

Matthew 5:13-16

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[0:00] And as you turn there, I want to begin by just asking a couple questions.! Who are we?

And in asking this, I'm thinking specifically of the church.! Who are we as the church? Number two, what do we do?

And number three, to what end? While we could spend several weeks answering just one of those questions, who are we, what do we do, and to what end, I find that when traveling through such difficult questions, these big worldview questions, it's easy to get lost in the weeds and the swamps of challenges and nuances with such questions, that we can actually be helped by stepping back and looking at our map and compass, so to speak, getting our bearings, figuring out where we actually are and where we are going, and then going back to the challenges and nuances that we need to address.

And so that's kind of the goal for this morning, to ask these big questions, to get our bearings. And my goal this morning is not merely to fatten anyone's head with these big questions, though that's a good and necessary first step.

The goal is a bit more ambitious. I want you all with me to examine our lives. not as a rebuke at all, but as a brother who wants to press you all and be pressed by you, such that we can all say in the end, by grace, we have fought the good fight, we have finished the race, we have kept the faith.

[2:02] I want to examine our way of being in this world such that when it is all said and done, we can say we were trees of life here and now for those who know us.

As Proverbs 11.30 says, the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise. So today as we examine our lives for maximum kingdom work and fruitfulness, it is good and helpful to remind ourselves who we are, what we are to do, and to what end.

And so with these things in mind, please read with me Matthew chapter 5, verse 13. This is the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, You are the salt of the earth.

But if salt has lost its saltiness, how is it to be made salty again? It is good for nothing except to be cast out and trampled underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a mountain cannot be hidden, nor does anyone light a lamp and place it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it shines its light before all in the house.

[3:24] In this way, your light must shine before men, so that they may see your good works, and they may glorify your Father, who is in the heavens.

So as the church, who are we? The answer to this question serves as our first heading, if you're taking notes. We are signs of the new covenant.

Who are we? We are signs of the new covenant. Read verse 13 again. You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its saltiness, how is it to be made salty again?

It's good for nothing except to be cast out, trampled underfoot by men. There are many interpretations on what this salt metaphor is intended to convey.

Perhaps most famously, we've probably all heard at some point from faithful Christians, they'll lean into this idea of salt as a preservative, and so we're meant to be agents of preservation, is kind of the idea.

[4:27] Others have talked about it being a tasty thing, and so the point is to live lives that are tasty. I don't know. Be good, pleasing, perhaps nutritious is kind of the idea there.

And while these ideas are certainly true theologically, we should be agents of preservation, we should live tasty lives, they're secondary at best, I think.

I want to convince you these ideas are not actually the primary thrust of this metaphor. Rather, Jesus intends to convey that we, his disciples, the church, we are the new covenant people of God.

Salt in Scripture is often tied to covenant. You can think of places like Leviticus 2.13, Numbers 18.19. But I want to read to you 2 Chronicles 13.5, because I think it makes this point clear. Samuel writes, Ought you not to know, in other words, you better know, right? Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt.

[5:43] So notice that. Something about this Davidic covenant is forever. It is made with David, but it affects his sons. The new covenant fulfillment of this is the new David, Jesus Christ, and his disciples.

So the salt of the Davidic covenant is a sign of the permanence of God's promises to David. And so likewise, amazingly, Jesus is saying to you and I today, to his disciples on the mount in Matthew 5, he's saying, you are a sign of the new covenant.

You are a sign of God's faithfulness to his redemptive plan. You are a sign of the day and age in which we live, which is the last days. And Jesus' packed words, you are, you and I together, are salt of the earth.

Now, perhaps some of you aren't totally convinced of this covenant tie-in just yet, but as the commercials used to say when I was a kid, just wait. There's more. Look at verse 14 with me again. Matthew writes, you are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.

[7:05] So this verse is parallel to verse 13. You have the double construction. You are, you are, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. And because of its repetitive structure, we should already be thinking these are mutually interpretive.

In other words, these two metaphors help us understand the other. And so the word or the idea of light, as you all well know, is a polyvalent term in scripture, right?

Your mind's probably already running with all these things light can convey. Light as truth, light as wisdom, light as beauty, light as glory, or revelation or so many other good and true, wonderful things.

