



**Red Letter City
Salt & Light
Courage Church,
Detroit, MI
Sunday April 17,
2016**

Last week we talked about the beatitudes.

The “blessed are’s....”

We spoke very broadly on the topic and now over the next eight weeks on Thursdays we are doing this EQUIP series on the

beatitudes, covering each one, one at a time and then after the teaching we are taking the time to dive into it all together. Thursdays are more of a dialogue at the end which we started this last week and it was powerful. We got a lot of great feedback.

So that is something that if you are available on Thursday nights, its something that I think will really bless your life.

But like we said last week and reiterated on Thursday... in a lot of ways, “The beatitudes” are kind of Jesus’ text, and everything thereafter in many ways shows us the application to the beatitudes...

What does a person in the Kingdom of heaven look like? How do they handle things like Oaths, like divorce? How do they handle things like anger and vengeance?

How do they pray? What do they do with their money?

Jesus addresses some of the toughest, most complex issues in the sermon on the mount as he lays out for us what life in the Kingdom of heaven looks like. and so today, we are looking at our first application.

So if you would, please turn your bibles with me to Matthew 5:13-16 -

“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 trampled under people’s feet.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your *good* works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Let’s Pray.

Detroit is the darkest city in America.

We have less working street lights than anyone. And maybe that statistic has changed by now, because I know that the mayor and our city officials have been working really really hard to put up new lights around the city and really make it feel safer for people when they are walking to their cars or walking down the street at night.

But most of you who live here have probably experienced what it feels like to walk down a street at night, with no lights.

Its a horrible feeling.

All sense of confidence is gone. Its just gone. You walk on eggshells. You wonder what is around you.

Because its really really dark.

You can’t see whats right in front of you.

There is something about experiencing a lack of light in a context like that one that makes you realize how valuable the light truly is.

It shows us what is right in front of us. It shows us what is a few feet down the road. It shows us where we parked, and who is walking toward us in that moment.

It brings certainty to a moment.

But how many of you know, we live a world that is filled with uncertainty. It is filled with doubts.

It is filled with people walking through their days not knowing what is on the other side of it, not knowing if people are on their side, or are out to get them...

not knowing if tomorrow is even going to come.

and in this dark city that still lacks lights to even guide our steps as we walk on the streets... in this dark city that is Detroit but in so many ways can represent life... Jesus tells us that in this city... we are supposed to be another city... a city on a hill.

In Israel, there existed in that day and still exists today, a city named Safed (S'Fath) and it is a city on a hill, it is also known as the City of Kabbalah.

It is the highest elevated city in Israel and it is in Galilee, and would have been visible from where Jesus was giving the sermon on the mount. Though we don't know for sure, its very possible and really quite likely that when Jesus told the people that they were "a city on a hill," they would have thought immediately about this one.

Even in the night, the city is visible from the lower cities.

It was naturally visible... it was naturally a light that could not be turned off.

So when Jesus says "you are a city on a hill," whether he was directly referencing Safed (S'Fath) or not, he was certainly referencing cities like it,

and this particular city was one that they would have been able to see from where they were. So they would have understood right away... a city on a hill stands out.

It doesn't turn off. Its there.

And so he tells these people, "that is you." You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are the city on a hill."

Now remember, like we talked about last week and will continue throughout the series... who is the crowd for the sermon on the mount? Who is hearing Jesus give this message?

His disciples are up on the mountain with him, and a huge crowd of people that is described a few verses earlier are all in earshot of it. Jesus was drawing all sorts of outcasts... loners... sick people, poor people... people with demons... people possessed and people oppressed... and he starts the sermon by giving the beatitudes to people who already, in this life, were the things described in the beatitudes.

He tells them, "you are blessed!" You have something that I can use.

and then after he goes through all of the beatitudes, then he tells the same crowd, "you are the salt of the earth."

"You are the light of the world."

"You are a city on a hill."

