

Fulfilling Our Calling

Matthew 5:13-20

We all know what happens when a revolutionary party suddenly finds itself in power. It's one thing to shout angrily from the sidelines, but quite another to form a government and run a country. All sorts of things have to be organized and dealt with which a rebel movement can happily ignore. When this happens, two questions are asked: First, can this new movement really do the basic things that a government can do better than its predecessor? Or is it just making a lot of noise which turns out to be just that, or can it really deliver on its promised goods? And two, can it remain true to itself and to its original goals even though it's now in power and has to do something? Will it, too, become corrupt or inept like the very government it ran against, starting off in a blaze of glory and high ideals but ending up not much different than what it replaced?

If you really pay close attention to what Jesus was doing, you can see that Jesus was starting a real revolution. There were others in his times who had tried to do so as well. But it was important that Jesus show the Jewish people of his day that his movement really was the fulfillment of all that Israel had believed and longed for. Second, he had to show that he and his followers were living by (and willing to die by) the new way of being God's People that he was announcing with his kingdom-of-God ministry. The Beatitudes are revolutionary, that is, if we really hear them. When they are taken seriously, they cut against the grain of much that people accept as acceptable. As I have tried to show and illustrate, with folk like Fred Rogers, Clarence Jordan, Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Joe," and others, Jesus' teaching is still powerful and saving, though often upsetting to some.

The Beatitudes are like lightning strikes that get our attention, and make us think, even shock us because they are not what we expect. But we must understand that when Jesus gave out these Beatitudes, he wasn't just whipping up some totally new religious movement or teaching out of the air. Jesus appears on the scene and says he has come to fulfill "*the law and the prophets*" (5:17). That phrase, "*the law and the prophets*" is a shorthand way of referring to all of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. So, he's declaring that He's fulfilling them--bringing to completion the Story of Israel, God's saving purpose for the world. Now remember what God is doing. He is saving the world. In Jesus, God has come to reveal God's love, to forgive and reconcile us to himself, and to make the world over again. That is salvation: God-in-Christ re-establishing our knowledge and fellowship with God, our being remade as human beings-- "*Christ in us, the hope of glory,*" (Col 1:27)--and to bring the reclamation and renewal of the world.

So, at this point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus moves from the Beatitude declarations to three inspiring images: salt, light, and deeds, and ties these with being part of the Kingdom Jesus declares is coming into the world. That is to say, if we want to be part of God's kingdom now and to come, we are to hear Jesus, grasp his teaching, and follow in his ways. By this, as he says, we "*enter the kingdom of heaven/God*" (Mt 5:19-20). This note Jesus sounds both clearly here and at the end of the Sermon on the Mount as he compares people who built their lives either on rock (and He's the rock), or sand (Mt 7:21-29). He then is both the kingdom and the way into the kingdom. As we participate in his life and ministry, we, too, are part of that kingdom coming for the sake of the world, or again, as Paul says, -- "*Christ in us, the hope of glory,*" (Col 1:27).

Now then, if the Beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount, this present passage (5:13-20) is something of a gateway to all that follows. And we must understand all this in Jesus' own times. As God's prophet (and more), Jesus was calling his people, the Israel of his day, to really be Israel, God's People, as they were meant to be. But here's where the message turns decisively: the only way that can happen is by becoming his disciples and following in his way. John the Baptist had prepared Israel--at least those listening--for Jesus, this One to come and do this. What Jesus says applies to us all now, but its original challenge was to his own contemporaries.

So now Jesus says here: "*you are the salt of the earth.*" What does Jesus mean by that? Salt in that time did several things. It was a food preservative; it was a seasoning for food; it was used as an ingredient for certain temple offerings; it was used to purify other things. That is, salt was a vital life necessity in many ways. However Jesus meant it, it is clearly his point that to be salt is to have a good effect, a positive influence. And likewise, God had called Israel to be the "salt of the earth" before, to be a special people known not only for its Temple and worship, its religious uprightness and moral rectitude, but also for its practice of mercy, justice, care for its poor and the vulnerable--things Jesus specifically addresses in his teaching.

