



Theme: The Sermon on the Mount
“The Challenging Ethics of Jesus”

sermon preached by Aaron Strietzel
April 24-25, 2021

Weekly Memory Verse:

14 “You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept.” – Matthew 5:14 (The Message)

VIDEO Sermon Bumper

SLIDE “The Challenging Ethics of Jesus”

Today we continue on our sermon series as we explore the challenging ethics of Jesus found in what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount. As Pastor Jeff said last week, “we recognize this sermon to be the single most important sermon which was ever delivered.” In actuality, what we call the Sermon on the Mount is likely a collection of sermons that have been “copied and pasted” together by the author to put together “one great single sermon” that best captures the core message of Jesus.

I remember a season of my life where I was struggling with the word Christian. I was asking questions like, “Was I a Christian?” “What is a Christian?” While wrestling with these questions, I decided to read through Matthew to come back to the core teachings of what it means to follow Jesus. When I read through the Sermon on the Mount, it spoke to me in a deep way. I don’t know if I ever made it through the book of Matthew, because for the next several months all I could do is read through these three chapters.

I say all this to highlight how important they are, but also how influential they have been in my own life as I discovered them in deeper ways during a season of asking some pretty difficult and important questions. Let's take a look at today's text, the four verses found in Matthew 5

Bible **¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. - Matthew 5:13-16**

I'm a huge fan of candles. Most mornings, I wake up early, make a cup of coffee, and light a candle, and watch the flame as it flickers in the midst of the darkness. Then I settle in for a short meditation.

There is something about a lit candle, shining in the darkness, that speaks to my soul.

- Perhaps it's the flickering of light shadows cast on the walls?
- Perhaps it's the slowing down and sitting in the silence without it being absolutely dark. Just enough light to ease into the morning.
- Or perhaps, like a campfire, there is something mesmerizing about a flame?

To be honest I'm not exactly sure what it is about a candle that warms my soul in the early morning hours, but somehow it creates a sacred space, or maybe more accurately it reminds me that all space is sacred.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. In the text for today he tells them that they are to be the light of the world and then gives a metaphor about a light. Say you wake up in the morning, before the sun rises, light a candle, and then cover it up.

This idea makes us ask:

- Why in the world would someone do such a thing?

It's kind of:

- Like filling up a gas tank, knowing you won't be driving anytime in the next year.
- Like taking a shower, and then putting on dirty clothes.

- Like getting all done up, only to head straight to bed.

I have a thing for nachos and beer. When I say I have a thing, I mean I could eat nachos like 2-3 times a week for dinner. I feel bad saying this because I've been a pretty healthy eater most of my life, and my wife is a naturopath and is always finding healthy alternatives, but what can I say, I'm from Wisconsin. Cheese runs through my veins!

The other night I grabbed some beer and all the garnishes for nachos. I bought chips, cheese, green onions, black olives, jalapeños, cilantro, and...for the finale...a juicy, red, organic tomato. Am I making anyone hungry?

I shredded the cheese and placed all the toppings on the tortilla chips and put them in the oven and started the timer. While the nachos were being warmed up – oh that wonderful smell of cheese melting in the oven - I cracked open a beer while I sliced up the tomato, thinking I would add it after they were finished. When the tomatoes were all cut, I thought to myself, “don't forget these Aaron!” as I sat down to start the movie. The timer went off and I grabbed the sizzling nachos out of the oven, brought them over and started to enjoy. After I was finished, I got up for another drink, only to see the tomatoes, all cut up and ready, sitting on the counter. “Dang it Aaron!” I said to myself.

Have you ever done something like this?

Jesus' metaphor of the light is almost as if he was saying, “What if you bought all the toppings for nachos, including a splurge on tomatoes, you cut them all up and then just left them on the side!”

Again, it begs the question:

- Who would do such a thing!

The answer:

- No sane person would do that intentionally!

Jesus says,

Bible ***You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.***
Matthew 5:14

It's interesting to note here that Jesus isn't saying

- "Don't cover up your light by hiding your faith."
- "Make sure to give glory to God for every good act you do."
- "Make sure you're being a good witness in every interaction...or else."

Jesus is simply stating a fact. A city, which is built on a hill is unable to be hidden.

