

## Becoming Salt, Light, and Hope

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MATTHEW 5:13-16 (NRSV) *“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. <sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*

A recent poll showed that in American Evangelical churches, the three least preached biblical texts are Matthew 25, Luke 4, and Matthew 5 & 6, each of which describes Without intending or implying any judgment, the trend increases as one moves to the right on the religious spectrum.

It’s a part of a “Salvation Only” approach to faith. Last week I shared about the church in which I grew up; I don’t recall ever hearing a sermon or a Sunday School lesson about these texts. Everything was about personal salvation, with virtually nothing about what to do once you were saved, except don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t dance, and don’t have sex before marriage—oh, and go out and witness and get other people saved. As I was growing up, I thought the only purpose for the church was to make sure people didn’t go to hell when they died.

Now, I’m not discounting the importance of personal salvation. But nothing in Jesus’ teachings or in the Gospels or in the New Testament Epistles supports a “Salvation Only” approach to faith.

In all three synoptic gospels Jesus begins his ministry by announcing, “The kingdom has come!” In Luke and in Matthew, he clearly describes what that kingdom looks like. In each case it is a “new socio/political order.”

In Luke, in his hometown Synagogue, he began with a reading of Isaiah 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (probably the year of Jubilee, prescribed in Leviticus 25.)

Jubilee was meant to occur every fifty years. All debts were to be forgiven, all slaves released, and all property returned to the families of the original owners. There’s no biblical evidence that Israel ever observed Jubilee, and the biblical account of Jubilee is not included in the Christian Lectionary. Isn’t that interesting?

Jubilee was an expression of God’s sense of justice/righteousness, leveling the playing field for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. Jesus embraced it; it undergirded his attacks on unjust systems built upon property,

wealth, and power: "God has sent me to proclaim Jubilee."

In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, in which Jesus lays out his vision for this "Kingdom that is at hand." Jim Wallis says "It's like a charter or constitution, the clearest and simplest framework for what the new order he came to bring will look like."<sup>1</sup> Blessed are the humble, the ones whose empathy can make them mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, those whose lives are lived sacrificially for righteousness (and in the Bible, Justice and Righteousness come from the same root word; they're first cousins.)

Nowhere in either text is there mention of heaven or eternal life. Please don't misunderstand: the New Testament is clear: John's gospel proclaims, "God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten son, in order that whoever believed in him would not perish but would have eternal life." That's clear.

God so loved "the world" (and the word in the original language is "cosmos"—not just this planet, but the whole ordered and harmonious universe.) God created all humanity in the divine image and loves all humanity and is concerned about ultimate and eternal expressions of that love. That's clear.

But, unless we're selective in our biblical application, it's equally clear that God's concern with eternity is never separated from God's concern that humanity interrelate with righteousness and justice—on earth as it is in heaven. And that concern for righteous and just human interaction is expounded repeatedly by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus in his first acts of ministry.

Immediately following the Beatitudes is the passage Mark read earlier—a metaphor repeated once in Mark and three times in Luke—in which Jesus compares living into this "way" to being the "salt" and "light" the world so desperately needs,<sup>2</sup> *especially in times of crisis*. And it would be difficult to deny that today's culture of rage, characterized by moral, ethical, and political chaos and violence, is a crisis. America—and American Christianity—are houses divided.

Jim Wallis' primary thesis, and I concur, is that public policy in America, and the process of legislating, executing, and adjudicating that policy currently do not reflect an integrity of values and principles and application Christians can endorse.

The North American culture in general, and specifically that subculture that calls itself, "Christian," has become disconnected from Jesus, and does not live by his teachings and his examples. Instead, Jesus has been dressed up in red, white, and blue, an American flag thrust into one hand and a Bible into the other; and he's been pushed into molds that represent various regional socio-political values and the ethos that comprises this house divided.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis* (p. 245-246). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

But to the degree that people of faith become “salt” and “light,” there is hope, because hope is not a feeling, but a decision; not a mood, but a choice; and one based on faith.<sup>3</sup>

These qualities of life, these behaviors Jesus says are “salt” and “light:” They become signs and signals of the kingdom of God—the characteristics of the new order that is at hand. They comprise how the kingdom begins within each one of us and goes into the world—and is meant to change the world. Living this way, by doing and being these things, is how the kingdom will come<sup>4</sup>—on earth, as it is in heaven.

Salt is a preservative, and there is much to preserve and keep about life and culture and history. In proper proportions, salt works to help regulate bodily functions and metabolism and temperature—to sustain a balance within the human body. Those who inhabit the new order—the kingdom that is at hand—will work to help sustain a balanced perspective between beliefs and principles that are different, but don't have to be antagonistic.

As “light,” citizens of the new order reveal the things we should not let darkness cover up or make us accept—things that should be different. Light exposes injustice and illuminates ways of racial and economic justice. Only when light shines will the darkness go away. Light also serves as a beacon that others can see, illuminating what true love and justice look like. And remember, as Cornel West has said, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”<sup>5</sup>

When I was in high school a group of us went to a Billy Graham crusade held in a huge indoor arena. As we entered, each person was given a book of matches. At a given moment, the lights were turned out, and everyone was instructed to strike one match from their book. The arena was lit almost as bright as with the electric lights. Then, one-by-one, the matches went out, and we were in darkness.

When the lights came back on, Billy Graham began his sermon on the theme, you are the light of the world. He noted how bright the room was when everyone's light was shining. Then, noted what happens when individual lights go out. Finally, he noted that, when only one match was still burning, it could be seen from all over the arena. He said, never underestimate the effectiveness of your light.

It's true: a small candle burning outside on a bright sunny day will scarcely be seen. But on a dark, stormy night, when the electricity goes out, that same small candle beside the crib makes all the difference in the world.

In a dark world, the smallest light can be seen by all. When you live in the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 247-248.

way of Jesus, you are salt. You bring flavor and balance to life. Where you touch life, it's better. You are light. You illuminate the path Jesus calls us to walk. And where there is light, there is hope. And in that moment, in that place, the kingdom is at hand.