

“Living Beatitudes”

Introduction: Dr. Craig Keener is a well-known biblical scholar and professor of NT at Asbury Theological Seminary (KY). He earned his Ph.D. in New Testament Studies and Christian Origins from Duke University. He has written for numerous academic journals and has authored seventeen books, several of which have been award winning. He and his wife, who was a refugee in her home nation of Congo for 18 months, also devote time to working for ethnic reconciliation in the U.S. and Africa. By any standard, Keener is a sincere Christ-follower. But it wasn't always that way and Christians, sadly, did not help! He writes:

Until my conversion in 1975 I professed to be an atheist in part because I looked at the roughly 85 percent of my fellow U.S. citizens who claimed to be Christians and could not see that their faith genuinely affected their lives. I reasoned that if even Christians did not believe in Jesus' teachings, why should I? My excuse for unbelief – and the excuse for many other secularists I knew – continued until God's Spirit confronted me with the reality that the truth of Christ does not rise or fall on the claims of his professed followers, but on Jesus himself. [Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, p. 108]

It's a good thing that the truth of Christ doesn't ultimately rest upon us! Yet, Jesus expects that our faith will affect our life to the extent that our lives as Christians will draw others nearer to God, rather than being an excuse for people to stay away from him. To emphasize this point, Jesus uses the images of salt and light in his Sermon on the Mount (SM) so that his listeners – the church – would know from the get go that the kingdom life that Jesus has made available through his invitations “repent” and “follow me,” the life that he introduces in the Beatitudes and will go on to flesh out in the body of the SM, is not only for the abundance of our own life but is to be lived for the sake of others and the glory of God.

Remember from last week our definition of a disciple. It is a term Jesus uses to describe anyone who would follow him, anyone who is being spiritually formed to take on his heart.

A disciple is one who has responded to Jesus in repentance and faith and who has intentionally entered into a life-long apprentice relationship with him, for the abundance of life, for the sake of others, and for the glory of God.

So how do the images of salt and light help us to understand the life Jesus offers and calls us to live? Even more, if the Beatitudes, as we heard last week, reveal the character of the kingdom of God, how do we come to reflect that character, to become “living beatitudes?” We'll consider first that salt and light call us to be a people who are both authentic and available. Then we'll consider the need for our righteousness to surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law to have a righteousness that begins from the inside level of the heart, if we are to reveal the presence, in word and deed, of the kingdom of heaven.

I. Salt and Light – Authentic and Available People

A. As a boy, Jesus must have often watched his mother use salt in the kitchen and light the lamps throughout their home as the sun began to set. Salt and light, items that we likely take for granted unless we're experiencing a power outage, were two essential household items in a first century home.

1. Salt had three main functions. It acted as a preservative, in the days before refrigeration, and was rubbed into meats and fish to slow decay. It acted as a seasoning to enhance the flavor of foods. Finally, it was used in small quantities as a fertilizer in certain types of soil. Taken together, we can see that salt was a vital necessity for everyday life. Without it, food would go bad, taste bland, and might not even grow. The applicability to our lives is not that hard to see. With this metaphor Jesus is indicating to his followers that they are necessary for the well-being of the world. Even more to the point, as the kingdom of God has touched their lives, so are they in turn to touch others, seeking in society to prevent decay, add flavor, and enable the right kind of growth.

Part of the challenge is that we can lose our “saltiness.” Now, a good chemist will tell you that sodium chloride is a very stable compound, one that rarely breaks down. So how can we lose our saltiness? Well, in Jesus’ home, when salt became contaminated, if it became mixed with enough dirt and sand and other substances, it would lose its ability to preserve, season, and fertilize. When that happened, a homemaker would usually gather up the contaminated stuff and toss it out the kitchen door onto the foot path leading up to the house. There it would be, to use Jesus’ words, “trampled underfoot.” It was good for hardening the path, but not much else.

Thus, we lose our saltiness when the ways of the world permeate our lives of faith to such an extent that there is nothing much that distinguishes us from non-Christians and, as Dr. Keener put it, it becomes hard to see that our faith affects our life. So we need to always seek to be authentic as Christ followers, to seek to have our hearts formed into the heart of Christ, to learn and understand and put into practice the kind of life that Jesus will picture for us as the SM continues.

