

**‘LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE’  
MATTHEW 5:13-20**

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, All Services, Sunday February 7, 2021]**

**1. The Peculiar Kingdom.**

I loved Pat’s sermon last week. It was such a great introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, and such a clear explanation of how the beatitudes at the start of chapter 5 are meant to function for us. I walked away from the sermon with immense clarity. Clarity about just how different the world’s vision of the good life is from the one which Jesus offers us. And I walked away thinking that the vision of the good life the world around me offers is really very thin. My heart was stirred, and I found myself drawn deeply to the good life that Jesus invites me into. Of course, the reason it was a great sermon was because its clarity reflected the clarity of Jesus’ own words.

But there was one word from Pat’s sermon last week that has stayed with me all week and which has bounced around in my brain. It was my favourite word of the sermon. And it was the word ‘peculiar’. Of course, ‘peculiar’ is an excellent and memorable word even without a context. But in the context of Pat’s exhortation last week it was a word that made an enduring impression on me. Because the kingdom of Jesus is peculiar, is it not? It’s strange. It’s not normal- at least not by any worldly measure. It represents a vision of life, and beauty, and the future that couldn’t be more at odds with the world we live in. The kingdom of Jesus is as peculiar. And Jesus invites us to be a part of it.

And if we will, then you know what’s going to happen, don’t you? We’re going to be peculiar too. And in the verses we read today from Matthew 5 this is exactly what Jesus says. He tells his disciples, then and now, that people in Jesus’ kingdom are peculiar. And they should live their peculiar life loud and proud- for some very excellent reasons. That’s what we’re going to see today.

So let’s start by reviewing what we’ve read. This is Jesus’ call to a peculiar life.

**2. Jesus’ Call to a Peculiar Life.**

**- you are salt**

Verse 13.

[Read 5:13]

Jesus begins by saying that those who follow him are the earth's salt. Salt of course adds taste and flavour to food. In the same way, Jesus says, his people will live in the world with a distinctive flavour. And you notice that this isn't an instruction. It's a statement of fact. Christ's people won't be the same as everyone else. They won't just blend into some kind of bland background. They are the salt of the earth. And Jesus reminds his hearers that salt must remain salty to fulfil its purpose.

**- you are light**

And then verse 14.

[Read 5:14-15]

Jesus moves to a second metaphor to describe those who follow him. They are the world's light. And lights, he says, aren't designed to be hidden or covered, but to give light to others. In the same way the people of Jesus will enlighten those they live amongst in the world- they will share the light of God's truth and love by the way they live and speak. And once again you notice that this is not a command but simply a description of the way things are.

**- so shine**

But with this second metaphor, Jesus does move from description into command. The image of verses 14-15 is followed up by the exhortation of verse 16.

[Read 5:16]

Jesus says, if you are the light, then shine. If you've been lit, then enlighten others. And in particular, he has in mind that the way we conduct ourselves can have an enlightening influence on the world. He refers here to our 'good deeds'. And ultimately he hopes that the effect of his people's peculiar living will be other people coming to give glory to God.

**- practice and teach the commands**

And having said that, Jesus then launches into a discussion of his relationship with the Old Testament. And you may well ask why he does so at this point. It can seem at first glance to be unrelated to what's come immediately before. But I think what Jesus is doing is answering the question: 'how can disciples live as salt and light?' And the answer he's giving is this: 'by obedience to God's commands'.

So he doesn't want anyone to mistakenly think that he's come to abolish the Old Testament law or the prophets. And so he's emphatic about this. He says that every letter of the law will remain till the very end. Not even a small pen stroke will be erased from it. But of course, that's not because nothing has changed. Jesus' arrival on the earth is

revolutionary. And that's why the word 'fulfill' in verse 17 is so important. Jesus hasn't come to abolish the old covenant so that it will no longer exist. But he has come to fulfil it. So the Old Testament will still have relevance and authority, as it does today, but its continuity will, from this point, only be valid by reference to Jesus and his kingdom<sup>1</sup>.

