

THE RADICAL RABBI: "RADICAL OPPORTUNITIES"

(Matthew 5:13-20)

1.17.21

Description: *Jesus continues His teaching ministry by explaining why the character traits He just outlined are so important in proclaiming the gospel message to the world in which we live.*

INTRODUCTION

Last week we started our look at the "Sermon on the Mount," one of Christ's greatest teaching moments in His entire ministry. We began by looking at the character traits of the Kingdom to which Christ is introducing us. Today we look at the opportunities created by living lives molded by those character traits. There is so much richness in what Christ is saying that we are going to break it down into smaller pieces so that we don't miss a thing! So, as we begin, **let's start with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Matthew 5:13-20)

Jesus starts out by telling the crowd: ***"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:13.***

Now remember that Jesus is sitting on a hillside in a place where His voice would be naturally amplified. There was a massive crowd of His disciples there, including those He had picked to be His closest followers. Wherever they had come from to be in this place at this time, they were all united by one common factor: There was something about Jesus of Nazareth that they all felt they needed to be connected to. And so, as He taught, they fell silent so as not to miss a thing He was saying.

Now as He shared the characters traits of those who inhabit the Kingdom of God - the Beatitudes - He has presented them in a general sense; in other words, people, whoever they are, who belong to the Kingdom of God show these kinds of qualities as a reflection of the Father who rules that Kingdom. But, starting with the verses we are looking at today, Jesus becomes far more specific to the crowd of disciples listening to Him, moving from "blessed are they/those" to something far more immediate, and personal: "You" - in other words, Jesus is saying: "I am now talking to you about you, and your role in the Kingdom of God." But by making that shift of focus, Jesus is making the character traits He had just outlined personally applicable as well. In other words, having explained those character traits, He is now going to be explaining why those traits are so important. I can almost hear Him saying: "You, every individual one of you, are to be living in this world with these Kingdom characteristics - and in doing this, in living like this, people will begin to take notice. These Kingdom character traits will give you the opportunity to impact your world in such a way that it moves people from simply watching you to something much more important - wondering what is behind the life they see you living."

And then Jesus immediately begins identifying what that opportunity is, starting with: "You are the salt of the earth." Now what does He mean by that? Well, one of the great things about the style of teaching that Jesus used was that He spoke in a way and with images that people could very easily relate to. "Salt" is an example; everybody there would have understood the purpose of salt in their daily lives. Ok; fine, but what did it mean for Jesus to call them "salt?" He is referring to the ability of salt to be used as a seasoning to flavor food, as a preservative to

maintain food, and also for use as a fertilizer to grow food. He is employing those common uses as a picture of the purpose graced to believers - to season the lives of people around us with the life we have found in Christ, in other words, to by our lives let them, as David said so well: ***Taste and see that the Lord is good - David, Psalm 34:8a.*** This in turn may "fertilize" others by stimulating a desire to know the same kind of peace and joy in their lives that we are showing, leading them to lives spiritually preserved in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. And how would that be done? By proclaiming the Kingdom of God through righteous living connected to proclamation of the gospel. Now there are a whole lot of good, polite, generous, nice people out there in the world. But while righteous living may get peoples' attention, it is that righteous living openly connected to the gospel that underscores the foundation that makes righteous living even matter. It says to the world: "I'm living differently; I'm living with a different sense of purpose, with a different sense of identity, and here is the reason why - the gospel. It is the gospel that is molding me and making me to do what I do, and to be what I am." Wow - what an opportunity!

But, as Christ points out, and as the crowd that day would have easily understood, salt can lose its "saltiness." Natural salt can lose its mineral content by exposure to moisture, and the salt itself can break down when in high heat. When this happens, it makes the salt useless to anybody. Such salt would wind up simply trampled underfoot, thrown away without thought or purpose. In this context, Jesus could look at everybody listening to Him in that moment and let them know: "You have purpose. You were born with purpose; you are alive for purpose. There is a Kingdom reason for you being here." Wow, that my very existence is vital and essential, and potentially beneficial to all those around me.

