

Sermon for February 5, 2017  
"Christianity 101"

Matthew 5:13-20

The Sermon on the Mount can be compared to a course in how to be a follower of Jesus: Christianity 101. Last week we examined the opening of Jesus' lesson on how to be one of his followers. The beatitudes in a way might be called the syllabus of the course. Jesus says if you complete this course you will be expected to be humble, meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be pure, etc. And before this course is over you will be persecuted on account on me. If the beatitudes are the syllabus of Christianity 101 then the verses we read today are the first lecture. Having looked at the syllabus last week, let's begin our course in Christianity 101.

Everyone open your textbooks to the New Testament page 4. For those of you with other editions of the textbook that is in Matthew lecture 5 verse 13. Now what is the first thing Jesus says to his disciples in verse 13? "You are the salt of the earth."

Now I don't know about you, but I like salty foods. I love pretzels and chips and anything that has salt on it. So this first thing I think of when I hear this is the flavor. Jesus is saying that Christians should give flavor to life.

But there is more to Jesus' statement than just flavor. While Jesus and his hearers might have thought of the flavoring aspect of salt, that probably was not their first thought. You see in Jesus' day, they didn't have ways of preserving food like we do. And one of the major sources of protein in Israel was fish. Most of the fish that I have in my house is either frozen or canned. Back in Jesus' day they didn't have freezers or, to my knowledge, canning. They used salt to preserve their fish. And the salt preserved the fish by killing bacteria.

So Jesus and his followers probably thought about the preservative qualities of salt. Jesus is saying that it is our job to purify & preserve people. We are called to spread scriptural holiness like John Wesley did. We are to be a holy influence on the world. Our deeds and action are to lead others away from the wickedness of this world and to the righteousness of God, and in the process enable them to experience eternal life; to be preserved. But it is more than just preserving. Here is where the flavor comes in. When someone comes to Christ, they not only are cleansed of their sins and preserved for eternal life; they are also given an eternal quality of life. Jesus spices up their life as well as preserving it. So like salt we should purify, preserve, and spice up people's lives.

Salt was also an important part of sacrifices in the Old Testament. Remember these students of Christianity 101 had all passed Judaism 101 and probably 201 as well. So when they heard "salt" they probably thought of the salt added to sacrifices. This was the "salt of the covenant" and represented holiness. So just as the priests salt sacrifices to make them holy, we are to spread holiness and salt the world.

What is the next thing Jesus says? Look back in verse 13 again: "if the salt has lost its taste how can its saltiness be restored?" While it may be hard for us to imagine, salt can lose its taste. It can become contaminated so that it is no longer of any use for flavoring or preserving food. Have any of you seen road quality salt. That is salt that is not good for human consumption. It looks like granite. It is gray with white streaks. Because it has other minerals in it, it lacks flavor and would probably make you sick. It's only use is to throw in the road to melt snow. In one sense such salt is no longer salt. It's just sand.

In Israel it wouldn't even be good for that because they don't get much snow in the holy land. You wouldn't want to throw it away in your garden so you would throw it in the road and use it like sand. That's what a Christian is who has lost his or her flavor for life. If they are no longer doing their job. They are no longer what they claim to be. They are like salt without any salt in it.

So Jesus' first lesson in being a Christian is that we are like salt. We are supposed to be holy so that we can spread holiness. And by spreading holiness we purify and preserve the world. And if we aren't doing that, then we are good for nothing. In a sense, a Christian who no longer lives Christ is no longer a Christian, at least not in the way they live their life. They are no longer Christians in the same way that salt which has lost its flavor is no longer salt.

The second point in Jesus' opening lecture on Christianity is found in verse 14 and 15. Look in your textbooks. What does verse 14 say? "You are the light of the world." Many people, myself included, look at this and think it is saying the same thing as verse 13. And it is close, but there is more emphasis here on doing.

Jesus goes on to say that you don't light a candle to cover it up but to place it high so that many can see. In the book of Revelation the churches are symbolized as lamp stands. The church holds up the light of Christ just as a lamp stand holds up a lamp. Some people use a lighthouse as a symbol or metaphor for the church. The purpose of the lighthouse is to shine a light in the darkness so that ships don't hit a reef or rocky shore.

Jesus says that like a lamp we must shine our light before people so that they see our good works and glorify God. Jesus is not talking about showing off. He deals with that kind of false piety later in the course. Here he is talking about true acts of love and mercy and justice. As Christians, we should live so that others see what we do and give glory to God.

The final point of Jesus' introduction to Christianity 101 is found in verses 17-20. Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have not come to abolish but fulfill." Remember, Jesus' first students were graduates of Judaism 101. Was Jesus teaching them a new way that would mean throwing the old out? "No," Jesus says. What Jesus is teaching is different. But it in no way contradicts or countermands Judaism. In fact it fulfills it.

It is like a student who takes a class in European or Asian history. The student learns about periods of time and kingdoms and dates and such. Then the student takes a class in World history. The content is different in the second class but it does not contradict but rather fills out what the first class did not cover. Judaism was a class in how to be God's people for a particular nation: Israel. Christianity is a class in how to be God's people for all humanity.

The problem was that many of Jesus' students had poor examples for teachers in their course on Judaism. The scribes and Pharisees and other religious leaders talked about the law and the prophets and put on a good show, but they were not really trying to serve God. Jesus was clear about their failure, but said that his followers should have a righteousness that far exceeds those other teachers. Sometimes people think being a Christian means being wishy washy and trying to please everyone. Maybe some thought Jesus was offering people an easy way out. Jesus said, "No, this is no easy way out. You don't have to live like the Pharisees. You have to live better."

So that is our introductory lesson in Christianity 101. The points to remember are this:

- #1 You are the salt of the earth. It is your purpose in life to be a holy influence in the society at large and bring others to eternal life in Christ. If you don't, you are like salt that has lost its flavor.
- #2 You are the light of the world. You are supposed to shine God's light through your good deeds. That way people can see them and be saved from destruction.
- #3 Don't forget everything you already know about righteousness but seek to exceed the righteousness of the teachers of this world.

Thank you for your time, class. I will see you next week. Don't forget to read your textbook in the meantime. Oh, by the way, there will be a test on the contents of today's lecture. It begins right now and lasts for the rest of your life.