And that's why he tells his hearers in verse 19 that anyone who ignores the commands of God will be called 'least' in the kingdom of heaven, but those who practice and teach God's commands will be 'great' in the kingdom. Of course, given the Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus and given he came to fulfil it, practising and teaching God's commands now, must be shaped by the Lordship of Jesus<sup>2</sup>. But nevertheless, turning our backs on the Old Testament is just not an option. Because people who want to live in Jesus' peculiar kingdom will love every word that comes from the mouth of God. And they will know how to be salt and light because they love to obey God's commands.

### **- surpass your leaders**

Which is why it's also not an option for Jesus' followers to be anything like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Because Jesus' doesn't seem to think they're very serious about obeying God's commands at all. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that he counts the Jewish leaders of his day as those who were 'setting aside' God's commands to use his phrase from verse 19. And presumably that's why he doesn't think they'll be entering the kingdom. Verse 20 is very stern isn't it? He talked in verse 19 about people being lesser or greater in the kingdom, but here he's talking about those who won't even enter it. And the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are the low bar<sup>3</sup>. In Jesus' mind they were people who wanted to look religious but who really demonstrated no true repentance. That was certainly the verdict of John the Baptist back in chapter 3<sup>4</sup>. They liked the commands they'd come up with themselves and made a show of keeping them stringently. But did they really love every word that came from the mouth of God? It seemed not. So, Jesus says, at the very least your righteous welcome of God's commands must surpass that of your leaders.

### **3. On Being Peculiar Today.**

And that's where our passage today comes to an end. Of course, in the verses that follow Jesus will go on to demonstrate what it means to live with righteousness that surpasses that of the Jewish leaders, what it means to practice and teach God's commands, and what it means to live as if Jesus himself has fulfilled the Old Testament law. So you'll have to come back next week to hear more on that. But for now, we ought to reflect on what

<sup>1</sup> See Don Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p.144.

<sup>2</sup> See Carson on this point as well- p.146.

<sup>3</sup> In this respect I think he's making a different point to that made in 5:48. Some people often see these verses as existing in some kind of parallel. But I think God's righteousness is offered as a "high bar" standard there. I think the opposite is true here.

<sup>4</sup> 3:7-8.

Jesus' words here mean for us. If Jesus was calling his disciples then to live a peculiar life in his peculiar kingdom, what does it look like for us to embrace his kingdom today?

Well, it seems to me that these verses ought to leave two main impressions on us. They certainly leave two key impressions on me. And I want to reflect on those with you now. What does Jesus say about being his peculiar followers today?

### **- distinguishing yourself**

Well, firstly, living in Jesus' kingdom means distinguishing yourself. And I don't mean distinguishing yourself with personal glory. Rather, I mean distinguishing yourself by being different to those around you. Surely this is at the heart of what Jesus' two metaphors have in common. To be the salt of the earth and to be the light of the world is to be distinctive. It's to be noticeably different amongst those we live with.

And, in particular, we will distinguish ourselves by our good deeds- verse 16. By practising and teaching the commands of God- verse 19.

So here's the question. Have we? Have we distinguished ourselves? Do the people we're living amongst think we're different- like food that has salt on it, or like a dark room with a light on in the corner? The people we live with, go to school or Uni with, work with, spend time with- would they say we're peculiar?

Or would they say we blend in pretty well?

Now I don't know about you but I find that an very challenging question to answer. It's an uncomfortable question for me. And I suspect that if you're honest, it's an uncomfortable question for most of you too. And it's an uncomfortable question for me because, in many ways, I blend in.

Here's what I think. I reckon very few of us are totally trying to hide our lamps under a bowl. I reckon most of us are happy for people to know we're Christians and we're not ashamed of that. We're not trying to desperately make sure no-one finds out. But, at the same time, we're hoping that people won't think we're too fanatical. We're hoping people won't see us as one of 'those Christians'- the ones with offensive beliefs about sex, about other religions, about heaven and hell. We're hoping people will accept us the way they accept their other friends. We're hoping people will like us and respect us. We'd really like it if we weren't the sort of people who they had conversations about behind our backs, saying things about how they wish we just didn't take it all so seriously. In our heart of hearts we'd kind of prefer it if they didn't see us as peculiar.

