

Salt, Light, and Righteousness

Matt 5:13-20

Let us pray: Father God, we come before the word of life once again. Wash us, nourish us, and heal us through this word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, last week we heard Jesus declare, through the Beatitudes, who the blessed ones are. His words were not conditions but a declaration that those who come before Jesus are already blessed.

And then, quite naturally, another question arises: *If these people are already blessed, how should they now live in the world?* Today, Jesus answers that question, not with commands, but again with declarations: **"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."** I hope you receive these words as promises.

Jesus often taught using images drawn from everyday life, things people could easily recognize and understand. When they heard him say, "You are the salt of the earth," what did they think of first?

Salt is one of the essential elements for human life. It is necessary for sustaining life itself. When I was serving a previous church, there was a woman who suddenly became ill and had to be taken to the emergency room. After tests were done, the doctors discovered that the cause was a severe lack of sodium. She believed that salt was unhealthy, so she had almost completely eliminated it from her diet and drank large amounts of water instead. A lack of salt can seriously damage one's health.

As in most ancient societies, salt was indispensable in Jesus' time. Without it, food could not be preserved. Salt prevented fish and meat from decaying. In Korea, we are familiar with many traditional preserved foods—kimchi, pickled vegetables, fermented sauces, and salted seafood—all made with generous amounts of salt so they can be stored for long periods of time.

When Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he is also telling us something about the world itself, that it is a place prone to decay. And it is precisely into such a world that Jesus declares his blessed people to be salt.

The Lord has placed us as salt in a world that is so easily spoiled so that we may serve the role and function of preventing decay and corruption. The disciples who first heard these words were only a small group. They were ordinary and unimpressive people, fishermen from Galilee, a northern border region that was often treated almost like Gentile territory. They were not the kind of people from whom one would expect significant influence on society. And yet, to them Jesus says, "You are the salt that restrains the corruption and evil of the world."

God restrains the rapid decay of society not only through the church and believers, but also through institutions such as the state and the family. In theological terms, this is called "Common grace."

Through the judicial system and the rule of law, the state limits the spread of corruption, and through the warmth and nurture of family life, there is an order of common grace that seeks to hold back the world's moral decline as much as possible. Yet while these institutions can restrain corruption, they cannot eliminate it entirely. Because human beings are born with sin and evil from their mother's womb, a world inhabited by sinners will naturally move toward decay and corruption if left on its own. Institutions like the state and the family are not sufficient to stop this process. That is why God has placed believers and the church in the world as his solution for restraining its corruption.

Why can believers and the church serve as such an active and effective solution? It is because believers are people who, through faith in God, experience genuine inner transformation. At the heart of Christianity is true inward change. As the inner self is renewed, believers come to hate sin, to pursue holiness, and to live lives that do what is good. They do not avoid sin merely out of fear of punishment, but because they truly hate sin itself. They choose a holy and pure way of life and practice goodness, and in this way a new people emerge, a people who are being shaped to reflect the character of God.

That is why believers exist in this world as salt. Like salt that dissolves, we enter into the world to restrain its corruption and to preserve what is good and sound. The more faithful believers there are who are willing to melt into the world in this way, the more the world is given a path away from decay and ruin. In that sense, even one believer is entrusted with a role that is deeply important and meaningful.

Salt also has another essential function. It brings out flavor. When seasoning food, salt must be added in just the right amount, not too little and not too much. Salt must go into the soup, be sprinkled on the meat, and soaked into the kimchi. Yet salt itself never becomes the food.

This is the place of salt that Jesus is describing. It is a place of being in the world without overpowering and disappearing into it. When salt tries to draw attention to itself, the food is ruined. When salt forgets its role, the food becomes bland. The life of a disciple is the same. We are not called to dominate the world, but to add flavor so that the world may become a place worth living in.

Salt works quietly, seeping in and making the world more livable and more joyful. But Jesus does not stop the disciple's calling there. If there is a way of life that quietly blends into the world, there is also a way of life that cannot remain hidden.

So Jesus goes on to say, "You are the light of the world." If salt adds flavor within the world, light shows the way.

