

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER TEN

MATTHEW 5:13-16

IT is at once evident that these words were addressed, not to the promiscuous multitude, but to the inner circle of disciples. Having declared that the supreme matter in His Kingdom is character, and having described that character in the Beatitudes; the King showed that the purpose of the realization of character, in the subjects of the Kingdom, is that they may exercise an influence upon those who are outside the Kingdom, and revealed the nature of that influence.

Influence is His ultimate intention in His present government of, and relation to, His Kingdom. To recognize this is again to be brought face to face with that fundamental truth, that, although He spoke to His own, the multitudes were ever in His sight, and on His heart. The law of the Kingdom is for such as have submitted to the King; but they are to be governed by that law in order that they may become the means of blessing to the multitudes beyond.

As the Shepherd King leaves the multitudes, for the saints, that He may instruct them, it is not for their sakes merely. He loves the people, the vast unheeding multitudes; and if He blesses us, it is that we may bless them. If He conditions our life, it is that we may exert among them an influence that shall be for their healing and for their uplifting.

Christ's estimate of the needs of the multitude is revealed by His description of the influence His people are to exert. The influence is to be that of salt and light.

- Salt is needed where there is corruption.
- Light is needed where there is darkness.

Jesus, looking out over the multitudes of His day, saw the corruption, the disintegration of life at every point its break-up, its spoilation; and, because of His love of the multitudes, He knew that the thing they needed most was salt in order that the corruption should be arrested. He saw them also wrapped in gloom, sitting in darkness, groping amid mists and fogs. He knew that they needed, above everything else, the irradiation of the pathway, the illumination of all things; that they needed light.

This is Christ's estimate of the need of the multitude of to-day, for His words were not for a day or an age, for a geographical position, a coast limitation, or a national boundary; His words were words for all ages. He did not deal with the accidentals of human life, but with the essentials.

As Jesus looks out over the vast multitudes, for whom we are responsible, He knows their need, and that need is still expressed in the two thoughts suggested by the description of influence; they are in circumstances of corruption and darkness.

With these preliminary positions in mind, let us consider the passage before us in three ways.

- First, the character of the influence which Jesus declares will be exerted by such as are in His Kingdom;
- Secondly, the influence of character;
- Thirdly, the solemn, and earnest, and urgent teaching of Jesus concerning the responsibility of the subjects of the Kingdom with relation to the exertion of such influence.

First, then, the character of the influence which is to be exerted.

According to the teaching of Jesus, the character of the influence is the influence of character. **“Ye are salt,” “Ye are light;”** not, Ye have salt, or, Ye have light. Much less does He say, Ye dispense the salt, or, Ye dispense the light.

There is all the difference between a living influence and a dead, official, attempt at influence. If Christ had said, Ye dispense the salt, then we might have looked upon our position as official. There is no such thought.

The King began with the fundamental necessity of human nature, and He said, **“Ye are.”**

- It is only as a man is salt in his character that he can exercise the influence of salt in his age.
- It is only as a man is light in himself that he can scatter light upon the pathway of others.

Jesus always takes hold of human nature as it is according to Divine intention, and bases His whole philosophy of life and influence upon the first Divine thought in the creation of man!

The influence you exert is always the influence of what you are. No man exerts upon other people any influence by what he says to them, save only as what he says is the outcome of what he is in the deepest fact of his being.

As the father of a family, the influence you exert upon your boys and girls, is the influence of what you are, and not of what you tell them they ought to be. It is the influence of your own personality in its deepest fiber that is going to make or mar your bairns.

There is no escape from this.

We may tell our boys to be good; and, if we are bad, by the grace of God they may be good some other hand may mold them, some other life may win them but if we are going to win our boys for goodness, we must be good. Our influence comes out of what we are.

- **“Ye are salt,”** and if you are not salt, you lack the power to exercise the aseptic function.
- **“Ye are the light of the world,”** and if we are not light we cannot shine.

As one studies the teaching of our Lord, one is more and more impressed with the fact that He never tarried upon the surface of things, but that He got down to the depths. We shall never exercise the influence of salt, or the influence of light in our family, in our church, or in our city or nation, unless we are right ourselves. One of the most damnable heresies that has ever been foisted upon the thinking of any age is that a man may be pure in public influence if impure in private life. He cannot be. What we are, determines the character of our influence in the world, whether we will or no. Thus the character of the influence to be exerted by those who are in the Kingdom, is the influence of character.

Secondly, what is this influence of character?

