

What is a Christian? (Part 2)  
February 6, 2017  
A Sermon on Matthew 5:13-20  
Lansdowne UMC

What is a Christian? We're in week 2 of my planned 4 week sermon series focused on answering this question. We're really trying to understand who Jesus' followers are, both externally, in terms of how they act, and internally, in terms of what's in their hearts.

By way of review, last week we talked about the section of Matthew chapter 5 that's usually called "the Beatitudes." These are 9 statements of blessing where Jesus tells his disciples who they need to be and what they are to value. We talked about how living by the Beatitudes is counter-cultural, and how the Beatitudes cultivate a person whose life takes on the same shape as the life of Jesus.

Since I haven't plugged it for a while, check out the sermons section of [lansdowneumc.org](http://lansdowneumc.org) to read or listen to the first message if you missed it, or if you know someone who you hope would benefit.

So today, as we move on to the very next verses in the chapter, Jesus describes the big picture of what being his disciple means. In the weeks to come we'll watch Jesus hone in on some particular ways that his vision works itself out in the life of Christians.

Jesus uses two images from everyday life to describe the big picture of what Christians are. Christians are Salt. And Christians are Light.

Let's talk about the salt image first. "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus says to his disciples. What could he possibly mean by that? Well, most obviously salt is a seasoning. You don't put salt on food and then say, "Wow, that's really good salt." If the food is well salted, you say, "wow, that's good food!" Or at the most you might say, "Wow, the salt really brought out the great flavor in the food." In the same way Christians themselves are not the main event. They simply help the world to receive the flavor that is already there in the good news.

Salt has uses beyond being a seasoning, though. For example, it's a preservative. It keeps things from going bad, just as Jesus' disciples are to keep the world from going bad.

But whatever uses Jesus had in mind, the point is that salt has some particular characteristics that makes it salt. If it didn't have those, it would be useless. If the salt doesn't flavor the food, it's useless. If the salt doesn't draw the moisture out of the food to preserve it, it's useless.

I know it's hard to imagine salt not being salty, so maybe this will help. If you lived 2000 years ago, you wouldn't get your salt from the Morton's factory store. It would likely come from a mine or maybe from a body of water like the dead sea. Either way, whatever you get is salty, but it's not pure salt. It's got other minerals and impurities mixed in with it. You can imagine what would happen if the salt, the actual sodium chloride, dissolved away-- you'd be left with all of the other junk that isn't salt. It would still look like salt, more or less, but you wouldn't be able to season or preserve your food with it. Instead, what you have is essentially dirt. It's not good for anything. You throw it away. You certainly wouldn't want to put it on something valuable.

Here's the difficult point. Just as there is no point on calling something salt if it doesn't do the things that salt does, there is no point on me calling myself a Christian if I don't do the things that Jesus' teaches. Jesus wants truth in advertizing. The salt should be salty. The Christian should live as Jesus taught. If Christians do not live in a manner that is distinct from the world, then they are of no use to the world.

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says to his followers. That's the job. The world is dark and the world needs light.

And here's the thing-- Jesus seems to have this crazy idea that if you live as he teaches, it will be impossible to conceal. You'll have no more luck hiding your faith in Christ than hiding a city on a hill, whose light shines bright into the darkness above all of the obstacles that normally prevent light from travelling far. It'll be impossible to conceal, because the world will see us doing the things that God commands us to do. Jesus didn't want his followers to become what Isaiah condemns-- people who call out to God, but don't do the things that God commands. Jesus wanted us to be people who would feed the hungry, house the homeless, and gives clothes to those who need them. That's part of the light that people will see that will cause them to praise our Father in heaven.

I think there is more, though. Sometimes, I think we sell ourselves short on how *good* the good news is. Think about it. The world tells itself this story that God does not exist. It says that everything that exists is simply the result of the random movements of particles of matter. The world seems to forget, or understandably not want to think about what that means, if you carry it to its full conclusion. It means that nothing you do

matters. It means that the things that are the deepest longings of your heart are just illusions that arise from evolution to help the human race to continue. Love doesn't matter. Human rights don't matter, although thankfully many people haven't given up that Christian value. But if they let their logic continue, they will have to go that way eventually. Because science tells us that law of the land is nothing more than survival of the fittest, or at best, survival of the herd. Everything is valued based on its use to society or to me as an individual.

What's more, people who live in the darkness-- and by that I simply mean people whose lives have not been enlightened by the gospel-- they are always looking to the next thing and saying, "I'll be happy after that." But time after time, they get there, and they find that something is still missing.

Do you know what I'm talking about? When I finish school, then I'll be happy. Nope. When I get in a relationship, then I'll be happy. Nope. When I get married, when I can pay my bills, when I get a house, when I get a nice car, when I have a kid, when I have a good job, when I retire... then I'll be happy. No, no, no, no, no, and no. Sure if you hit those milestones, some aspects of life will be different, and for a while that novelty will help obscure the darkness in your heart-- that hole in your soul. But it won't last. You'll soon be looking to the next thing.