2. If salt points to our need to be authentic, light points to our need to be available. If Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever believes in me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12), then what Jesus seems to be emphasizing early on in the sermon is that we need to be careful that we don’t hide the light that we are taking on by withdrawing from the world in what some would call our “holy huddles.” Yes, we need to meet together regularly for worship and training and encouragement so that we can remain authentic. But if we do not go back out into the world and seek to identify ways in which, in our roles as parents or teachers or stock brokers or flight attendants or retirees can touch the world, then it’s like we’re lighting a lamp and putting it under a bowl, which is both a ridiculous and unhelpful thing to do!

The metaphor of light calls us to be available, as well as authentic, in and to the world. If we’re just seeking to be authentic, only hanging out with Christian friends, only reading Christian books, only doing things that take place at church, then we will probably fail to touch the world with much of a Christian influence. On the other hand, if we’re just seeking to be available, supporting various causes and engaging in various community-building activities, without intentionally offering the name of Jesus as the reason for our involvement, then the people with whom we come into contact will never likely come into contact with the savior who has touched our lives and is motivating us to serve.

In the SM, Jesus will unfold what this salt and light life looks like. The question is, how does this happen in our life? Jesus goes there next, pointing to our need for an inside-out righteousness.

II. Inside-Out Righteousness

A. We’ll do more talking about this as we go along, but it begins with recognizing that a salt and light life develops from the level of the heart. Jesus draws this conclusion for his listeners as he responds to those were thinking that all that he had been saying had nothing to do with anything that had come before him, with all that God had revealed to them through what we now

call the Old Testament, which Jesus sums up with the phrase, the Law and the Prophets. So Jesus warned, “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.” It’s worth hearing this in light of a conversation Jesus had with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus after his crucifixion and resurrection. As these men were having trouble understanding all that had gone on, and certainly were having trouble recognizing Jesus, Jesus took them through the OT and, beginning with Moses (“Law”) and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Lk. 24:27). And so what we see in Jesus is that he did not just appear out of nowhere to begin something brand new, but that he completes the story of God’s actions in history that OT began to record. We see that he fulfills, on many levels, the prophecies found in the OT. And also that he reveals the full depth and meaning of the OT law, with which much of the Sermon is concerned.

B. What had become an issue was how this law was being used, in particular by the groups within Judaism known as the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus was not against the law, just the way it was being used, and expanded. The belief of the Pharisees and teachers of the law was that if they just kept God’s law well enough, then God would be faithful to his promises and bring his kingdom, take all the pagan oppressors away, and restore Israel to what was thought to be her rightful position in the world. To help them keep the law, to make it more precise, more specific, more relevant to every conceivable situation, they added several hundred additional laws, sometimes known as the “oral tradition.” So, if the law said not to work on the Sabbath, then the oral tradition tried to identify what constituted work and legislate against those activities.

But here’s the thing. You can’t really keep the law by trying hard to keep the law. Instead, one must become a different kind of person. One must become the kind of person that wants to keep the Sabbath because it’s a way to love and honor God. In that way, one’s righteousness, one’s goodness, is to exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. If there’s no change from the inside, at the heart level, one will never “enter,” will never be able to experience the kingdom of God that Jesus has brought near. That’s the level at which Jesus will be preaching in the SM, at the level of the heart. As he begins: “You have heard it said, ‘Thou shalt not murder,’ but I say to you that anyone who is angry . . .”

C. In his teaching, Jesus he uses two primary illustrations to focus on this inside-out righteousness. Using that of a dishwasher (the person kind!), Jesus simply observes that it’s easy to clean the outside of a cup without washing the inside, but it hard to wash the inside thoroughly and leave the outside dirty. If you wash the inside, the outside gets clean along with it (Ma. 23:25-26). Using a farmer, Jesus simply observes that a good tree produces good fruit and a bad tree bad fruit. Then he says, “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Lk. 6:43-45). Actions, in other words, do not emerge from nothing but faithfully reveal what’s in the heart. “I am the vine you are the branches,” says Jesus, “abide in me and you will bear much fruit” (Jn. 15:1-8). Against this background, the prayer Paul prays for the church in Philippi is worth hearing. He prays that their lives might be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11). The fruit or righteousness comes as we live in relationship to Jesus and open ourselves to the power of the Spirit.

D. The “triangle of transformation” that we have pointed to in the past (James Bryan Smith) is helpful here. The inner life of our soul becomes transformed, through the power of the Spirit, as we learn the narrative of the Kingdom of God, enter Christian community, and engage in the spiritual disciplines that are appropriate to our walk of faith. As inner change happens, our outer behavior follows suit and we become the kind of people the SM pictures, people whose lives are genuinely affected by our faith, and whose lives are lived, not only for our own abundance but for the sake of others and the glory of God.