

3. Having articulated the essential character of those who inhabit the kingdom of heaven, Jesus turned next to how they live out their identity in the world (5:13-16). This context is sometimes referred to as *the Similitudes*, and it builds upon the Beatitudes by clarifying and focusing their practical implications. So, for instance, the Similitudes help to clarify the way in which the Christian's meekness and merciful disposition express themselves. But they especially draw upon the matters of peacemaking and persecution: Both of these beatific issues directly imply interaction between the sons of the kingdom and the sons of this world, and the Similitudes provide insight into that interaction. *In a word, the Similitudes highlight the Christian's role as witness.*

- For its part, peacemaking summarizes the nature, manner, and goal of that witness. Thus it places the spotlight on the sons of the kingdom, showing how they interact with the world. Peacemaking is the outward effusion of the kingdom in the present age; it is the ministration of the kingdom's presence and gospel to those who reside outside of it.
- In contrast, persecution reverses the order of interaction; it flows from the world back to the kingdom's sons; persecution is the normative response of the kingdom of estrangement to the witness of the kingdom of heaven.

Left without further comment, Jesus' closing beatitude could have given His hearers the wrong impression. They might well have concluded that rejection and opposition are all that the sons of the kingdom can expect in this world. Certainly that appeared to be the case with the prophets and faithful men of past generations (5:12). And if so, wasn't the best course of action to maintain a low profile? Isn't avoidance the most reasonable answer to the problem of persecution?

But beyond purely pragmatic concerns, history itself could have seemed to Jesus' Jewish audience to justify withdrawal and isolation: God Himself had insisted that Israel should exist as a distinct and non-commingled kingdom, radically separated from the world; *didn't it make sense that the messianic kingdom should follow the same paradigm?*

In this way, too, Jesus' kingdom profoundly differed from what Israel had known and expected. The kingdom He was ushering in wasn't to be isolated from the world, for it is the kingdom promised from the beginning – the kingdom that would embrace the whole creation. It is the kingdom of global blessing pledged to Abraham; the kingdom of comprehensive renewal proclaimed by the prophets. Not withdrawal and concealment, but open, engaged testimony is to mark the sons of the kingdom in this world, and Jesus employed two metaphors to make that point and show how their witness is carried out.

- a. Though obviously very different, the metaphors of *salt* and *light* share some common features that powerfully express how the kingdom's witness occurs. First and foremost, both salt and light have a foundational and crucial role in the matter of life itself. In his *Natural History*, the Roman scientist and historian Pliny observed: "*Nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine.*" Indeed, the absence of either makes life impossible and brings it to an end.

Salt and light have their most significant point of commonality in their *necessity* for the very existence of life, but they also share key areas of *functional* commonality that are important to their metaphorical use in this context.

- 1) First of all, both salt and light manifest themselves and accomplish their essential purpose only by interacting with things other than themselves. Salt *savors* and light *illuminates*, and these functions presuppose interaction.
- 2) Secondly, salt and light act upon their surroundings so as to transform them. In this way, each triumphs in its interaction with its environment. Rather than being overcome by or conformed to that with which they come in contact, salt and light, as it were, transform those things into their own image: salt, by making them salty; light by making them luminous.
- 3) Finally, both salt and light have their effect entirely by means of authentic self-existence. That is, neither “does” anything to accomplish its work; salt and light transform their surroundings merely by being what they are: Light illuminates and dispels darkness simply by shining; salt has its savoring and preserving effect by virtue of its inherent saltiness.

These three features – and especially the last one – are central to Jesus’ treatment of salt and light in relation to the sons of the kingdom. This is particularly evident in His emphasis on the crucial necessity of salt being salty and light fulfilling its illuminating role. If salt loses its saltiness, it becomes worthless. Worse than that, it is entirely destructive; no longer able to preserve and savor, it must be discarded on a walking path where nothing grows (5:13). So also light that doesn’t illuminate serves no positive purpose; quite the opposite, it leaves its surroundings in the dark – obscured, remote, and potentially even hazardous (5:14-15).