And I think that's, that's all in play here. Nonetheless, I also think with many interpreters before me that Jesus is primarily speaking of our identity as signs of the new covenant.

That through this metaphor, he's telling us we are the people of God. God speaking through Isaiah says in Isaiah 42 verse 6, he says, I am the Lord.

[8:11] I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people a light for the nations.

I think that's where this light of the world language is coming from. And so in Isaiah 42 6, there is this both and aspect to this. On the one hand, Isaiah 42 6 is about Christ.

John 8, 12 makes this clear. Jesus says, I am the light of the world. But on the other hand, as we've seen, Jesus also says in our text today that we, his church, are the light of the world.

And so marvel at this. Such, such is our identity with Christ that just as he is the light of the world, we too get to claim by grace through faith that we are the light of the world.

You and I. Paul, in his own words, touches on this in Ephesians 2. I'd love to read the whole passage, but I'm just going to read verses 6 and jump to verse 9.

[9:21] But Paul writes, stating, this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

He continues on in verse 9, describing his own ministry, and he says, to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known.

Paul's mystery and his reference to the church displaying that mystery by bringing it to light is synonymous with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5. We are heralds.

We are announcing this new age, this new dawning of salvation, revelation, and light of Christ's coming and the new covenant. So don't miss what Jesus says.

He says, we are the light of the world. This is anticipating the universal possession and blessing as promised to Abraham.

[10:32] This is covenantal. The new covenant does not merely promise the geographical land called Israel today, but it entails all of the new earth with Jew and Gentile alike.

And additionally, I want you to notice Jesus compares the visibility of light in this passage with the visibility of a city on a mountain. And this is no strange thing in his context.

In the ancient world, light is a scarce thing. They had no concept of light pollution the way we do today. Things got really dark at night.

And so if you did see a light at night, if you saw things going, it's because something was burning.

And so it was an expensive endeavor to keep the lights on in a city especially.

And while he doesn't make it explicit, I think Jesus is picturing a well-lit city. In other words, not only is this city so visible because of its prominent position on high, but it's actually lit up in a dark world.

[11:43] I think that is the picture he's creating. The city is a beacon. And this is in contrast to the Romans, by the way. You may know the famous Roman Cicero, for example, refers to Rome as, quote, the light of the world and the refuge of all nations.

Wonder where he got that. And so Jesus is saying something that is inherently anti-Roman. But more importantly, more foundationally, I think Jesus is describing a specific city.

In other words, I don't think Jesus is just describing any old generic city for argument's sake. I think Jesus is teaching on the new Jerusalem, the Jerusalem from above.

His audience would have understood this. They have Old Testament scripture that speaks to this. These symbols are so alive in their minds. Just one example, Zechariah 8.3. We have this connection of a renewed Jerusalem and the holy mountain of God.

Zechariah 8.3, Thus says the Lord, I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain.

[12:57] So he's anticipating a day where Israel, Jerusalem, are living rightly with their God. And so not only do we have this Old Testament anticipation of this new city and this mountain following these things, but going along with the covenantal contours of Matthew 5 regarding the salt and the light and bear in mind the setting of the sermon, right?

Jesus goes up on a mount in Matthew 5.1 and as the new Moses begins to teach on the law, the Sermon on the Mount, right? When you input all this imagery, the natural output in verses 13 through 16 is that Jesus is describing the new Jerusalem.

And he does this later in the Sermon on the Mount as well. If you look at Matthew 6.10 in his prayer, he models this and asks the Heavenly Father, he says, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In other words, Father God, bring down the new Jerusalem. And of course, the new Jerusalem, the new creation is associated regularly with light.

Revelation 21, 23 through 24 makes this perhaps most plain. Where John writing of the new Jerusalem says, the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the lamb.

[14:31] By its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. God's saints will be the saints of the earth So who are we?

Friends, we are not only God's saints as the saints of old were, but uniquely we are God's new covenant people here on earth.

We are the first fruits of a new creation. We are already citizens of this new Jerusalem that is yet to come in full. And so we uniquely in hindsight get to proclaim the victory of our God through his son in light of his finished work.

