

The world is a dark place, in which everything is falling apart.

That's probably not the most inspiring way to begin a sermon. But, it's true. You don't have to like it; in fact, you shouldn't. And you don't even have to be a religious person to acknowledge the truth of it. Just look at the human body; or try to maintain a house (or a church building); or attempt to keep a relationship strong, and you will see how much work it takes to hold things together. And with all our efforts, things still degrade and decay. And as for darkness, do I really need to build a case for that? I don't think anyone is under the illusion that human beings are becoming more moral or more considerate or more concerned with doing what is right. It's a dark place, in which everything is falling apart.

I hope you agree that is true. And I hope you will agree that this is equally true: knowing that this is the case—that the world is dark and things fall apart—Jesus has spoken a solution into this dark world. Believe it or not, the solution involves you.

Last week I described Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as his inaugural address. What was being inaugurated? The kingdom of God. The reign of God; a spiritual reality in which God is working to repair His world. Jesus has come to counteract the forces of darkness and disintegration. A new light is breaking into the world and Jesus is bringing it. But here's the twist: when you receive the light of Jesus—when you believe the gospel—you also reflect it. When you trust that Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection saves you from eternal death, God turns around and injects you into a culture that is dying. For what purpose? To hold it together. To preserve it. To rebuild it. The solution to a dark and decrepit world involves you. Jesus says you are salt and you are light.

Now, to call a human being salt and light is, of course, a metaphor. Jesus is making a vivid comparison in a way that invites us to explore it and look at it from different angles. One thing to be said about salt is that it served as a preservative in the ancient world. As

you know, there were no freezers back then, so rubbing salt into meat would slow the rate of decomposition. Light has more obvious value, but it's still good for us to remember that the ancient world was far darker than ours. Light is the way in which we see everything else, and torches, candles, and oil lamps were your nighttime options. That's sort of the raw material of the metaphor. So what is Jesus trying to say by making this comparison? How are you salt and light?

Well, one way to think of it is that salt and light expose the decay and the darkness of this world. And this often happens just by you, as a follower of Jesus, showing up. Let me give you kind of a tongue-in-cheek example, but it really does make the point.

For a number of years my dad and I would go to Myrtle Beach to go golfing. As a twosome we were almost always paired up with two other golfers to play the course. In that situation you kind of give a little introduction; your name, where you're from, stuff like that. Then it's off to the first tee. And it's golf, so people, ususally guys, hit shots and then they say things. Phrases you would not say around your mother. In combinations you never thought of before. And then on about the third or fourth or fifth hole, they ask, so what do you guys do? And my dad would say, "I'm a pastor and my son is studying to be one." And you would see this look on their faces that is hard to describe, but after the next bad shot they would say, "Oh rats." And it was that way for the rest of the round.

We weren't trying to be the speech police, but do you see? When you are salt and light, and people know you are salt and light, it exposes things. Your presence can reveal where someone's heart is at and you don't have to say a word. But then, when you begin to act in a Christlike way, that turns things up several notches. Jesus says "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." What's really illuminating is that the word Jesus uses for "good" when he says "good deeds" is a deliberate choice. There was one word in Greek, *agaotos*, that means good in quality, but he used a different word, *kalos*, which means beautiful. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your beautiful deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Are you

reflecting the light of Jesus in a way that could be described as beautiful? You may be doing it without even realizing it.

Another thing that salt and light do is they bring joy. They bring joy! Salt was not only a preservative in the ancient world, it was a seasoning, and the same is true today. Salt is still popular because it brings flavor to life. And there is great joy in light as well. though we've seen it thousands of times, we still stop to watch the sun rise or set. At Christmastime we put lights everywhere we can stick them, because of the joy it brings. So it follows that a disciple of Jesus brings a note of joy into every situation. A believer in Jesus knows that the greatest victory has already been won, and that gives you a solid confidence, a steadiness, an ability to find the good and celebrate it. Salt and light bring joy.

And last, if you are salt and light, you are part of something bigger than yourself. We are working together to carry out beautiful deeds that will glorify the Father. Jesus says, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden." You need more than one person to make a city. Likewise, you need more than one grain of salt to make a difference. One grain is not going to preserve or season much of anything, but a handful of salt; a cup of salt; now you're going to see results. Jesus is talking to us as a group. There's no doubt we affect our surroundings on our own, that's true, but Jesus is addressing us here as a community and saying together you are salt. Together you are light. Together you are preserving and seasoning. Together you are reflecting the truth of Jesus. Together you are doing beautiful things that glorify our heavenly Father.