

## Matt. 5:13-16

### Intro:

At first glance, in this section, Jesus seems to be speaking about the identity and character of believers. His main ideas are both stated with the words “You are..” followed by a metaphorical description of His disciples. And these verses do inform believers about an aspect of their identity in Christ and the character they should demonstrate. However, the main point of this passage is about the function and role of believers in the Kingdom and the ways that believers should impact the world around them. In other words, this section is mostly about what believers should accomplish, and only secondarily about who believers are, which enables them to accomplish this.

### I. You are like salt, so, make a difference (13)

#### A. You are the salt of the earth (13a)

In this proposition, Jesus metaphorically likened His disciples to salt, and said that they are the salt “of the earth.” In that age, with no refrigerators, salt was a primary means by which they kept food from spoiling. Salt was used as a preservative. It penetrated into the surrounding food in which it was placed, and kept it from going bad. And of course, it impacted the taste of their food, usually for the better. And the phrase “of the earth” points to the fact that the salt, representing the disciples, would somehow impact the world around them.

So, Jesus was saying that, in some way, the presence of His disciples living according to His standards would keep society from getting worse and worse. And by their tasteful seasoning, they would even make their society better. History has proved that a strong Christian influence has typically made cultures stronger, more just, more peaceful and safer, and more prosperous. Genuine Christian influence is a blessing to any society.

In this verse, Jesus was teaching that His disciples should pervade our surroundings with Christ’s influence. We should impact our surroundings with Christ’s goodness. And we should preserve and even improve our surroundings with Christ’s grace and power through our witness to Christ. Jesus’s disciples are to make a difference, because we are the salt of the earth.

#### B. Therefore, make a difference in the world (13b-f)

##### 1. If the salt loses its taste (13b)

In this proposition, Jesus brought up a hypothetical situation – if salt would stop being salty, if it would lose its taste. There is a problem in that natural salt never loses its taste. It always remains the same chemical compound. If it remains salt, it will always be salty. The only way that it can lose its effectiveness as a preservative and seasoning is if it is mixed with something else, like dirt, for example. The word translated “loses its taste” is literally “to become foolish.” Some suggest this reflects a double meaning from the word in Jesus’s native language. But in this context, it clearly means to lose its effectiveness as salt – to cease being a preservative and seasoning influence. He was saying that if salt no longer tastes like salt and no longer accomplishes what salt was used for, there was no point in its existence as salt.

But Jesus was not primarily talking about natural salt. He was addressing His disciples as a preserving and positive influence. His disciples should not lose their influence in society, because they cannot help but be influential as long as they live according to the truth of Christ. So, here, Jesus was warning against not exercising a positive influence in the surrounding society. The only ways that this would happen is first, if His people get so mixed in with the corrupt society that they themselves are corrupted by that society, or second, that they cease to live out their trust in Christ and His way of Kingdom living. Neither of which is a legitimate option for genuine Christians. And so, Jesus was warning against this in the next propositions, where He told what would happen if His disciples lost their saltiness – if they failed to have a pervasive preserving influence. He did not tell His disciples to become salt, but suggested they remain what they were.

2. It cannot go back to being useful [again] (13c-f)

This section communicates the result if salt loses its saltiness. If this ever happens, the salt would lose its identity and reason for being. If salt is not salty, it is not anything. And if a Christian loses his difference from the world, and therefore, his preserving and bettering influence on his surroundings, his Christianity is fruitless and called into question.

a In what way will it become salty? (13c)

This proposition is a rhetorical question that expects a negative answer. It functions as a statement that salt which lost its influence cannot be made influential again. Like in the preceding proposition, salt does not change its chemical makeup. So, Jesus was introducing the fact that for salt to lose its influence was an unthinkable event, which could not be remedied. For salt not to be salty means that it loses itself beyond repair. It needed more [different] salt to be made salty. It no longer had the saltiness in itself. In applying this metaphor to His disciples as witnesses and influences on the surrounding society, Jesus probably held to the possibility that un-salty disciples could repent and return to being a positive influence by the convicting and empowering work of His Spirit in their lives. But, like in the warnings included in the letters to the churches in Revelation (see Rev. chs. 2-3), there is a possibility that a church may be so compromised that Christ takes its lampstand away and it ceases to be a church. Here Jesus was strongly warning against His disciples losing their preserving influence in the first place by pointing out that if they are not salty, they are betraying their identity and purpose.

b It won't be useful, but will be discarded (13d-f)

This continues to describe the results if salt loses its saltiness.