You and I as heralds of this new covenant get the transformed hearts promised by the prophets produced by the indwelling spirit such that our very lives are signs of the work of God signs of the new covenant.

And chiefly as I preached previously our love for one another in particular demonstrates this truth. We are the salt of the earth.

[15:47] We are the light of the world because we are Christ and we are in Christ by grace through faith. Jesus is so serious about identifying us in this way with him that both these metaphors come with urgent words.

If you look at verse 13 again regarding the salt metaphor he says you are the salt of the earth but if salt has lost its saltiness how is it to be made salty? It's good for nothing but to be cast out trampled underfoot by men.

Likewise with the light metaphor he says in verse 15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket you can hear the absurdity in that nobody does that but he puts it on a lamp stand and it shines before all in the house and so Jesus has a certain implied warning and exhortation here the

warning is don't become useless be who you are you are the sign of the new covenant this identity has been given to you by grace fulfill it be it embody it and so the implied exhortation here is this if you're salt be salty if you're light don't be hidden but expose the good news of Jesus Christ and his new covenant on all and so we are the salt of the earth we are the light of the world we are signs of the new covenant but what kind of activity or what kind of work does this actually entail right moving beyond but not without these metaphors what are we to actually do as signs of the new covenant right what's our job as citizens of the new

Jerusalem here and now this is our second question what do we do second heading we do good works before a watching world we do good works before watching world look back at verse 16 with me Jesus says in this way your light must shine before men so that they may see your good works being the light on a lamp stand being a city on a mountain being the light of the world how could the world not see us and yet Jesus command here shows us he is aware we often fail to live up to the identity we've been given by grace as salt in light and so he says in the manner of such a city in the manner of such a light in the manner of salt we're to live our lives such that we are noticeable why will we be noticeable not because of worldly standards it won't be because of our wealth it won't be because of our looks or our intelligence it won't be because of our positions of authority or power in this fallen world no none of these things but what are good works our light shining is our good works what are good works well he's talking about righteousness and not just the judicial imputed righteousness that

Paul talks about as good and as important as gospel as that is we need that but in the gospel of Matthew when this word righteousness is used he's actually almost always talking about practical righteousness in other words the actual heart disposition and the ensuing actions from that heart that are righteous that are good and this righteousness is a it's a heart and a life ultimately marked by mercy if you want some Matthew theology big picture stuff that's it like mercy is the quintessential virtue of a righteous life another sermon for another day but even that big idea of mercy is this tapestry interwoven throughout Matthew and inseparable from love kindness peace patience faith giving generously proper ordering of one's loves love for

[20 : 30] God first and from that love for neighbor among so many other good things in fact the entire sermon on the mount is actually about this true righteousness this inner righteousness that's Jesus' thesis statement of the sermon if you look at Matthew 5 20 he says for I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of the heavens well how can our righteousness exceed the scribes and Pharisees this is his point it's that by being internally righteous and then living out that righteousness remember the Pharisees are white washed tombs they are hypocrites they are dead on the inside that's their big problem but you and

I by grace as salt and light we are good trees that bear good fruit we're actually made whole by Christ such that our yes is our yes and our no is our no in other words our hearts are aligned with our actions and we have this integrity this wholeness brought about not perfection but wholeness and this is the greater righteousness the exceeding righteousness of which take that right this this internal heart of flesh that we've been given in fulfillment of the new covenant take that and make it shine before men let them see your good works your righteousness righteousness to play on the title of Cal Newport's book which has nothing to do with this be so good they can't ignore you now someone might wonder doesn't

Jesus forbid this doesn't he say we ought not sound the trumpet before us when we pray does he not tell us in Matthew 6 1 beware of practicing your righteousness before others Jesus point there is not that we ought to hide our righteousness if it was then he'd be contradicting himself because it's very plain in 13 through 16 he wants us to be loud and proud right to be righteous to be a light on a hill his point rather in Matthew 6 1 and these other texts where he warns against this practicing of righteousness is when we beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them that's the concern but for

