



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
Bible Study Session 04  
Matthew 5:13-16: Topic 4.0

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

5.13 Ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς· ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ, ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται; εἰς οὐδὲν ἰσχύει ἔτι εἰ μὴ βληθὲν ἔξω καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων. 5.14 Ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. οὐ δύναται πόλις κρυβῆναι ἐπάνω ὄρους κειμένη· 5.15 οὐδὲ καίουσιν λύχνον καὶ τιθέασιν αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τὸν μῶδιον ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν λυχνίαν, καὶ λάμπει πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ. 5.16 οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

13 Ihr seid das Salz für die Welt. Wenn aber das Salz seine Kraft verliert, wodurch kann es sie wiederbekommen? Es ist zu nichts mehr zu gebrauchen. Es wird weggeworfen und die Menschen zertreten es.

14 Ihr seid das Licht für die Welt. Eine Stadt, die auf einem Berg liegt, kann nicht verborgen bleiben. 15 Auch zündet niemand eine Lampe an, um sie dann unter einen Topf zu stellen. Im Gegenteil, man stellt sie auf den Lampenständer, damit sie allen im Haus Licht gibt. 16 Genauso muss auch euer Licht vor den Menschen leuchten: Sie sollen eure guten Taten sehen und euren Vater im Himmel preisen.

**NRSV**

13 You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. 15 Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

**NLT**

13 You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

14 You are the light of the world – like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. 15 Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>

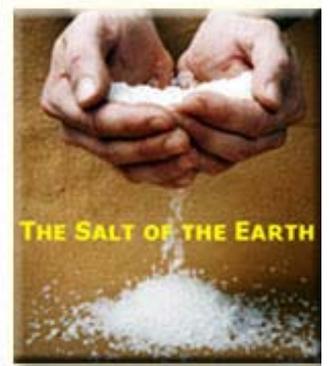
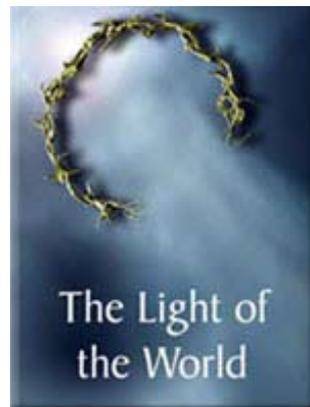
**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

The understanding of the biblical text with accuracy depends on first determining what the author was saying to his initial target audience in his own world and time. Absolute certainty of this meaning is never possible, but, through careful analysis of the historical and literary nature of the text, high level confidence in that original meaning can be achieved. This 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, becomes the foundation of and establishes the parameters for a modern application of the text, i.e., the 'now' meaning of the passage. It is on this side of the interpretive process that multiple applications become possible, since a core scripture principle can be applied to many different situations in contemporary Christian experience.

In seeking to be true to this time-proven method of interpreting the Bible, these studies explore first the 'then' meaning as a basis for the 'now' meaning.

**Historical Background:**

The historical issues in verses 13-16 mainly revolve around identification of the figurative meaning of the metaphors of salt and light. Two core axiomatic declarations<sup>2</sup> form the core of the passage: 1) Ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς and 2) Ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. Clearly the images of salt and light are word pictures without intended literal meaning. But the more graphic use of figures of speech for dramatic impact always carries an intended meaning. The pictures express ideas. The interpretive challenge is to determine, first, the range of possible meanings, and, then,



<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>The more technical label for these kinds of statements is 'maxim,' which, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary means: "1: a general truth, fundamental principle, or rule of conduct; 2: a proverbial saying."

to conclude which one of these possible meanings is most likely the intended one by the author of the text.

The challenge in the process here is to let those possible meanings come out of the author's world, and not to superimpose onto the text meanings derived from the modern world. Figurative language is always shifting in meaning. The same figure of speech doesn't always keep the same meaning over extended periods of time even inside a particular language and culture, just as word definitions undergo shifts in meaning. Add to this a different culture with a dramatically different language, and separate out the 'then' and 'now' by over two thousand years, and you have a real challenge for correct understanding. But not an impossible one! All of this is to urge caution in drawing conclusions about intended 'then' meaning of these metaphors of salt and light. The Bible student is far too naive when modern figurative meanings of salt and light are read back into the biblical text. False meanings can easily be generated by such a process.