- b. Salt and light are appropriate metaphors in their own right, but Jesus also likely chose them because of their *salvation-historical* significance. For, both of them played a role in God’s developing revelation of His kingdom – first in relation to the Israelite theocracy, but also in the prophetic witness to the coming messianic kingdom of which the kingdom of Israel was the prototype. Thus Jesus’ use of the imagery of salt and light served also to connect in His listeners’ minds the kingdom addressed in His discourse with the one promised in their Scriptures.
  - 1) Salt played an important role in the administration of the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh. The people’s grain offerings were to be seasoned with salt (Leviticus 2:13; cf. Ezra 6:1-10), and this sacrificial (relational) use of salt was expanded to embrace the notion of a *covenant of salt*. Here the emphasis was on the purifying and preserving qualities of salt which, in turn, symbolized the intimate and enduring nature of God’s covenant relationships – first with the nation of Israel as His covenant “son” (Numbers 18:19), and then with the house of David as the chosen royal seed appointed to rule over it (2 Chronicles 13:5).

Occasionally salt has a negative connotation and speaks of defilement and desolation (cf. Judges 9:45; Psalm 107:33-34; Jeremiah 17:5-6; Ezekiel 47:1-11; Zephaniah 2:9), but in terms of the nation's covenant life with God, salt had a distinctively positive sense, signifying the important concepts of seasoning, purity (cleansing), and preservation (ref. 2 Kings 2:15-22; Ezekiel 16:4). Thus Ezekiel appropriately spoke of its use in relation to the coming eschatological kingdom (Ezekiel 43:18-24).

All biblical symbolism has an ultimate christological reference point, and salt is no exception. While the New Testament nowhere directly links salt with Jesus and His work, it clearly associates Him with salt's preeminent qualities of purification and preservation. And if the covenant of salt spoke of God's intimate and enduring relationship with Israel and David, those relationships (the one being a subset of the other) find their fulfillment in the True Israel and singular Son of David.

The important place of salt within the Israelite kingdom is highlighted by the fact that Ezekiel spoke of its use in his visionary account of the final kingdom which Israel prefigured. This, too, points to a christological significance in salt, and in the Similitudes Jesus notably extended that significance beyond Himself to those who are subjects in His kingdom: By virtue of their union with Him, *they* have become the “*salt of the earth*” (5:13) – not in the sense conveyed by the English idiom, but salt taken from the earth for the sake of the earth.

*The sons of the kingdom have been taken from the world to be agents of purification and preservation in the world.* Their status as salt speaks to their witness of Christ and His gospel of cleansing, life, and reconciliation, and so also to their identity as true offspring of Abraham fulfilling the Abrahamic promise of worldwide blessing.

**This is precisely why it's absolutely essential that those who are the “salt of the earth” be salty.**

- From the moment of Eden's desolation, God has continued to declare and demonstrate that His ultimate goal for His creation is *comprehensive* renewal and restoration (cf. Isaiah 65:1-25; Colossians 1:19-20). Thus *witness* has always been the marrow of His kingdom's role in the world – so it was to be with the kingdom of Israel, and so it is with the fulfilled kingdom (cf. Matthew 28:16-20; John 15:26-27; Acts 1:1-8; 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:10).
- Jesus is the preeminent Salt of the earth, and His work of purification and preservation are to be carried out by His subjects under the leading and empowerment of His Spirit. They are salt in Him, and their witness is merely the life of their “saltiness.”

In what sense, then, could Jesus speak of salt *losing* its saltiness? Salt is a pure and stable compound; it doesn't ever lose its saltiness. Some find the explanation in the impure salt sources of Jesus' day which could become stale and alkaline. But, comparing this question with what follows (vv. 14b-15), it seems that in both cases Jesus was using hyperbole to make a point: Precisely because salt *doesn't* lose its saltiness, how can it be that those who are salt should themselves become unsalty? Such a thing is as unthinkable as lighting a lamp and putting a basket over the top of it.

