

Be Who You Are

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[0 : 00] Well, it struck me this week that it is very right and fitting that we turn back to Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel this morning because we have just witnessed a baptism.

And if we don't see the connection, Jesus makes the connection for us at the very end of this Gospel. Jesus came to them and said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. Make disciples, baptizing them, which we have done, and teaching them, which we are now doing.

So isn't that exciting as we come back to this Gospel that we are doing here today the very thing that Matthew gave us his Gospel to do, to train baptized people in the teaching of Jesus.

[1 : 13] And if that's not you yet, if you are not as yet following Jesus, well, this morning it's as if you've got your ear pressed up against his chest.

You are listening to his very heartbeat. You're glimpsing the crown jewel of his kingdom. So if that's you, keep listening, keep looking.

But for those of us who are following Jesus this morning, we are living it. We are part of his body. We are in his kingdom.

And so we are under his wise and loving rule. That's why we're coming, whoever we are this morning, to Jesus' words in the Gospel. And he began last week with a list of blessings.

And at heart, we thought, what blessing is, what is at the heart of blessing is, who is God happy with? And Jesus says, God is happy with a very surprising kind of person.

[2 : 22] God is happy, he said, with those who come to him spiritually skint, broke, nothing in their hands and nothing in their heart to offer him.

But instead, they come to cling to his king, Jesus Christ, to be their righteousness, to fill them and forgive them, to give them a pure heart and peace with God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. God is happy with people who know that the only thing they have of lasting value and worth is Jesus.

Even if they are rejected by this world because of him, blessed are you when people insult, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you because of me, he said. And it's important we see that that's who is blessed and who is part of his kingdom.

Because we're so prone, we're wired to think that it's if we follow his commands, then we're in.

[3 : 39] When actually what Jesus has said is that it's those who know that they can't ever do enough or be good enough, but who turn and who trust in the king, who come into his kingdom.

So that what Jesus has given us so far is not a standard to reach for, but an identity to grasp. And we see that again this morning in these next few verses where Jesus again tells us if we are his followers, then this is our identity, it's who we are.

And then he goes on to tell us how we are to live as a result of that, our way of life. So I've summed up his point here, be who you are, be who you are. And to do that, firstly, we need to know then who we are.

So Jesus tells us his followers are two things. Just try and pick them out. There's one in verse 13, and the other one is in verse 14.

Do you see that? It's not a trick question. Both start with the words, you are. Who does Jesus say we are?

[4 : 54] Verse 13, you are the salt of the earth. And verse 14, you are the light of the world. That's who you are if you're a follower of Jesus.

But when you think about it, salt and light are very, very different things, aren't they? You know, I couldn't think of any task that you could use them interchangeably for, right? You can't make food taste better with light. And you can't light up a room with salt. You know, this is one of the things that makes Jesus' teaching so, so captivating. The way he puts surprising things together in ways that we would just never think of. So if what he says here is obvious to us in some way, it's only because we've heard it a thousand times before. Because there's actually nothing obvious about these statements, is there? Why put salt and light together and tell us that's who you are?

[5 : 59] Now, it helps that this is a classic example of what's called Hebrew parallelism. So that's just two statements that are put together and one develops the other.

If you read through the Psalms, you'll be familiar with this. Ninety percent of the Psalms are written like this, basically in kind of parallel couplets. And so what can we see? The earth and the world, right? Of the earth, in the world, they're basically saying the same thing. Even in the original, those ideas are interchangeable. But on the earth and in the world, we are salt and light. Right? Are we kind of getting why this is intriguing or different or odd? What's he getting at? To put those phrases into questions, what on earth are salt and light doing together? And what in the world do they both have to do with us? Now, if you've heard sermons on these verses before, every nerve in our body, right, wants to leap with both feet back into, what did people do with salt and light?

[7 : 22] Back when Jesus lived, right? What did people do with salt? So the sort of thing you'll hear is, well, salt was used to preserve meat because they didn't have fridges.

So it stopped things going off. And as a bonus, it made things taste better. Therefore, the thinking goes, Jesus must be saying that we are a preservative and as a bonus, an improveative. So here's Don Carson, wonderful pastor who I deeply respect, commenting on this. He says, implicitly, Jesus is saying that apart from his disciples, the world turns ever more rotten. Christians have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual putrefaction. Preservative. If their lives conform to the norms of the kingdom, they cannot help but be an influence for good in society. It's an improveative. He says we preserve and we improve. Now, the million-dollar question is, is that what happens in the Gospels?