But instead, Israel was pretty much acting like the pagan nations with their power politics, its factional squabbling, militant revolutions and spiritual desuetude and moral and religious discrimination among themselves. How could God keep the world from going bad--the main function of salt in the ancient world--if Israel, his chosen "salt," had lost its distinctive taste and ability? Jesus was calling his followers to take up the calling of God as their heritage, and fulfill it with him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well:

“When Jesus calls his disciples ‘the salt,’ instead of himself, this transfers his efficacy on earth to them. He brings them into his work,” (Discipleship, p. 111-112).

In a similar manner, God had called Israel to be the light of the world: *“I have given you...as a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness,”* and *“I give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth,”* (Isaiah 42:6-7; 49:6). Israel was the people God intended to shine his light into the world’s dark corners--not simply show up evil but to enable people who were blundering around in the dark to find their way. Israel was to be like that--their deep, heartfelt keeping of God’s laws would be a sign to the nations around that the one true God, the Creator of all, the God of Israel, was God indeed, and that they should worship him.

But what if the people called to be the light-bearers had become part of the dark-ness? That was Jesus’ warning--and his challenge--to his hearers. Then Jesus uses the light metaphor about his followers: *“You are the light of the world,”* (5:14). The hill-set city of Jerusalem was supposed to be a beacon of hope to the world--light referring to here to the things of truth, knowledge, and love. Jesus most certainly had in mind a passage such as Daniel 12:3, *“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”*

Jesus expands explains the light metaphor with, *“in the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven,”* (5:16). The good works or good deeds, while public, are not to bring attention to the doer so much as good to the one they are done to and bring glory to God. The apostle Peter wrote in his letter, *“Live such good lives among the pagans that,*

though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us,” (1 Pet 2:12).

We might well imagine some in Jesus’ day saying about him, *“Well, here’s another new teacher who thinks he’s got the answer! We’ve already got teachers of the law. The Pharisees think their interpretation is the right one. What’s so different about this man, Jesus?”* And Jesus gives his answer straight out. *“The scribes and the Pharisees do indeed teach a way of being faithful to God, a way of behaving in accordance with God’s covenant Law. But here’s the deal,”* Jesus is saying. *“Right now, there’s something else going on. God’s kingdom is breaking into this world. And those who want to belong to the new world he is opening up must learn a way of living that goes far beyond--far, far beyond--anything the scribes and the Pharisees ever dreamed of.”*

The Pharisees did indeed present a way--as they saw it--of fulfilling the law and the prophets. Likewise there are Christians--many of them--who see the Christian life in a similar manner. They divide the world into the morally right and morally wrong, and they are sure who is who. They see themselves as righteous and others as unrighteous, and they are sure who is who. They often speak with words of grace and gospel but practice rules and moral superiority. Jesus calls for a new way of being the people of God--people whose righteousness consists of mercy beyond measure, love of neighbors and enemies, never-ending concern and help to the poor and vulnerable, and the pursuit of peace and reconciliation and relationships made whole. As Augustine said in the 5th century: *“Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this two-fold*

love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”--Christian. Doct.

This is what Jesus meant. It wasn't just a matter of new teaching, though it included it, but it was a matter of people-transforming and world-transforming that Jesus was about. Jesus wasn't abandoning the purpose of the law and the prophets. Israel's whole story, commands, promises and all, was going to come true in him--NOW, that he was here. And with him, by him, his teaching, and his example, there was a new opportunity to for Israel--and ultimately for the whole world--to see God's covenant a reality in their own selves, changing behavior not just by teaching, but a total inner change of heart and mind and vision. Such is reflected in the Beatitudes we've already considered.

