

Matthew 5:13-16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 October 2015

Preacher: Nigel Kenny

[0 : 00] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

We should ask rather what has happened to the salt and light. This is a very familiar passage, but in my 33 years or so of being a Christian, I've not heard it preached on that often.

And I believe that the principles of this passage that are really for every age that we live in, for Christians of every background, obviously every civilization, every period in church history, there are timeless principles from this passage that perhaps explain what has happened to the salt and light, that we've forgotten these, as I see it, four crucial principles of Christian living.

[2 : 20] This is such a famous passage, isn't it? It's such a famous sermon. It's so often completely misunderstood. It's seen by many as the way in which they can get right with God, that if they live according to the Sermon of the Mount, then they will be accepted when they die.

But in fact, it's exactly the opposite of that. Jesus, as we see at the beginning of this chapter, is not addressing the crowds and telling them how they can get right with God by living in this way, but he's actually addressing his disciples, those who he had very recently called to come and follow him and by God's sovereign grace.

They had responded to that call and they had given up everything to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who has already been announced in his baptism as God's beloved son, the one who we read in chapter one of Matthew's gospel was the one who would save his people from their sins. And really what the Sermon on the Mount is, is a description of that life that we enter into when we take that step of committing our lives to the Lord Jesus and to following him.

That life which is the beginning of the kingdom of heaven for each one of us under the lordship and kingship of Jesus Christ himself and what it means to live under his lordship.

[3 : 55] We don't have time this evening, obviously, to go into that in any kind of detail, but interesting just to note in the Beatitudes the emphasis there is on righteousness. Verse 6, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Verse 10, blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, we read in Paul's letter to the Romans that the kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking, but it is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. So it is a life that is lived to the glory of God. It is a life that seeks to know what is right for each and every circumstance that we would live in.

It's a righteousness which is given to us, obviously, in the gospel. That's what Paul is at pains to speak about in Romans. It's a righteousness that none of us can ever produce ourselves.

It's that alien righteousness that the Lord Jesus Christ alone possesses that is given to us in the gospel that we receive by faith. And yet, it is something that consumes us if we are God's people.

[5 : 15] It is something that we hunger and thirst after in every area of life. We long to live righteous lives, lives that we can live since God has renewed our hearts, and he enables us to live lives which are pleasing to him.

But in these verses, verses 13 to 16, we find the Lord Jesus using these incredibly profound word pictures of salt and light.

And I want us really to consider together this evening four principles from these verses that we can hopefully apply to our lives living in Scotland in the 21st century.

And the first point that I think these verses teach us is that we need to understand the environment in which we live, the world in which we live.

We need to understand that it is not as God created. It is not what it will one day be when the Lord Jesus returns. It is a fallen world. It is a world that is marked by decay and darkness.

[6 : 31] We all know that they hadn't worked out how to harness electric power in the first century in the ancient world, so there was no refrigeration, there were no electric lights, there was no gas lighting.

And so salt and light, man-made light I guess, fires, lights put in a bowl with oil to feed the light were absolutely crucial for life in the ancient world.

Salt was used to preserve meat and fish. It was used to preserve that good meat to eat.

But also, obviously, to slow down its decay because left on its own, it would decay. And of course, there would be complete darkness if there were no lights in the house, indeed, as we have in our own day and generation.

But these pictures there are pictures of what society is like. Society is marked by moral decay and it's marked by spiritual darkness.

[7 : 47] And that moral decay, it can ebb and flow depending on, usually, the influence of the gospel within a society.

I'm sure there are many of us here this evening, a little bit older than myself, that will remember back in the 1950s and the 1960s where there was a far clearer understanding within society of what was right and wrong.

If a couple were to live together without being married, that was an absolute scandal. For children to be born out of wedlock, that was, again, something that was shameful. And yet, it's absolutely the norm in our society nowadays.

Over 50% of children in Scotland today are born out of wedlock. That is something that is a moral regeneration, moral degeneration, rather, within our society.

The moral state of the nation has slid so much in recent decades. So we live in a culture ourselves, in a society that has a much greater need for salt because of the moral decay that is there.

[9 : 02] But there's also a spiritual darkness, isn't there? And that's something that is more absolute. That's something that each one of us is born into, that each one of us has that darkness, spiritual darkness in our lives through sin.

