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Matthew 5:14 - 5:16



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg continues his study of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, focusing on verses 14-16. He explains that as Christians, we are the light of the world and are called to be salt to preserve and impact the spiritual and moral conditions of the earth. Gregg emphasizes that being a light is not just about sharing information, but living a life that challenges the assumptions of the world and reflects the teachings of Jesus. He laments the lack of success in the church's efforts to live as an alternative society and urges believers to strive to be a community that the world will take notice of.

Transcript

Let's continue now with our study of the Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. We have only come at this point to Matthew chapter 5, and we last time read and began to talk about verses 13-16. Here Jesus gives two metaphors for the church. One is salt and the other is light.

Last time we had the chance to talk only about the salt. We will now talk about the light. Let's read the whole passage again because the two portions are two parts of one teaching.

In Matthew 5, 13, Jesus said, You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Last time I mentioned that salt was used in the time of Christ for retarding the decay of meat. That is, they packed meat in salt in order that it would not putrefy so quickly.

And Jesus said that the disciples were the salt of the earth and therefore that they should see their function as having a preserving effect on the spiritual and moral conditions of the earth. But he did say that salt can lose its saltiness, and if it does, it will not fulfill its

function and it will simply be despised and rejected and trodden underfoot by men. I mentioned last time that I believe to a large extent the modern church has lost its saltiness, even though there are enormously popular churches where many thousands of people attend.

In many cases these people are not challenged at these churches to take seriously the conditions of discipleship that Jesus gave. And therefore, because they are not challenged, many times they do not change. It's a very sad thing for me to report.

I do not gloat and I take no pleasure in reporting. But there are many churches that have thousands of members where over the years people can be in that church and never be confronted about their pet sins, their materialism, their lusts, their pride, and so forth. They are not confronted with the issues of their self-esteem.

Instead, their self-esteem is coddled and encouraged rather than them being told to be poor in spirit or meek. They are not told to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Instead, their hunger for sports and entertainment is often affirmed.

And their hunger for prestige and popularity, they are often not prepared for persecution as Jesus prepared his disciples. The salt is absent and because of it the world has not been preserved from moral decay as Jesus intended that the church should preserve it. Now, the next metaphor that Jesus used is light.

He said, you are the light of the world. Now, the reference to the church being salt to the earth suggests that the earth is like a piece of rotting flesh and it needs a preservative and the church is to be that preservative. In saying that the church is the light of the world, it suggests that the world is in darkness and needs a light.

And that is certainly the case if by darkness we mean spiritual blindness. And that is really the case, you see. The spiritual realm, the realm of the knowledge of God, the realm of salvation, the realm of right and wrong even, even the nature of the spiritual realm, these things are not things that we know instinctively.

These things we know by revelation. The world, which does not know or follow God's revelation, is in the dark. As Jesus said on one occasion in John chapter 8, he said, I am the light of the world.

He that follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life. And yet, John says in 1 John that there are people who walk in darkness and do not know where they're going because the darkness has blinded their eyes. Certainly as we look at the world around us, there seems to be great blindness, a great lack of light because people are doing what's right in their own eyes.

Many of these people would do so even if the light shined to them. But to a large extent, people do what's right in their own eyes because they have not seen the light. The light

has not been given to them.

What is the light? Well, Jesus is the light. His teachings bring light. His example, Jesus is that true light that came into the world that enlightens every man, according to John 1.9. That is, he enlightens every man that is exposed to him.

But the church is supposed to be the light bearer. You know, in the book of Revelation, in chapter 1 and verse 20, John sees seven lampstands. And he is told that these seven lampstands represent seven churches.

What he is saying, of course, is that the church is supposed to be like a lamp. It's supposed to give light. Jesus says the same thing here.

He says people don't light a lamp and then put it under a basket but on a lampstand. And it gives light to all who are in the house. This, he says, after he has said we're the light of the world.

That means the house is the world and we're the light, the lamp. God has given us light. We are giving light to those about us.

Unless, of course, our lamp is under a bushel. Jesus made it very clear. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid and a lamp that's not under a bushel can be seen by everyone in the house.

However, sometimes our lamp is not on a hill. Sometimes our lamp is under a bushel where it is concealed. In other words, there are times when we know the truth but we are not illuminating the world around us with this truth.

Now, let's talk for a moment about this metaphor of a city set on a hill because Jesus used that right after he said you're the light of the world. And he said, essentially, the church is like a city set on a hill. Now, especially at night, a city can be seen, if it's on a hill, from some distance because in the dark the lights of the city are visible from some distance off.

If a person is a traveler at night through the desert or through the plains and he sees in the distance the lights of a far-off city, he knows the direction to go to get there. The lights are visible. And the church is supposed to be like a city on a hill.

It might seem strange to think of the church compared to a city, but the people of God have often been compared with the city. In the book of Hebrews, the church, which the writer speaks of in chapter 12 as the general assembly and church of the firstborn, is also referred to as the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God, the spiritual Mount Zion. This mountain or city imagery is not uncommon in both the Old Testament and the New in referring to the church.