This was/is truly revolutionary, yet at the same time deeply in tune with the ancient story of Israel and God's promises of renewal for his people and the world itself. And while Jesus was declaring these things on the one hand, he was demonstrating them in his person--his teaching, his forgiveness, his picture parables about God and the kingdom, his healing of all sorts of conditions and ailments of people, and the casting out of the demonic. If you had, as he said, “ears to hear” and eyes to see, you could see that it was all in front of you. He was the salt of the earth. He was the light of the world and said as much (John 8:12). And this light would also be set up on a hill--in Jerusalem-- crucified for all the world to see, becoming the beacon of hope and new life for everyone. By Jesus, God was embodying a new way of covenant love in self-giving, which is what the law the prophets were ultimately and deeply about. So Jesus called his followers.

Wm. Barclay puts it this way: *“The Jew aimed to satisfy the law of God; and to*

the demands of law there is always a limit. The Christian aims to show his gratitude for the love of God; and to the claims of love there is no limit in time or eternity. Jesus set before [us] not the law of God, but the love of God ...when we realize how God has loved us, the one desire in life is to answer to that love, and that is the greatest task in all the world, for it presents [one] with a task the like of which [one] who thinks in terms of law never dreams of, and with an obligation more binding than obligation to any law."

-- (Wm. Barclay, *Matthew*, 1, p. 133) .

Jesus' teaching here is crucial to a right understanding of the heart of the Christian life. When he speaks of "*not one letter*," "*not one stroke*," and obedience to "*the least of the commandments*," he's using the Pharisees' own words about the details and requirements of the Law. Jesus is just as serious about the Law as they are. But Jesus' point--his radical claim--is that he has the authority to declare what that is truly all about. He--and He alone--is the infallible and rightful expounder of God's truth as it pertains to the Law and the Prophets. Jesus himself is the pattern--not they--of righteousness that reflects the true meaning of the scriptures. He is talking a different level and concept of righteousness. To think of righteousness as rule keeping isn't even close to Jesus' idea.

When this comes clear to us, we see that while these sayings about salt, light, and deeds originally applied to Israel, Jesus came to apply to them to us and all those who follow Jesus and draw on his life as the source of their own. Jesus took impersonal metaphors and made them personal. For they declare-- "*You are!*"--not you will be, or you need to be, but "*You are!*" They reveal the church's fundamental task is to mediate God's presence as priests and to rule on behalf of God as his royal servants, serving God in God's mission for the world. Our task is nothing less than to represent God--like

Jesus, to mediate God's goodness, God's grace, God's justice to this world. Salt has an impact on whatever it touches. Light has an impact on any kind of darkness and its causes. Like them like Jesus, so are we. Salt and light are not just what we do, but who we are. And both are vital to life. Think of life without them.

But if we fail to be true to Jesus' design for us, then, what good are we to the world? If we bear the name of Christ, but have lost our true essence as salt, then people stop seeing us as useful for anything, and Christ's good name is squandered. If we say we are followers of Jesus but have hidden Christ's light under politics, or mere middle-class morality, or personal religious preferences, then we have robbed the world of God's greatest gift. What Jesus is saying here, then, is very important.

Disciples--who Jesus says are "blessed" recipients of his kingdom--are of vital importance for the accomplishment of God's purpose in the world. By and with Jesus, they are the salt and light without which the world cannot survive and remains in darkness.

Disciples'--our--mission is accomplished in word but also in deed, deeds of daily existence, deeds that make our lives distinctive and of inestimable value, and that others will see and glorify God in doing so. Christian author Madeline L'Engle has written, *"We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."* And we may add, the cross of the crucified One--now Risen and Reigning--is the light that illumines our works.

So far, we've dealt with the first two parts of the Sermon on the Mount--the "Blessed Are's" and the "You Are's." In the Beatitudes, we are given God's love; in the

“You Are’s” we sent to share this love with the world. In the Beatitudes, we are united to Christ for the world; in the “You Are’s” we are united with the world for Christ. For, discipleship to Jesus is not about believing the right things in order to escape the world. It’s about doing the right things as part of God’s plan to redeem the world. And that is our calling. Amen.