

The Teachings Of Jesus

(The Sermon on the Mount)

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The Influence of Moral Character (5:13-16)

Christianity does not function at its best as a militant revolutionary force; rather, Christianity is more of a moral force making changes through its moral presence in the world. This is evident here in this text where we are confronted with two of the most significant passages of the NT concerning the disciple's responsibility to influence the lives of others with the teachings that have influenced his life. This influence has to do more with character than moral codes. Our behavior is of more weight here than our beliefs. But there is a very critical relationship between our behavior and our professed beliefs. A general axiom of behavior is that people behave as they do because they think/believe as they do. It is the disciple's behavior that first attracts the attention of others, not the disciple's beliefs. But one's behavior is a reflection of what he believes - people live out of their beliefs, if their beliefs are realities rather than verbiage.

The essential point here is that if we are going to influence people with our beliefs, we must first influence them with our behavior. When one's moral character is such that it attracts the attention and admiration of others about him, the question of how he came to be who he is can't be far away.

The Christian is who he is because of who he believes Jesus of Nazareth to be. He believes what he believes so deeply he has

become one with his beliefs. These beliefs center in this person Jesus of Nazareth and what we believe about who he is has transformed who we are. Hence, beliefs and behavior are inseparably linked in the life of the disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, and that life is like salt and light in its permeating influence.

*The Influence of One's Moral Character
Is Like Salt (Matt 5:13-14)*

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt becomes tasteless, how shall it be used for salting? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. 14 You are the light of the world; a city that is set on a mountain cannot be hidden (Matt 5:13-14).

The salt metaphor was widely used in the literature of first century Judaism (e.g. it is found in the writings of the rabbis as a metaphor for the Law (*Torah*) and for wisdom; so also in the NT (cf. Mark 9:49-50; Luke 14:34; Col 4:6; James 3:12). In the ancient world salt had a twofold usage: (1) It was used to purify and preserve. In ancient times the Jews offered salt to purify their sacrifices (Exodus 30:35; Lev 2:13; Num 18:19; Ezek 43:24; Mark 9:49--50). Because salt does have a purifying effect, it was used as a preservative. The presence of salt preserves from putrefaction, corruption or decay, and even had a healing effect (cf. Ezek 16:3-4). (2) It was used to enhance flavor. Job 6:6 Job says: "Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is their flavor in the white of an egg?" Salt has both of these functions in our own society.

The function of the salt metaphor here is that the disciples of Christ, like salt, were to be purifying and preserving forces, enhancing and/or flavoring their world through the influence of their moral character, which is a reflection of the moral character of their God. The salt of Palestine was often adulterated (as in the Dead Sea) which rendered it useless and often bland; hence, Jesus' comment, "if salt loses its saltiness."

*The Influence of One's Moral Character
Is Like Light (Matt 5:15-16)*

Nor do they light a lamp and place it under a bucket, but upon the lampstand, and it gives light to all the ones in the house. 16 In this manner, let your light shine in the presence of men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in the heavens.

The light metaphor was, perhaps, one of the most widely used pieces of imagery of the first century Jewish world. It is a major figure in the Dead Sea scrolls, in the literature of the Rabbis, in the OT Scriptures, and in the NT. In the Dead Sea scrolls, the members of the Qumran community were called "the sons of light," who were set over against "the sons of darkness." In the rabbinic literature light is used as a figure for Israel, the Law (*Torah*), the temple, and many of the rabbinic scholars (cf. Paul's allusion in Rom 2:19).

More significant is its use in the OT where it is used of God himself (Psalms 18:28; 27:1; 90:8), but especially for revelation from God (Psalm 119:105, 130). Of major importance here is the use of light for God's salvation and the role of Israel in illuminating the Gentiles to the light or revelation of God (Isaiah 9:2; 42:16; 49:5; 51:4; 58:1-8). This last light metaphor is found throughout the NT, especially as applies to the coming of the Messiah and the salvation he brought into the world of darkness: Matt 4:16; 5:14-16; 6:23; Luke 2:32; John 1:4-5; 3:19-20; 12:35-36, 46; Acts 13:47; 26:18; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8, 13; 1 John 1:5, 7; 2:9.

In both the salt and light figures, Jesus is addressing the issue of the impact his disciples on those around them. The lesson here is far more significant than often thought. This Galilean Rabbi is saying to his disciples, in no uncertain terms, "You are the agents through God will bring change to the world!" It doesn't take a great deal of salt to affect that to which it is applied. In the midst of darkness, any light is easily seen. In a dark room, everyone in the room knows where the light is; when they want to be in the light rather than the darkness, they will know where to find it. To place a flame under a bucket was

the way one extinguished the flame of an oil lamp. Rather than hide the flame, one is to put it on a lampstand so that the flame can illuminate the whole room. Jesus was telling his disciples that hidden discipleship wouldn't influence the darkness any more than an extinguished flame; and adulterated salt cannot do much to purify, preserve, or flavor that to which it is applied. In all of this he is talking about the influence of one's moral character, as is reflected in the beatitude list, and that influence, no matter how subtle, can be significant.

Questions for Discussion for Lessons 1-5

1. What do you understand by the word "blessed"? Make a list.
2. Discuss the meaning of the Greek word *makarios*, as used here. How does the "Greek understanding" help our understanding of the concept we are working with here?
3. Discuss the "Hebrew understanding" of blessed. Especially important is the distinction between the Hebrew *barak* and *ashen*.
4. It is very important to our understanding of what Jesus is saying here that we understand what is meant by the word "blessed." Following are a number of NT passages in which the term *makarios* (blessed) is found. Use whatever you find helpful in informing your understanding concerning this word "blessed." Matt 13:16; Luke 1:45; 6:20-22; 11:28; 14:12-14, 15; Acts 20:35; 1 Tim 1:11; 6:15; James 1:12, 1:25; 1 Peter 3:14; 4:24.
5. What was Jesus' Messianic agenda as seen in Isaiah 61:1ff as compared to the primary Messianic expectations of first century Judaism?
6. Who were the *anawim* (especially as relates to such expressions, "poor in spirit" and "the meek") and what role do the *anawim* play in Jesus' Messianic agenda?

7. How do you understand the expression "attribute of character?"
8. What is the attribute of character in each of eight beatitudes?
9. In what way do the sayings concerning salt and light relate to the beatitudes?
10. Discuss the relationship between our beliefs and our behavior and how that relates to our influence on others.
11. In what ways are Christians to be like salt?
12. In what ways are Christians to be like light?
13. What is the significance of Jesus' comments about salt losing its flavor and hiding a flame under a bushel?

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