Many have understood Jesus as warning of the danger of decline and potential disqualification that always threatens the sons of the kingdom. Others have concluded that He was referring to individuals who seem to be His subjects but really aren't. These "lose" their saltiness in the sense that what appeared to be true about them is ultimately debunked. But given the historical and salvation-historical context of the Sermon on the Mount, *Jesus was clearly warning His Jewish audience about the danger of their falling short of their unique covenant privilege and calling.*

At the heart of Jesus' message to His generation was a stern warning about misconstruing – and thereby missing – *Him*; though Israel enjoyed the covenantal and historical birthright of the "sons of the kingdom," their rejection of the King would find them cast out and the kingdom given to those who would bear its fruit (Matthew 21:12-44; John 8:31-59). Inheriting the kingdom begins with embracing its King (Matthew 7:21-23; cf. Luke 13:23-30), and the "fruit-bearing" required of the sons of the kingdom consists in their witness to Him and His gospel by the testimony of their lives in the world. As branches in the true vine (that is, the true *Israel*; cf. Isaiah 5:1ff with John 15:1ff), they possess *its* life and likeness. So also their fruit is the vine's fruit and not their own: Fruit-bearing is authentic existence as sons in the Son; it is bearing *Christ's* fragrance in every place; it is living as "salty" salt.

- 2) Light is perhaps the most extensively used symbol in the Scripture. It is recorded as the first of God's distinct creative works ("Let there be light") subsequent to the creation of the material universe (the "heavens and earth"). This creational preeminence emphasizes the role of light as the fundamental point of ordering in the disordered darkness of the primordial cosmos (1:3-5; cf. 1:1-2). *From the point of this foundational act of creation the Bible attributes to the opposing principles of light and darkness a crucial and progressive spiritual significance in the upward movement of redemptive history.*

Following the pattern established in the creation account, darkness symbolizes the various aspects of disorder associated with sin's entrance into the world and the alienation, misery, desolation, and destruction that follow after it. So the ultimate manifestation of darkness is hell itself.

In contrast, light symbolizes *order*. Therefore, it is used first and foremost in reference to God Himself (1 John 1:5), and by extension to everything associated with Him. Beyond that, it is expressive of the life and fullness gained by man through his communion with God (cf. Exodus 10:21-23, 14:10-20; Leviticus 24:1-4; 2 Samuel 22:29-30; Psalm 4:1-8, 18:28, 27:1, 36:5-10, 104:1-2, 112:1-4; Isaiah 2:1-5; Micah 7:1-8; etc.).

The Scripture reveals God to be the light that shines into the cursed creation that gropes along and stumbles in the darkness of its alienation, and this symbolism comes to its full expression in *Immanuel*, the royal son of David and heir of his kingdom. He is preeminently the *light of the world* (cf. Psalm 118:1-29 with Matthew 21:1-9 and John 8:12, 12:20-46; ref. also Isaiah 9:1-7, 59:1-60:22; Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 1:76-79), and this metaphor points directly to Jesus' identity and role as the fulfillment of Israel: He is the promised Abrahamic seed through whom the light of the knowledge of God was to come to all the families of the earth.

Jesus is the fulfillment of light as that which illumines and casts out darkness (John 8:12), but, for this very reason, it is also true of His brethren ("*You yourselves are the light of the world*"). The Son of Abraham and True Israel is also the Last Adam: The Church which possesses His life carries out His mission of global witness. If Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness (John 1:4-5), His brethren bear that light and manifest it throughout the world (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:15; Ephesians 5:1-14; Philippians 2:12-16; also 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6).

- c. Thus Jesus' charge to the sons of the kingdom was simply His affirmation of what the Scriptures had revealed and promised from the beginning:
- God had purposed to restore the light of His presence and communion with His estranged creation through His Servant *Immanuel* (cf. Isaiah 7:1-9:7, 42:1-16 and 49:1-6 with Matthew 4:12-17 and Luke 1:68-79).
  - The Servant would effect that restoration by virtue of His self-offering through the renewing power of His Spirit, and those who had been translated into His kingdom of light were then to take that light into the far reaches of the dark and disordered world (ref. again 2 Corinthians 4:1-6).

Whatever the misconceptions of the Jews regarding the kingdom of God and their share and role in it, Jesus made it clear that the true sons of the kingdom are to "let their light shine before men" – not their own light, but the light of the glory of God that is in the face of His Son. For then, and only then, their works would testify to their King and their Father rather than to themselves. That testimony alone will cause men to give glory to God (5:16) and move them to come to Him from all the nations – to stream into the New Jerusalem and the brightness of her rising (cf. Isaiah 2:1-5 and 59:15-60:4 with Hebrews 12:22-24).