

BRIAN C. YOUNT  
TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
FEBRUARY 9, 2020

PSALM 112  
MATTHEW 5:13-20

“FULFILLING OUR FUNCTION”

*The main point of this sermon is that disciples fulfill their function as the salt and light of the world by having a righteousness that goes beyond an outward conformity to God’s commandments.*

### **The Christian’s Function**

This is our second week looking at the Sermon on the Mount. As we noticed last week, Jesus starts his “sermon” with eight beatitudes. They begin the same way, “Blessed *are*...” And not only do they begin the same way, but they produce the same reaction in us, don’t they? The beatitudes surprise us. They turn things upside down. We wrestle with them, because we don’t consider the poor in spirit or those who mourn or the pure heart to be blessed. What Jesus commends in those eight beatitudes isn’t our typical recipe for the good life. But that’s Jesus’ point – the good life is discovered in a very unusual way. It’s the meek and the pure in heart and the peacemakers and the merciful who are commended and congratulated. So, what I think the beatitudes point for us is, the surprising, countercultural character of Jesus’ disciples.

And that’s the link or connection to today’s passage. It is the disciples’ distinctive character that leads into their distinctive function as the salt and light of the world.

So, when Jesus says in verse 13 to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth,” he’s giving them a metaphor to illustrate their function. And it’s one of those metaphors that offers several possibilities for interpretation. It could mean that like salt the disciples will, in a sense, make the world taste better. It could also mean that like salt the disciples will preserve what is good in the world and work to keep things from going bad. And so, we don’t have to choose. Both those ideas work, because I think they fit with what Jesus is getting across, and that is, wherever his disciples end up in the world they are to make an impact. Their good works will make a positive difference.

But there is a condition, isn’t there? That impact is only possible if they keep their “saltiness.” Basically, disciples must be different. They must retain their *contrast* with the world around them. Otherwise, they just blend in with the world around them and have no effect.

And here’s what that doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that Christians are always hostile towards the culture. It doesn’t mean that Christians make it their life’s work to just go around bashing the world around them and decrying that everything is corrupt and beneath them.

The point is that Christians contrast with the world around them, because they get their identity from a different source. The Christian who is consumed with pointing out the culture's flaws is ironically getting his identity from the culture. In a subtle way, the surrounding world is still the functional way he gets his identity.

But the real source of our identity is that we belong to Christ. He makes our essence unique. And we belong to him by coming into his kingdom, through his sacrifice, where we are ruled by his gospel. So, it's Christ's person and words and work that fill out and inform how we relate to the world around us. That's what makes an impact! That's why we can hope to make a difference, because Christ is the difference we all need.

And think about how Christ made his difference and impact. What did it require him to do first? He had to come into the world. He had to make *contact*. And so, when Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world" he's making the point that they cannot remain hidden. They must be visible. Jesus came in the flesh and was seen and heard and touched (cf. 1 John 1:1).

The danger of overemphasizing our contrast is that it can lead to isolation. Christians can sometimes prioritize their distinctiveness so much that it leads them to hide away and disengage. But being distinct doesn't mean we can disconnect or walk away.

And notice what Jesus expects from his disciples. He says they are to be a "city built on a hill." Why a city? Because cities are made up of many lights. When you look at a skyline, what do you see? You don't see individual lightbulbs. You see the effect of all those lights working together.

So, you see, Jesus is focusing on the corporate impact of the disciple community. Yes, we have an individual light, but we don't exist as lone Christians. What the world needs to see is God's redeemed people living *together*, sharing life *together*, doing ministry *together*, loving *one another*. What's Paul's favorite metaphor for the church? A body that works together. A body that cares for itself. A body that builds itself up in love and holiness (cf. Eph. 4:16; 5:27).

And in verse 16 Jesus tells us why the world needs to see those good works. Notice, he doesn't say, 'Let your light shine before others, so that they can see your good works and admire your morality.' The reason he doesn't say that is because we aren't the source of the good works. That's why we don't get the glory. The glory belongs to our Father in heaven. He's the source, so we aren't to plagiarize and take false credit.

But our joy ought to come when other people recognize the goodness and glory of our heavenly Father. We can't just settle for having a good reputation in our community. We can't be content with our neighbors' polite recognition. Our mission is that the world, beginning in the places around us, would come to a true knowledge of who God is, so they too would know Him as their heavenly Father.