And that is something that only the Lord Jesus Christ can rescue people from in the gospel, giving them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus, shining in people's hearts to bring them to that new birth, to bring them to that new life in Christ.

And it's so easy for us to forget that that's the society that we live in. We become so used to the dark, just in the same way as physically, if there was a power cut, we would adjust to that while we found a torch or a candle or something like that.

Gradually we become accustomed to the dark. And sadly we can be like that in terms of the state of our society as well. We become so used to immorality and real spiritual darkness that we just accept it and therefore we don't see it in as bad a light as we ought to if our minds were truly informed by the word of God.

But also let's accept that things are not as bad as they might be. We do not have a state of anarchy. We do not have a state, for example, in the days of Noah.

[10 : 40] We're not quite at that stage yet. But we're heading that way unless God intervenes, unless God restrains the slide of society into complete degeneration.

And that's all because of God's common grace, God's general mercy and his restraining providence. And these are important themes that we frequently will stress in the work of the Christian Institute to help Christians understand God's dealings with all of society.

What we might say apart from the gospel. Obviously God's principal purposes are focused on the gospel, but they are not God's only purposes. And we find in so much of scripture, God's common grace, his purposes for having an ordered society where there are freedoms for his people to live and to practice their faith and to proclaim Christ.

And that's been a neglected area for many years within evangelical churches. So there's a number of books that we have, little booklets downstairs that deal with the idea of common grace and similar matters.

Please do have a look at them later. But the second point I want to come to really is, well, how are Christians to address this moral decay and this spiritual darkness?

[12 : 08] And the second point is really for us to see from these verses that the Lord Jesus Christ intends for our redeemed lives to have an impact.

And that, wherever we are, whoever we are, he intends them to have an impact. Because you are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world. Salt always transforms whatever it comes into contact with. Whether it's flavouring a meal, whether it's slowing down the decay in meat.

Even, it was used, I've come to understand recently, as fertiliser for the soil. That actually encourages growth within the soil.

Always has an impact on its environment. Light, we know, will always dispel the darkness. It will show people where they are.

[13 : 10] It will show people where to go. Things become clear when there is light. Light, obviously, can prevent danger.

Lighthouses have been going for centuries. There would be these great towers with huge torches, effectively, to warn sailors away at night or in fog from making shipwreck on the rocks.

If you are travelling late at night. And you are worried about wild animals or robbers attacking you on the road home.

When you see the light of your hometown or village. The light's on there. That's a place of safety. A place of hope. So, light always has, salt and light always have an impact.

And that is what God intends each one of his people to have in whatever spheres of influence they have. All of us have spheres of influence. Let's never forget that.

[14 : 13] Not only within our homes and our families, but with our neighbours, with our friends. If we are in places of work, then we are able to influence those at work.

And now that we have the internet and social media, there are avenues of influence on an international scale that could only have been dreamed of a few years ago.

So, we have masses of opportunities to have an impact and to influence our world for good. Not just on a local level, but as I said, on a national and even an international level as well.

But of course, the Lord Jesus spends most of his time here, doesn't he? On the dangers of not being salt and not being light.

Just before we come on to that, I just meant to mention there as well. We think of the example of, I think it's 2 Kings chapter 2.

[15 : 25] We want to look that up just now. It's a great picture of what Jesus is speaking about in relation to this. 2 Kings chapter 2 verse 19.

The men of the city said to Elisha, Look, our Lord, this town is well situated as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive.

Bring me a new bowl, he said, and put salt in it. So they brought it to him. Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, This is what the Lord says, I have healed this water.

Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive. And the water has remained wholesome to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.

So there's a great picture of the healing effect that salt can have. Now in terms of water, we know that you can put Epsom salts, and that has a purpose if you put them in your bath.

[16 : 49] It's perhaps going out of fashion a little. But in terms of, there's the example that I mentioned there about the land and salt being there for fertilizing, I guess, as that spring would water the land, then it would be productive.

But we find as well that salt has antiseptic properties. If we go to the dentist, and maybe we've had a tooth out, the dentist will say, you know, here's a saline solution.

Make sure you take that and you irrigate the wound to prevent infection. Indeed, the phrase rubbing salt in the wound, it's interesting how terms of phrase like that can change their meaning over the years.

