

West Valley Church
11/20/11

Engage The Word
Part Five: Matthew 5:1-6:4

Today we are on our fifth of seven Sundays of Engage the Word—our 40-day journey together through the Bible, reading the same passages together each day: excerpts from the first book—Genesis, to the last one—Revelation. Would you take out your “Engage the Word” books, and turn to the sermon outline page for today, day 28. If you don’t have a book, you can use the sermon notes in your worship folder, or use your iPad or smart phone and go to our website on the sermons page and download it from there. Information on accessing our wireless network is in your worship folder. If you don’t have a book, go to *Guest Services* right outside these doors. Many of you have begun talking about today’s reading in our Community Groups this morning. By the way, if you haven’t been to those, I encourage you to join us next Sunday morning at 8:45 for some great discussion.

Before we look at today’s passage from the Bible, I’d like to back up and share with you a little about the Bible and why we can believe it. Last week we began our readings out of the New Testament, so let’s talk about that. How accurate is this Bible that we have? How do we know we can count on the New Testament?

First, I think it’s important to note that the Gospel accounts were *not* written to be a detailed biography like the kind we write and read today. In the culture of the time they were written, there was no reason for anyone to tell a story unless there was a significant lesson or impact or meaning to it. There was no need for newspapers or the nightly news. Their attitude was, why tell a story if it’s just for information? A story *had* to have a reason. So they were not so much interested in writing to record the details of Jesus’ life. They were writing about the *significance* of His life and the *difference* His life makes for us. Which is why so much of the biographies (the Gospels) are about the last week of His life.

Now, do the Gospels tell the truth? Well, would the writers have lied? They had no reason to. The Gospels were written while people who were eyewitnesses to the events they wrote about were still alive. If it weren’t true, it would’ve been shot down and rejected.

The Gospels were written, according to Luke, “so that we could know the certainty of these things.” (Luke 1:4) But they were especially written, according to John 20:31, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” That’s the purpose: so you could know the certainty of what it says and believe in Jesus!

Have you ever noticed how, in the old copy machines, whenever you made a copy it wasn't as good as the original? And then when you made a copy of that copy, it got worse, and if you kept going it was pretty bad? Most copiers are digital now, so they don't do that anymore. But how do we know that a similar thing didn't happen with the biographies? How do we know that, each time a copy was written, it didn't get more off track and get worse? You'd think that each time it was hand-written, more mistakes would be made or pieces left out.

Well, when it comes to ancient writings, the more copies we have and the older those copies are, the more we can count on them being accurate. In other words, the closer to the original that we can get, and the more copies there are of it, the more we can verify its authenticity and accuracy. Make sense?

So before we see how accurate the gospels are, let's look at some other ancient manuscripts and compare. Each of these examples that I'm giving you are considered to be very accurate. You don't have to write these down—I'm just putting them on the screen to help you see what I'm talking about:

Caesar wrote his works around 75 BC. The earliest copy that there is from 900 AD—nearly a thousand years after it was written. There are ten known copies. Historians consider this to be highly accurate.

Tacitus wrote his works in AD 100—a couple of decades after the Gospels. The earliest copy we have is AD 1100—a thousand years after it was written. There are ten known copies of this. Scholars consider these to be accurate.

Josephus was a Jewish historian. He wrote his works in the first century. We have only one copy from the 4th century and two from the 10-12th centuries. Scholars consider what we have of his writings to be highly historically accurate.

Homer's *Iliad*, which is the bible of the ancient Greeks, was written in 800 BC. We have almost 650 copies. The earliest copies are from the 2nd and 3rd century AD—a thousand years later.

We consider all those to be historically accurate and true to the originals, even though there are so few copies in existence and the only copies we have are as much as 1000 years after the originals. Now, compare that to what we have of the Gospels:

They were written between 50 and 90 AD. The earliest copies are from 125 AD—only as little as 30 years after the original. And we have more than one or two, ten, or even a hundred copies to verify them. There are over 24,000 copies! Now if the others are considered historically accurate, aren't the gospels true? You had better believe it! And I mean that literally!

What I hold in my hand—the Bible that we have—is according to scholars 99.5% accurate. For ancient culture, if it was 80% accurate it was considered perfection. Even by our standards today, the biographies are only one half of one percent off.

What more do we need? The Bible considers it praiseworthy to have a faith that doesn't require evidence at all. How much stronger should our faith be with all this evidence!

