

Being Salt and Light
Isaiah 58:1 – 12; Matthew 5:13 – 20
Sunday, February 9, 2020

When I was a kid, I collected baseball cards. I had a pretty good collection and some cards that were worth some money. But the prize of my collection was an autographed picture of Mark McGwire from his first season in the Major Leagues. Mark McGwire was one of the greatest homerun hitters in baseball history. At one point he held the record for most homeruns in a season. And the thing was, Mark McGwire had stopped signing autographs. So this picture was pretty rare. You could not get something like this anymore.

I took it to a memorabilia dealer during the height of McGwire's fame, and he told me that this picture would sell for around \$1,000. So I'm thinking, "Man, this is only going to get more and more valuable! He's going to retire and then go into the Hall of Fame and at some point when he dies this thing could be worth a lot of money!" Then you know what happened? It was discovered that Mark McGwire used steroids. All of his accomplishments and the records he set were attained by cheating. And this picture became totally worthless. I could have made \$1,000 off of it if I had sold it then. But instead I held onto it, tucked it away, and didn't do anything with it, and it is not worth anything.

Jesus talks about salt and light. And a lot of times we can get caught up trying to figure out exactly what he means here when he compares us to salt and says that "if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" I must have spent a solid hour this past week studying salt, trying to figure out if salt can in fact go bad and lose its saltiness. (It *can*, but only certain kinds of salt from certain places.) But the point that Jesus is making here is that salt and light have a *purpose*. They are meant to be *used*. If you don't *do* anything with salt, what good is it? If you take your light and hide it under a basket, what good is it?

It's like baseball cards. They're not worth anything until you actually *do something* with them. And that's how it is with faith. You can *know* about God and scripture and theology and doctrine and spiritual practices. But *faith* is not just about what you *believe*. It is about *using* what you believe. Living it out. Putting it into action and making it useful. Faith is meant to be *used*. And if it is not used, then what is it really worth?

One of our kids likes to *eat salt*. Just by itself. I will catch them every now and then with a little bit of salt on their plate at dinner, dipping their finger into it and putting it right onto their tongue. And I have to stop them and say, "Whoa, you don't eat salt by itself! It's meant to go *on* something else." And that's one of the things Jesus is getting at here, too. It's not just that salt is meant to be *used*. It is meant to be used *with something else*. You don't light a lamp in your house just for the sake of lighting it, using it. It is meant to help us *see* something else. Salt and light are not for their *own* sake, but for the sake of how they help something *else*.

And, again, that's how it is with faith. Faith does not exist for its own sake. We do not have faith just so we can have faith. It is meant to be *used*, and it is meant to be used to help something, *someone* else. Christoff Blumhardt was a German Lutheran theologian around the time of WWI, and he once wrote that "religious knowledge by itself is of no value. People should learn how to be truly active, especially with their neighbors, and see to it that all have what they need to live a fruitful life." *That* is what our faith is for.

Salt is meant to be used for the benefit of food. Light is meant to be used for the benefit of seeing. Faith is meant to be used for the benefit of *others*, so that all can see and know God, live in harmony with God and their neighbor, and have what they need to live a fruitful life. Our

faith, what we do and talk about here, is not meant to be just for us. It is meant to be shared with the world; to be lived out *in* the world. So what does it look like for us to be salt and light in the world?

This is what Isaiah gets into. “Isaiah 58 was written during a time of deep uncertainty for Israel.”¹ The Babylonians had invaded Israel, destroyed their cities, destroyed the Temple where the presence of God dwelled, and they had shipped the people of Israel off to live in foreign lands. And so the people of Israel cry out to God. They say, “How could you let this happen to us? When are you going to help us? We’ve been doing all the right things! We’ve been following your law, your commandments, doing all the things you told us to do! We’ve been worshipping the right way, following all the ceremonial procedures and rituals that you taught us. We’ve been fasting. We’ve been doing all these things, but it’s like you don’t even notice!”

And what God says to them is, “Yeah, you’re doing all the right things, but you’re doing them for *yourselves*. You fast and you do all these rituals, but then you go and fight with your neighbor or mistreat them and oppress them. You let people go hungry. You don’t take care of the poor. You’re doing these things for your own sake, not for the sake of *others*. You *have* salt, but you’re not *being* salt. You *have* light, but you’re not *being* light. You *have* these things, but you’re not *using* them for the benefit of others, so what are they really *worth*?”

It would be like if you came here today and sing the songs and pray the prayers and hear the word of God, and then when it’s all done you get in your car to drive home, but someone pulls out in front of you in the parking lot, so you slam on your horn and give them the finger. You’ve

¹ Tyler Mayfield, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3153

done all the right things in *here*, but have they made you more compassionate, more loving out *there*?

This is essentially the same criticism that Jesus has of the scribes and the Pharisees (the Jewish religious leaders) all throughout the gospels. They *know* the law, they *know* the rituals, they *know* all the right things to do, and they *do* them. They *keep* the law. We've come to view the Pharisees as the unfaithful bad guys over the years because they were always going at it with Jesus. But in Jesus' time, they were the *height* of faithfulness; models of faithfulness for the Jewish people. Their whole purpose was to keep God's laws and teach others to do the same.

So when Jesus says, "Your righteousness has to *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees," the people around him would have been like, "Whoa! *Exceed* them? There's *no one* more righteous than the Pharisees!" The problem with the Pharisees wasn't that they didn't keep the law. They *did*. It's that they kept the law *for the sake of* keeping the law. It didn't make them more compassionate, more loving.

So God says through Isaiah, "Yeah, you fast for the sake of fasting, because that's what you're 'supposed' to do. But I want your fasting to lead you to loose the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free. I want it to lead you to share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into your homes, clothe the naked, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted; to remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger and the speaking of evil. If you do that, *then* your light shall rise in the darkness and break forth like the dawn, and healing shall spring up quickly."

Did you hear that? If you fight injustice and oppression and care for those who are hungry and homeless and poor and afflicted; if you stop pointing fingers and speaking evil and start

extending hands and speaking out of love, then your light will shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God. *That* is what it looks like to *be* salt and light in the world. It's not just having faith for the sake of having faith. It's *using* our faith in ways that give others what they need to live a fruitful life. It's not just worshipping, singing, praying, sharing communion. It's letting the things we do here lead us to deeper compassion and love and engagement with the world around us.

How does healing spring up in this time of deep uncertainty for our world? Not just by *having* faith, but by *using* it in ways that bring forth justice and compassion and kindness and love. *You* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the world. Jesus doesn't say, "*I* am the salt of the earth and the light of the world," he says *we* are. So while we are calling out to God, asking, "Why don't you *do* something," perhaps God is asking *us*, "Why don't *you*?"