

October 17-21, 2022 Edition

Following

The Year Of Jesus Part 42

Salt Of The Earth & Light Of The World

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to spend some time talking about one of Jesus' better known statements found in the Sermon On The Mount:

You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. You are the light of the world-like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father. Matthew 5:13-16 (NLT)

Ever heard the phrase, salt of the earth? What about light of the world? Sure you have. But what do they mean? We have a vague sense of what they might mean in our own culture but what did they mean to Jesus? What did they mean to the people who were listening to Him?

Well, first of all I think the people listening to Jesus would have understood the salt & light metaphor to be a covenant that Jesus was entering into with them. But what's a covenant? It's a sacred pact (sort of like the sacred Pact that Mr. Miagi and Daniel enter into in the 1980s classic movie, The Karate Kid). A covenant is so much more than a contract or agreement. There's nothing sacred about a contract or agreement. But a covenant is a sacred pact where one party (usually the one with the most power) agrees to do something for the weaker party as long as the weaker party holds up his/her end of the bargain. In the movie Mr. Miagi agrees to teach Daniel karate- that's Mr. Miagi's part. Daniel agrees to do whatever Mr. Miagi tells him to no questions asked. That's a covenant and covenants are something Israel was extremely familiar with.

Most of the people listening to Jesus' Sermon On The Mount were descendants of a man named Abraham. God entered into a covenant with Abraham which is what would eventually lead to Israel becoming a nation:

I will bless you... and you will be a blessing to others... All the families on earth will be blessed through you. Genesis 12:2-3 (NLT)

That's a covenant. God's part is to bless Abraham. Abraham's part is to make sure he doesn't hoard all those blessings but rather act as a conduit allowing those blessings to flow through him to bless the people God brings across his path. That covenant was what you might call "blessed to be a blessing". And that part of the covenant God made with Abraham is still alive today:

And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you. Galatians 3:29 (NLT)

What does that mean? That the covenant of Abraham (at least part of it) flows across the centuries and looks to be fulfilled in you if you are a follower of Jesus. Because of that you are blessed to be a blessing. What does that have to do with Jesus' teachings about salt & light? We'll look at that tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about how much of a blessing you are being to the people of this world. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty if you look at your life and think, "I'm not doing anything to bless the people of this world" because God's plan for each of us will be vastly different and we all go through

seasons of life that make it difficult to be a blessing but spend some time reflecting on what it means that you are blessed so that you can be a blessing to others.

Tuesday Reflection: Today we're going to look at why the people listening to Jesus would have heard His words on salt and light and recognized that He was entering into a covenant with them very similarly to the covenants God entered into with His children in the Old Testament. And it all revolves around the metaphors of salt and light.

Yesterday we talked about God's covenant with Abraham. It was that covenant that would eventually lead to Israel becoming a nation. Abraham is the father of every Jew that has ever and will ever be born. All of them trace their lineage back to Abraham. But that's not the only covenant in Old Testament. There was another very important covenant that the people listening to Jesus that day would be intimately familiar with- the covenant God entered into with the descendants of Abraham several hundred years after His covenant with their ancestor. The children of Israel were encamped around Mt. Sinai after being freed from Egypt by God through Moses (and some plagues that played a pretty big role in the story). Listen to God's words to Israel:

'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' This is the message you must give to the people of Israel." So Moses returned from the mountain and called together the elders of the people and told them everything the Lord had commanded him. And all the people responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has commanded." So Moses brought the people's answer back to the Lord. Exodus 19:4-8 (NLT)

Did you notice the components of a covenant there? God stated what He would do as long as Israel would live up to their part of the sacred pact. What were their responsibilities? To be a kingdom of priests and God's holy nation. How would Israel accomplish that? That's what the 10 commandments are all about. They are the stipulations of the covenant. Stipulations that cover a human beings' responsibilities when it comes to how to relate to God, others and ourselves. People talk about the 10 Commandments like they're some kind of impossible standard to live up to but let's look at them.

The first few commandments are about how we relate to God- no other gods than Yahweh, don't make an Idol, don't worship idols. Then God tells His people to rest every seventh day. Why? Because without rest we will never be able to live up to the covenant we have entered into. The rest of the commandments are basically about how we should relate to the people around us. We act like they are impossible standard but they're not- don't steal from each other, don't lie about each other, don't sleep with someone else's spouse, don't murder anyone...