He tells the common ones... the broken ones... the ones who *blended in* more than anyone, that they were the ones who were going to *stand out*, for Jesus.

and what is so interesting is that Jesus is using terms that these people truly would have understood. Light was something that was talked about a lot in those days. Believe it or not salt was something that was talked about a lot in those days.

Salt was the only seasoning in that day. It was the only thing really that they could add to their food to make it delicious, and it also was used as a preservative, because of course in that day there was no such thing as a refrigerator or a freezer, and food would go badly very very quickly if it was not preserved with salt.

It would rot. It would decay.

It would have the same fate that, we, if we are all honest with ourselves, we all are looking at.

Nobody lives forever. We are from the dust and we will return to the dust. It is appointed for a man once to die and nobody can cheat that.

Its the one thing that we all have in common.

Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:10 says “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

Sheol means the grave.

Solomon is saying “Do what you can now, because there is a place that you are all going, where you won’t be able to work anymore.”

and of course that realization lead Solomon on a journey of trying to figure out, if life ends the same way for everyone, then is there any meaning to it at all?

We are all heading toward death and every day we are getting closer to it. and there are people, some who don’t even know Jesus who have dedicated their entire lives to doing everything they can to prolong that moment that the bible tells us is appointed once to happen to all of us.

Because people are afraid of death. Because for so many, it is so full of uncertainty.

But what is so powerful about the mandate for Christians to be salt and light is that we have something that preserves life.

Because apart from the gospel Solomon is right... everything is meaningless. It doesn't matter what you accomplish, it doesn't matter what you die with, it doesn't even matter what you pass down because the next generation will just die with it.

What matters is people.

and the only true preservation of life is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But our bodies are passing away. They are here today, and gone tomorrow.

Even the earth is passing away. Jesus in the very next section of this sermon begins talking about the law, and he says the law won't pass away until AFTER heaven and earth pass away (Matt. 5:18).

It is all subject to decay and truthfully, it is all destined for decay.

Detroit has, for years been the poster child for what a city that is decaying looks like. People leaving beautiful homes for greener grass, and never looking back... sometimes with out a word and so these buildings sit until they slowly just turn to ruins. And suddenly we have, right in our own front yard a clear image of what a city that lacked salt for so long looks like. And Jesus is saying that its the job of the church... of Christians... of the people who bare his name, to go into places like that and start spreading salt... and to start shining lights.

man, when it comes to a place that could use some salt and some light... I think about Detroit. I can't think of a better city for the Red Letter City to invade, than the one that is waiting for us on the other side of these four walls.

Lets be salt for our city.

But salt is not just a preservative. Obviously, as our fast food culture knows so well, it is also a seasoning. But something that is fascinating about salt when you consider that Jesus used it as the example for what we, his body, are... when you think of it in terms of salt as something you eat... is salt does no good on its own. Nobody wakes up in the morning and says "I want to go and eat a brick of salt today."

Its horrible.

I am not sure if you have ever done a salt water cleanse... but its horrible. You fill like a liter of water and then you put a bunch of salt in and shake it up and then drink the entire thing. I think you are supposed to do it all in one drink or something like that... but I tried it once, and I had to drink it in the bathroom because I immediately would throw up whatever I would drink... and was salt WITH water.

Salt by itself is a bitter brutal taste. It is horrible. It has to be coupled with another flavor. It has to be a part of a bigger dish or its useless.

What does that mean for us?

Broken people of Courage church... Come together.

We are better together. We bring out the best in each other.

Salt compliments other flavors. It brings out the best in those flavors. Combined with other flavors, it can make a ridiculously good taste. Hopefully you never tried that weird salt water flush thing... but Maybe you have eaten one of those sweat and salty peanut butter bars... the combination is ridiculous. Or try putting some sea salt on your brownies. It takes a delicious thing and it accentuates the flavors.

And that is how it is in life. You are the salt of earth. You are not just preserving life but you are also bringing out the best in it.

Together.

Not by yourself.