I don't think most of us are trying to pretend we're someone we're not. But I think we would like to have our cake and eat it too. We'd like to be known as Christians so we're not disloyal to Jesus. But we'd also like the world to love us. And Jesus' words in this

sermon are here to remind us that that just might not be possible. And he'd like us to be wise enough to be peculiar- for him. With him.

What does it mean to distinguish ourselves? What does it mean to be salt and light and to shine the light before others? I've got a few suggestions.

It might mean going out of your way to serve the needs of others rather than simply serving when we have the time or when it's not too inconvenient? It might mean that instead of having the same phones as our friends, or going to the same restaurants, or drinking the same wines, or driving the same cars, or sending our kids to the same schools, that we're so radically generous towards the needs of others that we can't afford to do all those things? It might mean acknowledging that our neighbours' worlds are really dominated by incredibly small concerns, and being prepared to talk about the things in life that really matter- to us, and to the world? It might mean being willing to be thought fanatical, or being willing to be gossiped about, or being willing not to be in the inner circle, because we're prepared to stand by our offensive beliefs? It might mean, as we'll hear in weeks to come, refusing to hate even those who've hurt us terribly, it might mean adopting a completely different outlook on sex to just about everyone else we meet, it might mean not getting divorced though everyone we know encourages us to leave, it might mean keeping our word even though we uttered it carelessly and it's now painful to go through with it, and it might mean showing kindness to those who've never been kind to us? And it might mean introducing the name of Jesus into our conversations even when others would prefer us to talk about just about anything or anyone else?

Because we might not be people scrambling for an ashamed bowl to put over our Christian light, but we may be those in danger of losing our saltiness? Don't you think? Can you think of a time in your life when you were much more zealous for Christ, when you were much more bold, and much less self-conscious about other people liking you and accepting you? Can you think of young people in our church who are like that now? I can. And would you like to say that maybe those zealous young people will become more nuanced as they get older and wiser, but inwardly you suspect they're closer to the picture of true discipleship Jesus paints here than you are?

Sisters and brothers, is it possible that we've forgotten how naturally Jesus talks about the persecution that comes to all who follow him- like he did in the verses we read last week- and we've convinced ourselves instead that it's possible to be a Christian who everyone will like and never persecute<sup>5</sup>? Is it possible that we've forgotten how peculiar the kingdom is and have chosen a life for ourselves that is not that distinctive? Worse, is it possible that we've forgotten how vastly superior the kingdom of heaven is to the kingdom of the world, how much more profoundly attractive is Jesus' vision of the good life than

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Green speaks of Christians being an 'irritant' in response to Jesus' words here- a very evocative word (see *The Message of Matthew*, p. 92).

anything else the world has to offer? Is it possible that Jesus calls on us to distinguish ourselves, but we've fallen into a way of life that is just blandly middle class?

And if you're sitting there this morning/evening wondering how I seem to be able to read what's in your heart, then you don't need to wonder for long. I think you know how I know what's in your heart. Because it's in mine too. These temptations are common to us all. And that's why Jesus' words in this chapter are such a sharp challenge to us in this part of Sydney at this time in history. And we need to hear them this morning/evening.

### **- loving God's commands**

But secondly, if we're going to be people who distinguish ourselves, then we're also going to need to be people who love God's commands. And we don't just mean people who have mastered the art of maintaining the appearance of Christian conformity. That would make us no different to the Pharisees. We mean people who genuinely care about every word that comes out of the mouth of God.

We won't be those who disparage the Old Testament or who effectively ignore it. Jesus' words here won't permit that<sup>6</sup>. Instead we'll acknowledge its enduring relevance and authority, though we read it as Christians not merely as Jews would have read it. We'll treasure the Old Testament because it teaches about God, because it teaches us the gospel<sup>7</sup>, and because it teaches us what it looks like to live in obedience to God.

