

Outreach, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Visible Community

Matthew 5:13-16; 13:31-33

Introduction – There is a reason that we are not saved and then simply transported to heaven. There is a reason that we are to cultivate faithful families over generations and church communities that outlast ourselves. The disciples of Jesus must not only think of heaven; they have an earthly task as well. While most of us are not missionaries to foreign places, we all are very much a part of the work of the Gospel to the world. Building families, raising children, and cultivating body-life in the church – these are not at all disconnected to the work of outreach. We will consider two passages and four images to help us see this.

Salt and Light (Matt 5:13-16) – If you heard a town-crier exclaim, “*Hear ye, hear ye!*” would you think he was addressing individuals or a town? We tend to think of ourselves as individuals who are to be salt and light. Jesus, however, is addressing a community of disciples who are to be salt in the larger world, light in a world of darkness. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, “*The Cost of Discipleship*” titled the chapter dealing with these verses, “*The Visible Community*” and not “*Visible Christians*.” It is primarily in community that we are salt and light, not as individuals.

There is an individual aspect, of course, and salt and light provide the perfect example. Imagine seasoning your food with a little salt and then finding it needs more. You shake a little more salt, and then a little more. The final grain of salt makes it just enough – but it wasn’t more salty than the other grains; it was the cumulative effect. You could make the same case with placing a candle up on a dark hill, and then another, and then another – until all at once someone from a distance sees light. Sometimes our acts of love and grace, or words of truth don’t seem to make a difference. And then one day, some other little grace or truth or something of Christ is shared and “*Voila*,” someone comes to Christ. But it was the cumulative effect of many individual efforts and acts of love (1 Cor 3:5-8).

The Community of Salt and Light – Primarily, however, Jesus is indicating that the church, as a community, is the salt and light of the earth. First, we *are* salt and light (we are not commanded to become salt and light). Second, we are the salt and light of *the earth and world*. And this means we are not normally supposed to hide (under a bushel) but be seen and noticed by the world. What are they to see? “...*that they may see your good works*.” Not so much your individual good works (which would tend to puff you up – see Matt 6:1, 5, 16), but the good works of a community, the body of Christ (i.e. John 13:34-35, 17:22-23). This applies to the life of the church body as well as to the mini-communities of families and the relationships of husbands and wives. What will that accomplish? “...*and glorify your Father in heaven*.” And Jesus doesn’t mean a simple tip-of-the-hat here.

The Purpose of Salt and Light – Salt in the ancient world was regularly used as a preservative as well as a seasoning, and both work for Jesus’ point. The church is here to keep the world from spoiling and can be seen, when the church is salty, in civilizations (legal codes, etc) or at the water cooler (conversations). Salt does not tolerate corruption. Our speech is to be seasoned with salt (Col 4:6), wholesome, uncorrupted talk (Eph 4:29), and to change the metaphor, our lives are an aroma to the world around (2 Cor 2:14-16). Light in darkness and a city on a hill, neither go unnoticed. The city-mountain, Jerusalem, was of course the great place of refuge, and the disciples learn that they are the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-10).

Unsalty Salt and Hidden Lights – A community that has lost its saltiness is a church that has denied the Lordship of Jesus Christ and is on the verge of having its lampstand removed. It no longer has a purpose except to be thrown out and trampled. And in our day, what has become of the church? The problem is not the world, not the liberals, not the Supreme Court Justices. The problem is us. We have lost our saltiness. We have lost our distinctiveness in doctrine and in practice. We hide the light of the revelation we have been given. We dress it up with dark shutters of compromise and re-interpretations. May God grant repentance, reformation, and revival to the church first.

The Potent Work of a Little Body Life (Matt 13:31-33) – So, is it over for the kingdom? Not according to the good news of Jesus. The community life of the kingdom of God is potent, as potent as the smallest seed in a garden or peck of leaven in a lump of dough. As the kingdom of God comes (and as revivals and awakenings come forth), they often come like little things, hidden things that you cannot notice are growing and filled with life. Sub-communities in Christ are like a mustard seed and leaven. You might think these are too insignificant to change a city, a country, or the world.

But look closely at these four images. The kingdom of heaven, the community of the saints *are* salt and light and they *are like* a mustard seed and leaven (if they keep their saltiness). What is God intending to do? We become a tree where all the nations will come and find rest (Ezek 17:22-24, Dan 4:12). We are leaven, alive and active in a dead world, bringing life to it and it to life. Let’s be clear: the leaven is going to bring the dead lump to life. Jesus came to save the world and the world will be saved (John 3:17).

Our first application is to *believe* the teachings of Jesus. Our second application is to live it out in community (families and churches) that are the salt/light/seed/leaven for the world.