Jesus says (Matthew 18:19-20) that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for them... And if two or three gather in the name of Jesus, he is there... right there, among them!

Together.

Together our prayers reach heaven. Together we are salt and light.

So Jesus is saying in this amazing sermon:

You guys are it! You are the plan. The broken, shaken, sick, possessed, poor followers. The uneducated, slow to understand disciples who spent their time arguing about which of them would be the greatest while Jesus was making himself the least...

You are it.

You are the plan.

You are the salt of the earth. You are its preservation and you are its flavor. You are its joy and its hope.

You are what makes a dark world, light.

Then Jesus says, "You are the light of the world!"

And this was very significant in that day, because you see, Hebrew people believed, and it was taught, that every single choice that you matter, every decision whether big or small, either brought you closer to the light or closer to the darkness.

There was something in the Jewish tradition called *yetzer hara* or, "the evil inclination." and the idea was for everybody, there are two opposing inclinations that are essentially always in your life, that are either drawing you toward evil, or to good.

Every decision leads you on a path to somewhere.

And that was so often summarized as light, and darkness.

It was a very common teaching.

So for Jesus to come to these people, these people who are broken and probably have let the wrong inclination lead them in the wrong direction so many times in their past... for him to look at them and say you are the light... that was huge.

Light is the only hope against darkness. If we turned the lights out in this place and we covered the windows and eliminated all the light in here like so many Detroit neighborhoods still feel each night... I wouldn't know where the stage ends. I wouldn't know at what point I would drop. I wouldn't know when I am about to bump into one of you.

I wouldn't know if I had a friend near, or not.

I would be sitting in this room surrounded by my friends and I wouldn't even know it.

But just because of these windows that we have... if we turned out the lights without uncovering them... and didn't turn on a single house light, I still could walk through this place and know exactly who I am looking at. Exactly who is close, and who is far away. And that is just because of a small amount of natural light bleeding through an old stain glass window.

Light is extremely powerful.

But Jesus uses some words with pretty big implications here.

He says you are the salt of the **earth**. You are the light of the **world**.

The earth? The world?
That's basically everything.

God's redemptive plan **for everything** is relying on ordinary people like you and me to be salt and to be light.

So now that we understand the reference to salt and light, look at what Jesus says:

“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your *good* works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

We are the lamps... we are the ones who have the lamps, but we in and of ourselves are not the source of light.

Jesus is the source.

We are the lamp. We are carriers of the light.

(1 John 1:5) tells us that “God is light, and in *him* there is no darkness at all.”

In another place, (John 8:12) Jesus says “I am the light of the world. Follow me and you will have the light of life.”

But as for you... “here is the light... here is a lamp to put it in... do something with it!”

Lamps in those days were just a wick that would float atop of oil... and just like Jesus said, that light could light a whole house.

But the problem is that so many of the carriers of the light of Jesus, they hide the light. They put it under a basket. If they didn't, then why would Jesus. He says, “its not normal that you would put a light under a basket... no, nobody does that... so why are you?”

Everything about the sermon on the mount is about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is about how we bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. It is about with life in the kingdom looks like.

and in Matthew 25, Jesus tells a parable... one of his many parables about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. and it is known as "The Parable of the Talents." (Matthew 25:14-30)

And it goes like this, it says that the Kingdom of heaven is like a man who goes on journey. But before he leaves he calls his servants, and he entrusts his property to these three men. and he gives one of the men five talents, another man two and another man one.

and many of you are familiar with the story. The man who had been given five talents, he went out he traded with them, and he was able to make another five... so he turned five into ten.

and the man who had been given two talents, he also doubled his talents and made two more.

But to the man who was given one talent, he went out, and he dug a hole, and he buried it.

Now keep in mind, these talents were entrusted to them. They were not the owners, they were merely the stewards.

and so the master gets back after being gone for a really long time... He gave them plenty of time to do something with what he had given them... and so he goes to all three of them to settle his accounts.

and the first one tells him, "I took the five talents that you gave me, and I made five talents more." So he presented his master with ten talents.

