

Sermon- 2-9-2014

Text- Matthew 5:13-16

Title- The Purpose of Good Deeds

**13** *“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.*

**14** *“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. **15** 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. **16** In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*

I used to work with teens full time as a youth minister. In the summer I used to take my High School kids to the Appalachian Mountains in Tennessee for an event called “Week @ the Peak.” We reserved a campsite in the Smokey Mountain National Park and then arranged three unique mountain experiences. The most obvious was climbing to the peak of one of the mountains nearby, but in addition to that, we went white water rafting and finally spelunking; which is another way of saying that we explored a cave.

Now I had been told that the cave we were exploring was going to be well suited for our high school students. One of my friends was from the area and he assured me that it was going to be a safe and exciting experience. He was certainly correct about the exciting part. Once we were all inside the mouth of the cave we formed a long column.

I was struck immediately by two thoughts as I made my way down: 1. It’s really dark in here, and 2. There are going to be 60 moms ready to have my head when we get home. I considered this second thought as I felt my feet sink into about a foot and a half of thick red clay mud. I hadn’t prepared anyone for the fact that they were going to get really, really dirty, because I didn’t know it myself. But the further into the cave we went the more filthy we all became, and I don’t think any of us were able to salvage our clothes once we returned home.

Down, down, down we went. At times we would be walking through huge rooms and our flashlights would bounce off the crags and stalactites casting wild shadows. Then the walls would close in upon us as we traversed narrow passages, our hands and arms brushing up against the wet earth. We came at one point to a passage that our leader referred to as “the birth canal.” I can hardly believe that we decided to press on- I must have been crazy. To get through this particular section we all had to crawl on our stomachs and inch ourselves through an 8 foot long...”birth canal.” It was ridiculous and scary and yet it was invigorating and thrilling too.

Believe it or not, all 60 of us made it through and we continued down deeper and deeper, past an underground river that we could hear rushing through, even though we could barely see it through various holes and openings. Finally after two hours of making our way into what seemed to be the very belly of the earth our guides had us all congregate in the most magnificent underground room. They called it “the organ room,” because the stalactites and stalagmites stretched all around like the pipes from an old pipe organ. It was absolutely stunning to be in that place, hundreds of feet underground. Our flashlights were like 60 spotlights aimed high into the upper reaches of the room, which was so tall we couldn’t really get an idea of how high it went.

After several minutes of taking in the splendor of that place our guide got our attention and began talking to us about our experience. He asked us all to turn off our flashlights. One by one the lights went out and finally this giant room went absolutely pitch black. My friend continued to talk to us in the dark. He asked us to try and put our hands in front of our faces to see if we could identify them in the blackness. And we tried, but none of us could see our hands. He told us to wait a few moments, to see if our eyes would adjust. We waited, but they didn’t. Then he said something that I’ll never forget. He said, “You know, you could stay down here for hours waiting for your eyes to adjust, but they never will. Here in this place there is an absence of any light.” He said, “I’ve been in this cave dozens of times, but I assure you, that if we found ourselves in this room without any flashlights, I’d never be able to get us out of here.”

Sitting in that dark place, as the person responsible for getting all 60 of those kids back home, those were chilling words. Then he lit a match and the room was filled with its light. Faces were made visible and the features of the cave were made plain. “With just this much light,” he said, “I could get us all out of here safely.” I use that story to make this simple point. When you’re in a dark place, a little bit of light is a very welcome thing.

Today we’re in week two of a series we’ve titled: “The Sermon.” Each week during this series we’ll be progressing through the three chapters in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life that make up the Sermon on the Mount. We’ll be asking some big questions. What does it look like to be a follower of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What would it look like to reflect the light of Jesus as neighbors, friends, spouses and parents? As we study Jesus’ most famous sermon, we have an opportunity to hear Him answer these very questions. He calls His followers to a radically new way of living that stands in stark contrast to the priorities and values of this world. He encourages us to live and love and give in such a way that we actually shape the world for His glory! Today we get the opportunity to allow Jesus’ words to press into our lives and shape us, by His grace, into people whose lives shine in the darkness.

Let's talk about what that means for just a moment.

You know, it was once thought that human progress was inevitable. The assumption was that all existence and all creatures were inevitably moving towards higher and higher status. Things are improving. H.G. Wells once wrote, "Can we doubt that our race will presently realize our boldest imaginations? Unity and peace in a world more splendid and lovely than any garden or palace ever known. Going from strength to strength in an ever-widening circle of achievement." Just 20 years later he wrote this, "Homo sapiens, as he is pleased to call himself, is played out. His depravity has come near to breaking my spirit."

The optimism in the inevitability of human progress has changed. The characteristic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a deep and a deepening cynicism. This cynicism is in every area, whether it's arts or sciences or government, both formally and informally. There is cynicism about any real form of human progress or any real ability to deal with our problems.

