

## Prayer

O God, please hear our prayers. Strip away the unworthiness of our words, our deeds, our thoughts and our feelings, and hear those cries of the soul from deep within which even we who call out to You may not fully understand. Sift the truths which lie behind our needs and answer us according to our deepest spiritual needs, we pray, for You alone are the God of our Salvation. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

#### On-going prayers

- *Pray for the people you meet* Pray
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- *Pray for those who do research about climate change*

## Meditation

Be light to me, Lord Jesus, be bright light;  
Light which pierces through the darkness.

Be a bright redeeming hope for all the world  
Illuminate a pathway for the God-ward walk ahead;  
Warn of danger with a beacon, pierce the gloom;  
Reveal the scandals of unrepentant sinfulness;  
Enlighten hearts confused by murky worldliness;  
Emanate the awesome brightness of Salvation;  
Flood the church with fresh yet ancient teaching;  
Brighten minds engaging with God's truth;

Be light to me, Lord Jesus, be bright light;  
Light which pierces me, so I may radiate for You.

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## Bible passage - Matthew 5:13-16

<sup>13</sup> 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt loses its flavour, how can it become salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out onto the pathways.

<sup>14</sup> 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a bowl. They place it on a stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise Your Father in heaven.'

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## Bible Study

### Review

Having given the disciples the profound yet disturbing teaching that those who followed Him would inherit the Kingdom of God but also experience persecution (5:1-12), Jesus told His listeners of their immense value in the sight of God. He said 'You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world!' After each of these clarion calls, Jesus warned about the failure of each; salt could lose its flavour, and light could be hidden. Yet the clear intention of the pair of sayings was to be positive, and this comes through at the end;

'let your light shine before others ...' (5:16). Jesus' use of salt and light as illustrations are well known to us, but what would the disciples have understood by them?

'You are the salt of the world' is one of the most enigmatic of Jesus' sayings. We can easily think this means that the followers of Jesus are meant by God to be a blessing to the rest of the world, and hence the 'salt of the earth'; flavouring, seasoning and making life on earth more interesting. However, this can hardly be the point. The rest of Matthew's Gospel does not give the impression that the life of faith in following Jesus Christ is a spicy 'add-on' to life on earth which makes the world a nicer place to live. The Gospel, as we will find out, is far more radical than that. So what can Jesus mean by talking about 'salt'.

Salt is a preservative and a food flavouring, and this would have been taken for granted in Jesus' day. No home would have been without salt for both purposes. In addition, a Jewish home would also have used salt to offer with sacrifices in worship (see Num. 18:19, 2 Chron. 13:5), and interestingly, these references indicate that sacrifices 'with salt' reflected God's Covenant with His people (see also Num. 18:19). So when Jesus said 'You are the salt of the earth', He was saying to His disciples that they were the beginning of God's new Covenant with the whole earth. Their sacrifice of worship and discipleship was as salt not to the Jews, but to all nations!

In addition, when Jesus spoke about throwing 'unsalty' salt on the roads, he knew that this was commonly done to raise the acidity of the soil on pathways and thus prevent the growth of vegetation. By implication, Jesus may have been saying that the salt of the old Covenant had proved worthless and was fit for no more than trampling underfoot. The disciples, however, represented the salt of the New Covenant in Christ Jesus which would change the world forever!

'You are the light of the world' is a much simpler saying of Jesus. It was well known that God's people were called to be a 'light to the nations from Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), and the 'Law' was also likened to light ('your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' – Psalm 119:105). In addition, Jesus likened light to a 'city set on a hill', undoubtedly a reference to Jerusalem, the city of Zion to which the Messiah would come to bring salvation to the world.

With all these ideas already gathered around the idea of light in the minds of people in Jesus' day, His words to the disciples were forthright. The new light of the Kingdom of God which Jesus preached and now taught was more important than previous light. It was God's pure light to be raised up on a hill top and exposed to the world to enlighten 'everyone in the house' (5:15). Jesus commanded the disciples 'let your light so shine before others that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in Heaven' (5:16). This instruction was given to encourage the disciple to be unashamed of the light of the Kingdom of God which they were discovering in Jesus Christ. Jesus' purpose was not simply to be the light Himself, but to ignite a light within the disciples by which the evidence of God's Kingdom would be known throughout the world! In this sense, what Jesus said was a prophetic statement of incredible power.