We know that this is true. We look at rock stars and movie stars. They're rich and famous. They're beautiful and everyone around them is beautiful. They can have whatever relationships they want, no matter how serious or casual. There is nothing in this world that they can't have. And yet so many of them turn to drugs to fill the void. Same thing

with winners of the lottery. At the blink of an eye, it's gone. And yet time after time people tell themselves, "it'll be different with me." Sorry, it won't.

So think of what happens when the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ comes into all this darkness. What a bright light it is when we say "God loves you." You are not a worthless clump of randomly arranged matter. You are God's good creation. The gospel brings truth. It says "God desires more for you. You were created for a purpose, and you will be restless until you find your rest in God."

How can Jesus be so confident that his disciples are light to the world? Well, let's keep in mind that Jesus is talking to people who have committed to following him. And in it's original context, he wasn't just talking to people who made a profession of faith, but people who literally left everything to learn how to become like him. These disciples of Jesus have experienced the grace of God in person. They have received the call of God: "follow me." And Jesus knows that when he dies and is risen his disciples will receive the Holy Spirit, who will empower them to be holy, and who will teach them everything that Jesus was saying.

And so how can Jesus' disciples *not* shine into the darkness? They *are* light. The only way they can not shine is if they hide who they are to the world and fail to live out the teaching of Jesus *in the darkness of the world*. You don't light a lamp and hide it so that the lamp can look at itself and see how bright it is. You light the lamp and use it to give light to darkness.

When I was in middle school and high school, I would frequently be reading or doing my homework as the sun set. I'd end up reading and writing in a dim room. My young eyes didn't mind, but fearing for my eyesight long term, my mother would almost always come in without asking and turn on lights for me. "Have a little light," she would say.

Every single time, I was surprised by how bright the light was. I'd realize that I'd gotten used to the darkness. It had seemed normal until there was a bright light in the room. Then I would realize just how dark the room had become, because my eyes would have to adjust to see clearly again.

I confess that I think that the church at large has often fallen victim of getting a little too used to the darkness. We need to see the brightness of the gospel and adjust our eyes. We don't just have good ideas, we have *light*. And so the church is not the church if it's not going out into the places of darkness to be light. Light goes into darkness, and exposes the hidden things there-- the evil and the injustice. Light is a beacon to the truth that is Jesus.

I'll give you your weekly C. S. Lewis quote that I think wraps all this up in a nice bow. He said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

I'm coming to believe that one of the most central virtues for us to cultivate as a church is honesty. At some point, I hope we can get to the point of being deeply honest with one another-- having groups where we can finally take our masks off. But for now, let's just strive for each of

us to be honest before God. Let's just take off our masks in the presence of God.

So take off your mask and look at yourself in the light. What do you look like? Poor in spirit? Mourning? Meek? Hungry for God? Also someone who cares for the poor, the mourning, the meek, and the hungry for God? These are the traits that Jesus knows make his disciples the light of the world. We must be honest with God about where we are and where we aren't. If we come to God with full hands, we can't receive anything. If we come to God with empty hands, we are ready to receive what God has to give us.

Because we cannot make ourselves light to the world. We cannot make ourselves salt to the world. God is the only one who says "let there be light." God is the only one who speaks and creation comes into existence.

Although Jesus was primarily speaking to his disciple, he understood that not everyone in earshot would have already had their lives enlightened by his message.

So let's be pure in heart with God. In other words, let's be honest. Do you find that emptiness is still in your heart? God has something to offer you. Are you entrenched in actions that belong in the darkness, but not in the light? You can tell, by the way, if you are, when you think about what would happen if those things "came to light." I have good news. God wants to give you something.

And just in case any of us feel ourselves getting through the salt and light metaphors without being humbled, Jesus gives his disciples another reality check.

“...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” We’ll dig into this more in the next couple weeks. But for now, we just need to give the scribes and Pharisees credit. They literally spent all their time doing the best that was humanly possible to fulfill all 613 commandments of their scriptures. And honestly, they did a good job of it. Even more than that, they were earnest-- they really, truly thought that they were better than everyone else. In many ways, they were.

And yet Jesus finds them lacking. They have some of the externals, but they lack the internals. They wash the outside of the cup while the inside is filthy. Jesus expects his disciples to have both, the externals and the internals. By becoming clean on the inside, Jesus’ disciples will live lives that will fulfill the commandments of God on the outside, and with the right spirit and intent. This is the only way that one enters the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement believed that whatever God commanded you to do, God would empower you to do-- and that is the reality that he and other Methodists experienced.

But perhaps I’m not there yet; perhaps you’re not there yet. Can we just name our poverty in spirit? We’re hopeless not only apart from God’s forgiveness, but from God’s transformation. And so as we strive to live out being salt and light, can we just pray honestly?



“Thank you for loving us no matter what we do. We know that you want much more from us because you *have* so much more for us. In this meal that we are about to share, come to us, and help us....”