

TBD - Sermon Based on Matthew 5:13-20

by David Hindman on Sunday, February 6, 2011

Go to Israel-Palestine and you'll want to visit the Chapel on the so-called Mount of Beatitudes. It has a breath-taking view overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Ironically the chapel was built with funds donated by Benito Mussolini, Hitler's World War II Italian ally.

That beautiful church is a memorial site for the Sermon on the Mount. Of course we don't know if Jesus actually said or did anything at that particular spot. In fact Jesus never actually preached a Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew 5-7. That "sermon" is really a creation of the writer of the Matthew's Gospel. He took Jesus' sayings and teachings and put them into this particular order. And he did a brilliant job. This week I was amazed again at how Matthew presents theology through a story. Last week we looked at the Beatitudes. They are Jesus' description of the true blessing and happiness God gives when we live these ways. Today we heard what immediately follows the beatitudes. Matthew ties the two sections together by using "you" in the plural, or as we say in the south, "y'all." Matthew's Jesus ends the Beatitudes, "Blessed are y'all when people revile you and persecute you and speak all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before

you.” And then Matthew keeps using that plural you or y’all, “Y’all are the salt of the earth.” “Y’all are the light of the world.” “Let y’all’s light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Matthew is telling us that we need a community to live this way; we can’t do it on our own. And he’s telling us that when Jesus’ disciples live the Beatitudes, we stand out. We are like light in a dark world. We bring zest to life as we make peace and show mercy and live life in line with the life of God we see in Jesus. Jesus followers are distinctively different. It is no longer we who live but Christ living in us. Matthew’s Jesus warns us that if we live like him the world won’t know what to do with us except persecute or ridicule or mock us – just like it did Jesus. But what joy and life and passion are ours - Christ in us. Awesome. Matthew says we are salt of the earth. What a rich metaphor! Salt cleanses and purifies. It’s a preservative. Salt makes people thirsty for something and in the Bible it’s a symbol for commitment to God. Salt spices things up. One scholar suggests that today Matthew might say, “Ya’ll are red hot peppers for the earth.” In other words Christ’s disciples are noticeably different and shake things up. In fact Matthew’s Jesus says that if we’re not standing out and bringing some bang, we’re useless and serve no good purpose. The Greek here says we become insipid, bland, uninteresting, dull, boring. What’s the point of

being church if we're not going to liven things up? People outside the church aren't interested in whether church is fun or we have lively music or spectacular activities or the best lattes in town at a coffee bar. Bottom line? They want to know if this Jesus thing is real. Are we authentic? Does following Jesus really matter and does he really change lives? If not, all we are doing is taking up space and wasting time.

But we *are* the salt. We *are* the light. That's Christ's good news to us! And when Christ lives in us people are drawn like someone in the dark moving toward home's beckoning light. When Christ's light shines through us, we bring to light how messed up life can be on the world's terms. And others see what true and beautiful life can be. But it's not about us. We're not the light source; God's light shines through us; to God be the glory for great things done.

So far in Matthew's gospel Jesus' fame is on the rise. No thunderclouds of trouble are on the horizon yet. He calls his followers and the crowd to a lifestyle that stands out from the familiar. So we might wonder if Jesus wants start a new religious movement different from his Jewish roots. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Immediately after calling us to be salt and light, Matthew's Jesus says he has not come to do

away with the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. God's will made known through the Law and the words of the prophets is still in full force.

Matthew's Gospel reminds us that Jesus a first century Jew to the core. Jesus is like the scribes and Pharisees of his day in one very important way – he is committed 100% to doing God's will as seen in God's law and taught by God's prophets. Jesus doesn't do away with the tradition – he radicalizes it and gets to its root purpose and intent. What makes Matthew's Jesus different is this- as Son of God Jesus is *the* authority. With his direct connection to God Jesus is *the* plumb line for fully understanding the Law and Prophets. What they teach is this - we are to live first and foremost by the principles of love and mercy and justice and doing what is right at all times. Jesus holds up the scribes and Pharisees as models of righteousness. But we are to live to an even higher standard and commitment. Jesus is not letting us off easy. In the words of C. S. Lewis, Jesus calls us to “go further in and further up.” Don't follow the law and prophets out of duty or obligation. Live this way because we're so in love with God and so attuned to God's heart that we can't imagine doing anything less. We want God to have God's way with us and actually get to the heart of God's plans and purposes, and the Law and Prophets help us find our way. Jesus takes us further in and further up by telling us to live this way because these

teachings point us toward life, not because you have to do so. Don't rest one day in seven because it's the law, but because rest is God's gift and a necessary and good thing. You *want* to deepen your relationship with God and take the time to do so, and so you claim Sabbath time for yourself.

1600 years ago St. Augustine said, "Love God and do what you will." Our secular society forgets the first words and thinks the good life is simply doing what we want. We become a law unto ourselves, and it is killing us. Jesus calls us to keep the law purely – love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

What does it mean to love God and do what you will, to fulfill the Law and Prophets? That is TBD – to be discerned in the true light that Christ brings to us. At the very least it means being gracious and kind, practicing humility and generosity, living love and mercy and justice from the heart, even toward those who wish us harm. Quite honestly the 10 Commandments are a noble place to stand, too. There's nothing wrong with giving God first place in our lives, or honoring and respecting those who parent us. It's no crime to be truthful or to see marriage vows as sacred promises. Turning from theft or envy or violence do us good. This culture values us because of what we do and how much we make and how big our

resume is. So if we dare to rest and do nothing for God's sake, some think we are crazy, and we resist the idea like it is a terrible thing.

But it is life for our very souls. We live in a 24/7 world where time is no longer sacred. It's only to be filled up. But we are so very empty. The Law and Prophets are God's gifts not to make life miserable, but to make real life possible. And Jesus comes that we might have life in all its fullness. When God's mercy and grace and justice and love shine through us and season our lives, we *do* live. And when those things are seen in us, our lives are beautiful and good and others are drawn to the light and to God. Jesus says, "Y'all are salt, the red hot peppers of Ashland. Y'all are light. Be what Jesus says you are. Here and now. And others will praise God for what is happening in our midst. Thanks be to God. Amen.