1) It will no longer be capable of anything (13d)

Salt without saltiness has no power, no ability to accomplish anything it was created to accomplish. It would literally be good for nothing. It would lose its identifying characteristics and reason for being. If it is not salty, it is not anything. Jesus was using this statement to challenge His followers not to lose their preserving influence on their surroundings. If we don't make a difference in the world around, then what good is our Christian faith? If we are not salty, somehow making an impact, we have stopped having evidence that we ourselves have been impacted by Christ, and we may question whether we have been changed. A Christian or church that is not making a difference may not actually be a genuine Christian or church.

2) Except being discarded and disdained (13e-f)

This section is in the form of an exception, given to state the alternative that will happen to salt that has lost its saltiness. It is no longer capable of anything else, and so it will experience these things.

a) Except being thrown outside (13e)

This proposition uses the phrase "thrown out" in the same way we use this phrase to refer to trash that is discarded. It is no longer useful, so we get rid of it by sending it away from us. Salt that has lost its preserving and seasoning power will be treated in this way. Jesus did not specify whether this meant that His supposed followers, who lack this influence would be rejected by Him or by society. He had already spoken of His true followers being rejected by society because of their positive influence (see vv. 11-12). And so, this more likely implies that they would be judged and rejected by Christ Himself as not fulfilling a function for which they were created and redeemed. But, as the next proposition shows, there is also an aspect of rejection by society as well.

b) Result: to be trampled by people (13f)

This proposition is in the form of a result statement. This is what happens when the un-salty salt would be thrown out – it will be trampled by people. “Being trampled” has the connotation of being injured or even destroyed by being crushed. But it mostly has the idea of being disdained and thought nothing of. It is not even worth avoiding of picking up. It is not given a second thought and just stepped on.

We have seen this in our society. Christians that have tried hard to be relevant and liked by the unbelieving world have not succeeded in winning the world through that strategy. Instead they have mostly been ignored and/or disdained. And they have compromised their own identity. Why would the world see the need for supposed Christians who are just like them? They already have all that these people are seeking to imitate and affirm. But those Christians who are intentionally not just like the world will make a difference. Sometimes that difference results in persecution, as seen in the previous passage. But sometimes the result is conversions. This is so much better than un-salty “Christians” who make no difference at all.

II. You are like light, so, be conspicuous for good (14-16)

This section is parallel to the previous verse. It uses the metaphor of light instead of the metaphor of salt. But the main point is similar. Because of His people’s identity and role, they should have a positive impact on the society around them. And there is something wrong if they don’t.

A. You are the light of the world (14a)

In this proposition, Jesus metaphorically likened His disciples to light, and said that they are the light “of the world.” In John 8:12, Jesus proclaimed that He is the light of the world. And He is the light of the world in a way that His disciples are not able to be. But, in a way, He has called us to imitate Him in this role and be the light of the world. The function of “light” is to illuminate – to enable people to see things as they really are. Light is the opposite of darkness, and in the Bible, it is a symbol for goodness, truth, righteousness, and the transparency of doing good, as opposed to evil, falsehood, sin, and the hiddenness and sneakiness of all wrongdoing. Light is the vehicle for the revelation of truth.

And so, the application of this proposition is that God’s people should somehow communicate the truth of Who God is. This happens by proclamation. But it is also reinforced and demonstrated by living truthful, righteous, lives of integrity and transparency. We are to speak the truth, live the truth, and demonstrate the truth. When we do this, we illuminate and show the world the right way to live – the way that is blessed and flourishing. But we also, by contrast, highlight that the other ways of living are cursed and harmful in comparison. Like shining a light in a dark room will more clearly show up the dirt and imperfections, shining the light of Christ in a dark world will expose and confront sin, while at the same time, showing a better way. And that is why, according to John 3:19-21, many people hate and avoid the light, and even persecute the people that expose their darkness and sin.

