

Salt and Light



Sermon on the Mount (1877) by Carl Heinrich Bloch | Museum of National History | Frederiksborg Castle, Public Domain

¹¹ Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father. (Matthew 5:13-16)

What Follows

Our very short gospel passage follows immediately after Matthew’s presentation of the Beatitudes (5:1-10) as part of the larger “Sermon on the Mount” as it is popularly known. It is a parallel text, in part, to Luke 6:20-49, the “Sermon on the Plain.” More importantly, this passage is part of the first of the five great discourses in the gospel. At a broad stroke, Matthew 5-7 are an expose of Jesus’ authoritative teaching; Chapters 8-9 are pericopes of his authoritative deeds.

With the chapters dealing with authoritative teaching, there are four primary themes that emerge (R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*):

- 5:3-16 distinctiveness of Christian discipleship
- 5:17-48 disciples: fulfilling the Law
- 6:1-18 disciples: true and false piety
- 6:19-34 disciples: trust in God over material security

The majority of Chapter 7 is given to providing contrasting examples of these, with the culmination in

Matthew 7:28-29: “When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

Although crowds are described at the beginning of Mt 5, the focus of this larger discourse is for the disciples who have already responded to Jesus (cf. 4:18-22) and now need to learn what life in the Kingdom really means. To understand the “Sermon on the Mount” as simply a general code of ethics, is to miss that Jesus is beginning to explicate the demands of the Kingdom that point towards a way of being in the world: “*So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Mt 5:48) This is held in contradistinction from a simplistic following of the Law (5:21-48).

One of the points, lost in translation, is that the meaning of “*Blessed are....*” in the Beatitudes are a bit more subtle than would appear at first glance. The Greek word used in *makarios*. This does not mean “blessed by God” (*bārûk* in Hebrews, translated into Greek as *eulogētos*). The word “happy” in today’s English carries too much connotation of emotional and psychological well-being – and that is off the mark. The word “fortunate” gets closer, while some scholars the most idiomatic English expression which captures the sense in the Australian “good on yer.” *Makarios* is a description of the circumstances of a good life; a life well lived – even if it proves to come at a cost.

The 9th Beatitude

Verses 11-12 (not part of the Sunday gospel) are often called the 9th beatitude because of the opening phrase. But where vv.3-10 describes the good life, these verses bring it into contrast and begin to describe the cost (v.11) and remind the listener that you are simply joining a long tradition. The prophets who earlier proclaimed the kingdom and its demands were also persecuted.

Just as the prophets stood out and apart from “business as usual,” so too will the disciples who have committed themselves to Jesus. Here and in the next few verses the “you” that appears is always plural. The concern here is that the Christian community stand out, appear different, and become an alternative to the larger society. In Matthew’s account, the famous tune, “This Little Light of Mine” would read “This Little Light of Ours.” The community of disciples are called to be collective light and salt.

The salt/light metaphors (and possibly ‘city on the hill’) are only effective signs of the Kingdom to the extent with which the community is willing to use them, to bring them to bear. Salt, no matter how pure and tasty, if left in the cellar is not much use. A light locked away inside, will not illuminate anything in the world. In part, a goal of discipleship is to be noticed, to stand out, to be more than a curiosity, to be significant; in other words, to be distinctive and to be involved. The dangers of being a community too comfortable, too scared, or too closed off is seen in the *Book of Revelation*’s letter to the community of Laodicea: “To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this: ‘The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God’s creation, says this: “I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”’” (Rev 3:14-16)

Salt of the Earth

“*You are the salt of the earth.*” (Mt 5:13) Why Salt? In the first century, salt was much more than a seasoning. It symbolized preservation (for meat and fish), purification - salt was added to sacrifices (Lev 2:13); Covenant fidelity (cf. Lev 2:13: “you shall not let the salt of the covenant... be lacking”, Num 18:19; Ezra 4:14); Wisdom in Jewish literature (*m. Sotah* 9:15) as well as Greco-Roman literature; and, value as salt was sometimes used as a form of payment. Jesus’ metaphor would have carried all these resonances for His listeners as the description of the role of a disciple is teased out.

