

The Sermon on the Mount, Part 3:

Wrapping up the Beatitudes; Salt & Light; Jesus and the Law

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Beatitudes

1. *Spiritual hunger*: Green writes,

It is those who hunger and thirst who are happy, not the bloated... There is a profound happiness in having a desperate hunger, a burning thirst for goodness (for this is the main meaning of 'righteousness' in this Gospel)... These hungry ones desire the whole thing, complete righteousness, rather than a part of it. The phrase breathes whole-heartedness. If we have a passionate desire to be right with God and stay that way, he is going to meet that desire to the full, and we are going to be happy.¹

Does this refer to a desire for spiritual growth, a desire to know God better, a holy discontent with the church and the world, or something else? Is this sort of restlessness and hunger just preacher's talk, a young person's game? Or is this a lifelong attribute of a disciple?

2. Now that we've been through them all, what, if anything, ties them together? Are they best read as the way you need to be to enter the kingdom, or a description of disciples who already are part of the kingdom?
3. Which of the qualities described in the beatitudes do you most resonate with? Which, if any, do you feel you need to cultivate? Aside from "read the Bible and pray more", how might you go about this?

The salt & light metaphors

4. *Salt of the earth*: Davies and Allison list eleven functions of salt in the biblical world: "accompanying sacrifice, part of a covenant, purifying water, a condiment for food, a preservative, a necessity for life, a sign of loyalty, peace, gracious speech, wisdom, and beloved of the gods".²

Stott, Bonhoeffer, Blomberg, Carson, and (much earlier) Origen, Hilary and Chrysostom, see the primary function referred to here as *preservation*, not flavor³. After all, the danger given is that salt will lose its taste, and "the Greek verb is *moranthe*—'[if] it be defiled,' that is, corrupted. Besides, in a world without refrigeration, salt, particularly on meat, had to be used in such quantities as a preservative that it probably did not enhance the flavor the way we think of it doing today" (Blomberg, 5).

From sermons you've heard and books you've read, what is the salient (hah) feature of salt which Jesus is ascribing to his disciples in 5:13?

5. Stott adds, referring to both the salt and light metaphors,

¹ *The Message of Matthew*, IVP (2000), 90. Remember Green prefers to translate *makarios* "happy".

² Blomberg, "The Most Often Abused Verses in the Sermon on the Mount," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 46 (2004), 1.

³ In contrast to Green. Gardner, the *Jerome*, the *New Bible Commentary*, and Guelich demur.

The world is evidently a dark place, with little or no light of its own, since an external source of light I needed to illumine it... The world also manifests a constant tendency to deteriorate. The notion is not that the world is tasteless and that Christians can make it less insipid..., but that it is putrefying. It cannot stop itself from going bad. Only salt introduced from outside can do this. The church, on the other hand, is set in the world with a double role, as salt to arrest—or at least hinder—the process of social decay, and as light to dispel the darkness. (Stott, 39)

- a. How does the church universal act as a preservative for the world? (Is there a clue in the position of this passage in the Sermon?) From this passage, is this preservative role passive, a natural byproduct of our Christian lives, or does it require active, deliberate action?
- b. How are we in our small group acting as a preservative for the world around us? At a more fundamental level, how are we even different from the world?⁴

6. *Light of the world*: Carson writes of this passage,

The norms of the kingdom, worked out in the lives of the heirs of the kingdom, constitute the witness of the kingdom. Such Christians refuse to rob their employers by being lazy on the job, or to rob their employees by succumbing to greed and stinginess. They are first to help a colleague in difficulty, last to return a barbed reply. They honestly desire the advancement of the other's interests, and honestly dislike smutty humor. Transparent in their honesty and genuine in their concern, they reject both the easy answer of the doctrinaire politician and the *laissez-faire* stance of the selfish secular man. Meek in personal demeanor, they are bold in righteous pursuits.