But truth is always better than falsehood and deception. Light is always better than darkness. And so, shining the light gives more accurate knowledge, and revelation of the truth of Christ. The truth will inevitably come out and be victorious in the end. And so, shining the light is a beneficial thing, even if it is resisted by some. So, Christ’s disciples are called to be a part of this illumination of reality, and the revelation of Christ’s goodness, and even the exposure of the world’s darkness. We expose the world’s sin and darkness, not so that we can look down on them, but so that they can see the truth and find rescue and healing in Christ – Who is the ultimate light.

**B. Therefore, let your good works be conspicuous, for God's glory (14b-16)**

**1. Conspicuous things will be noticed (14b-15)**

Just like, in the previous verse, Jesus pointed out the absurdity of salt that is not salty in order to encourage His followers to live out their calling to influence our world, so here, Jesus pointed out the absurdity of light that does not shine and illuminate, in order to encourage us to demonstrate Christ's impact and influence our world.

**a A city on a hill cannot be hidden (14b-c)**

In this section, Jesus was negating an absurd possibility in order to make a point. This is an illustration by exaggeration. A city on a hill will be visible. It will be blatantly obvious and conspicuous. In the same way, His disciples should make their good works conspicuous and obvious. It should be as unthinkable that their Christian life could not be noticed.

**1) A city is not able to be hidden (14b)**

A city, being a very large object, is difficult, even impossible, to hide. It is obvious to anyone within the range of vision. And in the next proposition, Jesus made it even less thinkable that it would be hidden.

**2) Reason: being on top of a hill (14c)**

Any city would be difficult or impossible to hide. But this is made even more unreasonable to think if the city was on top of a prominent hill. It is elevated with no obstructions to sight, and therefore prominently visible for miles around. This kind of city is clearly conspicuous and cannot be hidden. In the same way, Jesus will emphasize later in the punchline of this section, our good deeds should be plainly seen.

**b No one hides a light, but rather uses it to illuminate things (15)**

This section is parallel to 14b-c. Something created to be conspicuous cannot and should not be hidden. It is the nature and purpose of light to shine and illuminate the things around it. To not shine, or to somehow prevent it from illuminating things is a contradiction and absurdity. Why would anyone have a light and not let it shine?

**1) Neg: No one hides a light (15a-b)**

**a) No one lights a lamp (15a)**

This proposition must be taken in connection with the next one. It is a setup for the main idea in the next proposition. Obviously, people do light lamps. But what they do not do is, after the preliminary action of lighting the lamp, do what is described in the next proposition. People do not light a lamp *and* do the next action together.

b) And places it under a basket (15b)

This proposition is the completion of the thought begun in the previous one. Once a person lights a lamp, they do not cover and obscure it. They do not put a lamp under a cover that blocks out its light. If someone were to take a typical first century lamp and put it under a basket, it would illuminate under the basket, but would give no light to the rest of the room. However, the purpose of lighting the lamp, as will be seen in the next section, is to illuminate the entire room. So, putting it under a basket would defeat its purpose.

This is parallel to a disciple that only shines in a limited private sphere. Of course, there are parts of the world, where it is more dangerous to be a Christian. And in those places, wisdom needs to be exercised on how to avoid persecution as much as possible without denying Christ. But in the other parts of the world, there should be no such thing as a purely private faith. If someone's faith is genuine, then it should automatically impact their public as well as their private lives. It should go with them into the public sphere and influence all that they do there. Everyone else acts in the public square according to their deeply held beliefs. It is hypocrisy and dishonesty to try to force Christians to keep their religion private, when everyone else's religion is public, especially in countries where there is freedom for other religions and viewpoints *only because* that freedom has come from the influence of Christianity on that culture. Christians should not buy into the historically mistaken understanding of "separation of church and state" or the "secular public square." Both of those ideas are a distortion of the historical reality and intention of our founding principles, as well as manipulative for the advantage of the opposite worldview, not to mention directly opposed to Jesus's teaching in this passage. Christians should not be ashamed of Christ and His way, either in private or in public, as illustrated in the following propositions.

2) Pos: Rather, they position it to illuminate things (15c-d)

a) But he places it on the lampstand (15c)

In that day, lamps were typically placed on lampstands, which elevated them and allowed them to illuminate more of the space in which they were placed. The proper use of light is to be seen and to illuminate. So, a lamp was put in a conspicuous place to shine and give light to the rest of the area. In the same way, Christians should allow their commitment to Christ to be conspicuous in their lives and make an impact on the society around them.

b) And it shines on all the things in the house (15d)

This is the continuation of the previous proposition. This shows the result of putting a lamp in a conspicuous position. The result is that it makes a difference – it illuminates the entire house. All things in the house receive its light and become more clearly seen.