The symbol of salt as a preservative point to the role given to all disciples to prevent moral decay within the community. Many Church Fathers and modern commentators see salt as that which keeps the world from corruption. St. John Chrysostom wrote that Christ’s disciples preserve the world from

“rotting in sin” by their teaching, holiness, and example. Thus, Christians living the Beatitudes that precede this verse, are the moral and spiritual agents that keep humanity from sliding into corruption. If they lose their distinctiveness, the world suffers.

Pointing to the role salt has in flavoring food is to be understood as the task to bring out the “flavor” of God’s kingdom by their joy and authenticity giving others a “taste” of God. Christians witness to God’s kingdom by: living the Beatitudes; embodying mercy, justice, and purity of heart; and revealing the joy and freedom of life with God. The idea is that Christian life should make God desirable not bland or burdensome.

As a covenant symbol disciples make God’s covenant present. “*All your grain offerings you shall season with salt. Do not let the salt of the covenant... be lacking.*” (Leviticus 2:13) In this light Jesus’ followers are the living sign of God’s covenant—a holy people whose presence points to God’s fidelity and holiness, keystones of what it means to be the people of God.

Salt was used medically and ritually. Elisha purified water with salt (2 Kings 2:19–22). Thus, disciples are to be agents of healing, instruments of reconciliation, and purifiers of the “bitter waters of the world” through mercy and truth.

In both Jewish and Hellenistic literature, “salt” could symbolize wisdom. St Paul makes the connection explicitly: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt...” (Col 4:6) Writ largers, the Sermon on the Mount itself embodies divine wisdom; disciples who internalize it become a source of true wisdom in society.

St. Augustine held salt to symbolize wisdom and also the sharpness of correction in that disciples teach the world and correct it with the truth. St. Jerome viewed salt as tied to righteousness: “We season the world with the justice of God.” St. Bede understood salt to represent the apostles’ doctrine, preserving the Church from error.

The Catechism echoes these themes: Christians, united to Christ, have a mission to transform the world and witness to the kingdom (cf. CCC 782, 2044–2046). Most Catholic commentators emphasize

- distinctiveness: disciples must stand apart by holiness,
- mission: the Church’s presence prevents moral decay and nurtures life, and
- witness: the life of the gospel gives “flavor” to the world.

But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. (Mt 5:13). This is a warning to the disciples

Disciples, if they are true to their calling, make *the earth* a purer and a more palatable place. But they can do so only as long as they preserve their distinctive character: unsalty salt has no more value. Strictly, pure salt cannot lose its salinity; but the impure ‘salt’ dug from the shores of the Dead Sea could gradually become unsalty as the actual sodium chloride dissolved. In any case, Jesus was not teaching chemistry, but using a proverbial image (it recurs in *Bekhoroth* 8b). The Rabbis commonly used salt as an image for wisdom (cf. Col. 4:6), which may explain why the Greek word represented by *lost its taste* actually means ‘become foolish’. (Aramaic *tāpēl*, which conveys both meanings, was no doubt the word used by Jesus.) A foolish disciple has no influence on the world.

Thus the warning: if disciples compromise the gospel, dilute the faith, or cease living the Beatitudes, they lose their effectiveness. This is just one of Matthew’s Gospel warnings about the danger of discipleship without authenticity.

Light of the World.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” (Mt 5:14-16)

In Scripture, light symbolizes God’s presence (Ex 13:21; Ps 27:1), God’s wisdom and law (Ps 119:105), revelation of truth, joy and salvation, and the mission of Israel (Isa 42:6; 49:6). In the Gospel of John, Jesus is explicitly called “the light of the world” (John 8:12). Matthew applies that same imagery to Jesus’ disciples. That alone is a striking theological claim.