Sometimes I think in Christianity we tend to overemphasize how we are supposed to be holy...or else

- Or else God gets mad
- Or else we get punished
- Or else something bad will happen

Have you ever noticed that threatening people doesn't really lead to change? In fact, for me the gospel isn't about believing the right things or else. The gospel is about embracing this radical idea that God, the Source of all, is Unconditional Love.

Unconditional, by its definition, means there are no conditions – there are no strings attached. But isn't it interesting how quickly humans place conditions upon God's love?

- God loves you if...
- God will love you when...

The gospel, this radical idea that God is good, and that God is on our side, I believe, has the power to form us so deeply. (By the word *our* I mean that God wants all creation to flourish...not that God is on our side and not on someone else's.) Yet to believe means more than just mental ascent. To believe includes a deeper experience. To believe means to have an experiential knowing, deep within, what God's unconditional love feels like.

I often think how easy it is today to become numb to the radical message of Jesus. And when I say "we" I mean those of us that are here today. Those of us who are inside the church. We've heard stories about Jesus so frequently, that they can lose their potency and impact. And even worse, religious people sometimes use the message of Jesus to exclude and draw lines, lines that I think Jesus himself sought to erase.

Let's talk about light for a moment.

Slide Light cannot help but illuminate.

It's not like a candle wick that experiences the light of a flame can somehow choose not to illuminate. And, it doesn't have to try hard to illuminate. It just illuminates. In a similar way, our text for today suggests that what Jesus is saying is descriptive. Jesus isn't casting threats or suggesting people don't hide their light, in fact he said,

Bible **No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand** - Matthew 5:15

Just like buying a tomato for nachos and intentionally letting the tomato go back doesn't make sense, light cannot help but illuminate.

Let me say it as simply as I can. I don't think the point of this passage is primarily about hiding your light. Rather, I think Jesus is suggesting that if you have Christ within you, you cannot help but illuminate. In other words, Jesus is saying something like this. "You are light, and no matter what you do your light will help guide people. If you truly abide in God, if you truly experience unconditional love, like a candle wick, you cannot help but be caught on fire."

It's similar to the idea what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once said

Slide ***Light yourself on fire with passion and people will come from miles to watch you burn.*** – **John Wesley**

Salt and Light. What is true of both of these images? What do both of these images have in common? Both are meant to be in service of something else.

A light of any sort is meant to help illuminate something for someone else. If I leave my porch light on when you walk out my front door late at night, I do so not because I just randomly feel like staring at the light and wasting electricity. I turn on my porch light to help illuminate the way for you.

Salt

I have a small bowl of salt up here with me today. If we were not in the midst of a global pandemic, I might ask for a volunteer who would like to come up front and eat this bowl of salt while we all watched. How many of you would volunteer for such a thing?

Now what if I had freshly grilled steak and said I need a volunteer to come up front and eat this steak, which I had just seasoned with some fresh salt. Any takers?

Light helps illuminate the way for others

Salt helps bring out the flavors of other foods

Both of these are for the benefit of others, which is why Eugene Peterson, in the message translation, interprets Matthew 5:13 the following way.

Bible **Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.**
Mathew 5:13 (Message)

You are not here to be better salt than your neighbor.

You are here to bring out the divine characteristics in everything and everyone you come into contact with.

Think of it this way. If God is the creator of all things, then all of creation reveals who God is correct?

What Jesus is saying here then, is that you and I are here to discover more about who God is through science, technology, relationships, education, finances, government, poetry, art, family, love, sex, work, etc. Every day is an opportunity to discover something new, something more about who this Mystery we call God is.

Slide **"The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything." - Julian of Norwich**

"Let me tell you why you are here," Jesus says. "You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth."

How do we do this?

- If you own a business, you do this by treating your employees with respect and give them a fair wage. You seek to help them become the best they can be, and while not allowing them to take advantage of you, you seek to nurture the divine within them by encouraging them when you see them work hard, be creative, or serve others.

- You do this when you buy groceries, asking the check-out person how their day is going, looking them in the eye, and showing appreciation.
- You do this when you tip your barista and say thank you...especially when shopping at Animas Chocolate and Coffee company!
- You do this when you call a friend and share how much their friendship has meant to you over the years, giving a few specific examples, while explaining how rare that is to find a friendship such as theirs.
- You do this by encouraging and supporting your kids through all the ups and downs of life, so that they know they can come to you when they are struggling.
- You do this by taking care of creation, recycling, reusing, and all the ways you seek to decrease your waste and increase creation care.

