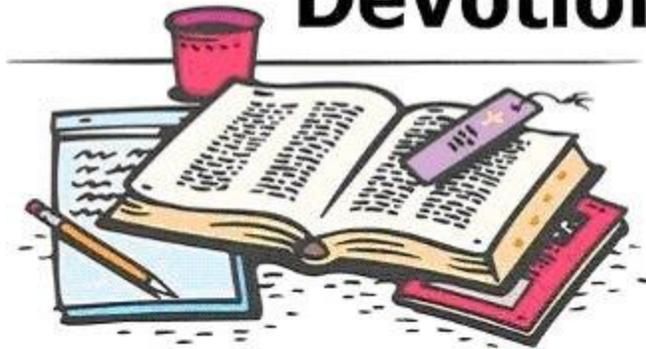


Berean Baptist Church
Devotions, Prayers, Sermon Notes
For February 5, 2023

Daily Devotions



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Monday

Scripture – Matt 5:13 - You are the salt of the earth

Theme – Rediscovery Joi de Vivre

Devotion – this week's portion of the sermon on the mount begins. 'You are the salt of the earth.' Like the first week's portion, Jesus focuses on affirmation and encouragement. Last week he proclaimed God's blessing. Creator is aware of suffering and actively creates happiness through justice and peace. This week Jesus moves from introducing the God of Blessing to describing the disciple's role in the Blessing God's benevolent intervention. First, he says, 'you are the salt of the earth.'

Hyponatremia, which is the proper medical term for having lower-than-normal blood sodium levels can cause some serious health problems. So when Jesus references salt or the lack of salt, he isn't just describing a bland meal. He is talking about the lived experience of the malnourished as food is the most prevalent source of sodium in our diets. In Jesus' time, salt was used to preserve food. Salt was used as a disinfectant for wounds as well (although that practice is not recommended by medical professionals). When Jesus talks about salt, it is a metaphor for a safe, healthy, wholesome life.

But here is the amazing thing about what Jesus has said. He doesn't say that God is the salt of the earth, or that he is the salt of the earth. No, he is speaking to the disciples and identifying THEM as the earth's salt. They are the easily ignored or forgotten mineral that is still necessary for health and well-being. Jesus begins the sermon with a reminder of the beneficence of God. God is that which makes life, safe, good, joyful, and possible. Then, in today's verse, he reminds the disciples that they have been created and called to join in that beneficence. They are called to be partners with God in this mission of blessing. God relies on them to embody the blessing of God in the world, among the spiritually bereft, oppressed, and traumatized.

Let's agree to begin each day this week with this **prayer**: 'Show me how to be salt and light for someone today, Lord. Help me serve as a blessing, share a word of encouragement, and contribute to the establishment of your kingdom here on earth.'

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Tuesday

Scripture – Matt 5:14 - You are the light of the world

Theme – Wisdom and Companionship

Devotion – While salt is a metaphor that is used in the First Testament, it is quite rare. But light, which is the metaphor that Jesus pairs with salt in today's verse, is used quite often. It wasn't so long ago that we observed the season of Christmas where one of the most often read passages of the prophet Isaiah states, 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.' The light, in this instance, is the action of God, rescuing the northern tribes of Israel from Assyrian oppression, and from the unfaithful leadership of King Ahaz. I know, this sounds very historical and political. So, think of it this way: the people walking in darkness (in Hebrew it's present tense not past) are the people walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Life is bleak, bereft of hope, and untenable. That is what darkness is. But God brings light to make wholesome life possible once again.

The light that the prophet Isaiah speaks of has deep roots of meaning. When the Hebrew people were liberated from Egypt, we are told that God was a cloud ahead of them during the day, and a column of fire at night, to give them light. God sent light to show the people the path away from cruelty and injustice and closer to the promised land. And of course, light is the first thing that God speaks into existence in the creation story. God intervened in the chaotic darkness of pre-creation with light. Light is a powerful metaphor for God's liberating activity, trustworthy presence, and safe guidance through all of life's challenges.

As with the metaphor of salt, surprisingly Jesus shifts the metaphor of light from referring to God, saying, 'YOU are the light of the world,' to the disciples. Obviously, God remains the source of wisdom, security, and justice. But Jesus highlights the role of the disciples in reflecting that light into the shadowy places of the world. God has blessed the disciples and entrusted them with the mission of guiding people away from suffering. This includes liberating them from anger and injustice and revealing the wisdom that will lead them to God's kingdom. Once again, Jesus uplifts and encourages his disciples and through them, the crowds that follow. He reminds them just how vitally important they are to the God who created them. God's healing of a broken world depends on them. God has created them to bear the light that shows people the way to a wholesome life.

Let's add to our **prayer** from yesterday, 'this little light of mine, show me how to make it shine. Help me resist the darkness I encounter and radiate your justice and compassion into the world today.'

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Wednesday

Scripture – Matt 5:13 - 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 underfoot.

Theme – The Power of Encouragement

Devotion – I confess that for some reason I've always read this week's portion from the Sermon on the Mount with more than a hint of criticism. So when Jesus says that the salt has lost its saltiness, I've heard that as Jesus confronting the disciples and/or the crowds with a lack of faithfulness. I thought he was revealing their failure. The same could be said of the section of the sermon in which Jesus seems to enjoin the disciples NOT to hide their light. He says to them not to put their light 'under a bushel basket.' Which sounds like a conscious and intentional action on the part of the disciples. But recently, I've been rethinking that assumption.