Nowadays, rubbing salt in the wound really means adding insult to injury. But originally, it meant more, you have to be cruel to be kind. Because before there was anesthetic, or indeed antiseptic medicines that could be used, for example, in warfare, if a soldier had an injury, a gaping wound, then what would happen?

He would be taken off the battlefield, and salt would be slapped into the wound. It was incredibly painful. And yet, it would save his life, because it would prevent the infection.

[18 : 14] It would have that antiseptic effect that would aid healing. And Christians in society are intended to have that effect in ways that perhaps we should be exploring far more.

It's been great in recent years to find evangelical churches having a return to the primacy of the gospel, and the exclusive saving power of the gospel.

But I think that's sometimes been at the expense of realizing that God uses our daily lives in his sovereign purposes. The change that he brings about in our lives, he will use as a tool to lead people to Christ, to stir in them an interest in the things of God, to stir in them an interest in their own eternal salvation.

And it's both Christian lives and the gospel that are needed and are used by God to bring people to him, to a saving knowledge of himself.

I think we've rightly overreacted, or we've rightly reacted negatively, I should say, but perhaps to the extent of overreacting, to the quote from, I think it's allegedly from Francis of Assisi, where he says, preach the gospel if necessary, use words.

[19 : 41] I mean, it is nonsensical, because you cannot preach the gospel without using words. But we've perhaps overreacted to that by thinking, well, it's simply preaching the gospel, and that's the only way that God works in people's lives.

That's the only way that God will save people. Obviously, it is the only way that people will be saved. But in the whole process of them coming to have an interest in the things of God, an interest in the gospel, it is really through the witness, the daily witness of Christian lives.

I was down in Edinburgh yesterday for the SOLUS conference that David Robertson was running, and it was a really excellent conference. It had to be rescheduled because Michael Ramson, who was the main speaker, was unwell and wasn't able to come to speak at the conference, so things had to be rearranged.

And Mez McConnell, that many of you may be aware of, who does the fantastic work with 20 schemes in Edinburgh and indeed elsewhere around Scotland, he had kindly agreed to come and be a last-minute speaker in his usual self-effacing way.

He said, it must have really been scraping the bottom of the barrel to have me come along. But he was saying, and it was really very, very telling, that while there's a number of people that have come to faith through the ministry of Nidre Community Church there in Edinburgh, and Mez works closely with them pastorally and knows how they have all come to faith, he says, well, it's absolutely crucial that a clear gospel message is preached every single Sunday.

[21 : 22] He says, of all those that have come to faith, it has been through the work of the church in the community, building relationships. People do come under the sign of the gospel, but it's those salt and light relationships that Christians in that church have within their community that has been the means by which people have come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now, it's obviously, it's much more than good deeds, even though we read of good deeds here. We need to share the gospel with one another, don't we? But that's part of being salt, as Paul says in Colossians chapter 4, where he says, verse 6, Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

That's speaking there really of gospel opportunities. In the conversations we have with people that we meet that don't know the Lord on a daily basis, let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

So, the impact that we have really is based on the fact that we are different from the world around us and we are distinctive from the world around us, in the same way that salt is distinctive and light is so utterly different from darkness.

And you may wonder, well, how is it that we are salt? How is it that we are light? If by nature we are in that spiritual darkness, if by nature we are, I guess, we could say dust, dust you are and to dust you'll return.

[23 : 10] And we read in Genesis, how is it that we can be the salt of the earth? How is it we can be the light of the world? Well, we're given a clue, aren't we, in Ephesians chapter 5, where Paul speaks about the Ephesians and their own experience before and after coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5 verse 8, we read, For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness, that word again, and truth. And find out what pleases the Lord.

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. And then lists many things later on, evil things that we are to shun.

But it's really this verse, You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. And we know that that difference in our lives, that distinctiveness, is only by God's grace.

[24 : 24] None of us by nature are light. None of us by nature are salt. But that is the transformation that the gospel makes to our lives, by giving us new hearts.

The Lord Jesus Christ, by his Holy Spirit, indwelling our hearts and our lives, so that we live through him, so that something of his beauty, something of his character, shines out in our lives.

So that people take note, that we've been with him, take note that there is something different, and distinctive about our lives, which is attractive, in the same way that light is attractive, in the same way that there is taste and flavor in salt.

All these things, ways in which God, in Christ, intends for us, in our redeemed lives, to have an impact on the world around us, at every level.

