

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE
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Matthew 5:13-16 We Were Blind, But Now They See

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Several years ago, I listened to a speaker at a church transformation seminary. He told how when he served as a regional executive minister, he would get to know each of his churches in a unique way. He would get to know the congregation from the perspective of the community in which they were located. On a Sunday morning, he would drive into town and stop at a local gas station.

He would ask either a customer at the gas pump or the attendant, how to find Second Baptist Church and then wait for the response. If it was a quick response like, "Go three blocks north to Vine St., take a left onto 58th street and it will be on the right," then he would know that the church had visibility and was known in the community. If he got a blank stare and the response, "I don't really know," Then he knew that the congregation was not well known to people in the community. If the person tried to talk him out of attending there, then he knew he had a problem. I don't know how scientific this research was, but for him it gave him a place in which to start with the congregation. See, it does make a difference what the community thinks of this church. Since my first Sunday here, I have been preaching on THE CHURCH. I'm preaching this little series so that you can see the Bible's perspective of what the church is supposed to be.

It will give you an idea also, of where I am coming from as I approach my leadership role as pastor of Second Baptist. I'm hoping that we can get on the "same page" as to how we approach ministry.

Last week, we learned basically two things: First, the church is not perfect and it has its share of warts, pimples and blemishes. Secondly, we learned that although there are imperfections, it is still the beloved bride of Christ and she is being perfected through the work of the saints (you and me), by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This morning, I'm taking it a step further. We know the church is imperfect, but today's question is, ***"HOW DO WE EFFECT THE COMMUNITY AROUND US?"***

Today's text is the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. We are salt and light. Two things about this statement: First, Jesus is giving the imperative. "You ARE the Salt of the earth...You ARE the light of the world." He is not saying, "You ought to be. You could be if you wanted. In perfect circumstances, you could be salt and light." It is understood that you are the SALT and the LIGHT. In case you might be thinking that this role might belong to someone else, that the person in the pew NEXT to you should be the salt and the light – think again. You ARE the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The second point is that just because we ARE salt and light, appointed by Christ to be an effective witness in the world around us – it doesn't mean we step up to the role and be the salt and light to those around us.

As most of you know, Grace and I went on a long motorcycle ride across North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin where we got on Route 66 and rode all the way to L.A. and then up the west coast and back to N.D. As we approached Chicago, we noticed a couple things about the city in trying to make our way down through the various ethnic neighborhoods, busy streets and changing neighborhoods. We noticed that the streets were very bumpy and in poor repair, and we noticed the signs were most often obstructed by tree branches.

We would be busy looking for a certain intersection or directional sign and we would end up driving past it or making a wrong turn because the sign was covered up by a tree. It made me think, as I rode in growing frustration, that the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois went to a lot of trouble to plan, create and post these signs. They probably even conducted studies as to where the signs should go. But in the end, all their efforts and for all intents and purposes, the sign has no value because it was obstructed. Don't you think this is the point Jesus is making. You ARE the salt, but if you lose your saltiness, you are really not salt at all. You are light, but if you hide your light so that nobody can see it, then it ceases being light at all.

My question this morning is this: ***IF WE AS THE CHURCH BLOCK THE LIGHT OF CHRIST BY OUR OWN ACTIONS, HOW WILL THE LIGHT OF CHRIST SHINE THROUGH?***

In some ways, the modern church has lost it's way by forgetting why we exist. We exist to follow Jesus. For example, we are not a service club. We are not driven by a set of ideal of simply making life better for other people, although that is a noble ideal. The church is focused and centered upon CHRIST as the one who transforms lives by using us as his hands and feet. We are the representatives of Christ. We are his reflection, his image. Everything we do is because of Christ. There are many wonderful humanitarian groups in the world who do wonderful things. They are driven by compassion for fellow human beings.