First, in the context of the sermon Jesus begins with affirmation and encouragement. Two Sundays ago, we heard Jesus announce God's blessing and then affirm the blessings God has bestowed so that the disciples can also be a blessing. There isn't, at this point in the sermon, any criticism. Jesus opens with inspiration and motivation. So perhaps he has not moved away from encouragement at all, in this week's reading. Second, Jesus is speaking to people he has described as meek. Remember that meek doesn't mean humble. It is more likely to suggest humiliation. The crowds and I imagine the disciples themselves are dispirited and despondent. The Romans have been telling them that they are inferior people destined for defeat and occupation. Herod uses them only to maximize his own personal gain, so they are objects to be exploited not humans to be loved and dignified. As the gospels represent the religious elites, they too seem to care very little for the people. Instead, they seem to care much more about gaining favor with the Romans and living in privilege.

So when Jesus describes salt that has lost its saltiness, he isn't faulting the disciples or the crowds. He is giving voice, sympathetically, to their experience. They have lost the joy of life because it has been taken from them. The Romans and the Herods and the High Priests have taken away the joy of life and hope for a future that is happy, safe, or secure. And when we feel abused and unworthy of respect, do we have the confidence to let our light shine? No. We do not. The whole point of crucifixion was to terrify the people into silence and submission. So when Jesus announces that the disciples (and the crowds) are salt and light, he is liberating them from shame and humiliation and announcing the loving esteem of God for them. They are valuable to God. And he is reminding them that their voices matter, their actions matter, and their courage matters. Telling them to let their light shine is a speech meant to encourage them to no longer accept their oppression. Instead, they should act, resist, and bravely live in ways that create the just kingdom of God.

Let's add to this week's **prayer**: rescue me Lord from fear and despair. Let me know that I am your beloved as I am. Show me how to bravely allow the light of your love, peace, and justice to shine through me encouraging others today.

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Thursday

Scripture – Isaiah 58:10 - if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

Theme – Salt and Light in the Community

Devotion – In Tuesday's devotion that explored Jesus' affirmation of the disciples as 'the light of the world,' I mentioned that light was a popular and often used metaphor for the presence of God. In the Isaiah passage that we read on Sunday, we got to hear the use of the light metaphor in some detail. The reading begins with an argument between God and the people of Israel. It takes place after the Babylonian exile. Those who were exiled have returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding area anticipating a joyous rebuilding of the city, the temple, and the whole society. But this rebuilding process is complicated, and success is elusive. So, the people complain to God saying that they fast and pray and worship faithfully and are frustrated that God's promised successful reconstruction isn't successful. God withholds the fulfillment of the promise.

God responds not by talking about the light at first, but by talking about worship (specifically fasting). The Israelites argue that they fast or worship faithfully but are denied blessings. God describes the fast or worship that pleases Him, suggesting that their current style of worship is not! God lists a number of behaviors that are displeasing; you oppress your workers, and you are violent toward one another. Then God explains the kind of worship that is pleasing, which I've chosen for today's verse. What we see here is that worship that is pleasing to God is not confined to a temple or synagogue or church. Worship is a spiritual practice that is meant to shape society in such a way that the vulnerable are acknowledged and cared for. The common good, here and now, becomes the goal, the purpose, and the ultimate good for those who worship God.

It is here that light finally arrives. When prioritizing, contributing to, and even sacrificing for the common good becomes the norm, God will bless Israel, and the light will rise on their darkness. The light functions differently in this reading than it does in Jesus' sermon in Matthew. This morning's reading reveals the way out of the oppression and injustice that they support. God reveals the light to lead Israel out of their cruel and selfish disregard for the poor in spirit. This includes those who mourn, those who are meek, and those who are starving for justice. In Matthew, the light encourages the exploited and depressed. In Isaiah, today, the light redirects the powerful and privileged back to living in covenant with God, by living in right (generous) relationship with their neighbors.

Let's add this to our **prayer** for the week: give me the courage to recognize the darkness in the world around me and the way it impacts my neighbors, Lord. Then show me the light that leads me away from injustice and into healthy and wholesome relationships with my neighbors.

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Friday

Scripture Isaiah 58:12 - Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Theme – Salt and Light in Action

Devotion – If we think about yesterday's verse as describing in specific detail what it means to be the salt of the earth; to feed the hungry and cloth the naked and shelter the unhoused and assure justice for workers, then perhaps today's reading leads us deeper into what it means to let our light shine. While a great deal of our reading from Isaiah is critical, it does end in a tone similar to that struck by Jesus in Matthew. Isaiah ends with inspiration, encouragement, and empowerment.

In today's verse, God acknowledges the desires of Israel to rebuild Jerusalem. As we saw yesterday, God radically redefines what rebuilding is. For God, rebuilding means the creation of a society of the common good in which all are cared for and provided for. When this is the kind of rebuilding that inspires Israel, God will empower them to pursue that goal. The empowerment God promises is quite poetic in the English translation. God will equip Israel to rebuild, raise up, repair, and restore. It isn't so much that these words differ greatly. They basically mean the same thing. But it is almost as if God is so caught up in the hope that Israel will respond to the light that God is overwhelmed in ecstatic speech.

Much as salt and light in Matthew, Israel is inspired to make life, safe, joyful, and equitable life, possible once again. With the light, they can repair damage, build strong foundations so that what they build will withstand time and storms. In addition, the light bridges the wealth and poverty gap, and creates safe neighborhoods that people can raise their families in. Like in Matthew, the light reveals the way to the common good, and it reveals that the common good is God's greatest desire.

As we close our **prayer** this week, let's ask the Lord to show us how to rebuild, repair and raise up. God, make my desires match yours: that your creation experiences joy, peace, and justice. Shine your light in me so that I can discover my role in your ongoing mission of repairing and raising up.

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