

Deeper Discoveries

Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 3: Matthew 5:13–16



Literary Design

It should surprise no one that Jesus spoke in a style similar to that of the Hebrew Bible. Old Testament authors, when writing in a poetic style, would often place two related lines together that invite the reader to ponder them as a single unit. See Proverbs for many obvious examples. This technique, called parallelism, is found throughout Scripture. In our text, Jesus uses two simple metaphors that mean almost—but not quite—the same thing, and in that is the richness and genius of his easy-to-remember words:

- ① You are the salt of the earth...
- ② You are the light of the world...

True disciples are both salt and light, not just one or the other; that's what Jesus said, and both metaphors describe the Christian life. Our Lord defines being salt and light as good. But the literal uses of salt and light are far different, and this is where the metaphors diverge. Salt preserves, *preventing something negative*. Light brings order and clarity, *enabling something positive*. The words, earth and world, are similar, but *earth* refers to the land where the people Jesus spoke to lived and *world* to the place where all the rest of peoples/nations under heaven lived. Remembering that this is a metaphor, *earth* then refers to the local community and *world* to everyone else. Why do followers of Christ need to salt the land *and* shine in the world? Jesus is telling us that the people of the land and in the world matter to God, disciples are commissioned into God's work of salvation, and disciples must actively care too as it regards the gospel. There is a lot to think about in these two simple statements. What do you think?

We are moving at a purposely slow pace through the Sermon on the Mount, studying much shorter sections than in previous studies. Take this opportunity to pause and think deeply about these words of Jesus, preserved for us and our salvation. Don't rush through metaphors! We more fully understand the mind of Christ when we study the rest of Scripture in its fullness, even the poetic style it is often written in.

Old Testament Connections and Themes

Salt

The use of salt as a preservative is well known, and it was prescribed in the Jewish sacrificial system and used in the language of covenant, but salt was also a metaphor for wisdom in rabbinic tradition. The Greek word translated as "lose its saltiness" also means "to become dull or foolish," which would work if wisdom was indeed the intention. In the end, salt likely carries multiple symbolic dimensions—wisdom, purity, preservation, and gracious conduct—rather than a single fixed meaning across all contexts. So be salt.

Light

Light and darkness serve as symbolic themes of good and evil from the very first page of the Old Testament, when God says, "Let there be light," and it was, and he pronounced it good as he separated the light from the darkness (Gen 1:3–4). The word "light" appears 24 times in the book we recently studied, Job. The LORD asked Job this unanswerable question to humble him, "What is the way to the abode of light? And where does

darkness reside?” (Job 38:19). Light is established everywhere in the Old Testament as that which brings order and clarity, while darkness represents confusion and formlessness. God’s presence on earth is closely associated with light, and this connection links light to holiness, purity, goodness, and moral perfection [1]. Darkness stands for distress, anxiety, and the confusion and destruction experienced by the wicked, while moral depravity itself is sometimes described as darkness [2].

The New Testament carries this meaning forward. In the first nine verses of John’s gospel, John uses the word “light” seven times to describe the Lord Jesus coming into the world he created, with the darkness unable to comprehend him. Jesus calls himself “the light of the world” twice in this same gospel (8:12, 9:5). In another book we recently studied, Colossians, Paul emphatically states that we are to give joyful thanks to the Father “who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (1:12–13).

Jesus says his disciples are the light of the world in this sermon, and that would come as a shock to anyone who had studied the Hebrew Scriptures. No ordinary human being had ever been described as light; it was always attributed to God, to fire, or to the lights the LORD had placed in the heavens. Jesus, the true light of the world, sent by the Father to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6), dwells in us. We can answer the question that Job could not: the way to the abode of light is found in Jesus Christ.

Commentary (Don Carson)

The values Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes are very different from the values that shape much of modern life, whether in education, technology, or military power. Yet many people think they are already living out the Beatitudes simply because they have heard them so often. Familiarity has weakened the impact of these powerful sayings. But when we slow down and think carefully about them, we begin to see their greatness. They also lead us to examine ourselves (see 2 Cor. 13:5) and ask whether we truly belong to God's kingdom.

People who live by these kingdom values cannot remain unnoticed. Their faith is not just a private experience. It is also seen in public integrity, meekness, righteousness, purity, and mercy. That is why Jesus immediately begins to talk about the witness of the kingdom (Matt. 5:13–16).

Jesus explains this witness with two metaphors. The first compares his followers to salt (5:13). In the ancient Near East, salt had many uses, but one of its most important purposes was preserving food. Before refrigerators, people rubbed salt into meat to keep it from spoiling. Much of this salt came from marshes and other natural sources, so it often contained many impurities. If too much of the salt was washed away, only the impurities remained, and the salt became useless.

In the same way, Jesus' followers are to slow the spread of corruption in a world that is constantly drifting toward sin. But if they lose what makes them different, they become ineffective. They cannot hold back the world's evil if they abandon their distinctive obedience, allegiance, and spiritual power. Instead, they become like worthless salt that is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Jesus gives a second picture in verses 15–16. Just as a city built on a hill and lit by thousands of olive oil lamps cannot be hidden, a true disciple of Jesus should stand out. It would be foolish to light a lamp and then cover it with a bowl. The very purpose of a lamp is to give light in a dark place. In the same way, the very purpose of Jesus' followers is to shine the light of Jesus, the truth of Scripture, lives of moral integrity, and the gospel of the kingdom into a dark world [3].

[1] Judith A. Odor, “Light and Darkness,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). Edited.

[2] Donald Mills, “Light and Darkness,” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014). Edited.

[3] D. A. Carson, *God with Us: Themes from Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 37–38. Edited.