What historical process needs then to be followed in determining the legitimate range of historical meanings of these metaphors? Two levels of analysis must be considered. First, the metaphors in the Sermon on the Mount are mostly drawn from everyday life experience in first century Jewish life in Palestine. This is the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* aspect of the text. Then based upon the assessment of Matthew's initial readership of this gospel, one must consider any modification or de-limiting of the possible meanings that writing these words to a readership living outside Palestine might impose. This is the *Sitz im Leben Kirche* perspective of the text. From the assessment of the Matthean community given in Lesson 01 of this study,<sup>3</sup> we can conclude that the Jewish heritage of Matthew's Christian audience in Syria would not impose many limitations on how Matthew would frame the words of Jesus so his readers could clearly understand their meaning.

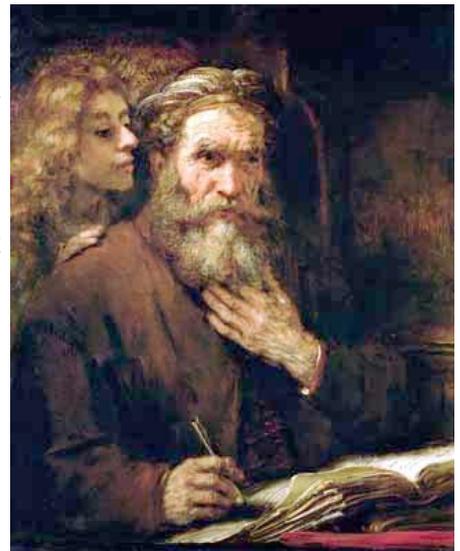
One other consideration that sometimes arises in this exploration. On occasion the religious significance of a metaphor has a different meaning than the popular, everyday meaning of the metaphor. Here the Bible student must evaluate whether the text favors the religious meaning or the everyday life meaning. One looks for clues in the author's presentation of the metaphor as to which source he is drawing upon in his use of the metaphor. In our passage, the everyday life origin of the metaphors of salt and light seems to be where Jesus was getting His ideas from. And thus any potential tension between popular meaning and religious meaning would favor the popular meaning as more likely.

With the images of salt and light, one doesn't find a parallel to Matt. 5:13-16 in Luke's version of the Sermon in chapter six. But the image of salt does surface in Luke 14:34-35<sup>4</sup> and also in Mark 9:50,<sup>5</sup> where they are used in different settings than here in Matthew. These two texts provide some possible signals of potential meaning of the metaphor of salt. Clearly Jesus used the image with a positive meaning, not a negative one. Consistent with Matthew's presentation, a warning accompanies the metaphor. One

<sup>3</sup>See Section 4. 1) of Lesson 01 for a detailed explanation of the Matthean audience. In summary, we concluded that his audience was Jewish Christians under pressure to abandon their Christian faith to return to the synagogue and traditional Judaism. They were living in Syria, possibly in Antioch and / or in Damascus in the early 70s soon after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Matthew's intent was to establish that Jesus and Christianity represented the true extension of the Old Testament revelation, rather than the synagogue and legalistic Judaism.

<sup>4</sup>Luke 14:34-35 (NRSV): "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? 35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

<sup>5</sup>Mark 9:50 (NRSV): "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."





16 <sup>5:14</sup> **You are the light of the world.**

17 **A city cannot be hidden**

set on a mountain

<sup>5:15</sup> neither

18 **do they light a lamp,**

and

19 **do they place it under a measuring basket,**

instead,

20 **they put it on a lampstand,**

and

21 **it gives off light to everyone in the house.**

<sup>5:16</sup>

So

22 **let your light shine**

before men

so that they may see your good deeds,

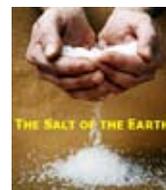
and

they may glorify your Father,

who is in Heaven.

### **Salt of the Earth, v. 13.**

Jesus' declaration in Matthew's rendering is clear and direct in the Greek: ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς. That is, "you are salt for the earth." You as salt must be beneficial to the earth. But how? The nature of Jesus' expression points to the use of salt in the first century world, and in particular to the first century Jewish use of it.