For us as Christians, we are driven by something that is different and that is a quest to be like Christ. Reading through the gospels we are confronted with dozens of examples of Christ having compassion on the crowds. As his followers, we are then drawn to be Christ-like in our relations to other people. Jesus teaches us not only to have compassion but to be filled with forgiveness. Jesus says not to forgive seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22)

Is that what the church models to the world? When they look at us, do they see forgiveness and compassion? When we say in the Lord's Prayer, "**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors**", do we mean what we say? Do we have the same forgiveness toward others as Christ has for us? Secondly, we are to be **people of Thanksgiving**, for it is God who pours out his blessings so freely as we have need. The other night at the close of our Executive Board Meeting, Our moderator, Terry Webber, closed in prayer by giving thanks for the people on the board and in the congregation who have varying gifts. He was right. We should be thankful for how God has blessed us with people of varying gifts, thankful that we are not all the same but that our different personalities and different gifts creates a tapestry of beauty and depth.

This congregation has learned to be thankful in the difficult times as well as the good times. We ought always to encourage each other and love each other for we all make up this rich tapestry called the body of Christ. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 12:24-25 these words, "²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." So in order to be a congregation that captures the heart of the community, we have to be people who are compassionate and forgiving and listen to the thoughts and suggestions of others.

So really, being that perfect church that I talked about last Sunday, the church that is being purified and made holy to become the bride of Christ – it really begins with each one of us and our attitudes we exhibit toward others. God needs to be changing our hearts. If you believe that when Jesus saved you from your sin, your attitudes suddenly fell into line and you became this loving and compassionate person, then you need to read about the Corinthian church that Paul ministered to. They too were saved but they still struggled with their selfish, bickering, prideful, hurtful attitudes. God saved us, but he is still purifying and sanctifying us to be in his image. That image is what the wider community of Lincoln, NE is looking for when they look at this church and every other congregation in the community.

Jesus says in our passage, "**You (meaning those of us who make up the church) are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.**" My mother's side of the family is from Tennessee. Back in the mid 1950s, shortly after my parents were married, they built a log cabin up in the woods above my grandparents house. When we would go to visit in Tennessee in the 1960s, we would sleep up the hill in the log cabin. We had flashlights that we would carry to illuminate the path on those dark Tennessee nights. Back in the woods you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. In the morning we

would jump out of bed and head down the hill for breakfast and invariably, we would leave those flashlights behind at the cabin. So that night when it was time to go to bed, we had a problem – no flashlights.

I remember one night, I left my grandparents house and headed through the woods in the general direction of the cabin. It was so dark, I couldn't see the trail and I couldn't even see the sky. I was running into trees and pretty soon I had no idea where I was or what direction I was going. I was scared. I finally just stood still and whimpered and cried in the darkness. A few minutes later, my parents emerged from the house with a flashlight and they caught up with me to show me the way to the cabin.

In the light of the cabin, I felt safe and secure. It was a great feeling compared to that scared and desperate feeling I had out in the dark woods. People who do not know Christ are out in the woods in the dark. They feel hopeless as they are uncertain of what lies beyond the grave. They do not feel the peace and security of experiencing the love and presence of God. They are looking for answers but often turn to the false light rather than the light of the world, Jesus. Jesus is telling us in this passage that we need to be the light for those who are searching in the dark. That happens when we put the love of Jesus into action.

Is this the church you have always dreamt of? I would guess it would depend which one of you I asked. But remember, each one of us makes up a portion of the whole. Each one of us is a grain of salt. Each one of us is a ray of light. Each one of us contributes to the whole.

I have heard many of you say to me over the past month, "We are so glad you are here." I appreciate that and I am hopeful that this is God's match up, not mine or the search committee. But let me remind you, that my being here is part of the whole picture. The other part is each person who shines their light and as part of this congregation. I can go out and visit people, and preach and teach and marry and bury.

Yet each of you go to your jobs, or your appointments or your coffee groups. Each one of you shine your light just as much as the pastor. So I'm glad that you are glad that I'm here – but let me remind you that my being here does not guarantee a healthy, contagious beacon of light emulating from this church.

Rather, it is the Compassion, forgiveness, thankful hearts and action that comes from each one of us as the collective body of Christ that fulfills God's plan. Let YOUR light shine in darkness. Be the salt of the earth. Let's be the church God has called us to be. AMEN