God's people who have been saved by grace through faith on account of the personal work of Jesus Christ we actually are signs and we are to demonstrate the faithfulness of God by our righteousness if you are indeed a saved citizen of this well-lit city on a hill you cannot be hidden and you must not be hidden but to what end it's not for the sake of being seen by others that's clear from Matthew 6 1 our inner righteousness gifted to us by grace what is this all for here and now in this fallen world what are we aiming at to what end our third question heading number three to the glory

of our father to the glory of our father look at verse 16 again with me

Jesus says so your light must shine before men so that they may see your good works and they may glorify your father who is in the heavens we do good works before the eyes of a watching world to the glory of our God our father our text is climaxing with this very progression note how Jesus begins with the salt of the earth he moves to the light of the world and to our father in the heavens as signs of the new covenant we are meant to be a guide to others so that they too in response to seeing our good works that they may glorify our father right that's that's just logical if I'm going around announcing the goodness of Jesus Christ the goodness of the gospel the truth and reality of the new covenant and the hearts promised within that new covenant yet myself not living righteously not actually embodying the truth

[26:05] I'm proclaiming why would anyone take me seriously they couldn't they shouldn't and so beloved while we need to share the gospel with our words so that they can hear it and faith be produced and Romans 10 17 kind of things as important and good and essential as that lest our words be empty not perfect lives but demonstrably transformed and trustworthy lives lives that commend themselves that commend the gospel that adorn the gospel just consider Peter's encouragement in a very specific and difficult context to Christian women married to unbelievers he says in 1st Peter chapter 3 verses 1 through 2 likewise wives be subject to your own husbands so that even if some do not obey the word they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives when they see your respectful and pure conduct and so our very lives are evidence of God's goodness and when the world sees it they may glorify

God now at this point it's important to recall that just before our text this morning we began in verse 13 but if you go back to verse 10 through 11 Jesus concludes the beatitude section and he says this blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account in other words Jesus in our text today he's not promising everyone will love you in response to your righteousness clearly he says we should expect persecution from some for our righteousness but even in their persecution though they do not intend it they glorify our father

Peter speaks to this as well in 1 Peter 2 12 saying keep your conduct among the Gentiles and by Gentiles he means unbelievers right keep your conduct among the unbelievers honorable so that right this is the reason so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation so thus everyone who responds to our good works when we are shining our light we are living righteously before the eyes of a watching world everyone responds glorifying God it's just a question of is it indirect through persecution or directly through conversion and we rejoice in both in all things our righteousness is meant to display the beauty and supremacy and glory of our

God as John Piper has said in proving on the Westminster confession of faith he said the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever how do we enjoy God by living righteously for his name's sake proverbs 21 3 to do what is right and just same root word for righteousness to do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice and so beloved as signs of the new covenant witnessing by our good works to God's saving reign coming in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ to the glory of God that we ought to be active strategic ambitious zealous to live lives that commend the righteousness of our great and glorious

God it's who we are it's what we live now I'd like to take these closing moments just offer a few additional applications and reflections that I pray Lord willing will help us fulfill this number one memento mori that is the old Latin expression that means remember you will die it's exciting I think about this a lot in Christian history you may well know Christians took this aphorism from the Romans the Romans used to have skulls on their dinner tables as a reminder that they would die and it was meant to remind them to live it up eat drink be merry for tomorrow we die but Christians took this and transfigured it to remember our lives are limited and we will give an account we ought to live well and so my challenge to you from this morning the challenge I'm giving myself again not as a rebuke but as a as an encouragement as a pressing as a zealous effort to keep striving is that in light of this wisdom and in light of this text this morning I want you to ask yourself this week today am I being faithful with the skills resources and opportunities

[32:13] God has given me to have my light shine before others so they may glorify him if you're lacking skills resources and opportunities which I don't think you are but but if you think you are

then the question is are you seeking to create and receive skills resources and opportunities for this all important kingdom work I just think of the encouraging words of James and James 1 5 with wisdom specifically he says if any of you lacks wisdom right if that if that's if that's the excuse you're writing right if he said if you lack it let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given to him and so if there's any godly ambition among you I want to encourage you pursue it trusting God will provide right take risks for the kingdom and so as a challenge I encourage you all with me examine our lives are we spending ourselves well for the kingdom do we have faith of a mustard seed that can move mountains application number two go and tell it's been remarked by many that the mission of the old testament people of God