[8 : 37] Does the presence of Jesus and his disciples stop society getting worse and sometimes help it get better?

For another million dollars, can you give me one example in the book of Acts where the sheer presence of Jesus' followers brought Roman society more into line with the values and ethics of God's kingdom? By revelation, is it true that the church has so influenced the world by its example that the world is becoming a fairer and more godly place to live for Christians and our neighbors? In short, where do you get the idea anywhere in the New Testament that Christians preserve good in society and change the world for the better? Here's another commentator.

[10 : 02] It's a coincidence that the people who go to work with integrity and neighbors who go to work with integrity and neighbors who open their homes and show hospitality. That is a great thing, and the more the better.

It was a coincidence that so many of the doctors that are left in the ARI are Christians. You can hardly walk down the corridor of the ARI without bumping into a Christian. But is Jesus teaching that by living that way and doing those things, we must somehow change the world so that if we're not stopping social decay or we're not improving society, we can't be doing enough. We can't be good enough. Well, the rest of the New Testament says that's not true. The identity of Christians is not as world changers. It's not as world preservers or world improvers. Let's just look at what Jesus says in verse 13. Notice that he doesn't say anything about what salt does. But the fact that it is salty. If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? See, he's talking about what it is, not what it does.

[11 : 26] Salt is salty. Salt is salty in a way that nothing else is salty. Because nothing else is salt. So if salt stops being salty, there's nothing that can top up its saltiness or make it salty again

because nothing else is salt.

Light is the same, right? What gives light that isn't light? Darkness is not the absence of batteries or mirrors or light bulbs.

Darkness is the absence of light itself. Your salt and light are completely different. Neither of them can do what the other does.

But isn't that the point? Nothing can do what salt does that isn't salt. And nothing can do what light does that isn't light. That's what they have in common. But they have nothing in common.

So here we go. What's Jesus getting at? I think what Jesus is saying is no more and no less than this. That in his world, his followers are totally, uniquely different.

[12 : 42] That his followers have nothing in common with anything else in the whole world. That we are specially set apart and distinct in who we are.

In the same way that nothing is like salt that isn't salt. And nothing is like light that isn't light. You simply cannot be like a follower of Jesus. Unless you are a follower of Jesus.

If you are not yet following Jesus, your trust isn't yet in him, you need to hear that. You can't fake it till you make it. You can't imitate being a follower of Jesus.

You need to begin with following him. And become this sort of person. Brothers and sisters, you follow Jesus. There is no one like you in the world.

There is nothing like the church. And that's not because of what we do in the world. The influence we have or the impact we have.

[13 : 45] It's because of who we are in the world. Who you are is who you became when you came to Jesus. And there is nothing like being a person who is forgiven by him.

And loved by him and ruled by him. So if the only point of this point is to relieve you of the sense or the need that you have to change the world.

That's great. Because listen, Jesus isn't giving you a command. He's giving you an identity. And it's a unique identity.

But no one can give apart from him. And no one can have apart from his followers. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

That's who you are. So then, how do you be who you are? This is our second point. Because our identity does need to be lived out in the world.

[14 : 51] But if we listen to the conclusion that Jesus himself wants us to draw, I think we'll see it's quite different from what we often think. You have seen that Jesus doesn't say anything about what salt does.

But there's a big clue, isn't there, about what he wants us to do. Because he does talk about what light does. In verses 14 and 15, He describes two sources of light.

A sprawling city and a coffee table lamp. One public, one private. But both are visible to everyone. And again, the genius of Jesus' teaching, right?

You can't hide a town built on a hill, he says. What a picture. Who's ever thought of doing that?

What would you use? A big, massive cloth?

Or would you plant trees around the hill to kind of obscure it from being seen? It's a non-starter, isn't it? How would you hide a city on a hill? It can't be done. Even at night when the lights come on in the windows.

[16 : 03] Or how crazy is this? That you would light the lights in your house. Or put the lamp on. And then go around with blankets.

Kind of tying them around to stop the light getting through. You know, who would do that? Lights give light, right? You're the light of the world.