It is perhaps right for Christians today to wonder whether they have become unsalted or placed their light under a bowl. The challenge must be faced, but when speaking to the disciples Jesus used these negatives to contrast the failure of the Old Covenant with the New Covenant of love in the Kingdom of God. We should be encouraged by Jesus' confidence that His disciples would indeed be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He places this trust in us, and if we remain faithful to Him there is no reason for us to fail.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

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## Going Deeper

Salt and light. It is a pity that we have had a weekend between our study of the Beatitudes and these four verses, as I believe they follow on from them. At the conclusion of the Beatitudes, Jesus had introduced the disciples and the crowd to the idea that they would have to face persecution for following him ('persecute you ... on my account' – v11); this, after he had introduced them to the inner and outer characteristics of those who would 'inherit the Kingdom of Heaven'. Having given them the 'bad news' of persecution, he now gives them the 'good news' about how important they are if they will follow him.

When we read these sayings, they sound to our churchy, guilt ridden ears, somewhat challenging. We wince at the dismissal of 'salt that has lost its flavour', and fear that we have somehow 'hidden our lights'. I believe, however, that they were intended by Jesus to bolster the disciples; to tell them how important they were to him, and encourage them to be bold, and to stand with him in the days ahead. They should not be cowed by the prospect of persecution, because they were important to God! Indeed, the 'contrary' side of each picture of salt and light is fantastical, after all, who has heard of salt that 'looses its flavour' (even salt graded for its

purity can change its properties, once made!), further, everyone would have known even in those days that if you place a naked flame (which is all they had then) and starve it of air by putting it under a bowl, then it will go out, almost straight away! I doubt most strongly that Jesus' words were intended to give us some intricate message about failure. He is single minded in His pressing home the positive; 'let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.' Why are we so afraid when Jesus encourages us?

My last reason for grouping these sayings with the Beatitudes is that the following verses (17-20) which we will study tomorrow, are a centre piece of teaching about the nature of Jesus' ministry and its continuity with the 'Law and the Prophets'. They are a crucial passage for the whole of Matthew's Gospel and address fundamental issues about the Christian faith, and to my mind there is a clear break between verses 16 and 17. Our verses today are therefore a follow-on from the Beatitudes, and to be seen as highlighting the positive role of the disciples in God's plan for the whole world.

## **Salt**

It is perhaps unfortunate for this text that we live at a time when we are bombarded with advice to reduce the amount of salt in our food. Supermarkets are required by law to declare food contents, including salt, and furthermore, are required to gradually reduce the salt content for the sake of the health of the nation.

Clearly, too much salt is a bad thing, but we have lost sight, somewhat, of the importance and benefits of salt. In the recent filming of Jamie Oliver's attempts to change cooking in schools, he is seen riding roughshod over regulations about salt in mashed potato, declaring that no wonder the children did not eat it, as without being seasoned, it was tasteless! The school dinner ladies had been instructed to never use salt. Jamie threw in the necessary salt to flavour the food and enable the children to eat and enjoy the food that was good for them, rather than rubbish food with dubious food quality and alternative chemical flavourings previously on offer. I reckon Jesus could have made something of the story!

Throughout time, salt has been used as an essential preservative and a flavouring of food, this would have been taken for granted in Jesus' day, and no home would have been without salt for both purposes. A Jewish home would also have salt for offering with sacrifices according to the law (Num 18:19, 2 Chron 13:5), and interestingly, these references indicate that sacrifices 'with salt' had a particular relationship to God's Covenant with His people 'all the holy offerings ... a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you ...' (Num 18:19) The 'Covenant' up to now had been thought of as existing, through Abraham, between God and His people; though an earlier Covenant had been made between God and all people together with 'the earth' in the days of Noah, after the flood (Genesis 9:8-17). It is possible, therefore, that Jesus is indicating to the disciples that their sacrifice of worship was as salt not to the Jews, but to the whole earth; a mighty calling indeed.

The word 'salt' was also used in Jesus' day as a figure of speech to indicate loyalty and graciousness (Ezra 1:14 and Col 4:6). This use is enigmatic, as it could indicate loyalty to Jesus and graciousness of outward behaviour, but that is by no means certain. Verse 13 does, despite my scepticism above, speak substantially about 'saltless-ness'. Throwing salt on roads was done in those days not to clear them of ice, but to prevent vegetation growing on the pathway. It raised the acidity of the soil to the point where plants could not grow. Again, it is hardly worth throwing 'un-salty' salt because it would not do its job; the whole picture is ridiculous. Yet it is God's Word, and it does have meaning.