The opposite of light is darkness. In Scripture, darkness often symbolizes the world as it is, a state of confusion, fear, and being lost without direction. Yet as we know well, the darkest moment comes just before the sunlight begins to rise.

Photographers speak of a time they especially love. For about ten minutes just before sunrise, and again just after sunset, there is a brief window often called the “magic hour.” The light during that time reveals the world in its most beautiful way without distorting reality. The light is radiant, yet the light itself is not the main subject. Because of that light, ordinary things come alive, and each object is shown at its very best.

In the same way, when Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” he is telling us that when a true believer stands in that place and shines the light of the gospel, the society in which that person lives begins, little by little, to become more beautiful. The atmosphere of life changes, and relationships between people grow more peaceful.

But there is something more we must consider. Light does not only make things beautiful. Light always reveals things as they truly are. What is white appears white, and what is black appears black. Dust shows itself as dust, and trash as trash. What is straight is seen as straight, and what is bent is seen as bent. This is another essential quality of light. Light does not beautify. It does not distort. It simply allows things to be seen as they are.

That is why when the light of the gospel shines, two things always happen at the same time. Righteousness is revealed as righteousness, and unrighteousness as unrighteousness. Good is shown to be good, and evil to be evil. What is pure is revealed as pure, and what is impure as impure. For this reason, light can sometimes feel uncomfortable. But without light, we lose our way.

In truth, we ourselves are not the light. We are light because we are united with the Lord who is the light, and because the Lord who is light dwells within us. Jesus says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” And 1 John 1:5 declares, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

Those believers who walk with the Lord, who is light, who worship him and live in fellowship with him, are the true light of the world. They help people use knowledge rightly, discern where it ought to be applied, and bring illumination to the world. In this sense, they become essential bearers of light.

As the light of the world, there is a defining characteristic we must remember. Light cannot be hidden. It will never remain concealed; its true nature will inevitably be revealed. Moreover, as those who are light, we shine upon our neighbors, awakening them to what is wrong in their lives and showing them the way they ought to live.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” When light is revealed and shines upon others, something remarkable happens. As believers begin to be seen as light, people do not ultimately fix their attention on us. Instead, they look beyond us to God, the source of that light, and give glory to him.

Light shines most clearly when the darkness is deep. Historically, this is often when the church faces suffering. Korea was established as a republic in 1948. But before this, during the period of Japanese rule until 1945, many of those involved in the independence movement were Christians. At that time, Christians were only a small minority of the population. Likewise, many of the founding fathers of the Republic of Korea were Christians, even though believers were still few in number.

Oswald Chambers once said, "God does not ask us to be successful; he asks us to be faithful." Salt is not flashy. Light is not turned on to draw attention to itself. Each is simply faithful to its place. The life of salt and light shows us that discipleship is not a matter of success, but a matter of direction and faithfulness. As 1 Thessalonians 4:7 says, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." When we are faithful to this call to holiness, the qualities of salt and light naturally appear in our lives.

After speaking about the life of salt and light, Jesus adds these words: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (v. 17). This statement is crucial, because the life of salt and light is not a life that treats the law lightly.

Jesus did not reject the law, nor did he weaken it. Rather, he fulfilled its true intention through his own life. That is why he goes on to say, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (v. 20)

This is not a call to be more strict, nor a demand to keep more rules. The righteousness of the Pharisees was an outward righteousness, a righteousness of appearances and form. But the righteousness Jesus speaks of is a righteousness that begins in the heart and flows from the inside out. That is why the Sermon on the Mount is not merely a guidebook for Christian behavior. It is a word that reveals how desperately we need Jesus. The standard God requires is so high that we are left with no choice but to build the house of our lives on the rock, who is Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to live as salt and light. But this is not something we can achieve by our own righteousness. Only those who are united with Jesus, who fulfilled the law, and whose life now dwells within them, can preserve the world like salt and illuminate the world like light. For this reason, today's word is not a burden but an invitation. It is not a call to boast in the blessings we have received, but an invitation from Jesus who sends us into the world so that those blessings may flow through us. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, thank you for calling us to be the salt and light of the world. As we respond in faith, may the flavor and light of the righteousness of your kingdom flow through us, drawing people to you, the Truth, so that you may be glorified in this world. In your name. Amen.