Responsibilities for Believers
Matthew 5:13-16
(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh in 1983)

1. The Salt of the Earth
2. The Purpose of Salt
3. Salt Can Become Useless
4. Emphasis on the Individual
5. Don't Miss Your Purpose
6. The Light of the World
7. Jesus Christ Was Light
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The last three studies have considered the passage known as the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are descriptive of one who has believed in Jesus Christ the Messiah as his Savior. Such a person would be referred to today as a Christian, one who has been born again. This description has been given in anticipation of the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus began preaching, His message to the people of His day was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). In the Beatitudes He gives the description of the character and conduct of those who will be part of the kingdom that He is going to set up.

The character of God is unchanging. Therefore, the character of His children should always be the same as well. A description fitting those anticipating the kingdom in Jesus' day should also be a description of those today who are trusting the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for their salvation.

The last study noted that those who manifest God's character and proclaim His message of salvation by faith in Christ alone can expect persecution and rejection as a by-product. A person should not court persecution and rejection by being antagonistic, but by the very fact that a person manifests God's character and proclaims His message, that person will stir opposition and arouse persecution. One should count it a privilege to be identified in suffering with the men of God who served Him as prophets in the Old Testament and with the apostles and early believers in Christ who are to be models in bearing suffering.

This section of the message that Jesus gave as the Sermon on the Mount covers Matthew 5:1-16. Therefore, verses 13-16, which are being considered in this study, flow out of the first twelve verses and are actually a part of the same section. In this way verses 13-16 are tied very closely to the Beatitudes. The character and conduct of believers has been discussed in the first twelve verses. In this section, Jesus describes the testimony and impact of believers on the world with two metaphors -- salt and light. The reason that believers are salt and light is that believers are manifesting God's character.
1. The Salt of the Earth

When Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth" (v.13) and "You are the light of the world" (v.14), He made a statement of fact. He did not say you should be the salt or you should be the light of the world. He said you are salt and light. The crucial thing is for us as believers to function as salt and light are intended to function. That is the purpose of the analogies Christ uses in His statements.

The Beatitudes clearly reveal that the believer is not to be like the world. The believer is to be different in character and conduct. But the other side that is revealed in the metaphors of salt and light is that believers are not to be isolated from the world. If we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, there can be no monastic kind of life where we withdraw from the world and its pollution. Rather, God's intention is that we have an impact upon the world. We are not to be like the world, but neither are we to be isolated from the world. The impact of the life and testimony of the believer is to be felt in the world. Because you are salt and because you are light, you will be the object of persecution.

Jesus said in verse 13, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men." The bulk of the analogy is given to warn us about failing to function as we should. When He tells us we are the salt of the earth, that fact is established. The warning is for us not to fail to function effectively as salt.

2. The Purpose of Salt

Salt is to act as a preservative and to resist corruption. By the very nature of the lives we live as believers and by the gospel we proclaim, we are salt in the world. We are a preserving influence and a resistance to corruption.

This is clear in the description of the church in 2 Thessalonians 2 after the Rapture of the Church occurs. At that time, the Spirit will no longer be indwelling believers as He is today, and lawlessness will break forth in greater force. When all believers are removed from the face of the earth, the restraining and preserving influence will be gone. Thus, lawlessness and corruption will sweep over the earth in a greater way than ever before.

By our lives and our testimony, believers are a preserving influence in the world. Corruption is restrained by our lives and by our testimony. If the believer is not manifesting God's character or proclaiming the gospel as he should, what good is he? What good is a believer whose life is so diluted and ineffective that he makes no impact for Jesus Christ? What good are two dabs of salt mixed in thirty pounds of sand? The salt becomes so diluted that it no longer has any impact.

3. Salt Can Become Useless
Believers are salt and we cannot change what we are. But we can be adulterated by other things so that we lose any real impact. That is the warning of this passage, "if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again?" (v.13). Salt can become so mixed in with other things and diluted that it no longer functions effectively.

That is the warning Jesus is giving us in this passage. After telling us what our character is and the importance of manifesting that character, we are warned that our character can be so diluted by the world that our impact is no longer felt. When that happens, we no longer function as peacemakers who effectively proclaim the truth concerning salvation by faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We talk around things, but we never get to the heart of the matter to present the truth.

Many people talk about God's love and a need to believe in Him, but there is no force in such a testimony. The gospel is not presented with clarity in such situations. What good is a believer whose testimony is like that? Such salt is worthless as far as its impact for Jesus Christ is concerned. That is indeed a sound warning for us!

After Christ so clearly delineates what our character is and outlines our responsibility for proclaiming the gospel, He warns us about being worthless or useless in our service. When He speaks of the salt being good for nothing but to be thrown out and walked on, He is not referring to the loss of salvation. Salt is salt and does not change. But He is talking about the impact of the life.

4. Emphasis on the Individual

Note that Jesus was talking about individuals. Martin Lloyd-Jones has a very fine discussion on this issue in one of his commentaries. Many have tried to transfer to the church what is said to the individual. Such an approach concludes that the church is the salt in the world, and therefore, the church ought to be involved in politics, economics and social work. But this statement is not addressed to the church as a body, but rather to the individuals who are to live out the life of Christ by manifesting His character and proclaiming His truth. This passage has nothing to say about the church trying to turn around the political, economic or social conditions of the world. The way you increase the impact of salt is to increase the amount of salt. In the metaphor Christ is using, the impact of believers is increased as the number of believers is increased. As more believers function in the role of peacemakers proclaiming the message of reconciliation, more people are saved.