Have you ever played the whisper game? We used to play it in grade school. Everyone sits in a circle, and the first person whispers a phrase in the ear of the person next to them, and they whisper it to the person next to them, and so on until it finally comes back, and it's pretty funny what happens. You could start with the phrase, "The queen sits in her yard by her roses" and end up with something like, "green beans get stuck up our noses." Well, let me tell you something: God has *not* played the whisper game with us. He moved men to write about Jesus Christ, His Son, and it has been shouted back to us literally millions of times and the message is still the same: Jesus is Christ—God Himself who came to the earth to live among us, love us, to never sin, but to die anyway even though He didn't deserve it, and to rise from the dead for us. So you don't have to experience the penalty of sin and death. That's Good News, and it's accurate!

Since we understand now how accurate this document is, let's look at our passage for this morning. Today's reading comes from a sermon that Jesus preached, and it's been called "the Sermon on the Mount," because the Bible says that Jesus went up on a mountainside, sat down, and began to preach. That's significant for a couple of reasons. First, to sit down meant that he was an authority on the topic; he didn't have to stand up to assert himself. Secondly, this is significant because it was on a Mount or Mountain. Remember that you read on November 3rd that Moses received the Old Covenant, or the Old Law—the Ten Commandments—on Mount Sinai. Now Jesus, the new Lawgiver, tells us what life in the Kingdom is like from another mountainside. We don't know for sure where, but tradition tells us it was on the sloping hillside at the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. It is a beautiful place; I was privileged to preach on that very spot to some friends when Shelly and I toured the Holy Lands many years ago.

Today we are only looking at an excerpt of Jesus' first sermon, but the entire thing is the inaugural address of King Jesus, telling us what he expects of members of his Kingdom. It contains declarations of "blessedness," which is what the word "beatitudes" means, it contains ethical admonitions, which is the section we are looking at today, and then Jesus contrasts his ethical teaching against the Old Testament Law, thus showing us what the Christian life looks like—a life that fulfills the Old Testament Law.

From the center of that sermon is the passage we are looking at today—these admonitions:

“You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”

(Matthew 5:13-16, nlt)

Jesus is telling us what we are to be like—what type of character we are to have and what a life of Christian influence is like. If you are here today and you are a believer in Jesus, this message is for you—it is a challenge and command as to the kind of character you are to have. If you are here today and you are not a Christian, you’ll probably first compare this with the Christians you know, and whether or not they are doing it. But deep down inside, this is going to resonate with you; it’s going to stir your heart to what you know you could be and what you want to be.

So let’s look at what Jesus is saying a Christian is to do, starting with

1. **Preserving Your World**

Jesus says that we are to be the salt of the earth. Salt in Jesus’ day had two primary purposes, which are still true today: to flavor things and to preserve things. I know all about the first: I admit that I am a salt addict. I love salt. The best salt is the salt you get at McDonald’s—it comes in those little packets with two sections, and you break the top and pour out all this fine-grain salt. I love it! It’s so good that I will pour it into my palm and lick it from my hand. Fortunately I do not have high blood pressure, and I know I shouldn’t like salt so much, but I love the flavor of it. I know that most food already has natural salt in it, but I personally don’t think God added enough salt to the original recipe for vegetables and fruit and meats. I always add more. I love the flavor of salt! Salt, to me, actually brings out more of the flavor of food. You put salt on certain fruit and you can really taste the fruit!

That’s one of the things that salt does, that Christians are to do in this world: God put flavor into this world he created, and Christians are to bring out that flavor. I like how Eugene Peterson translated this passage in the Message Bible: "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage." (Matthew 5:13, the message)

Christians are not supposed to be tasteless, or worse yet, a bitter taste in this world; we are supposed to bring out the flavor of God.

Salt is also a preservative. In Jesus' day, salt kept meat from going bad. Once meat has been butchered, it is dead and becoming more so. It will literally rot, left to itself. Salt slows down that process. In Jesus' day, fish caught in Capernaum was shipped on the back of a donkey across the desert heat one hundred miles to Jerusalem. Salt was used to keep decomposition at bay so that the meat could be consumed.

Here's the point: we live in a world that, left to itself, is rotting. It is decomposing. This world is going downhill—in fact, it's going that way faster now than it ever has. The role of the Christian in this world is to slow that down and keep that from happening.

Christian: you have Christ in you. You are to take him into this world, bringing the flavor of life—Christ himself—into everything you do, every place you go, and every person you meet. Your life is supposed to be such a good influence that you are literally holding off the rotting of this world. You and I both know that there are people that, when you are around them, they make your life better, and there are those that, after you've been around them, you feel worse. Or they gradually take you downhill in your attitude and action. You are supposed to be someone who makes life better, by taking Christ *in you* into this world.

You also do this by

2. **Enlightening Your World**

The same thing holds true here as in the first point: if you are a Christian, you are to take Jesus into the world. Jesus said of himself, "I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." (John 8:12, nlt) Later he said, "While I am here in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:5, nlt) Now here he says, "You are the light of the world." Jesus is saying nothing less than this: if you are a Christian, you are to be exactly like Christ in this world.