I remain therefore of the opinion that through translation from Jesus' Aramaic to Matthew's Greek, to our English, we may have lost some 'pun' of Jesus, perhaps a play on words or ideas about salt that is now quite beyond us; yet the point of it would have been to emphasise the value of salt. The disciples were now essential to Jesus and His cause; even at this early stage and in considerable ignorance of what was to come; they were vital to God's work of the Kingdom of God. Jesus wanted them to know that. I believe he was encouraging them; 'You are the salt of the earth', he said, in other words, 'you preserve the earth, you flavour it, and you represent God's Covenant with it, and the work of the Kingdom of heaven.'

## **Light**

Now Jesus goes further and tells the disciples that they are the 'light of the world'. He then talks about what this means, saying in effect, that this light is something that, of its nature 'shines out'; and we all know that any hiding of the light not only stops the effect of the light, it puts it out. Jesus likens 'the light of the world' to 'a city set on a hill', possibly Jerusalem. In making this likeness with the disciples, he may well have set the seeds for the words of Paul in his letters, who describes the people of God as the 'temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 3:16).

Light, however, was used as a metaphor for many things in those days, in the Jewish world and the Roman world with which it overlapped. The 'Law' was considered as a 'light', for example Psalm 119:105 'your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path', and the apocryphal book Wisdom (18:4) talks of 'the imperishable light of the Law'. At different points in scripture, and in other literature around in Jesus' day,

'light' is used to describe almost everything from God, Adam, Rabbin, Israel, the Law, the Temple, and Jerusalem! Perhaps the most significant of these are the famous passages of Isaiah which talk of the mission of Israel to be a 'light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 60:3); I think it would have been impossible for the disciples to have heard Jesus say these words and not be reminded of those famous scriptures, and the mission that lay implicitly within them; Jesus was calling them to an immense task.

We cannot underestimate the magnitude of these words. Jesus was talking to his early disciples about their mission to the whole world, and said that it was something that could not be hidden. To say that Jesus was interested only in the Jews at this early stage of his mission would be to misunderstand what Jesus thought he was about. His task was to save the world; yet he would do this by asking a group of Jewish disciples to 'shine' and let their good deeds be shown.

All the talk of lights inappropriately placed under bowls is illustrative, but not the heart of the matter. A light is for shining in the darkness, and this is the way the Messiah and his disciples fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light' (4:16). This theme is picked up by John in his famous discourse on Jesus as the 'light of the world' (John 8:12ff); a theme continued through the disciples and the church. Light is about creation (Genesis 1:3,4,5); it was a symbol of God's presence in the form of a lampstand in the courtyard of the Temple (Exodus 35:8ff); it is likened to life itself in the great theological discourses of Job (Job 12,18,33,35 etc.), and even 'righteousness' is described as light in Proverbs (13:9).

Jesus' great challenge comes at the end; 'let your light shine before others' (v16) and it is a challenge to the disciples, and a challenge to us. All the good things about the Kingdom of God are illustrated by the imagery of light, and are to be open and visible to the world. We are not to be hidden away, but completely exposed. When you think about it, that may be why Jesus knew he and his disciples would be persecuted; it was certainly God's will for them not to hide! The community of the Essenes and others of the day, hid their life and activities away in the sands of the desert; their scrolls and learning lying undiscovered for centuries. Jesus' Gospel was to be shown to the world by the Messiah and the disciples, immediately.

We have the same call!

## Application

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### Discipleship

#### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do you see yourselves as 'salt of the earth'? How is it possible to become 'unsalty'?
2. Has the imagery of light been changed by the introduction of electricity? How does this affect our understanding of 'light' within the scripture?
3. How do you feel about the great call to discipleship that is placed upon us in these verses?

#### **Personal comments by author**

*I firmly believe we are called to be salt and light in the world, and that God gives us the grace through Jesus Christ to achieve this task. It is not something that you or I can easily point to and say 'there, we've done it', because the way salt and light work is to project beyond a source to the wider environment. We cannot expect to see the full picture until we see it in glory!*

#### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Discuss with your church house group how it is that God's people may be salt and light in the world. Listen to find out what people think this means, and match it against what you have found out from scripture.*
- *Miss a meal over a period of three days in order to offer a fast to the Lord, praying to Him for your own witness as salt and light in the world.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Lead me towards the end of the day with Your care and compassion, Lord God. Grant me peace and an easy spirit as I draw to the end of the day so that I may sleep and genuinely rest. So refreshed, may I live each day for You. Thank You, Lord. AMEN

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