

+ Matthew 5:13-17 + Be Who You Are—in Christ! + 5th Sunday after Epiphany + 9 February 2014 +

Who are you? You have a name, but yet you're more than a name. According to your birth certificate, your driver's license, your marriage license, other public documents, you are a person recognized by the state to have a birthday, hair color, eye color, skin color, height, weight, and so on. Yet you're more than a few demographic facts on the tax rolls. You came from somewhere. You are someone's son or daughter. Perhaps you are someone's husband or wife, father or mother. You've had life experiences and an education of some kind. You've been places. You have a certain personality and certain talents and abilities. All of that makes you different than anyone else. All of that shapes and molds and impacts who you are, but even all of that put together isn't you. So who are you?

Perhaps you've bought into society's advice that you shouldn't let anyone stop you from being who you want to be. While it's not bad to dream, while it's not bad to strive to achieve, while it's not bad to set goals and aim high, sometimes you and I fall into the trap of trying to be someone or something we're not. You try to live up to impossible expectations that you or your friends or your classmates or your family have set for you. You try at all costs to give the impression that you're something different when you're out there in the world than what you are in the privacy of your own home. You indulge in sin because you want to and you're "free" to be who you are. Yet that's exactly what your sinful nature wants you to do—live your life in such a way that completely throws off your priorities, focuses on yourself, and blindly chases after whatever temptation seems to fit you at a particular moment.

..But that's not who you are either, is it? Someone has changed who you are. That someone knew how bad things really were for you. That someone knew how you've tried to be something you're not or how you've simply given up fighting desire and temptation. That someone knew who you were from the moment of your conception—a sinful human being—yet made you who you are now. That someone came to put himself where you are. That someone lived the perfect life you could not. That someone sacrificed himself for all those times when you fell into the trap of selfish striving, when you forgot who you were created to be, when you ended up being something far worse, far uglier, far more hostile to God. That someone, who was raised to life, created faith in your heart through his Word and washed you clean with the saving waters of Holy Baptism. That someone changed who you are right now—salt and light.

Salt and light? If you started dozing off, maybe you did a little head jerk just now. "Salt and light? That's who I am?" Yes, in Jesus, that is who you are. Jesus says it clearly, ***"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world..."*** So what does Jesus mean here for you and me? Let's take a closer look because Jesus wants you to **BE WHO YOU ARE—IN HIM!**

"You are the salt of the earth." Now why would Jesus describe us as ***"salt"***? Isn't salt supposed to be bad for you? Well, if you have too much of it in your diet, then yes, it can be bad for you, but salt is very useful. It's very important in many different kinds of ways. In the ancient world, salt was necessary for human existence. It was considered a basic necessity of life—indispensable for food preparation and preservation, for seasoning, for medical purposes, for cleansing and purifying purposes. It was used with sacrifices. It was used to tan hides and even used to clean up newborn babies. Salt was easily obtainable, yet absolutely necessary for daily life in the ancient world. Salt has remained important throughout history. The salt brine of Salina helped put Syracuse on the map as "The Salt City". Some even claim our salt helped the North win the Civil War, because we could preserve our food better. Today salt is widely used—on our tables, on our roads, in contact solution for your eyes, and in so many other ways.

So Jesus describes you as ***"the salt of the earth"***. What does he mean? Jesus wants you to realize how important, how essential, how beneficial he thinks you are—not because you're so great. After all, by nature, you and I are pretty worthless in God's sight, but Jesus has made you who you are.

He uses you to share God's Law and expose the painful impurities of sin in your life and in the lives of others. Yet he also uses you to share the good news of what he's done, the Gospel with other people to cleanse them of those impurities with his forgiveness. Through that Gospel you share, Jesus gives life to others. Through that Gospel you share, he preserves people for eternal life that will last long after their physical bodies have turned to dust.

