

MAY DAYS

Pastoral Bible Study on:

“Foundational Discipleship Instructions”

May 1(TH), 8 (TH), 14 (W), 22 (TH), 29 (TH)

7:00 pm – 8:15 pm weekly

(in-person & online)

Instructor:

Rev. Dr. Leslie D. Braxton

Week 1

“Salt and Light”

Text:

Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus’ teaching on “Salt and Light” is used as a bridge between section one (5:1-16) of the Sermon on the Mountain discourse – the *Beatitudes* (*notae ecclesiae*) – and section two (5:17-7:12), which presents actual discipleship instructions for the church as a community. The life of discipleship is conceived throughout as life within the community of faith, a community charged with a mission to the world. Like their master, Jesus’ disciples live their lives for the sake of the world that persecutes them.

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 by men.

The saying is a metaphor (*not* parable or allegory) with a brief rhetorical question, speaking of the disciples as salt. The saying is evocative and has multiple layers of meaning, since salt had many connotations in Jesus’ tradition and context – including:

- sacrifice (Lev. 2:13; Ezek 43:24),
- covenant fidelity (Numbers 18:19)
- eating together was called “sharing salt” and expressed a binding relationship
- purification (2 Kings 2:12-22),
- seasoning (Job 6:6; Colossians 4:5),
- preservative

The initial “you” is emphatic – its presence indicates emphasis – so that the sentence might be translated “It is you [and *not* the others – Pharisees? The Jewish people?] who are the salt of the earth”. Yet, there is no smugness, for the saying serves as a warning that if the disciples deny their mission, they (too) will be thrown out as useless. Salt loses its saltiness by becoming so impure, so mixed with other elements that it loses its function.

“Earth” is here the equivalent of the *“world”* (cf. 5:14). Matthew refers to *“the world”* nine times, never in a negative dualistic sense. The world does not belong to Satan. It is the creation of God (13:35; 24:31), the scene of the disciples’ mission (5:14; 13:38; 26:13), where God’s will shall finally be done.

Point: Salt does not exist for itself. Nor do the disciples. Their life is turned outward to the world – *“the field is the world”* (13:38).

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 men, they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in Heaven.

The disciples’ mission in the world is further illustrated by the juxtaposition of two clashing metaphors. On one hand, **the light metaphor** presents the disciples as illumination for the world. The primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are. On the other hand, in a provocative contrast, **the metaphor of the city on a hill** presents the disciples as inevitably and unavoidably *being seen*. This is the nature of proverbial wisdom in general: *“look before you leap,”* but *“he who hesitates is lost”*; *“fools rush in where wise men fear to tread,”* but *“damn the torpedoes – full speed ahead!”*

“Light” (to the nations) and **“city on a hill”** were both used with reference to Israel’s mission to the nations (Isaiah 2:2-5; 42:6; 49:6). Matthew believes that empirical Israel has failed to carry out this mission of the people of God and that the church of Jews and Gentiles is now charged with this task (28:19-20). Again, the very same verse that identifies the church as the community now tasked to reach the world for God, also functions as a warning to disciples not to fail in their mission. The **salt** and **light** saying picture mission as inherent to discipleship, just as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is essential to light. For salt, being salty is not optional. With these three metaphors of salt, light, and city, Jesus strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private.

Note: The conclusion of the **“light”** paragraph shifts from the indicative to the imperative. It shifts from speaking in the third person to speaking in the 2nd person.

Break out Questions

1. Provide examples of how the Church has lived up to the **“salt”** imperative.
2. Provide examples of how the Church has fallen short of the **“salt”** imperative.
3. Provide examples of how the Church has lived up to the **“light”** imperative.
4. Provide examples of how the Church has fallen short of the light imperative.