Israel was a come and see endeavor right come to our hill come come check us out we've got good falafel whatever but the new covenant people of God are a go and tell movement God may call some of you to move out of country at some point that's not necessarily what I'm talking about when I say go and tell rather I'm simply encouraging us all to think together as a body strategically sacrificially for how we might follow through on witnessing to those in our community right tomorrow morning most of us will go to work or we will go to school or we will go to the grocery store and in these places that you go as a sign of the new covenant you ought to tell tell your co-worker about the good news of Jesus Christ tell your classmates your teachers your students your children why you have a such such a hope in you right tell the cashier at

Walmart that our church meets at 1045 on AM and would love to have them right go and tell going and telling can also include inviting others to come and see right perhaps you and your family can host unbelievers this week for dinner in your neighborhood form friendships with such persons through pickleball leagues or whatever it is you do right maybe maybe a crew of us this is just an idea volunteers to run the concession stands at Lumpkin County football games right just a way to get out there a way to get our name there a way to shine light in our community and I'll tell you like one of the ways I'm super encouraged by our body uniquely for how well we do this is in the foster care ministry that's just kind of organically developed here over the years and I'm not just thinking of the parents who are actually doing the fostering as great and wonderful as that is I'm also thinking of the many of you who are supporting those parents through meals childcare and other various supports this church wide effort to care for the orphans what a testimony to our father who adopted us by grace what a witness to the gospel so thankful for that and so I know there's so many real ongoing activities of faithfulness in the life of our body to evangelize and witness but again the challenge I want to ask can we as a collective whole be even more fruitful is there a way we could do more or make reasonable changes for maximum kingdom impact and that's not a loaded question

I'm not about to break out my bullet plan list that's an open invitation for us to think together about how to be more effective and remember that we are to go and tell to live righteously to do this light shining work before all men and so I want to say this as a loving warning not a rebuke but a loving warning that we are to shine our light before all men and not just to our spouse and children at home there is this impulse that I fear growing in our kind of broadly reformed evangelical tribe to sort of shelter in place to remove any and all outside influence that's coming from a very good impulse right we want to protect our children we want to preserve our faith I want that I love my kids I do not want them to know about some of the things of this world and so that's a good impulse but we need to be reminded we can preserve and protect on the march right we want to we want to balance this this good and

God honoring impulse by remembering that we are a faith that is on the offensive right we are besieging the gates of hell hell is not besieging the gates of heaven and so again we need to examine ourselves is our life built such that we are a beacon on a hill for the world to see or are we doing everything we can to hide under a basket out of fear of the world but in the name of faith it's so easy to get caught in that trap and so if I can put it this way riffing on the old expression I want to say don't be of such a separatist bent in your pursuit of heavenly things that you are of no earthly good right it's true we want to live peaceable gentle quiet lives as

[39 : 14] Paul urges us to pray for in first Timothy 2 we don't want to use that as an excuse for inactivity or hiding after all this is the same Paul who turned the world upside down this is the same Paul who was imprisoned and killed for his faith the same Paul who was stoned by angry mobs chased out of town for shining his light before all men and so are we building our lives to be seen for the glory of God that's the question I can't answer that for all of you but we have to answer that

I'm so thankful for this means encouraging one another in the faith and the gospel reminding ourselves of our identity we've been given we're not earning our salvation and all this important work we're responding we need to recognize and exhort one another's gifts and deploy those in public service and I don't just have Sunday morning in mind but anywhere and everywhere deploy one another right recognizing to riff on Paul here the goodness of the hand and the goodness of the foot and how they contribute to the welfare of the body while also recognizing the foot's not the hand nor the hand the foot right we all have our giftings and our areas we are called to serve and so we want to do all this with and through the church with one another in love and humility and figure out what does it look like for us to deploy well in Lumpkin County in Hall County in Dawson in the places we represent and so in closing brothers and sisters I'm asking us all not just to dream big not just to think big but to plan to do extraordinary things through ordinary faith with one another this is who we are it's what we are to do before the eyes of a watching world and to the glory of our heavenly father let's consider let's think may may may may may may may may may may may may
And let's pray.