The more salt in the world, the greater its preserving influence; a greater amount of salt will result in greater restraint of corruption. It is a trick of the Devil that many people take this verse to say that the church is to be involved in the social and political action of our day. There is nothing wrong with individual Christians getting involved with these things. We have rights, privileges and responsibilities as citizens. We are free as individuals to function according to our consciences and the directions of the Word. But this passage has nothing to do with the church getting involved in such activities. This has been a trap of the Devil to dilute the church because it gets so taken up in social and political issues that it no longer manifests the character
of Christ and no longer proclaims the gospel of Christ as its main emphasis.

The church as a whole is more political today than it has ever been before. It is more involved in social issues than it has ever been before. Yet, we live in a more corrupt society than we have ever experienced. The reason for this is because believers are salt, and there are not enough believers. The church has been diverted from proclaiming the gospel and building believers, and its influence has been diluted by other activities.

5. Don't Miss Your Purpose

You are the salt of the earth. If you are not functioning as God intends you to function, you are worthless in bringing glory to Him and in being a preserving influence in the world. That is what He says. Salt that has lost its saltiness is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. It is worthless. What a tragedy!

He is talking about wasted lives. Believers are privileged to manifest the character of God and proclaim His truth, which will make an impact upon the world for God. What a tragedy to allow our lives to be useless because we become so diluted by being taken up with other things that we miss the purpose for which God has called us.

6. The Light of the World

The second metaphor Jesus uses to describe Christians is introduced in verse 14: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." The point is made clearly that believers are the light of the world. The only issue is how that light is shining. Is it shining as it should be or is it being covered? Jesus said, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden." You can see it from all around.

Verse 15 continues, "Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house." The purpose of a light is to reveal something or to make it known. No one lights a light and then puts a box over it. Why bother to have the light if you are going to cover it up?

It is interesting that God saved us and left us in the world. He could have taken us right to heaven the moment we believed, but He left us here to be a light in the world. He wants our lives to make an impact in the world around us by revealing the character of God and the truth of God. God intends for us to be lights in the world. That means that believers are going to stand out in the darkness.

7. Jesus Christ Was Light

Jesus Christ was also referred to as light in John 1:4,5: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend (overcome) it." Jesus Christ was the light. He revealed God and made Him known. He brought the character and the truth of God to all who believed in Him. Verse 9 adds, "There
was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man." It is through Jesus Christ that the true knowledge of God is made known. He brought the light and revealed the character and person of God.

Jesus Himself claimed to be the light of the world. "Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life'" (John 8:12). Jesus is the light. Those who follow Him are in the light, and they themselves become the light. We are those who manifest the character of God. He resides in us, and our lives are a reflection of His character.

8. Believers Are Light

Believers are those who proclaim God's truth and make Him known. The Apostle Peter addressed the believer's purpose for existence in 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, in order that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." So we proclaim the truth concerning Him. We are light, and our purpose is to make God known.

If an unbeliever comes in contact with you, he ought to see in your life the reflection of the character of God. He ought to hear from your lips the truth concerning God. God saved you in order for you to proclaim His excellencies. What a tragedy that some unbelievers have repeated contact with Christians, yet they never hear from them the marvelous excellencies of the One who called them out of darkness into light. We are to be proclaiming the truth of His salvation.

The Apostle Paul warned us about being partakers of those deeds that characterize the ones living in darkness. If we do participate in such deeds, it dilutes the impact of our lives. "Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth)" (Ephesians 5:7-9). When you read these passages, you cannot overlook the fact that we are light and that we have a responsibility to walk as children of light. This means that goodness, righteousness and truth ought to characterize the way we live our lives as believers. This is what Jesus is emphasizing in Matthew 5.

9. Light For Unbelievers

Jesus tells us how we are to be living our lives on this earth before men in Matthew 5:16: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." God's intention is that the world should see in us His character and, thus, be drawn to Him. Our good works are to affect others. This is not speaking of salvation by good works, but rather, of the good works of believers. We who have the character of God within us should be living as described in the Beatitudes--consistent with the character of God. Such a life will make God known among unbelievers and will be God's means of saving some of them.
That is the kind of life God expects us to live as we proclaim the truth as peacemakers. God
has saved us and left us on the earth for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to others. God
does not send angels to proclaim the truth to those around us. He has entrusted the gospel to us
as human beings. Paul told the Corinthians that we have this treasure in earthen vessels so that
if we proclaim the truth of God, we bring glory to Him. The issue at stake is that men might
see the character of God in us and glorify Him.

Good works are to occur in the life of a believer after salvation. Ephesians 2:8,9 makes it clear
that we are saved by grace and not by works. But verse 10 tells us that we are saved "for good
works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." It is God's
intention that believers manifest His character in all that they do. That is what Paul is talking
about in 1 Corinthians 6 when he says that we are not our own. "For you have been bought
with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (v.20). The way I live my life and the
things I say are to glorify Him. This is the means by which God draws men and women to
himself.

Are people being saved around you? Do you see men and women coming to know Jesus Christ
as their personal Savior because of your witness? If not, what kind of impact is your life
having? Are you really living a transformed life? Are you proclaiming God's salvation in its
clarity?

God tells us that we are the salt of the earth. We are to be a preserving influence in the world
around us. He also says that we are to be the light of the world. Some Christians like to hide
because they are uncomfortable when their lives stand out in the world. But it is not God's
intention for us to be light in an enclosed environment. We are to be light before men.

How salty are you to the world around you? How bright is your light shining to others? Are
you functioning as God intended for you to be? Or is it time for some changes in your life?