The Lord made use of two figures, “**salt**” and “**light**.” Here, again, He was careful with the infinite care of an infinite wisdom, and He made application of each figure in a natural sphere, and not carelessly. He did not say, Ye are the salt of the world. He did not say, Ye are the light of the earth. He said, “**Ye are the salt of the earth,**” “**Ye are the light of the world.**”

We will look in each case at the property described, and at the sphere of its activity.

First, salt and its sphere the earth; secondly, light and its sphere the world.

“Ye are the salt of the earth.”

The one value of salt is aseptic. In the presence of the fact of corruption, it prevents its spread. Salt never changes corruption into incorruption; it has no power to do so, but it prevents it spreading; moreover it reveals soundness, and creates the opportunity for its continuance.

There is not a believing man, woman, or child, who is able to take hold of any corrupt man and make him pure. That is not our work; we are not equal to it. Thank God, the Master is equal to it. Thank God, the King at the wicket-gate of the Kingdom can take hold of the vilest man and make him pure as He is pure. Our influence is of another value. Salt takes hold of that which is not yet corrupt, and prevents its becoming corrupted; it holds back the corrupting forces, and creates the opportunity for the exercise of goodness, and the continuity of soundness. Jesus never made a mistake in His figures.

The intellectual supremacy of Jesus is such as to enable us to take the smallest figure He made use of, and base on it a whole philosophy that is suggested by its use.

“Salt” we are to be, men and women, who by our life and presence in the world check the spread of corruption and give goodness its opportunity.

Do not forget that the Beatitudes closed with the affirmation of persecution. Do not be surprised at that. But we want “**salt**” men and women in the stores, in the offices; we want men and women everywhere, who, by their living, check corruption young men in whose presence no man dare tell a questionable story; young women to whom other young women in their sin will come, and ask for help and advice, that the good desire that has been hindered by evil power may blossom into beauty.

Now let us notice the sphere in which salt operates.

“Ye are the salt of the earth”

The word which Jesus made use of here marks the distinctly material side of things - the earth, literally the standing place; primarily the soil. It is a purely material word. But, of course, here it is used with reference to the people, the people viewed as of the earth.

Men and women are of the earth. It is impossible for us to escape from the material, while we are in the material, and of the material; and we need have no desire to escape from it. But Jesus said you are to be the salt of the earth. You are to live in the midst of men and women who live in earthly conditions, and are material, in order to influence that side of things with an aseptic influence. You are to save men, render possible their salvation by hindering corruption on that side of their nature that is distinctly of the earth.

To go back to the first of the Beatitudes, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”** Now, look at those people poor in spirit. Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. The government of heaven, the touch of heaven, is upon their life, dominating, thrilling, and impulsing. Ye are the people who have the Kingdom of Heaven; ye are the salt of the earth, the medium through which the heavenly government shall operate in material things. The earth divorced from heaven is corrupt. Live in it as heavenly people, and check the spread of the corruption. The earth divorced from heaven has in it unrealized capacities. Realize in it the heavenly order, so that the capacities may be realized.

But again, **“Ye are the light of the world.”**

Here our Lord takes another figure, with a different note. The value of light is illumination, and that is at once a positive principle of life, and the condition for intelligent activity. Light is a revelation of how life ought to be lived, and wherever you get a revelation of how life ought to be lived, there is in the revelation that which begins to help men to live it. Example is not enough to save a man, but example is a great force in the growth of the man who is saved. It is a great force also in luring a man toward salvation. We are not called upon in any sense to save men. We are called upon to shine on men, revealing to them the truth concerning human life, the possibilities of human life, the principles that underlie human life, giving them to see what life may be; we are called upon to be light.

Now, notice the sphere of its operation the world. **“Ye are the light of the world,”** not the age, but the world, the cosmos. A great word, which includes not merely the life, but the whole created order.

Here Jesus declares that His people are to illuminate other men as to their relation to the whole order, of which they form a part, and as to the necessary laws which govern it. All about us are men and women living not merely on the earth, but having relation to the infinite spaces, having relation to all created things, and therefore having necessary, even if unconfessed, relation to the Christ Himself.

The cosmos is a word which speaks of the infinite order, and presupposes the intelligence which caused and controls the infinite order. Every man loyal to the law of Jesus Christ, and living in His Kingdom, is in himself a revelation of the unity of the universe of God, of the perfection of the harmony of all its parts, and of that unity and harmony as consisting in relationship to the Throne of God.

To live on Christian principles is to show men what would result if all the world were obedient to the whisper of the Throne of the Most High. Every truly Christian life, every life submitted to the King, in loyal surrender, lights up the order of the universe; and from such life light will flash which will help men who are groping in darkness, and trying to find out secrets.