The 10 Commandments are not some impossible standard we could never live up to. They're not some high bar that's impossible to get over. They are in fact the least common

denominator or what it means to live in shalom (peace) with God, ourselves and others. When you think about it God set the bar so low with His 10 Commandments that we have to slither to get under it.

This is the covenant that God entered into with the descendants of Abraham- a covenant they couldn't (or more accurately wouldn't) live up to. How about us? How are we doing when it comes to living up to the 10 Commandments? I know what you're thinking- we're no longer under the Old Testament law and the 10 Commandments, are we? No we're not but the spirit of the law remains something that God requires of all of His children reflected in the words of Jesus:

"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments." Matthew 22:36-40 (NLT)

Do you see the spirit of the 10 Commandments in what Matthew calls the "greatest commands"? Maybe spend some time today reflecting on how we may not be under the letter of the Old Testament Law and the 10 Commandments but we are certainly still bound by the spirit of them.

Wednesday Reflection: If you were wondering why I didn't explain the connection between salt and light and covenants yesterday (you know like I said I was going to on Monday) it's because I got sidetracked talking about the Sinai covenant and lost track of time yesterday. It's ok- understanding the 10 Commandments and our relationship to them will help us better understand why when the people listening to Jesus heard Him talking about salt and light and immediately thought of covenant language.

The Old Testament uses a lot of metaphor to explain their covenant with Yahweh- there's a particularly interesting metaphor used sometimes that might help us:

It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for both you and your offspring, Numbers 18:19 (NIV)

The Sinai covenant that God entered into with Israel was a "covenant of salt". What does that mean? Well, salt was not just a seasoning in the ancient world to sprinkle on your French fries or popcorn. In fact you would have had to be fabulously wealthy to use salt to season your food. Why? Because it was one of most valuable commodities on earth in the ancient world. Ancient wars were fought over salt but why?

It's because in a world where there was no refrigeration, rot and decay were the great enemies of human life. Salt was the only preservative known to humans and so salt became incredibly valuable. The reason your paycheck at work is called your "salary" is because often Roman soldiers were paid in salt as their compensation. Your first course in a fancy restaurant is called a "salad" because of the habit of Romans to salt their leafy green veggies- not so they'd taste better but so they wouldn't rot so quickly. When Jesus tells His ragtag band of misfits (you know, the people who gathered to hear the Sermon On The Mount) that they are the salt of the earth they would have recognized the metaphor "covenant of salt" and

understood that God's covenant with Israel has found its fulfillment in them. They are to be salt in a rotting and decaying world. They are to slow down the spread of rot and decay in this world by living according to the terms of the "New" covenant. The Sermon On The Mount then would have been seen by them to be the stipulations of this covenant.

But what about light of the world? Well, as it turns out that's another metaphor for the Old Covenant:

It is far too small a thing for you to be my servant to... bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the (Nations), that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. Isaiah 49:6 (NIV)

Even in the Old Testament God's plan was for Israel to be a covenant of salt and light to draw the world to Him. Israel did a terrible job for all but a fraction of their history. God now enters into a new covenant with anyone who wants to be a part of His Kingdom asking us to salt to a decaying world and light to a world stumbling in darkness.

If you're a follower of Jesus then you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

At least you're supposed to be. Are you?

Thursday Reflection: When it comes to being the salt of the earth and the light of the world I think we need to take at least one day and talk about how difficult it is to be salt and light by yourself. I'm not saying it's impossible but I wouldn't recommend it.

Jesus is all about community. Community that shares everything (I'm not talking about a political system of government here but a way of life that followers of Jesus enter into no matter what the latest fad of political system happens to be in vogue at the moment). In the New Testament the phrase "one another" is used almost 100 times in the New Testament. Here's just a sampling of what God wants to us to do for "one another": love one another, accept one another, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, grieve with one another, put up with one another...