But somebody unable or unwilling to see their Kingdom purpose would wind up serving no purpose at all. And the Greek amplifies the idea of salt losing its saltiness. It actually refers to foolish or immoral behavior - in other words, those who might make a claim to Kingdom citizenship but whose lives are lived on their own terms, quite apart from Kingdom character traits, in an unrighteous and even destructive manner rather than in a purified manner. When that is what the world sees that testimony is worthless to the cause of Christ; nothing can grow where they go. The Greek goes even further, suggesting that salt no longer "good for anything" has literally lost all of its potential force or impact; it has become essentially impotent. As a result, the only purpose for such salt was to be thrown out to kill vegetation on a pathway. Talk about grief for opportunities lost, for what might have been possible for that person to accomplish through the life of the Kingdom of God.

And then Jesus makes another illustration of the impact of Kingdom living: ***"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"- Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:14-16.***

What amazing words. Here Jesus is calling His followers the "light" of the world. That means that we are to be "luminous" for the Kingdom. To be "luminous" means to be "full of or shedding light; bright or shining (and here's the cool part), especially in the dark." Why is that last part important? It goes back to one of Isaiah's prophecies concerning the Messiah Himself, some 700 years old by the time Jesus is teaching in this moment. Isaiah said: The people

walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned - Isaiah 9:2. The "light" Isaiah is referring to is the coming of the Messiah into the world. And now Jesus is saying that we are going to be light in a similar sort of way. Now of course, Jesus is the light for the world; He said as much in John's gospel: ***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life"*** - ***Jesus Christ, John 8:12***. But what He is telling us here is that, by being filled with His life, we can ourselves be the light to the world by living lives that reflect the true light of Jesus Christ. And the light of the life of Christ is a light that cannot be hidden, any more than, as He says, a town built on a hill can be hidden.

And then Jesus gets into His purpose: Why are we to be a light? To give the light of the life of Christ to everyone in the "house" - meaning to everybody we come into contact with. And Jesus uses a little picture of absurdity to underscore His message. What would be the point, He implies, of lighting a lamp only to place that lamp under a bowl? Anybody would think doing that was flat-out dumb. But His point is wonderful: If Jesus intended to bring God's light into the world, once people have received that light, then their purpose becomes to light the "house" in which God has placed them; in other words, that's what we're here for. And note that we are called to be light to "everyone in the house." Nobody is seen as unqualified to receive the light shining in that house. Just like what a light can do in a darkened house, we are to shine - literally, to "radiate brilliancy" - of the Kingdom before others, that they may by our light become aware of, begin to gain some knowledge of, the source of our shining so brightly. That will be done by observing our "good deeds," literally works that are valuable or virtuous or, in a context we have used many times, deeds that reflect a faith that looks like something, that people will see and make them begin to think of what's behind those deeds. That can only happen for the Kingdom when those deeds reflect the "light" of the Kingdom - Jesus Christ - and thus bring glory to God Himself.

And one additional point before we move on: The absurdity of Christ's little parable picture also tells us that it is His greatest desire that His light be shined throughout the world with the express purpose of people coming to His light, of people being saved. Not only is that what He died for, but that is also what He lived for and taught for, that people in seeing Him would see the life He offered - a vision He passionately wanted them to see.

And then Jesus moves into the hope, the confidence, we can embrace as "salt" and "light" for the world. As He continues: ***"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"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:17***. First, Jesus by His life, by how He lived and responded, by His actions and His emotions, His thoughts, words and deeds, came to "fulfill," literally to bring meaning and closure to all the Scriptures that talked about Him or about a life pleasing to God. He was not here to somehow dissolve, disintegrate or demolish their Scriptures, but rather to fulfill, meaning, to complete them and, by doing so, to reveal their real purpose. Jesus was the outcome of the Scriptures - both in terms of prophecies concerning His coming, and in terms of obedience to every one of God's commands.

