

MATTHEW 5:13-20

ST JAMES', 9.2.20, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Matthew 5, we read: *Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them . . .* We know that the crowds followed, and that they overheard Jesus' teaching, because at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew tells us that *the crowds were amazed at his teaching (7:28)*. But Jesus' teaching is aimed primarily at his small group of disciples – which at this stage consists of Peter and Andrew, James and John (Matthew 4:18-22). Put into that context, it's mind-blowing to realise that, when Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world" (vv 13, 14), he was speaking to just a tiny group of Galilean peasants.

Jesus tells his first disciples that they're called to be different. They're to be different from everyone else around them – different in such a way that people *may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven* (v 16). And they're to be different to *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law*, the religious élite. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were scrupulous about obeying all the rules and regulations of the OT law. And yet Jesus tells his disciples: *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven* (v 20).

These verses are lessons number 2 & 3 in discipleship, in how to follow Jesus. Lesson no 1 is what we call the Beatitudes, in verses 1-12.

There, Jesus describes the character traits which he calls his disciples to develop. Lesson 2 (the salt and light, verses 13-16) shows the influence which they have in the world. In lesson 3 (verses 17-20), Jesus makes it clear that following him is about so much more than obeying a set of rules and regulations.

Jesus first disciples took his teaching seriously. Their lifestyle and teaching were so attractive that more and more people were drawn, firstly to *praise [their] Father in heaven* (v 16), and eventually to *enter the kingdom of heaven* themselves (v 20). As Jesus' disciples today, it's for us to follow their example – so let's think about what Jesus says here in more detail.

THEY WILL . . . GIVE GLORY TO YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

You are the salt of the earth, Jesus tells his disciples (v 13). Salt is a universal commodity. We use it mainly to provide flavour, but in Jesus' day, and in places where there are no fridges, salt was and is used to preserve food, especially meat.

Whether you prefer the idea of Christians preserving the human race, or flavouring the human race, there are two ideas we need to hang onto here. Firstly, Jesus' disciples are those who've entered the kingdom of heaven. Their citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). In this nation, we consider those who don't share our nationality to be foreigners or aliens. In a similar way, those who haven't entered the kingdom of heaven are aliens, spiritually speaking. Jesus' disciples are different from, separated from, those who aren't his disciples.

The second idea to hold onto as we think about Jesus' disciples being *the salt of the earth*, is that Christians are called to have a positive impact on the human race in general; we're to make the world a better place. If we're going to do that, we need to be involved in the lives of the people around us: withdrawing from the world isn't an option.

You are the light of the world, Jesus tells his disciples (v 14). Light can have lots of different uses. Michael Green points out:

Light is often a warning: think of a lighthouse. It is often an attraction: think of a lighted window looming out of the fog when you are lost. A light is often a guide; think of a torch or a flare path.¹

Other uses for light include celebrations (birthday candles, fireworks); or comfort and reassurance (a nightlight). But as Michael Green goes on to say, 'Above all, a light is visible'. If we're going to allow our *light* to *shine before men*, we need to be distinctive in the way we lead our lives: keeping our faith private, not allowing it to impact our lifestyle, isn't an option.

If we take seriously Jesus' call to his followers, if we're involved in the lives of those around us, and allowing our faith to impact our lifestyle, then the end result will be that other people will *see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven* (v 16). The question is how should we allow our faith to impact our lifestyle; how can our righteousness possibly exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (v 20)?

YOU WILL . . . ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were two groups of people within C1 Judaism who were concerned above everything to keep the Law. So that they could be certain that they didn't break even *one of the least of these commandments* (v 19), they'd added a huge number of extra rules and regulations. Just one example from among many which were designed to ensure that they kept the Sabbath holy: goats could go out with a protective cloth on their udders to keep them dry, but not to collect their milk.²

So it's a very daunting prospect to be more righteous than the Pharisees and teachers of the law (v 20)! Jesus' disciples couldn't possibly beat them at this game. *Righteousness* is about a lot more than literally obeying all the rules and regulations of the OT law. It's about developing the character traits which Jesus has described in verses 1-12: things like spiritual poverty, humility, mercy and purity of heart. It's about seeking to please our heavenly Father in response to his amazing love and generosity towards us. Or, in the words of the prophet Micah, its about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law have yet to enter the kingdom of heaven. But those who've responded to God in love, humility and gratitude, those who've chosen to follow Jesus, have already entered the kingdom of heaven.

CONCLUSION

Jesus' disciples are people who have chosen, freely and willingly, to take up the offer of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. If we've entered the kingdom of heaven, then we've already shown that our *righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law* (v 20). As citizens of God's kingdom, we're called to act as salt and light in the world, so that other people *may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven* (v 16). We can't do that effectively by ourselves. Jesus doesn't describe our role as *light of the world* as 'you in your small corner, and I in mine'¹³. Jesus describes many lights gathered together as a *city on a hill* [which] *cannot be hidden* (v 14).

We're called to be and to do together. Jesus called his disciples to form a team, to go out together to teach, preach and heal, each using their own different gifts and strengths, to help and encourage each other along. The *good deeds* they do together will be like a city of lights shining before people, who will see them and *praise [their] Father in heaven* (v 16).

Christians in C21 Britain are often not very good at letting their light shine at all. We're discouraged from doing so by wider society. We don't want to be seen to be pushing our faith down other people's throats. We tend to think that it's a private affair between ourselves and God – some people even prefer not to join with other Christians in worship! But if that's the way we live out our faith, then we're allowing our salt to lose its saltiness, we're hiding our light under a basket, and so we're not doing what God requires of us.

But when we come together, our light shines more brightly. *A city on a hill cannot be hidden* (v 14). Working together means we can help and support one another. And working together means that the effects of our labour are multiplied!

So this morning, I believe that the Lord is challenging us again, to think and pray about the part each of us plays in the mission of this church. Are we fulfilling our purpose as salt and light in this community? Does our righteousness surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? Think about what part you play in helping St James' to be that *city on a hill* which *cannot be hidden*. Do you limit your involvement to coming along on a Sunday morning? You may feel that you can't do any more than that, and you may not be able to help out in practical ways, (although if you can, I hope you will) but there's always something each of us can do to contribute to the life and mission of our church, and so to be salt and light in this community.

¹ Michael Green, The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven (Bible Speaks Today commentary, Leicester, IVP, 2000), p 91

² Shabbath 3-6 in the Mishnah, quoted in Green, p 93

³ Susan Waner (1819 – 1885), Jesus bids us shine