I could go on and on. Following Jesus is a team sport- not an individual competition. During the Last Supper Jesus tried one last time to explain to His followers (who got into another argument during the Last Supper over which of them was greatest/most important) what following Him would look like:

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:34-35 (NLT)

You may remember Jesus' answer about the greatest commands- love God, love others as you love yourself- so how are Jesus' words at the Last Super a "new" command? Well, the old command was "love your neighbor as you love yourself." I've known lots of people who don't treat themselves very well. Who don't do a very good job of loving themselves. I think Jesus is anticipating that some of us will say, "well I wouldn't do that for myself so I'm not doing it for my neighbor because that's the standard- to love my neighbor as I love myself."

Jesus takes it up a notch at the Last Supper. The standard is no longer to love as you love yourself. The new standard is that we would love others as Jesus loves us. Do you see the

difference? I know I do and it's not always terribly comfortable, is it? But what's Jesus saying? Well this isn't all of it but at least part it seems to be that we can't follow Jesus alone- Christianity has to be lived out in community with others who are on the same path:

Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near. Hebrews 11:24-25 (NLT)

We have to be careful with this passage of scripture because it has been used to control and manipulate followers of Jesus for far too long. I don't think this verse is saying "you have to go to church and if you don't you're going to H, E, double hockey sticks but that's exactly the way it was explained to me growing up. Sure, church services are a place where followers of Jesus can and do gather together and where they can and do encourage one another. But it's not the only place this can or even should happen. In fact if the only place you're gathering with other followers of Jesus to encourage and be encouraged (see how it's not just about your encouragement but also about each followers responsibility to be an encouragement to those who need it) then you're going to have a really tough time being salt and light to a decaying and dark world.

Why? Well first of all the whole "blessed so that you can be a blessing to others" part of the covenant is almost impossible to live up to if you're not living in community with other followers of Jesus but there's something that's maybe even more important that only comes when you live in community with other followers of Jesus- growth:

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend. Proverbs 27:17 (NLT)

If you don't have other followers of Jesus to "sharpen" you then you're going to be a dull tool. Sorry- it's not me saying it- it's the Bible. You will never become all that Jesus intended and created you to become alone. It just can't happen. Are there followers of Jesus who are sometimes forced into solitary lives of following Him? Sure. The Apostle John was sent to the island of Patmos by Rome to live his life out away from the influence of other followers. Why? Because he was a part of sharpening people's lives to such an extent that the empire felt like there was not other option than to make sure he wasn't around others from the Christian community. It still happens but it's not the plan. It's not the ideal. So what is the plan? What is the ideal?

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NLT)

That's the ideal. And it's not even only about what someone else can do for you- it's what you can do for others as well. So if you find yourself frustrated by other followers of Jesus and it makes you wish you could just do this on your own, welcome to the club. Most of us feel that way at one point or another. Jesus never said it would be easy but if you want to know how committed He was to this idea just look at the prayer He prayed on His last night before the crucifixion. He prayed for quite a while that night. Do you know what He spent most of His time praying about? You and me. Those of us who would believe in Jesus because of what His

ragtag band of misfits would tell us about Him. He was going to the cross but He only spent a very short period of time praying for Himself and what He knew was coming. He spent most of His time praying that we would live together in harmony and unity. Only then will we be a "city on a hill" that shines out in this dark world so that others who desperately need Jesus can find Him. Read this and then ask yourself how you're doing:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one- I in them and you in me-so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23 (NLT)

Friday Reflection: There is no such thing in the Bible as a "Lone Ranger" Christian. Christians are supposed to be like the velociraptors in Jurassic Park- if you see one you should assume there are others nearby because they hunt in packs.

Ok- so maybe the hunting metaphor wasn't a great one but you get the picture, right? Followers of Jesus are to live in packs or at least spend a certain portion of their days/weeks/months/years/lives with other followers of Jesus. Now some might say, "i don't need anyone else to get through this life. I've got Jesus and my Bible and that's all I need."

Well, even if that were true (you may be strong right now but the day will most likely come when you'll need help) what makes you think this is just about you? When you enter into covenant with Jesus you agree to be "blessed so that you can be a blessing to others". You can't do that alone. People will often say, "I'm part of the universal church" but when the day comes when you are no longer strong enough to stand on your own two feet and you need help who are you going to call? The universal pastor? The universal church? Good luck getting through. I get calls all the time from people who claim to be followers of Jesus but aren't part of a community of Jesus' followers. They need help suddenly but they have no one to turn to so they open the phone book (or Google these days) and start cold calling local communities of Jesus hoping to find help.