He uses you to season this world by injecting purpose and meaning into an otherwise meaningless existence. Even if your job is monotonous, Jesus uses you to season your work with faithful service to your employer and with love shown to others by providing them something they need. Jesus enables you to season your conversations with kind, meaningful, clean thoughts that may even give you an opportunity to talk about him.

Now Jesus does have a warning for his “salty” followers. **“But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”** Jesus isn’t trying to make some scientific statement here about salt losing its saltiness, but his point is this. If it could happen, salt would be worthless.

That applies to us. If God has made you and me to be **“the salt of the earth”**, then he’s given us a worth that can’t be overestimated. So then, how will you be who you are in Christ? Will you spurn that worth? Will you take it for granted? Do you want to risk becoming worthless once again, worthy only of rejection and being **“trampled”** by God’s condemnation?

If not, then by faith in Christ, let’s be who we are. Let’s treasure the gift our gracious God has given us that makes us **“the salt of the earth”**—that is, the Word of God. Let’s read it. Let’s study it. Let’s talk about. Let’s spend time in that Word growing in our “saltiness” and learning how to salt this earth. Then with God’s help, let’s be who we are in Christ—**“the salt of the earth”** AND **“the light of the world”**.

You’re not just “salt”, but you’re also “light”. **“You are the light of the world.”** Now you might be wondering, “Didn’t we just read a verse earlier that said, ‘Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world’ (John 8:12)? So what’s going on here? Which one is it?” The answer to that last question is “Yes.” Jesus is **“the light of the world”** and **“you are the light of the world”**. Think of it this way. Jesus is like the sun that produces its own burning light, while you are like the moon giving off that bright light, but only as a reflection. Jesus is like a burning fire, while you are like metal that is heated with fire and gives off the light of the fire. Jesus produces the light of life, and you reflect it.

So if **“you’re the light of the world”**, what does Jesus mean for you? He goes on. **“A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** Jesus wants you to be his light. He wants you to live in such a way that you reflect what God has made you to be in Christ. You let the light of your saving faith in Christ shine out brightly through a life of faithful service to your Lord in every aspect of your life.

Jesus doesn’t want you to take that saving faith and cover it up. He doesn’t want you to lurk in the shadows where no one will see who you really are. He wants you to be like a city on a hill shining for the whole region to see. He wants you to live your Christian life in a very public, very evident way. Now he’s not encouraging you to be some kind of in-your-face, shove-my-Christianity-down-your-throat kind of Christian, but one who will **“let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** That’s why Jesus wants you to be who you are in him—light for those living and lost in the darkness of sin’s guilt and unbelief.

Sadly there are times when you’ve tried to lurk in the shadows, when you’ve tried to cover up your Christian faith in the midst of peer pressure, when you’ve tried to draw attention to yourself for your own “light”, but all that has done is promote sin’s darkness. Perhaps you’ve even been at the point of having that light of life inside you nearly snuffed out. Sometimes you only reflect the Savior’s light weakly, but then you read the verse right after our text and it becomes a lot easier to let your light shine before other people.

The Light of the world says to his reflecting lights, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** How is it possible that you can be who you are in Christ? How is it possible that you can be both **“the salt of the earth”** and **“the light of the world”**? The answer can be found in Jesus.

Jesus did everything God’s holy Law demanded—perfectly and willingly. He accomplished everything the Old Testament prophets promised down to the minutest detail. Jesus did all that perfectly and willingly for you. He didn’t just **“fulfill”** all that, but he also died for you and every time you’ve made yourself worthless in God’s sight or hidden his light from others.

Amazingly, Jesus still makes you salt and light. He makes you absolutely essential to the lives of those around you. He makes you a city shining brightly on a hill for all to see, and he tells you not that you “should be” who you could be in him, but to be who you already “are” in him. In Jesus, **“you are the salt of the earth”** and **“you are the light of the world”**. So go out and be salty salt. Go out and be a shining light. Go out and be who you are in Christ! Amen.