Now we can't forget who this is who's talking here. This is not only the Messiah, God living in human form, but He is also the Author of all the Scriptures He is going to be talking about.

Who would know a book better than the author of the book? Jesus is that author. So now, in Jesus, not only are we going to get an explanation for the meaning of the book, but we are also going to get a living, breathing example of that explanation. We're not just going to hear the Scriptures from Him but we're going to see the Scriptures from Him as well. Talk about bringing a book to life!

"For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:18.

Now the King James Version of this verse gives us a phrase that may be familiar to some of us: While the NIV says "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen," the KJV says "one jot or one tittle." So, what are those? The "jot" is the Hebrew letter jod, which resembles an apostrophe in English. And "tittle" is a slight pen stroke used in Hebrew to distinguish similar letters in much the same way as the tail that distinguishes our letter "q" from our letter "o." What Christ is saying is that He regarded the Scriptures (our OT) as completely accurate and completely reliable right down to the smallest detail. For Jesus, every detail of Scripture mattered.

So, then He goes on to explain what that view of Scripture ultimately means: ***"Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:19.***

Now it's important to remember that all these things that Jesus is sharing are being shared with His followers, with believers. That said, this is a "shout-out" to all believers everywhere to keep all Scripture in the highest regard. This is not a salvation issue, but its importance is underscored by Christ's referring to adherence to honoring all commands and all teachings as being a barometer of measure in the Kingdom of God, in that low esteem for God's word will result in low esteem from God Himself. In our culture, it is popular to separate the "God" of the OT from the "God" of the NT, and to purge virtually all OT commands from our progressive, evolving picture of theology and our assumptions of the purposes of a loving God who would never mean this, or that, or the other thing if it means something we judge in our self-important "wisdom" to be somehow cruel or vindictive.

But no, Jesus says: quite the opposite. True believers uphold every part of God's law. So, if we find in Scripture that God says a certain behavior is wrong or immoral or contrary to His intentions, then that is sufficient to the moment. God has called us to be followers of His word, not editors. So, we teach and preach the things we do, not because we are trying to be bigots or hateful or moral superiors, but because we bow to the wisdom and authority of a Heavenly Father described by David as a God whose ***way is perfect [and whose] word is flawless - David, Psalm 18:30a.***

And then Jesus completes this section with these words: ***For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:20.***

The scribes and Pharisees were the "poster kids" for holiness in the time of Christ. Most everyone thought that to be holy, you had to live like them. And interestingly, Christ

acknowledges righteousness to be found in the lives and lifestyles of the scribes and Pharisees, but it was a fatally flawed righteousness because it was built on the false assumption that satisfying the holiness of God was possible by the effort of external obedience - in other words, the outward things that people could see. That myth still exists today. If you ask somebody why they think they'll be in heaven, their answers may sound similar: "I was baptized as an infant," or "I was confirmed when I was 14," or "I've taught Sunday School and been a youth leader in my church." All nice, but all wrong!

The Scripture teaches that, as Isaiah put it: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags - Isaiah 64:6a*. No amount of effort or high-minded desire, no matter how sincere, will accomplish anything in God's eyes apart from the perfect life found in Jesus Christ. There is only one path to the righteousness that pleases God. That's why Christ's "fulfilling" the Scriptures is so important. He pleased God in every way and, in so doing, gave us the opportunity to claim the perfection He lived.

APPLICATION

So, here we are, living in the "house" God built, meaning that it is the sovereign power of God that has placed us in the particular environments of jobs, neighborhoods, schools, and communities in which we live. He has also placed around us the various co-workers, neighbors, classmates and teammates, and townsfolk we see every day. And He has also chosen the families, and extended families, into which we were born. And it is to those people that we are commanded to let our light shine, that by seeing our light, they may see the light of Christ. There are no accidents; we are here, in this time, in this place, in this environment, to reflect Jesus. It's all about Him.