The “*Riddle of the Universe*” will never be solved by examining the protoplasmic germ, or by careful examination of natural phenomena. Men living in the will of God are the light of the world.

But notice two things here.

We are not to try to illuminate the universe; we are to live in loyalty to Christ; that is all. It is not by effort after illumination of the problem; but by quiet simple abiding in His will in the world, that character will flash its light abroad.

But, then, do not forget another matter. We hear a great deal about reflected light. We have heard it said that Jesus is the infinite Sun, and that we take the place of the moon. True, the great allegorical passage in the Song of Solomon says she is “**fair as the moon,**” but it also says she is “**clear as the sun,**” and she will only be fair as the silver moon, which kisses the night with softness and beauty, as she is clear as the sun.

It is not reflected light merely; it is the light of our own life, communicated to us from the Essential Light. When we received the Essential Light it was not merely that we might reflect it; it was that it might ignite us and burn in us. It is only when Christian men are burning, as well as shining lights, that the world knows they are the light of the world.

Finally, what did Jesus say about the responsibility of the subjects of the Kingdom as to being the salt of the earth?

“If the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men.”

- This has nothing to do with the question of a man’s ultimate salvation.
- It has everything to do with the question of a man’s present influence.

We have no right to take things out of the context and say that Jesus says, if Christian people do not exercise the Christian influence of salt He will cast them out and they will be lost. This is a question of influence.

The Master says, **“If the salt have lost its savour.”** It is difficult to find a word that seems to catch and carry the real value of this word **“savour.”** Of course, there is a simpler meaning, **“If the salt have lost its taste.”**

In a little pamphlet containing the Gospel of Matthew in broad Scotch, the reading is *“The saut o’ the yirth are ye, but gin the saut hae tint its tang.”* Perhaps that gets nearer to it than anything one can find. “Tang” is that quality in taste which is pungent, keen. Have you lost the “tang” of your Christianity? Do men know that you are a Christian? If there is no “tang” then listen to Jesus. He says you are good for nothing except to be cast out and trodden under foot of man. There are thousands of Christian men who have lost their “tang” and men trample them under foot; laugh at them, make fun of their Christianity. It is not enough to recite the Beatitudes. We must live in them, in order that the savour of them may tell among men.

As to the other responsibility for light, the King declared that there is a twofold influence of light - a city, and a candle. **“A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.”** Take out the affirmation that it cannot be hidden, and observe the description of one commentator, “A city on the top of a mountain lying.”

That is the element of the Church influence of light. No individual Christian can exert that - One may be a beacon on the top of a mountain, but one cannot be a city. By the way of those who are in the Kingdom there will be the illumination of vast expanses. A city on a mountain lying, is seen from all the distant valleys; its flaming glory is caught from peaks far off and near. This is the picture of an influence that the Church has almost entirely lost; it is the picture of the Church’s social order flashing its light upon the age. This is no careless figure.

A city in which God is the Governor; a city in which there is nothing that defileth, nor worketh an abomination, nor maketh a lie; a city in which all things of beauty, and order, and light, and delight, are gathered; all that, the Church ought to be, and consequently she should guard the gates of entrance against all likely to corrupt and harm her.

And when the city is that, when within her borders there is the realization of the social ideal, so that when one weeps, others weep; and when one laughs, others laugh; when to the poor saint there is given of the world’s substance, and to the needy, of spiritual help; and when no man says anything belongs to him, but they have all things common when that is realized, then the Church is the “city on the top of the mountain lying,” flashing her light over far places of the earth.

That is not all - **“A candle.”**

The King passes from the city to the house. It is for a light that shineth unto all that are in the house. If the figure of the city illustrates the light as illuminating vast expanses, the figure of the candle illustrates the light as irradiating private places. One cannot be a city lying on a mountain, but one can be a lamp in the house. That is the other exercise of the influence, so that all the family order is illumined by the presence of one Christian soul, one lamp burning for Jesus in the house. **“Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.”** Do not forget this negative application.

The exposition of Dr. Alexander Maclaren makes others unnecessary. He says, “No man lighteth a lamp and puts it under the bushel; but supposing he does, what will happen? One of two things: Either the bushel will put the lamp out, or the lamp will set fire to the bushel.”

Lastly, the King said, “**Let your light so shine before men, that they may . . . glorify your Father.**”

And thus He summarized, employing in the final utterance - the last part of His figure the whole truth, that in His Kingdom, character counts, because it exerts influence.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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