There's your identity. So here's the implication. Be the light of the world. Go and give light. Let your light shine before others. Again, I think that challenges the idea that if we just go about our daily life as Christians, we'll make this difference.

Right? If that was true, why would Jesus need to teach us to be who we are? Why follow the identity with a command? We do need to decide to live out this identity as light by letting our light shine.

Now, you can't stop being light. Notice that Jesus doesn't say you can turn the lights off. But simply that if you are a light, you can cover it over. In a way that contradicts our identity.

[17 : 17] We can kind of live against ourselves. But that would be as crazy as tying plastic bags over your light bulbs or trying to hide Sterling Castle. The obvious thing to do, isn't it?

Obvious thing to do is put your lamp on a stand. Let it give light to the whole house. Let it be seen. But that is a decision we need to make about how to put our Christ-given identity to use in the world.

Let your light shine, he says. So how do we? What's Jesus getting at? Well, the big clue is in what comes before these verses and what comes after these verses.

Jesus says in verse 16, Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds. Now, what good deeds?

Good deeds that flow out of your identity as followers of Christ. And what is that identity characterized by? Well, everything that we saw in verses 3 to 12.

[18 : 29] Confessing our spiritual poverty. Grieving our sin. Humbling ourselves before others. Hungering for righteousness in our own lives.

Showing mercy to others. Being inwardly pure. Holding out peace with God and peace with one another. Being persecuted for Christ and his righteousness.

Friends, it's not rocket science. You don't need to go out and set up a charity. Or start a food bank. Or tour the slums.

They might be all really good and wonderful things to do that result in so much good. But don't think that Jesus is saying more than he's saying. When we are followers of Christ, you reflect his character in our lives before others, publicly and privately.

And let others see our deep need of him. And the change that is made in our lives. Then we are letting our light shine. It's not as complicated as we sometimes think.

[19 : 35] Here's Don Carson again. Listen. Listen. In better days and in other lands, the faithful and divinely empowered proclamation of the gospel so transformed men that they in turn became the light of the world.

Prison reform. Medical care. Trade unions. Control of a perverted and perverting liquor trade.

Abolition of slavery. Abolition of child labor.

Establishment of orphanages. Reform of the penal code. Again, they might be great and wonderful things to do. If you're a doctor, it's great and you should give the best medical care that you can to the patients who come to you.

If you're a lawmaker, it's right to push through good and best laws. But listen. Jesus does not give every Christian the responsibility for doing that.

Nowhere does he lay the weight of the world on our shoulders and say, go and fix it. We might have opportunity to help and to change things.

[20 : 49] But for most of us, what that list says is, unless you're taking on the courts or turning politics on its head or reforming the NHS, you're not shining your light.

And either we go home crushed by that or we just shrug and say, well, I'll never be able to do it then. But brothers and sisters, Jesus does not give us that list of things to do.

Jesus does not give us that list of things to do. What he insists that we do is both much easier and much more challenging than we think.

Next Sunday, Jesus is going to give us a whirlwind tour of God's law. And he's going to say the comfortable standard that you've set for yourselves.

And the boxes that you've decided you can take are too small. You've heard it said, but I say to you. You've heard it said, but I say to you.

[21 : 55] The good works Jesus gives us to do are both simpler than world transformation and more challenging than world transformation. Right?

Because they're not just dealing with one part of life or a pet project, but our whole life. Not only what we do, but who we are as people.

How we relate to him and to each other. How we live in the world. We can fill in that phrase, good works, with anything that is good. But the best way to work out what Jesus means by good works is to look at what he says in the rest of the sermon.

And what he teaches in the rest of the gospel. And hear Jesus when he says that those good works are possible for everyone who follows him.

Not the super Christians. Not just the people that people write books about in church history. But every Christian.

[22 : 59] Every follower of him is the light of the world. And every follower of him can let their light shine before others through their changed lives and good works.

As we follow Christ and depend on him. Every Christian, you, if you follow him, are the light of the world. And this week, you can let your light shine before others.

And every Christian, you, today, can also contradict their identity and cover up their light and lose their saltiness. That is, we can all become less distinctive and less different in the world by the way we live.

Now, we might do that by not living as Jesus teaches us to live. You don't get this, actually, in the translation. But the word Jesus uses in verse 13 for loses its saltiness is actually the same word translated foolish in chapter 7, verse 26.