The church is like a city. It's a community. It is a group of people living as a community, and by that I don't mean necessarily a commune.

I just mean as a society, like a city, like those who are citizens of a city. We are citizens of the kingdom of God, and that kingdom of God is planted here on the planet to give light to the world. We are an alternative society, and as such, we should provide an alternative to the world so that it might have light instead of its normal darkness.

Now, think about this for a moment. The world around us is clearly in the dark. You can see how little unbelievers around you know of true right and wrong or know of God.

People form opinions about God. They form opinions about right and wrong, but if they're in the dark, their opinions are of no value. Their opinions are simply their best shot at guessing, but you, if you are a Christian, if you have been taught by Jesus Christ, if you know his word and what he has revealed, you have light.

You have information that goes beyond your best guess. You have what God himself sent Jesus down to reveal, and he sent it down not just to reveal it to you, but to reveal it to others through you. Thus, you are a light to them, and you're to give light to all who are in the house.

You're not supposed to stifle that light by putting it under a bushel. Now, what is this light? Exactly what is the light? You know, we think of light maybe as information, and to a certain extent, it is. When we speak of being enlightened, we mean that someone knows something, and we usually think of that in terms of some kind of being informed of something.

However, look how Jesus described the light that we are to shine there in verse 16. Matthew 5, 16, he said, Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Now, notice, what are they seeing? They see light.

Well, what is the light? The light is good works. You are the light, and people should see your good works and be enlightened by them. What this means, of course, is that the church is not to enlighten the world simply by telling the world what God says and telling the world what God requires, but by showing the world what God has said and showing the world what God requires by our own behavior, by our own good works.

This may call to mind, for some of you, what Paul said in Romans chapter 12. In the beginning of that chapter, Romans 12, 1 and 2, he says, I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service, and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Notice, don't be conformed to this world.

The world is dark. You're light. If you begin to conform your lifestyle and your behavior to that of the world, you simply dim your own light.

You put a bushel over it, and the world will not see it. But rather, don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That is to say, you need to be transformed by embracing with your mind and with your actions what Jesus taught, and by doing so, Paul says, you will prove, that is to those who look on, what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

The world needs to know what the will of God is, and they need to know it not just from Christians preaching it. They need to know it by Christians living it, that you are the light of the world, and let your light shine before men so men will see your good works. That is the light.

Now, let me just get specific here. I believe that most Christians who are evangelicals know that they should stop doing some of the sinful things that the world does. Before you were a Christian, maybe some of you would blaspheme.

Maybe you told dirty jokes. Maybe you actually were involved in sexual immorality. Maybe you were a drunkard.

Perhaps you used consciousness-altering drugs. These are very common sins in our culture, and I'm sure that many of our listeners did some of those things, if not all of them, before you were saved. Now, when you become a Christian, hopefully, you are aware that these things are to be done away with.

Most gospel preaching, I hope, informs the sinner that they have to give up their drunkenness and their drug addiction, and they have to give up their blasphemy, and they have to give up their immorality. Shockingly, I have found churches that don't even tell people that much. But if they do tell them that much, that's not enough.

Jesus didn't simply say, clean up your act. Jesus didn't just say, stop being a drunkard and a fornicator. That's just the beginning.

That actually is something that should happen the day that you are converted. You repent of those known sins, and you begin to live a life that does not follow these corrupt ways. But there's more to it than just that.

Many Christians have gone that far. They've stopped using pornography. They've stopped sleeping around.

They've stopped getting drunk on weekends. They've eliminated profanity from their language. And they figure, now, I'm a good Christian.

And, you know, that's between them and God whether they're a good Christian or not.

I'm not going to tell you whether you are or not. But let me say that giving up these grosser, obvious sins is not all that's involved in letting your light shine before men.

Jesus said, men should see your good works and glorify your Father. You know, if we began to follow everything that Jesus said, our works would be changed in many more ways than just those few ways I've just mentioned. We would not only stop stealing, we would start giving.

We would not only stop sleeping around, we would stop endorsing entertainment that encourages sleeping around, for example. We would stop entertaining ourselves with actors and actresses and musicians whose very lives affirm the lifestyles that we've rejected. There are many ways in which Christians need to go further in being different from the world.

You see, if the world sees that you don't commit adultery but that you enjoy going to movies where adultery is featured, then they'll just know that you're a wimp, really. I mean, they're not going to be impressed by your Christianity because they'll know that you are entertained and drawn to adultery as much as they are. You just don't have the guts to do it anymore.

Or worse yet, maybe you do. The hypocrisy of Christians is certainly the opposite of shining the light. Christians have, to a large degree, been conformed to this world which Paul said not to do.

Therefore, the world is left without a proof, a light, as to what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. I'd like to suggest to you, and I don't do this very often on this broadcast, that I'd like to recommend some tapes to you. I'm not here to sell tapes.