Matthew highlights that the light of the disciples is derived, not inherent. They share in the Light of Christ. Since Jesus proclaims Himself the true light (cf. John), the Church becomes the reflection of Christ’s light, a visible continuation of His mission, and a community whose holiness reveals the presence of Christ. This interpretation connects closely to the idea of the Church as the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12).

Matthew 5:16 explicitly identifies the “light” with good deeds that point to God: *“that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”* Light, therefore, is concrete actions of mercy, justice, forgiveness, and compassion forming a public witness to God. These actions become a force that pushes back the darkness of sin, sorrow, confusion, and injustice. Unlike the hidden practices in Mt 6 (almsgiving, fasting, prayer), these deeds are meant to be public because they reveal God’s goodness, not the disciple’s ego.

Isaiah speaks of Israel as a *“light to the nations”* (Isa 42:6; 49:6). Jesus now gives that vocation to the disciples. Thus, Matthew presents the Church not as replacing Israel but fulfilling Israel’s mission of making God known among the nations. The mission is to reveal God’s justice and mercy and so for the Church and its members to be a visible sign of the kingdom.

A city built on a hill is both unavoidable and unambiguous. In the same way, the Christian community is meant to be publicly recognizable. The Church can not be an agent of the Kingdom if its holiness remains private, hidden. The nature of discipleship is inherently evangelistic, calling people to “come” to the *“city set on a mountain.”* The city is the Church, an ecclesial image of the visible and public community, not simply individuals

A *“lamp on a lampstand”* connects to a simple image that was in the experience of all people: a single small lamp could illuminate the entire room. Jesus’ image teaches that the gift of faith is meant to be shared to light up a community and the world. It means that disciples should live lives of integrity, transparency, and in view of the world. Suppression of one’s Christian identity contradicts the very nature of discipleship. And in a world that may push back or ridicule, fear must not extinguish missionary zeal. Fearless witness is a theme frequently emphasized in Matthew’s writings (cf. Mt 10:26–33). It means that the disciple must refuse to hide the Gospel.

Matthew’s use of light also serves as an image of interior transformation that becomes exterior witness. In Jewish wisdom literature, light symbolizes wisdom and the inner life of the righteous: *“The light of the just rejoices”* (Prov 13:9). This idea is also well expressed in the familiar passage: *“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path”* (Ps 119:105). Thus, being “light” involves an interior conversion that is achieved by embracing the Beatitudes. This leads to an exterior radiance in which the disciples live visibly transformed lives. The Sermon on the Mount emphasizes this integrity between inner dispositions and outward actions as constituent of discipleship.

St. Augustine understood the light as the life of grace within the disciple, expressed in noble deeds directing praise to God. St. John Chrysostom held that light refers to the example of the apostles, who

enlighten a world darkened by ignorance and sin, emphasizing that Christian witness must be both public and humble. St. Jerome pointed out that light is the proclamation of the gospel, dispelling the shadows of error. St. Gregory of Nyssa emphasized the interior life in which light is the soul purified and united with God, whose radiance naturally spreads outward.

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is tasked with carrying that Light to all the world in its fundamental roles of evangelization, carrying out works of justice and mercy, living holiness of life in our everyday, being a public witness of truth, and being a source of comfort for the afflicted, thus revealing God's compassion. The Catechism echoes all this emphasizing the Christian vocation to transform society. (CCC 782, 2044–2046)

With the use of the light imagery, Jesus declares that His disciples, shaped by the Beatitudes are:

- the visible manifestation of God's presence
- the continuation of Israel's vocation to enlighten the nations
- the instruments by which Christ shines into a dark world
- called to public witness through good works that reveal God's glory

Being light is not optional—it is the very identity and mission of the disciple.