For the foolish man who hears Jesus' words but doesn't put them into practice. And we can all relate to that at some level, can't we?

[24 : 13] We can be so foolish in letting Jesus' words wash over us. Or we get them up here, but we don't do anything with them in here or anything with them out there.

That's the definition, says Jesus, of becoming less salty. Salt that's lost, what makes it different and distinctive. You, something that should be like, unlike anything else, can become just like anything else.

But there's no use for that. We don't need more of everything else. Our lives are wasted by not putting Jesus' words into practice.

We can contradict our identity. So don't waste your life. Don't muddy your witness. Don't compromise your obedience.

Don't lose your distinctiveness. But we can also contradict our identity by putting Jesus' words into practice, but not letting anyone see.

[25 : 20] You're crazy as it is. Because we can throw a blanket over the lamp, can't we? When we don't come into contact with people who are not Christians. Well, nobody outside the kingdom can see your changed life.

Or if we cover up what's most different about us, and only let people see what's acceptably different. So you perhaps at work, everyone knows that you're the one who doesn't try and get away with cutting corners.

And that's great. But if you never say, you know, I can only do that because I'm working for the Lord, and that frees me from my selfish desires to waste time or do the least possible.

Well, you know, if we don't say that, then how is anybody going to see the light on the light stand? Jesus says, Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

How will anyone know to do that? Unless you put two and two together for them, and they see that you live that way because you follow Jesus. Francis of Assisi is quoted as saying, Preach the gospel, use words as necessary.

[26 : 37] Another writer says, That's a bit like saying, Feed the hungry, use food if necessary. The gospel is words. We need them to shine our lights.

Anyone can be a good doctor, but not anyone can be a Christian doctor. Anyone can be a good neighbor, but not anyone can be a Christian neighbor.

Anyone can do nice things, but not anyone is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So be who you are.

Let your light shine before others. Understand and grasp the identity that Jesus has given you and live it out in the way that he teaches us in his word and get ready to see him unpack how to do that in the rest of his sermon.

He wants that life for us because lastly, others might glorify our Father in heaven. See, what's the great purpose of being who we are in the world?

[27 : 46] We would be much more comfortable, wouldn't we, if Jesus had finished saying what he had said six words earlier, that they may see your good deeds?

But he adds this ultimate outcome, that they might glorify your Father in heaven. So this is why Jesus teaches us to be who we are in him, not simply as an end in itself, but so that others would join us in giving glory to God the Father through Jesus, his son.

And so as we finish this morning, the question is, is Jesus' ambition for your life your ambition for your life?

Is your ambition in life to live for Jesus openly and unashamedly so that people will notice your life is different and lead them to Jesus so that they enter his kingdom and give glory to God?

In short, do you want more than anything to live to glorify and enjoy God and lead others to glorify and enjoy him too?

[29 : 01] If you do, you share Jesus' ambition for you. I said, it's both easier and harder than the ambitions that we make for ourselves.

But if we have come to him with nothing and received his kingdom freely, if he is our king and savior and we have nothing of lasting worth apart from him, then who are we to deny his authority to tell us what our lives are for?

We live now to spread his father's glory, he says, so that his name is known and celebrated by more and more people. And we get the privilege individually of being the lamps and collectively of being the city on the hill that points people to him.

He's given us a glorious new identity to be set apart in his world, his treasured possession, his kingdom of priests, his holy nation. So be who you are in him so that God would be glorified in Jesus and through our witness by more and more and more people in his world.

Let's pray for that together now. Let's pray. Our Father, we glorify you.

[30 : 32] We praise your name. Lord, we celebrate your work in your world and in our lives through Jesus, your Son, and the Holy Spirit. And Father, we long that more and more people would see our witness, see our good deeds, hear of Christ, and glorify you with us.

Lord, that is our longing. We confess, our Father, each and every day we lose sight of that longing. And each and every day, Lord, we live not as lights in your world, but how we pray, Lord, that you would help us to grasp and to live in the identity you give us in Christ.

Lord, help each of us who knows and follows you this week to let our light shine before us for others, that they might see a changed life and a new creation and come to give you glory.

Father, we pray for those among us who as yet are not following Jesus and how we pray, Lord, that by your light you would lead them to him. Lord, that you would bring your glory to bear on each and every heart.

For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.