### **Christ's Function**

And isn't that Christ's mission? To glorify his Father (cf. John 17:1) and make Him known? And so, verse 17 is Jesus' way to tell his disciples *how* he glorifies his Father. It is by fulfilling the

law and prophets. Jesus isn't setting them aside or undermining their authority; instead, his function is to fulfill them.

But this concept of fulfilling is somewhat confusing, isn't it? The law and prophets are big and daunting to read, aren't they? So, it helps if we understand what the law and prophets are about. So, what are they about? At their core, the law and prophets tell us and point us forward to God's true intentions for us. And what Jesus is saying is that the law and prophets ultimately point forward to him, because he alone reveals God's true and final intention and purposes for us. That's why Paul in Romans 10 says that "Christ is the end of the law" (v. 4). He's where it all leads. In other words, the law and prophets have a goal for us, and it is only Christ who can meet that goal and fulfill all of God's plans and purposes.

That's why nothing from the law or prophets will pass away. That's why we don't dismiss even the so-called "least of the commandments." All of it is there to point us to Christ. That's why the Old Testament is still authoritative. Yes, its role for us is different. We have a different relationship with it compared to historical Israel. But it is still valid because in it we see what Christ will bring to completion and fulfill.

And so much of the controversy surrounding Jesus had to do with this point. Everyone failed to see what Jesus knew and taught. That the scriptures testified about him (cf. John 5:39). Jesus wasn't just another voice thrown into the Debate Club. He was the final voice. The final say-so. He alone can reveal the true nature and depth of God's intention for us.

Think of Jesus as the key. He opens our eyes to what's been there all along by correcting all the previous misinterpretations and misapplications.

### **Fulfilling Our Function**

That's what Jesus is doing in verse 20 when he says to his disciples, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What Jesus is telling his disciples is that they cannot fulfill their function as the salt and light of world by having a similar righteousness to the scribes and Pharisees. And that would have been shocking to Jesus' disciples, because the scribes and Pharisees were known for their meticulous law-keeping. The disciples probably thought Jesus was asking the impossible, because no one went above and beyond the scribes or Pharisees. They appeared far more serious than anyone else.

But here's Jesus' insight into their righteousness. They had come to trust that their outward conformity to the law was enough. In Calvin's words: "The Pharisees had infected the people with a perverse opinion: that he who has committed nothing by way of outward works against the law fulfills the law."

And scribes and Pharisees aren't alone, are they? We too settle for outward conformity. We tend to justify ourselves by measuring and weighing the things we've done or not done. And what Jesus is saying in the rest of the chapter is that there's more to God's commandments than surface-level obedience. What matters is your heart's disposition toward God and your neighbor.

Remember the older brother in Jesus' parable about the father and his two sons (Lk. 15:11-32)? The older brother was very moral. He was a hard worker. He didn't throw away his money on prostitutes like his younger brother. On the surface, he was a very good person.

But in the end, we learn that underneath all his diligent hard work was a growing resentment and hatred for his father and brother. All his hard work and good behavior was done with a wicked heart. He hated his father's grace, because he was a legalist. And that's why at the end of the parable he was outside his father's house.

He didn't examine what he truly owed his father and brother. And if he had, he would have grasped what the law was really pointing toward, he would have seen that what was truly required of him was to love his father and brother even to the cost of his own life.

So, how do we go beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and the older brother? How do we get beyond our own comfort with an outward, surface-level obedience? We've got to go to the very end with Christ, because it was Christ, more than anyone else, who deserved all the rewards and blessings a righteous life could merit. But when we go all the way to the end, we see that Christ lost his reward. Instead of blessings, he was cursed. He gave us what he earned and received what we deserved. He loved us to the high cost of his own life.

Going to the end with Christ comes with a condition: it is only those who recognize that their righteousness isn't enough who make it to the end. And it's the self-righteous and those who trust in themselves who stay behind and find themselves on the outside. And when you reach the end with Christ, you see that you owe God everything. You owe him your life. And that's what makes you ready to fulfill your calling and function to be the salt and light of the world. It's his love and sacrifice and grace—his gospel—that makes you distinct and beckons you into the world. He's our salt and light, because he is our righteousness.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Works Consulted

Brown, Jeannine K. *Matthew*. Teach the Text Commentary Series. General Editors: Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015.

*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volumes 1-3. Edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.

France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

Hurtado, Larry. *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016.

*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Revision Editor: Moises Silva. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.