Any tapes that I ever suggest to you are available on a donation basis. We're not selling tapes here. But if you wanted to write to the address given at the end of this broadcast, I'd like to highly recommend that you pick up a series of tapes.

I taught a few years ago called *Toward a Radically Christian Counterculture*. There's 24 of these tapes in this set. It's available both on cassette and videotape.

Toward a Radically Christian Counterculture examines the things of our culture that the church copies and presents a radically biblical alternative to them. It intrudes into many areas of life. You might say, Preacher, you've left preaching and gone to meddling when you hear this stuff.

And you bet I have. We're meddling. God is meddling.

His Word is meddling. And He calls us to a radical holiness that goes much more than we have guessed beyond simply giving up overt immorality and blasphemy. It has to do

with the way we order our financial lives.

It has to do with the way we raise our children. It has to do with the way we relate with our spouse. It has to do with the way we relate to our employer.

It has to do with the way we respond to people who are hostile to us. It has to do with the way that we find a mate. There are many, many areas of ordinary life that the modern church, to a large extent, never looks at in the sense of challenging the world's assumptions about it.

But the Bible does. The Bible challenges the world's assumptions on many areas that you'll almost never hear preached about in church. I'm not sure why.

That is, I'm not sure why the church doesn't preach it. But I have a feeling it's because most churches, the leadership must assume a high degree of carnality in their audience, and they figure they probably would offend people. Or, in many cases, the pastors themselves have never studied the Scriptures on these issues and don't know the answers.

Anyway, I say this. The only reason I recommend these tapes is because on this short broadcast, I simply don't have the time to go over these subjects in detail. But what I'm suggesting is that if Christians would begin to obey Jesus in every area of life, then what would emerge among them as an alternative society, as a city on a hill, is a different lifestyle that amounts to nothing less than a radically biblical counterculture, and one which the world can look on and say, Wow, look at these people over here.

And when I say over here, I'm not speaking of geographically. Christians don't have to go off and live on a mountaintop somewhere. But wherever Christians are, if Christians begin, as a community, as an alternative society, to begin to live the life that Jesus taught in all areas of ordinary life, then the world would have to eventually say, Wow, here's some people who don't go to counselors to stay sane.

Their kids are not on drugs. Their daughters are not getting pregnant. Their marriages are not falling apart.

They're not getting divorces. They're not running headlong after money. They're not getting ulcers from participation in the rat race.

These people have a better life. Now, that's what I believe Jesus had in mind when he said, Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. What does the world see when it looks at the average Christian now? Let's say a Christian who's working in an office or at a store somewhere with other people who are not Christians.

What do they see? Well, hopefully, in many cases, they do see radically holy living. But

only too often, I suspect, they see a wimpy, compromised, unenlightened life from somebody who ought to be able to provide light to them who are in darkness. Instead, those who are in darkness have dictated lifestyle, and the church has too often followed it.

Remember, Francis Schaeffer said, Tell me what the world is saying and doing now, and I'll tell you what the church will be doing seven years from now. Meaning that the church simply follows the world too often. Well, that's unfortunately true.

That certainly isn't what Jesus had in mind when he said the church is to be a light to the dark world. The light illuminates the Christian lifestyle, the Christian culture. That city on a hill, that alternative society, is supposed to be demonstrating to the world what that good and perfect will of God is.

And, you know, the will of God is good for people. That's not why we do it. We're supposed to do the will of God because it pleases him and because we belong to him and he's worthy to have us live in a way that pleases him.

But you know what? One of the byproducts is it's good for us. It's good for people. It's good for the church.

It's good for society to follow the ways of God. The church has simply not done it very successfully. Remember that quote.

I think it was G.K. Chesterton said, he said, the teachings of Jesus have not been tried and found wanting. They have simply been found difficult and not tried. And to a large extent, that would have to be acknowledged as a correct assessment.

Where, for example, do we find a group of Christians who are living radically as followers of Jesus and their whole financial lives, the way they entertain themselves, the way they educate their children, the way that they conduct themselves as single people seeking a mate or the way they teach their children to do so, that everything about them is following what Jesus said and not following the world's lead. I don't think you'll find very many groups like that. From time to time, no doubt you will.

But it's unfortunately not very common. And for that reason, what do we have? A world in darkness without a piercing light. We do not have very much in our current society a world that looks at the church and is impressed to the point of glorifying our Father, which is in heaven, because they see such strikingly good works.

What they see is striking and lamentable compromise on the part of Christians to a great extent, I would say, in the majority of cases. Again, I say that without rejoicing. I say that grieving.

But I say that hopefully that it may inspire some to explore and make a change. We can't

go any further today in the Sermon on the Mount simply because we are out of time. We will continue, Lord willing, next time.

I hope you'll join us as we continue through Matthew 5 and through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and indeed through the rest of the New Testament. In the meantime, if you're interested in the tapes that I mentioned, the tape set is 24 tapes. It's called Toward a Radically Christian Counterculture.

You can write to us at the address that you're just about to hear from our announcer. Thanks for joining us. We'll talk to you again tomorrow.