Now a few weeks ago, I had you fill out a number of forms - the prayer net and, particularly, a volunteer sheet for your willingness to do ministry inside our walls, and also a sheet for ideas of ministry we can do outside these walls - all for the purpose of letting our lives shine with Christ and for Christ in our community. We already saw two really great examples of this: (1) Mark organizing the Christmas caroling at Garnette Gardens so those residents could hear some music of the season and know they are not forgotten, and (2) Tracci giving us those houses for kids to build (and eventually eat). That's exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about now - making ministry visible, all for the honor and glory of God, at one level church work but, more importantly, Kingdom work. So, this seemed like a good time to share with you all the "community ministry" ideas that have come in so far:

Esther Scharfencamp: Publicity notices for our church services, Bible studies, etc. Post them around town (grocery store, post office, etc.). Especially important if we have anything special upcoming. Contact Esther if you are interested in this ministry.

Tom Latterell: Work crews to clean up after weather-related events (e.g., shovel snow, cut up downed trees, repair damage from wind or flood, send in meals for people who have lost power). Two or three crews of five people (men and women). Rather than wait for a call, ask our neighbors if they need help cleaning up, and then call the church for a crew to come. Contact Pastor Tom if you are interested in this ministry (I had the same idea, a nice confirmation).

Linda Vesta: Pen pals. We have so many shut-ins (the crew at Garnette Gardens, people who

are recovering from surgery or illness), or anybody who has been away from us for some time. If you can put pen (or pencil or even crayon) to paper, request somebody from our church family to write to to help during this time of separation. It's an opportunity for people to get mail, something tangible that lets them know they are missed, but also thought of and prayed for. This one in particular requires a commitment - meaning that, if you are written back, you continue to respond. Contact Pastor Dan if you are interested in this ministry.

Pastor Dan: Summer ministry opportunities. I am going to be working through our district offices to connect with churches in our district that would really appreciate a day or two of whatever they need. Right now, I am starting by looking at contacting Northside Neighborhood Church in North Minneapolis and the Payne Avenue Free Church in St. Paul (a revitalization church, meaning they are hoping to restart in a spiritually healthy manner). These are both inner-city churches that may not have a lot of resources so it is very possible that any kind of help will be greatly appreciated.

Pastor Dan (just remembered this one this morning): Once the weather settles down, doing worship in a city park (call it "Praise In The Park" or something like that). We have several guitarists here. Just a time of getting together outdoors, but also something public and visible that may entice other people to at least come close enough to listen. This is also something to which we could invite people from another church to join us. On a side note, we could also arrange to occasionally do our Bible studies outdoors as well - anything that allows people to hear the praise, prayers, and teachings of God's word.

These are all wonderful examples of letting our lights shine to those around us (though obviously not the only ones that are out there). But what should be fueling this should be our love for our Savior - as well as the outcome of "blessed to be a blessing." You want to have a really long but really wonderful worship experience? Simply start thinking of all, and I mean all, the blessings that God has poured on each and every one of us. Talk about the joy of the Lord being our strength. You see, the more we become aware of all that Jesus has done for us, the more that will lead us to want to do something for him.

CONCLUSION

So, one of the great takeaways from all this? Everybody here matters. Don't let Satan's lies of "I'm too old" or "I don't matter" or "I'm sure somebody else can do this better than me." Lies, all lies! The only reason any of us are here is because God ain't finished with us yet; in other words, He still has purpose for us. Maybe the hook is, do you believe that.

So how do we start putting ourselves out there in ministry? Start by praying, maybe something along these lines: *God, I praise your name for another day of life. But sometimes I have a hard time seeing what difference another day of my life really means. Father, please show me; please lead me and guide me. What do you want me to do today for you, tomorrow for you? What ministry is there here in this church family to which You would like me to join? You know why You have me here, Father. Make it clear to me, that I may be the best light for You that I can. May all my life be all about You. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

And as you continue to seek His wisdom and His guidance, He will bring you the opportunities He wants you to pursue. He loves nothing better than having us shine for Him. I promise you He will plug you into His best spot. Let's pray!