As I jumped the gun slightly earlier, to move on to the third point, but we can see from this passage, that Jesus spends most of his time, warning us, about the dangers of not being salt, the dangers of not being light.

[25 : 32] And it's really, we are to be aware, of these twin dangers, these twin temptations, of dilution, and disengagement, of compromise, and concealment.

See, when he speaks about salt losing its saltiness, those of you who have studied chemistry, will think, well, how can salt lose its saltiness?

It's sodium chloride, it's, that doesn't go off, so to speak. However, if it's mixed, with other impurities, then its effectiveness, is completely ruined.

And that's why we need to make sure, that we are nurturing, our spiritual lives. we need to make sure that, the way the world thinks, the way the world speaks, the way the world behaves, doesn't come in, to our lives, so that we start, thinking the same way, as the prevailing culture, saying the same things as them, even perhaps behaving, in the same way.

We will be utterly ineffective, in God's purposes, if we allow that to happen. So it's crucial, that we stay salty, that we retain our saltiness, if we are going to be effective, in God's service.

[27 : 03] Indeed, there's a hint there, isn't there, that, if we let the world, take over, our thinking, our speech, our behaviour, really there is no, there's no way to remedy that, it cannot be made, salty, again, no longer good, for anything.

So it's absolutely crucial, that, that we do nurture, our lives, nurture our spiritual lives, and, we all know, don't we, how we can do that, we need to be immersed, in God's word, we need to have fellowship, with God's people, we need to be, meeting regularly, on Sundays, and at other times as well, with God's people, we need to have a, a good prayer life, disciplined prayer life, we need to be involved, in sharing our faith, we need to be involved in, thinking through, all these issues, that we hear about, in, in the news, that, is seeing the, the dismantling of our, of our Christian heritage, the massive changes, that are happening, in Western culture, and returning, really to, a pagan kind of mindset, really the sort of world, that, many of these, Christians, that we read of, in the New Testament, experienced, in ancient Greece, and in, in southern, southern Europe, that, that kind of world, is the one, that we are returning to, or indeed, the time of the exile, in Babylon, our culture, is rapidly, turning, to, to that kind of, mindset, and we, find that we are, existing in the same way, as Daniel, and his friends, in that kind of, world, that we live in, but so crucial, that we retain, our saltiness, and, don't hide, our light, so as well, as the dangers, of, compromise, and, dilutions, of watering down, what we believe, under pressure, from, from non-Christians, around us, there's also, a great danger as well, isn't there, of, just hiding away, from society, and that's what Jesus, spends a lot of time on here, doesn't he, about, just no one, puts a light, under a bowl, you know, the whole purpose of light, is, is to give light to everyone, not to hide away, not to hide away, from, where light is needed, and light is needed, in every area, of our society,

Christians, are called to be, in the world, but not of the world, we need to be involved, in every area, of society, and that is part of the, the ministry, of the Christian Institute, to encourage Christians, really to take, not only, the, many opportunities, that are there, for seeking to influence, those in public life, or politicians, but really to think, biblically, and this is particularly, important for, some of the young people here, when you're considering, about what kind of, job you'd want to have, what kind of career, you'd want to have, realize, that just about every career, is open, for Christians, there's a great need, for Christians, to be involved, in the professions, to be involved, in

government, to be involved, in politics, to be involved, in all sorts, of different areas, as salt, and light, and, it may seem, something that is unattractive, it'd be far better, to go into the mission field, or to go and work, for a Christian organization, like the Christian Institute, or to go into gospel ministry, well all these things, are good, and right, and important, but, we should never think, that they're the only things, that Christians, can be involved in, Christians are needed, in every area, of life, to be salt, and light, to, we have opportunities, to reach, non-Christians, through secular work, in a way, that we never would, if we were involved, in gospel work, so, really important for us, not to, to conceal, or to disengage, from things, from all these issues, that we will be looking at together, later on, if you're able to stay, simply because, we find them too difficult, or we find that if we speak out, about them, somehow, we'll be shunned, by our friends, or our families, by our workmates, who might even lose, our jobs, if we speak out, about our faith, we're very reluctant, to, to, have any inconvenience, or suffering, in our lives, by nature, aren't we?