**Where do we turn in order to answer the question of first century Jewish use of salt and then of its symbolic significance?**

Several answers to this question exist. The beginning place we should check out is the use of the term for salt inside Matthew's gospel. This provides the most immediate context for understanding its use in 5:13. In our contemporary technology oriented world a couple of quick ways for checking this out exist, particular for the Bible study not familiar with Greek. *First*, do a concordance check on the frequency of the English word 'salt' using a selected English translation. This can be done in a matter of seconds at web sites such as [Bible Study Tools](http://BibleStudyTools.com) at Crosswalk.com.<sup>7</sup> *Then*, analyze the results. A [check](#) of the English word "salt" as it shows up in the gospels in the New Revised Standard Version reveals that it is only used here in Matthew's gospel. Instances of the word can be found in Mark and Luke, but not in John. The word "salt" also shows up in Col. 4:6. Confirmation of the accuracy of this comes from checking a Greek lexicon which reflects the eight uses in these four passages:

**Matt. 5:13**, "You are the **salt** of the earth; but if **salt** has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men."

**Mark 9:50**, "**Salt** is good; but if **salt** has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have **salt** in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

**Luke 14:34**, "**Salt** is good; but if **salt** has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"

**Col. 4:6**, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with **salt**, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone."

In analyzing these uses, one thing is clear. In Paul's use of the metaphor 'salt,' the meaning is that of seasoning. Our 'salty language' is supposed to be gracious and productive in that it has appropriateness in responding to questions about one's Christian commitment. That is, our words should be 'tasty' to the listener.

But in Jesus' use in Mark and Luke, He characterized 'salt' as good (καλὸν τὸ ἅλας). That is, salt has a noble quality to it. Functioning as salt would then mean something positive and noble for the world. At best the idea is that of having a positive influence on the world. Additionally, from Jesus' usage, salt is

<sup>7</sup>The web site is located at <http://bible.crosswalk.com/>. When doing a concordance search, first select the desired English translation that you want to use. Most of these electronic Bible translation web sites contain large numbers of Bible translations that can be selected. Crosswalk has one of the more user friendly formats. Also, select the section(s) of the Bible that you wish to search. Most sites allow you to choose between the OT and the NT. Additionally, sub-groupings of scripture books will also be available for limiting your search, e.g., the gospels. Once you have your settings in place, type in the word or phrase that you want to check, and then click the Find button. Usually the web server can do the search for you in less than five seconds. If you want to keep the results of your search, just copy and paste them from the web site into the document that you're working on.

something that can be lost, and become restored only with extreme difficulty, if at all.

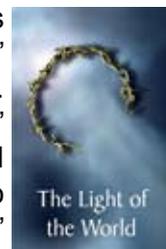
In the ancient world, the figurative meanings of 'salt' ranged from 1) preservative, 2) seasoning, 3) fertilizing, 4) purifying, 5) metaphor for wisdom, 6) sacrificial, 7) covenantal, to 8) moral purity. The most common everyday life meanings were salt as preservative and seasoning. Meanings 6 through 8 are religious associations coming out of the temple sacrificial system. Most commentators will opt for one of the above meanings, but in reality the more general and inclusive sense of 'influence' most likely is the better understanding.<sup>8</sup> To press the metaphor with further detail, e.g., influence by preserving the world from ruin, forces an either/or choice of meanings that the Matthean text doesn't signal.

The warning of losing one's 'saltiness' is the next important concept here. Statements 14 and 15 in the above diagram stress the extreme difficulty of regaining one's influence on the surrounding world after it has been lost. Although not completely impossible to regain, the point of these declarations is to warn disciples that regaining a positive influence on their world after losing it is extremely difficult and very unlikely. And whatever influence that might be regained will never reach the levels it had before losing it.

Consequently Jesus asserted the role of His disciples having a positive influence upon the world around them. Critically important was a lifestyle that in no way compromised that influence through bad example. For if they did mess up, they would have few if any chances to regain that positive influence.

### ***Light of the World, vv. 14-16.***

The second axiom is that Jesus' disciples are to be light to the world. The use of 'light' is extensive in the New Testament. In the New Revised Standard Version the English word 'light' shows up 76 times. The Greek word for light, φῶς, is used in 73 times in the New Testament. One should remember the difference between 'light' as the opposite of 'heavy,' and 'light' as something giving off light into the darkness. The first meaning of 'light' is the Greek word ἐλαφρός in the New Testament. Illumination is φῶς in Greek. The meaning here is easier to determine than with salt, particularly with the clear contrast to darkness in the usage. Jesus' use of this metaphor is clearly that His disciples are to be a channel of understanding to the world without understanding around them. The light is illumination that provides understanding that generates reaction.