What happened to the optimism of H.G. Wells? What happened to the belief that humanity was headed toward ever-higher levels of goodness and prosperity? Here's what happened. (Keller) Several hundred years ago, all of western society was based on a Christian vision. Whether it was Catholic or whether it was Protestant or Orthodox, here was the Christian outlook. The world is a difficult place with lots of problems but there is an authoritative word (the Bible), there is a supernatural God who lives in a realm of the kingdom of God and through conversion this realm can come breaking into reality and things can change.

Except in the 1700s along came a view called the Enlightenment. And the Enlightenment says human beings, by the use of their own reason, can figure out things and we can get better and better. Humans are evolving toward higher and higher life forms. And we're not even talking about Darwin at this point. The Enlightenment was a particular view of humanity that was incredibly optimistic. They looked at Christianity and said, "All this gloom about sin, that just lowers our self-esteem." "And all this talk about authority, all that does is kill our creativity." "Education! Scientific advances! We know the life we want and we're going to get it."

And what was the result? The result has not been greater optimism. The result has been an enduring pessimism. Why? Because in spite of all our progress, and in spite of advances in science and technology, the world is still a dark place. There are still wars and acts of genocide. There's still racism and prejudice and pain. In spite of all we've achieved, the death rate remains unchanged. It's one-to-one.

The world remains a dark place and so that begs the question, how is a follower of Christ to view the world? Are we to identify with the optimists who believe it's getting better. Or are we to join the pessimists in cynically believing that nothing will ever change? Are we simply stuck at the bottom of a cave with no light? No hope? Biblical Christianity is neither dark pessimism, nor shallow optimism. Here's the reason why. It doesn't look idealistically at the world the way the optimists do and it doesn't look at our current reality the way the pessimists do, it looks at Jesus Christ. And who is Jesus Christ? If he's real then he has made the idyllic a reality. He's blasted a hole between the wall that has kept the light and darkness apart.

Or think of it this way: Jesus stands in the depths of a dark cave from which we could never escape, He lights a match and bids us follow Him through. It's the greatest adventure of all. Faith in Christ acknowledges that human prospects are desperate but they are also more glorious than you can imagine because the kingdom of God is breaking into the world.

When we know Jesus as our Savior the Light of the World comes into our darkened lives and changes them. Then we realize that we ourselves can become agents of change. That's what this passage is about. What Matthew 5:13-16 teaches is that the world needs salt and light.

The first thing Jesus teaches here is that the world, in and of itself, is falling apart, but there is a salt and a light from outside the world that can save it. If you associate yourself with Jesus, you become the salt and the light. That's an astonishing statement. The world is decaying, but there's salt and light from outside to stop the decay. And you and I can become that salt and light.

Salt, in the near-eastern times, was used as a preservative. They didn't have refrigerators, so the only way to preserve meat was to salt it like crazy. Light actually has the same kind of effect. You have to realize that there was no electricity in that time. So the light that Jesus is talking about would have been a wick floating in cup of oil. If you've ever been in a city where everything has gone out and there's no light except for candles. You realize how dark things really get at night. We don't realize how dark things really get at night. When you are really in utter darkness. Not just a minimal light, but utter darkness it gives you a sense of vertigo and disorientation and dislocation.

What Jesus is saying when he says the world needs salt and the world needs light, is that the world, human existence, left to itself, inevitably goes toward greater disorder, dislocation, and disintegration. Let me explain this as simply as I can. Things fall apart. Everything falls apart.

Let's not just think of this philosophically, let's think of this physically. Think of yourself. We're all falling apart! And it takes a tremendous amount of work to stop it right? And inevitably it happens anyway.

Everything falls apart physically. But think of this also relationally and socially. Nearly all relationships tend to go bad. Only with the greatest of effort can you keep relationships together. Look at marriage the ultimate relationship. Look how hard it is to keep that thing intact. Look how easy it is for that to unravel. You have to constantly work, constantly talk, constantly pray so that you can continue seeing eye to eye and the minute you stop working things can fall apart and there is resentment and misunderstanding and anger. Which underlines what Jesus said, which is the natural tendency is to go to greater and greater disorder. Crime, racism, war, class struggle and friction between the haves and the have-nots, all these things just show that the natural tendency, in the social area, is disorder, dislocation and disintegration.

This happens internally too. Nobody is naturally happy. Only with the greatest of effort can you keep yourself mentally intact. Disintegration is right around the corner any time you start to coast. There's depression there, there's anxiety there. Everything is going to pieces. Things left to themselves are going to pieces and that's what Jesus is saying. The world needs salt. The world needs light.

