

### MULTIPLYING BLESS-EDNESS

What we discover in the Beatitudes, those all-important opening lines of Jesus' sermon, is that,

“God wills our happiness. He blesses. There is no question about that. He also graciously describes the kind of life that is **able to receive and live out the blessings that he wills.**”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' focal point in his kingdom portrait is the character and quality of the experience of life under God's intimate and purposeful rule. For those who enter the kingdom of heaven, that is, those who experience in the details and relationships of everyday life the inherent realities of God's reign, they are given the titled description, “Bless-ed.” Their already existing state of happiness (complete life) is not the reward of their behavior, but means of it. Because God has shared the fullness of his life with them (bestowing and consummating the conditions of their happiness), they can therefore live a full life. We do not live up to the standards of the Beatitudes; we live them out. Or, as the apostle Paul would say in his letter to the Ephesian faith family, we

“walk in a manner worthy [in equal measurement] of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility [poor in spirit] and gentleness [meekness], with patience [through mourning & persecution], bearing with one another in love [mercy], eager to maintain [hungering & thirsting after] the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace [makers].” (Eph. 4:1-3)

It is undoubtedly freeing and praiseworthy to know the quality of life God desires for us and the characteristics which this received quality instills (makes possible, cultivates, and engenders). Yet, a thorough picture of life under God's rule also includes our responsibilities within the all-encompassing and intently redemptive kingdom of God.

Remember what we said last week, that the “bless-edness” (happy, full, completeness) of shared life with God could never be contained within the nomadic community or established nation of Israel. Instead, it was intended to spill over into the world they inhabited—the earth and its living creatures, and the nations and their living beings and systems. We see this proliferating responsibility in Genesis 12. Having discerned the destructive end of humanity making itself the center of the seen and unseen world at Babel, God mercifully disperses rather than destroys (see Genesis 11:1-9). The dividing of peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations was not a parental act of punishment, but rather a purposeful act of redemption (see Deuteronomy 32:7-9). From among the diversity, God chose Abram to step out of Ur and into a promise. Here is what God said would be the responsibilities of Abram's (or Abraham as he would come to be known (Gen. 17:1-5)) “bless-ed” state,

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, “Jesus Went Up the Mountain,” in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 241.

And I [God speaking] will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you [share my happy, full, whole life with you] and make your name great **so that you will be a blessing**. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2-3)

More literally, “by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves,” shall find themselves in my blessedness. The blessedness, which marks the quality and produces the character of our life with God, sets us apart with particular responsibilities within the boundaries and limitations of our habitations. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, as Jesus says in our text today. And it is to these twin responsibilities that we now turn our attention.

## **TWO METAPHORS, ONE DISTINCTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

Jesus gives us responsibility in this world as kingdom citizens, not through a specific set of to-dos, but two metaphors. Each metaphor a different side of the same coin, revealing our twin **responsibilities to influence the places and people among whom we live for “the good.”** Through two “domestic,” common, everyday metaphors, Jesus affirms our God-ordained role in his earthly reign and the conditions by which we can faithfully live out our responsibilities. Both metaphors assume that the household tasks of influence stem from a “Bless-ed” life. A full and happy life lived in humility before God, in mutual submission to one another (poor in spirit & meek), recognizing the lessons of suffering and our contribution to it (mourning), extending healing and forgiveness because that is what we have received (mercy), daily motivated to relate rightly with God and others (hungry & thirsty for righteousness), our hearts seeing clearly what is before us (pure in heart), as we enter into the troubles of daily life to bring wholeness (persecuted peacemakers). Our influence and specific directives come from the embodiment of the “bless-ed” beatitudes. If we live a life that receives and lives out the blessing God wills, we cannot help but be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.” We will, by God’s good design, be a blessing to the world we inhabit as kingdom citizens. The final phrase of verse 16, “give glory to your Father who is in heaven,” is not merely a statement of vocal worship or acknowledgment; it is the reception of the Father’s “bless-edness,” his shared life. The world, our city, our workplace, our neighborhood, our home, the people and the place of God’s kingdom come, his will done.

## **SALT OF THE EARTH**

By teasing out these everyday metaphors, we’ll be able to imagine (envision) how we might influence the people and places among who we live for “the good.” So, let’s tease them out. The first metaphor is in verse 13, “You are the salt of the earth...”

Jesus affirms our God-ordained role within his created and governed earth to preserve. Let’s look at two things to understand our responsibility, what salt does, and how salt is compromised.

What does salt do? Salt preserves that which is dead, decaying, or rotting so that it remains useful for the perpetuation of life. Secondly, it aids in drawing out the most desirable flavors of what it is used on.



The assumption of Jesus, which aligns with the story of the Old Testament, is that the earth is passing away. Since the Fall in Genesis three, death has shared space with life. For all that life can achieve, it cannot last. The systems, institutions, societies, relationships, and vocations in which we live are not eternal. They are subject to the same reality as the rest of living, death, decay, and rotting. Should that fact lead us to abandon such things to the nature of death? Jesus says, no! Instead, he contends that we should coat the meat of the earth to preserve them and draw out of them their most desirable flavor and use.

The images of preserving and flavoring, along with the practices themselves, are messy and intimate. The salt coats the not-forever-living, not by mere proximity to it, but being pressed in on it, folded into the muscle fibers, filling every crack and crevis. And the process requires a lot of salt, not a singular grain!