And we'll love the New Testament too- because we learn in its pages how to imitate the perfectly peculiar life of Jesus, because we learn the words Jesus spoke, and because we learn from his apostles what he's done for us, and how we can worshipfully respond.

And we'll love the Bible so much we'll consume it voraciously- the way some people consume the daily news, or their favourite TV show, or the latest offerings in their Instagram feed. As Pat reminded last week, God's word will inform and nurture our vision of what the good life really is. God's word will be our reference point for every opinion we have, every decision we make, every word we speak, and every emotion we feel.

And when I say we'll love the Bible, I mean love. We live in a world where people don't like being told what to do. But we're Christians. So we welcome it. We love being told what to do. And what to think. And what to say. And what to value. Because we know the one who tells us. We know how trustworthy he is. We know how much wiser than us he is. We know how much he loves us, because he's proved his love- spectacularly in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and time and time again since then too. We love God's

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<sup>6</sup> See J C Ryle's commentary where he speaks about the danger of coming to 'despise' the Old Testament (*Matthew*, p.29).

<sup>7</sup> 'The Old Testament is the Gospel in the bud; the New Testament is the Gospel in full flower' (J C Ryle, *Matthew*, p.29).

commands because we love to obey them. We love to obey them, because we love him who we obey.

#### 4. Peculiar Motivations.

But, with those challenges ringing in our ears, I want to finish this morning/evening by pointing out the peculiar motivations that Jesus says fuel this way of life. Because I hope you noticed here that Jesus doesn't just want to exhort us, but also to excite us. So as we finish, let me briefly show you four motivations we find in these verses- motivations for living the good life of Jesus' kingdom.

##### - kingdom entrance

Firstly, we mustn't miss what verse 20 says. Nothing should motivate people to listen to Jesus like the prospect of entering his kingdom. And here he says that the way you can make sure you do is by taking God's word more seriously than the religious leaders of his day did. There's a warning here that you can't enter the kingdom just by going through the motions of conformity and giving yourself the name Christian. No- that won't do. But, if you'll really hunger and thirst after righteousness, if you'll mourn your sin and come humbly to Jesus, then the kingdom that he loves to share will be yours. That's the first thing.

##### - kingdom greatness

The second thing to notice is what he says in verse 19. He encourages us there to pursue greatness in the kingdom. I guess the implication of that verse is that it's possible to enter it, to be part of it, but to then sit very loosely to the kingdom's values. Perhaps these are people who know they need Jesus and so who come to him to receive his forgiveness, but who then show scant interest in what his kingship means for their lives. And Jesus urges us not to be like them. Instead, he invites us to long for the kind of life where the kingdom's values shape us entirely. And when we long for that we long for the kind of recognition that the king gives to his most loyal subjects.

##### - light for others

But the third motivation I want to point out is the joy of bringing light to those who are in the dark. Do you remember the words of verse 15?

[Read 5:15]

This is what light is for- to give. To give light to everyone in the house. And this is our privilege. The world may persecute us, or reject us, or wish we were less peculiar, but what many do not understand is that we live this way in love for the world. We have light to give. And though they don't know it, so many people around us live in darkness. But

one of the ways God has ordained for people to move from darkness to light, is by the distinctive lives of his people- their good deeds. So this our opportunity- to be used by God to help people living in darkness find the light that's in Christ. How wonderful! I hope that excites your heart.

### **- glory for God**

But what I hope excites your heart even more is the fourth motivation we find in Jesus' words here. We saw it in verse 16. There Jesus says that when we shine before others and they see our good deeds, some of them will turn to Jesus and ultimately give glory to God. And is that not the best motivation there is? Because God deserves his glory. He spoke in the beginning and there was light. And he sent his son to rescue us- Jesus the light of the world. He speaks through every page of the Bible to reveal himself to us. He is a Father to his people. He is glorious- gloriously good, gloriously holy, gloriously loving. So when people glorify him, they honour him as he deserves to be honoured. And people like us who owe everything to him, should want nothing more than to see him receive the glory he deserves. And Jesus invites us to joyfully invest our lives to that end.

[Read 5:16]