



Salt, Light, and the Shape of Love
 March 8, 2026
 3rd Sunday in Lent
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead
 Matthew 5:13-17, 21-26, 38-48

Over these first weeks of Lent, we have sat in the crowd on the hillside and listened to Jesus sketch an outline of God’s dream for the world. We began by noticing that Jesus does not start with rules or religious performance, but with blessing for the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, those who hunger for justice. Then we heard how those blessings take flesh in mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and courage that can be costly. The Beatitudes are not sentimental words to stitch on pillows; they are the blueprint for a new community, a family shaped by grace instead of greed, by humility instead of domination, by love instead of fear. Today, we keep walking deeper into this sermon—not as spectators, but as disciples learning what it means to live in this upside-down kingdom.

Having told us who we are—blessed—Jesus now turns to what that identity looks like when it walks out the door and into ordinary life. He moves from naming our belonging to describing our impact on the world, and he does so with two of the most unforgettable images in all of Scripture:

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

When Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth,” he is not issuing a command but naming a reality. He declares his disciples to BE salt. No doubt, we can list all kinds of reasons that image works—salt preserves, salt enhances flavor, salt is essential for life; it’s used in everything from toothpaste to soap to dyes to clearing icy roads. But to understand the heart of Jesus’ message, we have to notice not only the salt, but also the earth. You are the salt *of the earth*. We who are followers of Jesus are not meant to exist for ourselves, alone. We are given for the sake of the world. Our calling is to bring flavor, depth, and energy to the places we inhabit. Simply by being who we are in Christ, we become a gift. So, when others encounter us, they should glimpse something life-giving—something that reassures them that goodness still has a home in this world.ⁱ

In her book, *Sermon on the Mount: a Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, Amy-Jill Levine makes several points on the nature of salt. First, this simple element does not have to be enhanced by something else. It is the enhancer. Second, just as we cannot live with too little salt, we cannot live with too much of it. Salt loses its saltiness when it becomes diluted with things like the cares of the world. Too much salt, on the other hand says, “Look at me,” and that approach is deadly to faith. Levine writes, “The best salt—in food, in medicine, in dyes—is almost undetected. It does its work not by calling attention to itself but by brightening, making more alive, everything it permeates.”ⁱⁱ

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” once again he is naming something true before he asks us to do anything at all. We can linger over the metaphor—light helps things grow; it gives warmth; it allows us to see what is otherwise hidden. It can power our homes and guide our steps. We might think of sunlight streaming through a window, stars piercing the night sky, or a small flame flickering in the dark. Scripture is filled with light imagery. But here, in this moment on the hillside, Jesus is reminding us of something essential: just as salt is necessary for life, so is light. Without it, nothing grows. Without it, there is no warmth, no clarity, no signal that we are not alone. Light is precious—and it must be tended carefully. Too much salt destroys, and too much light blinds. The goal is not to glare, but to illuminate. True light doesn’t draw attention to itself; it makes it possible to see everything else more clearly. It doesn’t shout, “Look at me.” It simply shines, so that the world can live.ⁱⁱⁱ

You are the light of the world, Jesus says. And then he offers this: “So let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and *give glory to your Father* in heaven.” Did you hear that? Give glory to *your* Father in heaven. On this point, Richard Rohr offers an encouraging word:

Jesus says “*your* Father” almost as a calm and secure assumption. He is seemingly trying to invite us into the same relationship with God that he has. He’s not just *my* Father, Jesus is saying, but he’s also yours. So we needn’t be the mountain top, the city, the whole house. We’re simply that which shines on the mountain top, which illuminates the house. We’re not the whole loaf of bread, we’re just the leaven. We’re not the whole meal, we’re not the broccoli, mashed potatoes or roast beef; we’re just the salt, and our shared and loving God is the banquet, the mountain, and the focus of all praise.^{iv}

At this point in the sermon, Jesus makes a turn toward the Law of Moses: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.” Jesus is not tearing anything down; he is bringing it to its deeper meaning. What follows are the passages scholars call the Antitheses—those striking lines, “You have heard it said... but I say to you...” And in each one, Jesus moves beyond mere rule-keeping. He shifts the focus from external compliance to internal transformation—from managing behavior to reshaping the heart. It’s less about tightening the law and more about undergoing a kind of spiritual heart transplant.

You’ve heard it said, *Do not murder*. But I say to you—do not let contempt take root in your heart. Do not carry your brother or sister around already judged and sentenced in the courtroom of your mind. If there is a tear in the fabric between you, tend to it. Seek repair before you dare approach the altar.

You’ve heard it said, *An eye for an eye*. But I say to you—step out of the old rhythm of getting even. Turn the other cheek. Walk the second mile. Hand over your coat. Love your enemies. Pray for the ones who wound you.

It’s important that we don’t mistake what Jesus is doing here. He is not tightening the screws of the law. He is uncovering its deepest intention. The law was never meant to be a checklist for managing behavior. It has always been about forming a people whose lives bend toward God and toward one another in love. It’s possible to keep every rule and still nurse resentment. It’s possible to avoid bloodshed while allowing bitterness to simmer just beneath the surface. You can obey the letter of the law and still live with a hardened heart. But Jesus says that is not righteousness—it is mere compliance. And compliance has never been the goal.

Righteousness, in the kingdom Jesus describes, is about relationship. It’s about being so deeply turned toward God and toward one another that love becomes a reflex rather than a requirement. When Jesus says, *love your enemies*, he is not stacking one more impossible demand on our already weary shoulders. He’s describing what grows naturally in a heart formed by the Beatitudes—a heart that knows its own poverty of spirit, that has tasted its own mercy. Such a person does not love enemies because of a rulebook. Such a person loves because they remember what it feels like to be loved when they least deserved it.

So, what does that kind of life look like out in the wild? How does it *show* up? Jesus tells us that salt which loses its saltiness is no longer useful. Light tucked under a bowl helps no one see. There is a gentle urgency in these images. A faith that never leaves the interior life, that never touches the street or the workplace, or the dinner table is—by Jesus’ own telling—missing its purpose.

But hear this—the *showing* is not the goal. When a community is truly being shaped by mercy, when people are learning to grieve together, to hunger for justice, to make peace in small and costly ways, something begins to shine. Not because anyone is trying to be impressive. But because love, when it is real, cannot stay hidden. People notice when forgiveness interrupts a cycle of harm. They feel it when someone refuses to answer cruelty with contempt. There is a holy strangeness about a life that blesses instead of curses, that goes the second mile, that sees even an enemy as a neighbor. That quiet strangeness—that steady, unselfconscious love—is the light. And the world, even when it resists it, cannot quite look away.

We are three sermons into this journey, and I hope you can feel the thread weaving it together. Jesus is not after behavior modification; he is after transformation. He is shaping a people from the inside out, through the slow, steady work of grace. My sisters and brothers in Christ, blessed are we, learning to live the way of Jesus. May the world see in us a taste of God’s mercy and a glimpse of God’s light. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: a Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, 46-48

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 48-49.

^{iv} Richard Rohr, *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, 144.

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