In the same way, disciples should make a difference in society. There is no part of society where disciples should not have an illuminating influence. Our faith should not just impact our lives in private and in church (though it should make a difference there as well). Rather, Christ should transform every area of our lives and everything we are involved with, including our public roles.

2. In the same way, let your good works be conspicuous, so God will be glorified (16)

In this verse, Jesus applied the illustrations He had used in the previous verses. He translated the ideas of salt and light into how His disciples should respond to this teaching. We are to be salt and light by living righteously, so that our good works will be seen in public for God's glory.

a In the same way, let your light shine before people (16a)

In this proposition, Jesus applied His illustration to the real life of His disciples. We are to let our faith make a difference in every part of our lives so that it is seen by the people around us. Christ should make a tangible difference in our everyday lives so that it is noticeable. The people who know us should be able to see the difference our discipleship has on everything. And this is further explained in the following propositions.

b Purpose: so that they will glorify God for your good works (16b-c)

This section explains the result of letting our light shine before people. In other words, when we succeed in letting our light shine, this section describes what happens as a result of that.

1) So that they may see your good works (16b)

The result of Christ's impact on our lives will be a variety of good works, both in our private and public lives. We will live in a righteous manner. We won't be perfect in this lifetime, but we should be markedly different from the unbelieving people around us. And this lifestyle and these good works should be demonstrably different from those who do not follow Christ. And when we do this, it will be noticed by the people around us. Our good works are the result of Christ in our life. And our good works will be noticed because of Christ.

This verse must be compared with what Jesus will later say in 6:1. In that verse, Jesus taught us not to do our good works to be seen. But in this verse, Jesus said people should see our good works. This is not a contradiction. If we read each verse carefully and understand what Jesus was teaching, the difference is the motivation and purpose why we do good works. In 6:1 we are taught not to do good works in order to glorify ourselves. But in this verse, we are taught to do good works, and the next proposition will give us the correct motivation and purpose for doing them.

2) And glorify your Father in heaven (16c)

In this proposition, Jesus taught the ultimate result of our letting our light shine, which He explained as doing good works in the sight of the people around us. But this is also the ultimate purpose for why we do these good works. It is for the glory of God our Heavenly Father.

This is the first verse in the New Testament where Jesus referred to God as "Father." And what is striking is that He did not use this to speak of God as His Father (which is true). He spoke of God as the Father of His genuine disciples, who would be glorified by their demonstrably changed lives. In the Old Testament, God was said to be the Father of all of Israel, and He spoke of some kings of Israel as His son. But never was God described in the close father/son relationship with all Israelites. Now, here in the New Testament, Jesus called God the Father of all of His true disciples. Jesus never said that God is the Father of all humanity. But He does say this of all His disciples. So, His disciples are all in an intimate Father/child relationship with the God of the universe. He cares for us and provides for us, and teaches us, and disciplines us, so that we are molded into His family likeness and character. But God is also described as our Father *in Heaven*. He is far above us. He is holy, and Sovereign Lord of all the universe. In this one phrase, Jesus clearly communicated both the immanence and transcendence of God. He is close to us as Father, and He is infinitely High above us as Lord.

When people see the positive change in our lives; when we tell of Jesus and let our light shine by our proclamation and righteous lifestyle, people will conclude that God is real and has made a change in us. And they will be drawn to Him and glorify Him. In other words, we are to be salt and light – we are to live differently, so that people will see God in our lives.

We are to do all things in the Name of Christ (Col. 3:17). And Peter echoed Jesus's teaching when he wrote "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us" (1 Pet. 2:12). And we are to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15). Our lifestyle and speech are to demonstrate the reality of God and draw others toward Him, for His glory.

That is the point and aim of Jesus's teaching in this section. We are, by virtue of being His disciples, salt and light in this world. And that means, we should make a difference in the world around us as Christians, pointing to Christ as the difference maker. And as we do this, God will be glorified in us and through us, because people will see our good works and conclude that we could not have done this on our own, and therefore, God must have been working in our lives.