Sadly, this is my last sermon I get to share with you all. At the end of April I will be stepping down. I am doing this because there is something calling me, something within luring me, to move into something new. I don't yet know what that something is yet, but I've found comfort in the words of William Faulkner who wrote

Slide ***You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.*** – William Faulkner

Or, to say it in Christian terms, new life, resurrection, or the birth of something new doesn't happen until death. I'm letting go of something in order to grasp something else. It's scary, and I'm uncertain what that will look like, but I wanted to leave you with a few examples that I have personally experienced this church community bringing out the God-flavors in the world around you

1. Every year this church sets aside an entire weekend in the summertime and instead of holding worship services, you all serve several needs in our local community by building fences, cleaning school gardens, painting, etc. We call it "Love Out Loud."
2. This church serves the larger local community through the Methodist thrift store in town.
 - a. Every year, the thrift store gives away proceeds to Manna Soup

Kitchen, La Plata County Family Center, La Plata Youth Services, Summit Church Early Learning Center for scholarships, and college scholarships to graduating seniors.

3. This church serves families in this community through the pre-school here.
 - a. Our preschool opened in 1998, with a goal to minister to the whole child. by supplementing the traditional learning domains – cognitive, small and large motor skills, science, math, social emotional with a spiritual component.
 - b. The preschool operates year-round and presently has 70 children enrolled, serving 61 families.
 - c. The preschool is also able to provide scholarships to help offset the cost.
4. Outside of COVID restrictions, we often have at least two mission trips to Kenya and Guatemala. Both of these allow people here to serve those in other countries through building homes and offering medical clinics which can see upwards of 1,000 patients each time!
5. Our community began a relationship with the Navajo nation to help offer support through what has become known as Native Hope. Here's just a few things that Native hope has done
 - a. Between October 2018 and March 2020 (before Covid) Native Hope installed 221 solar lighting units in homes on the reservation that did not have electricity.
 - b. Through our quarterly food drives, Native Hope has supplied over 250 care packages of food to families on the reservation that need food.
 - c. We have delivered 55 gallon water tanks with pumps to over 50 families who do not have water, or the ability to get clean water due to lack of transportation and funds to purchase water.
 - d. We have delivered 30 cords of firewood to homes on the reservation this past winter to help families stay warm.
 - e. We have partnered 42 Navajo families with Durango area families since December 2020 through our Family to Family program, where Durango families provide monthly food and cleaning supplies to the

- Navajo families, and the Navajo families commit to do one act of kindness to someone outside of their family once a month.
- f. We currently have 3 part time Navajo employees who are our boots on the ground on the reservation and help deliver all the food, water and firewood.
6. One of the things that is so behind the scenes that I think is often overlooked is our caring ministries, supervised by Pastor Karen Wallace.
 - a. We have 17 different caring ministries, offering emotional and spiritual support to those walking through difficult seasons.
 - b. Some of the things the caring ministry offers is prayer – making daily visits to mercy medical center to offer in patient prayer, offer support to those grieving, meals, prayer quilts, baby blankets for newborns at Mercy and a lot of listening and compassion.
 7. Every year this community takes its two largest giving worship services, Christmas Eve and Easter, and gives away the offering.
 - a. For Christmas of this past year (2020), this community gave:
 - \$25,000 to Habitat for Humanity-La Plata County
 - \$70,000 to Acacia Ranch in Kenya (money was put towards construction of a home for orphaned children)
 8. You serve young people in a number of ways, including kids ministry, youth ministry, Rooted college ministry, and kids and youth summer camps. The church has also poured into young adults through an internship program, of which I was the first benefactor and forever be grateful for all the ways this community has brought out the God-flavors in my own life.

For all of these things, and so much more. Thank you for the ways you have and continue to serve our community. This church, far more than any I have ever experienced, seeks to bring the God-flavors out by being Jesus Christ to the world in tangible, practical ways.

My hope is that you continue to do this, both individually and also as a church community. As my closing statement for my last sermon here, I wanted to celebrate and say thank you for all the ways I have seen this church has be a light on a hill and has brought out the God-flavors in our local community.

Amen.