I get several calls/emails/messages/requests every day for help from someone who thought they didn't need anyone else because they were so strong. Unfortunately there are so many scammers just looking to take advantage of the generosity of Jesus' followers that it's next to impossible to sort out the truly needy from the manipulators. We try to help those who are truly in need but sorting them out from the scammers is a full time job.

That's one reason Jesus wants us to live in community with one another. When the church began it was only natural for the believers to band together because otherwise they were going to have a rough go of it alone:

They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity- all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. Acts 2:46-47 (NLT)

Now we have to be careful here- preachers have used this verse as another way of controlling the folks in his/her church. Their (our?) language when explaining this verse usually revolves around convincing people that they need to join a particular church and that once you have all the "one another" passages in the Bible refer explicitly to one particular congregation or church. Churches will often make members sign a covenant card promising to attend faithfully, give generously and serve selflessly. If you don't then you've failed to live up to God's plan for the local church.

Now before you go sending this reflection off to a pastor of a church that you know who uses covenant cards in their ministry let me say- there's nothing wrong with covenant cards. I don't like them much but then again, I'm weird. Covenant cards are fine as long as they're not used to guilt, manipulate or strong arm people into complying with the pastor's idea of community. I truly believe the local church is the hope of this world as far as it relates to finding Jesus but people can (and have been for centuries) Christians without being part of a local church. Sometimes pastors will make you feel like if you leave their congregation then you've left Jesus. That is almost never the case in my experience. When people leave the local church it's usually because they have lost faith in local leadership- not Jesus.

At the church I grew up in we had a "peg board". It was a board with the names of every "member" of the church with three holes drilled into the board to the right of each name and a white gold tee in each hole. When I went to church on Sunday morning I'd pull the first peg and drop it in the container at the bottom of the board. On Sunday night I'd pull the second peg and on Wednesday night the third peg. Then when I'd come back on Sunday all three white pegs would be back in the holes next to my name.

If I missed a few weeks my pegs would turn yellow (I'm assuming some human changed out the white ones with yellow ones but when I was little I kind of thought it might be God Himself) indicating I haven't been attending as often as I should. Go a few months without coming to church and the pegs turned red. After a certain amount of time (I don't know the exact rules governing the peg board so all I can give you is a general idea of how this worked) the name would be taken off the peg board altogether. It was like having ones name removed from the Lamb's book of life.

Now the people who thought up and maintained the peg board were almost assuredly sincere, loving, devoted followers of Jesus who were trying to do what they thought Jesus was asking them to do but I hope you can see the issue- guilt and shame and manipulation were never tools that Jesus asked His followers to use in order to pressure people to go-to-church. In fact, guilt, manipulation and shame are the tools of our adversary the devil. Please don't use them and if they've been used on you please know that none of that was Jesus- it was His misguided (and hopefully well intentioned) kids.

You don't have to attend my church in order to be in God's church. Riverside Community Church is only a very small part of God's "church". And we as humans were never given the responsibility of deciding who's in and who's out- God does that. Did you notice the last line from the verse we read a few minutes ago?

*And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.
Acts 2:46-47 (NLT)*

Who adds people to the church? God does. Not me. Not you. Not the pastor who has their people sign a covenant card to be "added" to their church. Now like I said already, there's nothing wrong with a pastor or church using covenant cards as long as they don't make you feel like their church is the only church. And the way we do church at Riverside is almost assuredly a reaction to the kind of church that most of the leaders who helped shape this church from its infancy grew up in- but I hope it's not an over reaction. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't but we feel strongly that it's not up to us who is in and who is out of God's church- He's handling all of the administrative work of keeping track of the saved- our job is to provide a place where those who have been added to His church can gather together to do the important "one another" work that is an integral part of each Christian's maturity.

Is it possible to be a follower of Jesus all by yourself. Sure. Maybe. Probably. But is there a reason Jesus created the church so that followers of His would never have to be alone. Yes. So what's our part supposed to be? We are to be a blessing to others who are in need and when/if the day comes when you find yourself in need you will already be known by a community of folks who are all doing their best to take the blessings God funnels into their lives into the lives of those who so desperately need it. So... how are we doing?