be. And so he prayed for his city, just before his arrest and ultimately, his crucifixion:

John 17:9-18:

*I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. 11 I will remain in the world no longer, but **they are still in the world**, and I am coming to you. **Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one***

*13 "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. 14 **I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.** 15 **My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.** 16 **They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.** 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

We are sent into the world as a city on a hill—but a totally unique kind of city. *This* city will not be made out of stone and brick, it will not be defended by swords and spears, and it is not built for the glory of violent men who come and go and are forgotten.

It will, rather, be made out of hearts and minds and hands and feet committed to participating in his kingdom; it does not resort to violence, but prays for its enemies, turns the other cheek, and goes the extra mile for those who oppose it; **it is to be a city built not for the glory of power-hungry human beings, but for the glory of the God of peace who makes all things new, the God who climbed another hill, with a cross on his back and the weight of the world on his shoulders, and laid down his life for his enemies.**

And so Jesus prayed for us—for you, for me, and for every other person who would bear his name, who would be his city on a hill to light the way for a lost and hurting

world. He did not pray that we would be able to cling to our faith until he returned, or that we would retreat into a holy huddle and ride out the storm. In his prayer, Jesus is very clear that we are *sent out* into the world for a purpose.

This morning's text makes it clear what this purpose is. We are a city on a hill—a city that, like salt, preserves, protects, and adds flavour to whatever it is added to and, like a lamp on a stand, lights the way back to our redeeming God.

May God help us—as individuals and as a church body—to preserve, to protect, to add flavour, and to be a beacon of hope and light in whatever dark corners of our communities and our world God calls us to.

“You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

Benediction

For our benediction, we look to another hill—the hill in Galilee where Jesus' disciples met him after the resurrection.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Go in peace.