But the Lord Jesus, addresses that, doesn't he, in these verses beforehand, verse 10, blessed are, those who are persecuted, because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom, of heaven, blessed are you, when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say, all kinds of evil, against you, because of me, rejoice, and be glad, because great is your reward, in heaven, for in the same way, they persecuted, the prophets, who were, before you.

[32 : 07] So, rather than, shrink back, from speaking out, about our faith, shrink back, from being, from being known, by all, as, as a Christian, Christian, we should rather, be completely bold, and upfront, and unashamed, of being Christians, regardless of what, consequences that will bring, because the Lord Jesus says, even if these things happen to you, you're blessed, and there will be a great reward, for you, in heaven, who would want to, miss out, on that.

But just in closing, let's remember, the fourth principle, one I've touched on, already, and that is, God's purpose, in using, our lives, all of our lives, to lead others, to himself.

Verse 16, in the same way, let your light, shine before men, that they may see, your good deeds, and praise, your father, in heaven.

So, the fourth principle, is, live your life, with gospel, intentionality. That's a phrase, I heard for the first time, yesterday, it's one that I think, Tim Chester uses, in his book, with Steve Timmons, Total Church, gospel intentionality, that we live our lives, every single day, looking for opportunities, in what we do, in what we say, in how we live, to share Christ, to share the gospel, with those, who don't, know him.

That obviously, has to be in word, but it can also be, indeed, because it is good deeds, that the Lord, Jesus is speaking about here, we live in a society, that is so caught up, with people, just looking after themselves, we're losing, a sense of community, people don't look out, for each other, people don't show interest, in others.

[34 : 06] Indeed, when I first came to faith, in my last year, at school, it was really, through a Christian teacher, who clearly, had an interest, in what I was going to do, with my life, in a way that, other teachers, just didn't seem, to be interested.

That was a good deed, that was an act of kindness, on his part, that led me, to go to the, scripture union group, that he ran, and over time, I came to, put my faith, and trust, in the Lord Jesus Christ, but he was simply being, salt and light, in, in his calling, as a teacher.

So, we need to see, and understand, that God will use, all sorts of things, in our lives, to speak to other people, to make them realize, that the Lord Jesus Christ, does make all the difference, to our daily lives, not just, to our eternal destiny, not just to these things, which are obviously, the biggest issues, to be settled in our lives, but there's a real difference, as a transformation, in the daily lives, of Christians, through the gospel, that we become, salt and light, and we have that impact, on the world around us.

So, just in summing up then, just to recap, do you understand, the environment, that you've been placed in, as a Christian, that it is a fallen world, it's a world, marked by moral decay, and spiritual darkness, but do you realize, that it's God's purpose, to use your redeemed life, to have an impact, on that world?

Are you aware, on a daily basis, of these two dangers, these dangers of dilution, and compromise, the dangers of disengagement, and concealment, and do you realize, that God will, and I'm sure that we'll find, on the last day, that God actually, has used our lives, far more, than we ever imagined, to speak, into the hearts, and lives, of others, to show them, the difference, that Christ

makes, in a life, so that they, in time, will come to that point, where they give praise, to, our Father, in heaven, through the witness, that we, that we bring, even in the, the, the work, of the Christian Institute, as we encourage, our supporters, to, to get involved, in these political issues, you might think, well, are people really, going to be, impressed, or think well, of us for doing that, well you'd be surprised, we find, that, the things, that we do, at the Institute, even non-Christians, are delighted, that someone, is speaking up, when things, are going wrong, and are, providing, direction, and, assistance, to, our politicians, but, more of that later, hopefully you'll be able, to stay, and hear a bit more, from Jamie, and myself, downstairs, but, let's, just, commit one another, to the Lord, in prayer, about these, important issues, of being, salt and light, shall we pray together, heavenly father, we, thank you so much, that, the Lord Jesus, has given us, these word pictures, of what it means, to, to live, as a Christian, in this world, that you've placed us, we thank you, that, even though, we, are in this world, we are not to be of it, we thank you, that the Lord Jesus, has prayed for each one, of us this evening, that, we would know your protection, in this, dark and decaying world, and we thank you for that, but we pray Lord, that you would help us, to, to stay salty, and to shine brightly, for you, that we would truly, live as children, of light, and we ask Lord, that you would help us, to think through, the many ways, in which we can do that, that we might indeed, live to the praise, of your glory, in Jesus name, we ask it,
[38 : 24] Amen.