The mixing of the metaphor in the elaboration of verses 14b-15 poses something of a challenge. At first Jesus asserts that His disciples are light. Then in verse fifteen He suggests that they are lamp stands, holding the light. This idea is further emphasized in verse sixteen with the verbal command 'let your light shine' (λαμπάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν), that is, 'function like a lamp stand.' Then in the fourth gospel, 'light' consistently means Jesus rather disciples, as in 8:12 where Jesus said, "I am the light of the world [Ἐγὼ εἶμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου]. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." This points to the spiritual reality that Jesus' disciples are channels of the salvational light who is Jesus Himself. The outside world looks at the believer; they should detect the presence of God in clear tones. That divine presence is the presence of Christ as Lord over the life of the disciple.

The warning aspects of this passage in vv. 14b-15 draw upon two images, a city and a lamp stand. The option here is different than with salt. There it was losing saltiness; here it is the illogic of trying not to shine.

The city in mind is probably Jerusalem, which was located high on a hill in Judea at about 2,500 feet (760 m) high in elevation. The ancient custom during times of war was to not light any fire or shining object at night so as to help hide the location of the city at nighttime. At other times, lights of some kind would be burning during the night to help travelers find their way to the city. It is this aspect that Jesus' warning plays off of. To conceal the lights then would make it dangerous for travelers coming to the city. With the temple located in Jerusalem, trying to conceal the city especially at times of major Jewish festivals with thousands of pilgrims making their way to the city would have been the height of foolishness. For a disciple to attempt



<sup>8</sup>For an example of an ancient writer who used the metaphor of salt with a variety of meanings, see Philo: 1) Opif 66 (preservative); 2) Spec III 96 (seasoning); 3) Praem 154 (religious purity)

to hide the presence of Jesus in his life would make it difficult for a lost person to find the light of salvation in Christ. Just as foolish, if not more so.

Even more illogical was the matter of the lamp stand. At night people light lamps so they can see inside their homes. Most homes in the ancient middle eastern world did not contain any windows. Light entered the home only through doorways to the outside. So lights were needed even during the daylight hours. To light a lamp and then set it under a measuring basket<sup>9</sup> would have made no sense whatsoever.

Thus the emphasis is upon the choice of the disciple to seek to conceal his spiritual identity to the outside world. Such an action is completely contrary to Jesus' demand upon His followers. Secret discipleship is non-discipleship. To the contrary, logical reasoning in the metaphor argues that the disciple make his witness as evident as possible in order to provide salvational illumination to a maximum number of people (πάσιν τοῖς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ).

Verse sixteen brings not just the image of a lamp but the entire pericope to a climatic point: "In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." The admonition urges the disciple to shine. In no way does this legitimize exhibitionism as a believer. This is not self-glorifying by one's actions. The reaction to the disciple's 'shining' clearly negates this, as well as Jesus' subsequent condemnation of the Pharisees' tendency toward this in 6:1-18. The nature of the disciple's 'shining his light' produces the action of glorifying God. That is, the 'shining' is the reflecting of the divine Presence in the disciple's life. He is not showing off his own spiritual achievements in a self-glorifying manner. The light, who is Jesus, is reflecting through the disciple in such a way that those observing recognize the extra-ordinary presence of God in the person's life. And they acknowledge this with praise to God, not to the disciple.

How does the disciple reflect this divine Presence? By his "good works" (ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα). The adjective καλὰ has an outward focus in its definition of 'good.' The actions of obedience by the disciple have a noble, attractive quality to them that draws other people to God.

Thus our mission to the world around us as disciples of Christ is two-fold. We are to have a positive influence on the world that results in a better world. And that influence will come through our reflecting the salvation light of Christ to that sin darkened world through noble actions of obedience to Christ.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) How can you have influence on your world?
- 2) How can you loose that influence?
- 3) How can you be a channel of light to a darkened world?
- 4) How can you fail to be a light of God's grace to the world around you?
- 5) When your light shines, who gets the credit? You, or God?



<sup>9</sup>The μῶδιον was a basket and held about eight quarts of dry measure, i.e. 8.81 liters or one peck in British measurement. Page 6 of Bergpredigt Study