So here's the good news, Jesus says there is salt and light. The salt and light are Jesus himself. He doesn't mention himself, per say, in this section, and yet he does. He says, "*You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 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.*

This tells us what kind of light we are, and this is critical. Jesus doesn't say that we're like the sun and stars in the sky, because the sun and the stars are light unto themselves. We're like a lamp, and a lamp cannot produce light, a lamp can only hold light. That means Jesus is implying here what is stated very strongly elsewhere- that he is the light of the world, and we become the light of the world only as we're lit by him. Our light is derived from another source. We're lamps, not the sun.

When Jesus is called the light of the world in John 1, and when he calls himself the light of the world in John 8, what does that mean? First, it means he's the truth. Truth illuminates. The truth makes all things plain. Second, it means Jesus is gloriously good. He cannot lie. He cannot cheat. He's beautiful in his glory. That's why we call him light.

Third, he's light, meaning, he guides us. You can see a light itself, and then the light shows you everything else. Because we have the lights on, we can see the chairs. The chairs cannot show us themselves, but the light shows us the chairs. The difference between light and chairs is the light is the way we see everything else.

Jesus is our guide through this life. When he says, "I am the light of the world, he who walks in my light will have the light of life and never walk in darkness again." When he says that, he is saying, "I am the true light. I and I alone show you the way."

You realize what Jesus is saying? When he says, "I am the light of the world," he's saying, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father except through me." That's the essence of the Christian faith.

Now, if Jesus is the light, if he's the only way that we're going to see reality. If Jesus is the salt, he says, "In me all things hold together." If only Jesus can renew the world so the body stays together, so relationships stay together, and if only he renews the heart so the psyche stays together, then we can be realistic about the decay around us and we can visualize what happens when the light of the world shines into the darkness.

Jesus points out that you and I can be the salt and light of the world if we associate with him. In other words, if we receive Jesus as Savior, his light comes in; his saltiness (his preserving power) comes into our lives and we become the salt of the earth and we become the light of the world. That has got to be one of the scariest things that has ever been said, and I hope you are scared. If you're not scared yet I've got a few minutes left to make sure.

When Jesus says that we are the salt and light of the world this is what he's saying a Christian should be like. Ready? 1. Salt and light expose decay and darkness. If you're light, then that means your life should be so beautiful, so distinctive, that when it comes into contact with others the beauty of your life shows other things for what they really are. For example, if you're a Christian, just by your very presence you reveal the dishonesty in the business, you reveal the gossip in the office, you reveal the racism in your neighborhood, you reveal the corruption in your political district, you reveal the promiscuity at your party. Just by your decision to live according to the truth- to the beauty of Jesus Christ. Your life, by its order, (by the way in which you handle pressure, by the way in which you deal with criticism, by the way in which you treat those who work under you) if you're like Jesus, the beauty of that is going to show up the reality of your environment.

A good light shows you true color, right? Have you ever noticed that sometimes you pull out a pair of socks and you can't tell if they're blue or black and you look in one light and you still can't tell so you have to go to a good light in order to tell if it's blue or black. A good light shows you the real colors. If you are walking like Jesus Christ, then the beauty of your life shows everyone around you what is good and what is bad.

You know the phrase "good deeds" from our text. (*In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*) There are two Greek words that can be used for "good" *agatos* and *kalos*. *Agatos* means good in quality, *kalos* means beautiful, and it's *kalos* that's used here.

Your deeds ought to be beautiful. People ought to say, "amazing!" And that's the question. Is your life so remarkable that it shows the contrast between the beauty of Christ and what's around you? Or do you blend in, and there's nothing remarkable about your life at all, and there's nothing that stands out?

If you're salt and light that means you bring joy to people. Now this is really scary. Salt is not just a preservative it's a seasoning. It was the original seasoning. It brings out the taste. It makes things taste good. Light of course is beautiful because it shows off the beauty and detail of things. What it means to be salt and light is that you are not a killjoy. Now this is really tough, because I just finished saying that being salt and light will reveal true color. If your presence- the beauty of your life, reveals racism, that's bound to cause friction. If your presence- the beauty of your life, reveals corruption, that's likely to cause difficulty. But, on the other hand, at the same time we are to be the joy of whatever group we're a part of. We are the stability of our neighborhood. We're the glue in our offices. Because the follower of Jesus doesn't look at a situation and ask, "What can I get out of it?" The follower of Christ acts like salt and asks, "How can I bring out the best in this organization, out of this group, out of these people?" A Christian brings joy to the people around them.

-Salt and light examples.

Are you the light of the world? Have you ever been lit? You have to be lit. Has the light of Christ ever come into your life? That's a question to ask. If Jesus light has come into your life then you've come to realize the beauty of what he's done for you and your great need for Him.

On the other hand, for those of us who have chosen to follow Christ, I worry that there aren't many people noticing the beauty of our lives. I wonder if we are radiating the light of the world through our lives or if we're simply blending in?