Salt and Light Together

“Salt” and “Light” are overlapping images. Both metaphors stand or fall together as they emphasize

- identity: not merely what disciples do, but what they are
- mission: disciples exist for the sake of the world
- distinctiveness: disciples must be different from the world
- effect: disciples are meant to transform their environment

A disciple who is not “salty” cannot shine; a disciple who does not shine has no salt.

Yet they are different. Salt works quietly; light works visibly. Salt transforms from within, preserving what would decay, purifying what is corrupt, and giving flavor to what is bland. It works silently and imperceptibly, yet powerfully. Light is public, visible, and unmistakable. Light transforms from without, revealing what is hidden, guiding those in darkness, and manifesting truth. Salt is a subtle influence; light is a visible witness.

Salt is the depth of discipleship; light is its expression. A disciple must be transformed (salt) before he or she can transform others (light). Salt without light risks being hidden holiness and missing the opportunities to evangelize. Light without salt risks being hollow activism. A person might appear active but lack interior holiness.

Salt and Light together form a balanced identity: a holiness that shines and a witness rooted in integrity. Together they can take the mission of the Church to the ends of the earth.

The Patristic Tradition of Salt and Light

Here is a sampling of early Church leaders and their thoughts on the salt and light metaphors used in Matthew's gospel.

St. John Chrysostom (4th century): “For what is salt? It renders food useful and even indispensable. So too, the disciples by their doctrine hinder the whole world from decay. And what is light? It shines forth and discloses what was hidden in darkness. Thus they are both the salt that prevents corruption and the light that enlightens the mind... For the presence of those who live in virtue both stops the corruption of others and guides them to the truth.” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, Homily 15.6–7*)

St. Augustine of Hippo (4th–5th century): “The Lord said to His disciples: You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. In these two names He wished to show what His disciples would accomplish: by the one, corruption is kept from the world; by the other, the darkness of ignorance is driven away. So let the Christian be salt by his conduct and light by his teaching and praise of God.” (*Sermon 53.6*)

St. Hilary of Poitiers (4th century): “To be called the salt of the earth and the light of the world is the charge of a life both pure and manifest. Salt preserves righteousness; light manifests the works of God. He who is salt must also be light, so that both the corruption of sin is restrained and the brightness of faith is shown.” (*Commentary on Matthew 4.10–11*)

4. St. Jerome (4th–5th century): “The apostles are the salt of the earth in the teaching of the gospel, lest the hearts of believers grow corrupt. They are the light of the world because their works shine and show to all the truth of their preaching. Salt without light is hidden; light without salt lacks strength.” (*Commentary on Matthew 5:13–16*)

St. Gregory of Nyssa (4th century): “The Lord calls His disciples salt and light: salt because they cleanse the uncleanness of life; light because they reveal to the world the way of salvation. But these are not two works but the same grace: for the soul purified by virtue will also shine with the radiance of truth.” (*Homilies on the Beatitudes, Homily 5*)

St. Bede the Venerable (8th century): “The Lord made His disciples to be at once salt and light. Salt, that they might season hearts grown tasteless in folly; light, that by their example they might shine before all. For the seasoning of doctrine and the brightness of holiness must go together in the teacher of Christ.” (*Homilies on the Gospels I.14*)

Across the Fathers, a clear pattern emerges: salt refers to moral integrity, purity, preservation of righteousness, and the inward force of holiness. Light refers to teaching, public witness, visible example, and illumination of truth. Both together express the fullness of Christian discipleship: a holy life (salt) that gives public witness (light).

Notes

5:13 loses its taste: *mōranthē* (from the verb *mōrainō*) to make foolish

5:14 You are the light of the world. Light is a much more prominent and univocal image in the Bible than salt. Matthew 4:16 (citing Isa 9:2) has already associated light with Jesus and the Kingdom ministry in dark Galilee. Isaiah 42:6 speaks of Israel’s role in the world as a “light to the Gentiles” (cf. Isa 49:6; 51:4–5; Dan 12:3; Rom 2:19).

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