Now there is something pretty incredible about the chemical compound we call salt. It is a super stable, tightly bound compound that does not lose its essence without introducing electricity directly into the compound. So, what salt preserves cannot change the salt, but the salt can change it.



However, there is a way for salt, as Jesus says, to lose its saltiness; through dilution. You can dilute salt in water, for instance, so that it loses its preservative and flavor-enhancing ability, but the salt remains salt. You can also dilute salt by adding in, mixing in other things with it. About 100 miles from where Jesus was preaching his sermon is the Dead Sea or Salt Sea.

Some historians believe that the commoner of Jesus' day probably used a white powder from the dead sea, which did contain sodium chloride (salt)

as well as a variety of other minerals that had the appearance of salt but were something else. Dead Sea salt truly is salt, but only 12 to 18 percent sodium chloride, leaving tons of room in its composition for magnesium, calcium, sulfur, bromide, zinc, potassium, etc. Because salt is the most soluble compound in the mix, it could be most easily washed out. The remaining "residue of white powder still looked like salt...but it neither tasted nor acted liked salt."<sup>2</sup> When this dilution became apparent, the people would

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<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 60.

not just throw away the “salt without saltiness” into a trash can as we would; instead, they’d repurpose it as road dust, gravel for the street. It still had usefulness, but a much less life-giving utility, and certainly one for which it was not primarily meant.

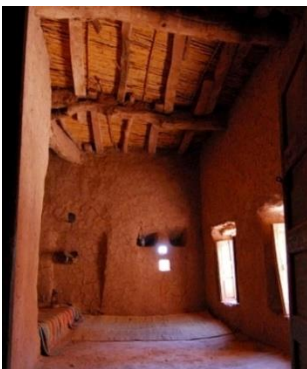
So, while we as “the salt of the earth” can never lose our essence, there is a way of living in which we are so mixed and mingled with the ideas and practices of the other minerals around us that we lose our saltiness. Ironically, it is not through interaction with the dead and decaying, the systems and relationships and institutions and vocations we are meant to preserve and draw out full life; but rather—as will see in the remaining chapters—through our mixing with those ideas and things that have the appearance of Godliness but not the heart of godliness.

## LIGHT OF THE WORLD



The second metaphor Jesus uses is in verse 14, “You are the light of the world.” Jesus then provides two word pictures to help us imagine what he means by “light.” The first is a city on a hill. The image here, familiar to all those listening, is a person walking through the darkness of the wilderness or desert. The darkness of the pre-electrical world is hard for us to imagine, but there is a totality to the dark void of unnatural lights, which makes any light stand out vividly. A city on a hill, on a raised place, by its very existence and

chosen placement, cannot hide in the darkness. The light required for living, the consequences of living, shines out across the landscape.



But Jesus doesn’t spend too much time on this image of his metaphor. Perhaps he knows that we would be get caught up in the old tendency of city builders to play God (see Gen. 11), even as God’s people. So he shifts the image to an everyday norm, a house lamp. Now, the average house in Jesus’ day for most of his listeners would have consisted of one room.



Perhaps some would have a second room for guests, and many had “built-in barns” at a slightly lower elevation (2-3 feet) than the main room. Regardless, the main eating, living, and sleeping space would easily be lighted by a single lamp. Light the lamp, and you can clearly what is in the room, what is to be used for what, and what shouldn’t be there. The lamp shines a light on what is in and happening in the living space. The light makes the room functional, practical, and secure. It makes the room livable in a positive sense. If salt preserves the usefulness and flavor of the decaying, light brings truth, beauty, and goodness to the darkness. No one would dream of lighting a lamp and putting it under a bucket. What use would that be to those in the room? What use would the lamp be then

## **CONCLUDING COMMENT**

No, Jesus says, by living out God's blessing, the salt of the earth and the light of the world, sharers of the "bless-ed" life. I'll leave us with these words from theologian and pastor, John Stott, penned in the 1970s yet appropriate to 2020. Here is Stott's summarizing reminder of the responsibilities Jesus' metaphors engender:

"Whenever Christians are conscientious citizens, they are acting like salt...However small our part may be, we cannot opt-out of seeking to create better social structures, which guarantee justice in legislation and law enforcement, the freedom and dignity of the individual, civil rights for minorities and the abolition of social and racial discrimination [and segregation]. We should neither despise these things nor avoid our responsibility for them. They are a part of God's purpose for his people.

...human beings need [also] more than barricades to stop them from becoming as bad as they could be. They need regeneration, new life through the gospel...For the truth of the gospel [lived] is the light, contained indeed in fragile earthenware lamps, yet shining through our very earthiness with the more conspicuous [noticeable] brightness. We are called both to spread the gospel and to frame our manner of life in a way that is worthy [in equal measurement] of the gospel.

You must be what you are. You are salt, and so you must retain your saltiness and not lose your Christian tang. You are light, and so you must let your light shine and not conceal it in any way, whether by sin or by compromise, by laziness or by fear.

[A]ssume your Christian responsibility, because of what God has made you and where he has put you."<sup>3</sup>

Let's pray.

## **COMMUNION**

"You must be what you are." We are what we are—salt and light—"Bless-ed" children of our heavenly Father, heirs of his kingdom's goodness and good responsibilities, because the Son, the firstborn of creation, gave his life so that we might live. We did not make ourselves salt or light but are blessed to be a blessing. May we walk worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Read and receive with me,

Father, we desire to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace made for us through Jesus Christ. In his name, we receive your "blessed" life, that we might be a blessing to the world. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 67, 63-64.