For a variety of reasons, Christians have lost this vision of witness and are slow to return to it. But in better days and other lands, the faithful and divinely empowered proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (who himself is the light of the world *par excellence* [Jn 8:12]) so transformed men that they in turn became the light of the world (Mt 5:14). Prison reform, medical care, trade unions, control of a perverted and perverting liquor trade, abolition of slavery, abolition of child labor, establishment of orphanages, reform of the penal code—in all these areas the followers of Jesus spearheaded the drive for righteousness. The darkness was alleviated. And this, I submit, has always been the pattern when professing Christians have been less concerned with personal prestige and more concerned with the norms of the kingdom.⁵

- a. How is the *modern* church following this example?
- b. Menno Simons sees this witness to the world as a natural product of righteous living:

⁴ As Stott points out, quoting Lloyd-Jones, “‘The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first.’ Of course, if we Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians, we are useless.” [*Christian Counter-Culture*, IVP (1978), 60.]

⁵ *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker (2004), p. 33.

...where the true church of Christ is, there she will be made manifest among this wicked and perverse generation by words and work, for she can as little be hid as a city upon a hill, or a candle upon a candlestick⁶

If our good works are un-hideable, why is Jesus telling his disciples to “let your light shine”?

- c. Acting as light requires the church’s actions be both righteous and public. How do we accomplish the latter when the media focus predominantly on the church’s many *missteps*?

Jesus and the Law

7. In 5:19, Jesus warns that “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. James joins this saying with Matt 6:14 (forgive others to receive God’s forgiveness) and Matt 7:1 (don’t judge lest you be judged). What role does “whoever breaks...commandments” play in 5:17-20, and in James 2:8-13? Is James’ reference to the “law of liberty” meant to frighten or reassure?
8. If Jesus is strict on his adherence to the Law here, it may be because elsewhere he is accused of the opposite (Matt 12:2). When Jesus says in 5:17 that he has come to “fulfill” the “Law or the Prophets”, he uses *plerosai*, which means to bring something to its designed end. Depending on your interpretation of the passage, this could connote “fulfill=do, carry out, or as *bring to full expression*=show it forth in its true meaning, or as *fill up*=complete.” This is contrasted in the beginning of the verse with *kataluein*, translated “abolish”, meaning “to cause to be no longer in force”.⁷ [BDAG]

We eat shellfish and mix fiber types in our clothing. Yet Jesus appears to be maintaining the Law and even, in the “antitheses” (5:21-48), proposing a higher standard. In light of the verses which follow, what’s the *Christianity 101* resolution to this apparent paradox?



Fun quote: “Central in [Abraham Lincoln’s] use of the Bible [in his second inaugural Address] is this passage from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: let us judge not so that we may not be judged. Remember the expectations of the audience ... they wanted Lincoln to judge the South. Lincoln quickly disabuses that by invoking Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. You recall that Jesus’ sermon is rooted in humility and passion. ...blessed are those who do not follow the way of the world, the way of judgment and criticism.”⁸

Fun fact: “The “one letter” of v. 18 refers to a Hebrew *yodh*. Jewish teachers said “that when Sarai’s name was changed to Sarah, the *yodh* removed from her name cried out from one generation to another, protesting its removal from Scripture, until finally, when Moses changed Oshea’s name to Joshua, the *yodh* was returned to Scripture. ‘So you see,’ the teachers would say, ‘not even this smallest letter can pass from the Bible.’” (Keener, 178).

⁶ From his response to Gellius Faber, who pointed out that even among a corrupt church there may be some who are saved and yet invisible, known only to God. [*The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Herald Press, 1986), p. 747.]

⁷ “Jeremias even suggests that the rhythm of Jesus’ Aramaic wording here is the meter used in lamentations at funerals, which may suggest that he originally uttered these lines with strong emotion.” [Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 177]

⁸ Dr. Ronald White, “Abraham Lincoln’s Sermon On the Mount”, <http://www.natpresch.org/sermon.php?d=2006-07-02%200000>.