Jesus was making several points here, one of which is that light is meant to be seen. In Jesus' day, obviously there was no electricity, so at night houses were very dark. There were no windows except maybe one little circular one, maybe eighteen inches across, so very little light came into the house even in daytime. Lamps were like little sauce-bowls that would fit in the palm of your hand, with oil in them and a wick sticking out. There was not a steady supply of matches, so it would take some effort to relight it if it went out. You would put that light in a lampstand—usually just a branch or a stick of wood, and that was your source of

light in the house. The only time it wouldn't be there was if you were going out—then you would put it in under a clay pot so that the lamp would be safe and not catch anything else on fire. When you got back you would take it out again. The only purpose of it was to give light to the house. Your Christian life is something that is *meant to be seen!* Anyone should be able to look at your life, and tell right away by your attitudes and your actions—your character—that you are like Jesus. Your life is meant to be seen.

Light is also a guide—it helps us see where to go and helps us get there safely. The life of any Christian should be such a positive influence in this world that they are a guide to others.

Now, don't be mistaken: you are not *the* light; you *carry* the light. You are a reflection of the light. The moon reflects the light of the sun onto the darkened side of the earth. The life of any Christian should be visible and illuminate the world, reflecting the light and life of Jesus. John the Baptist was an example to us on sharing the light of Jesus with the world. This is what the Bible says about him: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The One who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” (John 1:5-9, nlt)

You and I are to bring the light of Jesus into the world!

All of this means that, if you are a Christian, you are to be

3. Influencing Your World

What Jesus is talking about, using the metaphors of salt and light, is the kind of influence we are supposed to have in our world. This world is supposed to be a better place because we are in it. That means that the checkout cashier or the waitress or the post office attendant should have a little more flavor, a little more light into their lives because you've just had an encounter with them. That means that your neighbors' lives are better because of you. That means where you work or the people in your classes at school are better because of you. In fact, you should look for dark places to take light into!

We all want to make a difference; we want our lives to count. Your life can make an eternal difference in this world. Your influence can last longer than this life! This is how that can happen—with Christ in your life. If you admit your sin apart from him, accept his forgiveness and death on the cross in your place, and give your life to him, you can live a life that has an enormous influence in this world. You are here to make a positive, Jesus-like difference in this world. Do you? If

you are a Christian, and you are not making a difference like this, I might wonder if you even have Jesus in your life. Because Jesus said this is what you would do. If you are not making a positive influence in this world, changing it for the better, you'd better get with it, or I and the people in your life will wonder if you are a Christian. Do you bring people up, or bring them down?

Jesus said, "No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." (Matthew 5:15-16, nlt)

Notice that he says it's your good deeds that are salt and light in this world. It's your good deeds that bring out the flavor of this world, that preserve this world, that is visible and illuminates this dark world. It's by what you do. In the Greek language there are two words that are translated "good." One is *agathos* (*agathaws*), which means that something is good in quality. The other word is *kalos* (*kalaws*). This word describes something as more than just good, it is good and winsome and beautiful and attractive. It is so good that others are drawn to it. *That's* the word that Jesus uses to describe the kind of deeds we should have.

Many people think that what Jesus meant was that we are supposed to be obnoxiously good; that we should shame others by our right behavior. That we stand against everything that is wrong so the world will know that we are right. That's not what Jesus meant. That kind of good deed is repulsive. Instead, we are to live rightly and with such salt and light—with the love of Jesus, the very essence of Jesus—that others are drawn to want that kind of life, too. As a result, others are drawn to Jesus, not to us. If we have an obnoxious Christianity, always talking about what we are against, we are only drawing attention to ourselves. If we are legalistic and condemning, we are only drawing attention to religion or to rules. But if we are salt and light, we are drawing attention to Jesus.

Our church's mission statement says that we are to "introduce people to Jesus Christ, to equip people with a faith that works, and to live as people with purpose." In short, to love, learn, and live. Our mission is about salt and light—that is how we introduce people to Jesus: by being salt and light; by living in such a way that we draw people's attention to Jesus and they want to meet him!

Is Jesus in your life in such a way that others see him in you? That you carry him in your life, so you are salt and light? You can, if you are not a Christian. And you must, if you are a Christian. You can accept him, and you must reflect him.

We are going to share together in communion this morning. Communion is, in many ways, an illustration of what we are talking about. Jesus said that in communion we are consuming his body—the bread, and his blood—the cup.

When we share communion, it is our public commitment that we are going to ingest Jesus and take him into our world when we leave this place. So as we get ready to take communion, I want you to pray, and prepare to make this kind of commitment. By sharing in communion, you are making the statement that you are receiving Jesus into your life, and that you will carry him into your world.

Prepare communion