And the master said to the servant "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."

and then he went to the servant who he gave two talents to, and that servant had turned his two into four.

And again, the master said to the servant “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”

and then the man who was given one talent came forward, and he said to his master “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

So... Giving that man a talent bore literally no fruit for the master. The servant took his talent, and he buried it. He took his light, and he put it under a basket.

and the master was furious. He couldn’t believe someone would be so wasteful with something so valuable, and this is how he responded:

“You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness.”

This is the reality. And it is a hard one.

God has given you something. He has called you out and said “you are salt, and you are light, and you are the way that I am going to change the world.”

But if you take that light, and you bury it... He is going to take your talent and he is going to give it to the guy who has ten. He is going to use the guy who bares fruit with what he is given. The guy who has proven faithful time and time and time again. And its not because he is mad at you or because he doesn’t want to use you... but there is a job that needs to be done and that job is the reconciling of our world to the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

and we will talk about this much more this summer when we get to “A tree and its fruit,” but Jesus says in John 15:5-6 (NIV) “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you **do not remain** in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

God is going to do what he is going to do.

And he gave us this world to steward. He wants to do it through us. He wants to do it through you.

You are the light of the world. But if you put that light under a basket... if you refuse to shine it... if you bury your talent, He is going to give it to someone else.

I used to write a lot of songs, and one of the lines that I wrote years ago in one of those songs said this:

“The light can’t conquer darkness because we won’t flip the switch.”

When it comes to light, its so simple. We have the light. We control the light. We just have to use the light!!! but so many, instead... they bury the light. They bury the talent. They bury what God has given them to make a difference in their community and instead they sit back as their community falls apart... and you have to wonder, how does a community filled with Christians and fancy church buildings and all the things that are supposed to be good... still fall apart?

Because enough people took their light, and they put it under a basket.

and when the good guys do nothing the world goes to hell.

Have you ever wondered this question?

How does salt lose its saltiness?

Maybe you never thought about this... but salt doesn't really lose its saltiness. Salt is an absolutely stable compound. It is extremely consistent.

The only way you can ruin salt is to mix it with the wrong things. You can add it to something that it can't be separated from again.

But Jesus makes it very clear... don't let the salt lose its saltiness!

What if Jesus is telling us, "Don't lose sight of what it is that I have called you to do here!" If you really do have all this amazing flavor, share it with people... be a light to the darkness. Don't hide your light. Spread salt around your city. Don't just spread your salt around the church building so you can create a country club that doesn't reach anybody new. You will kill your mission if you direct your attention to the wrong places.

Your life should be gospel salt.

Your life should be salt to the message of Jesus.

and I am not saying that the gospel needs "our salt" to make it more attractive, that is not what I am saying. We said it earlier, if you aren't salt, God will use someone else to be. But God partners with people to reach people... and if you are mean to everybody you aren't helping anything.

For far too long the church has been the factor that has distanced the world from its savior because instead of being the flavor that brings out how amazing Jesus is, they create their own concoction of a gospel that doesn't look all that much like Jesus... and people, honestly, find it gross.

Don't turn the church into something that repels people... but don't take the gospel out of the message either!!!

That's one trap that is easy to fall in. Social justice above all. And so sometimes that is where we put our salt, but if it is not combined with the gospel then we will have something that seems good for a moment but leaves a bitter taste in the end because the part about HOPE got left out.

You are supposed to be out there... with the light. Visible in the community. Bringing the red letter city into the city of Detroit.

“So they may see your good works.”

Jesus says this... but be careful with it.

This word “good” that Jesus uses is not good as in “agathos” which is the Greek word for good as to say something is intrinsically good or it is “good in nature..” That is the “good” we normally use when we typically think of “good works.”

We think of right living. We think of following a rule that makes us justified because we followed it... but the moment we think *like that*, we have justified ourselves and have killed the gospel in our own lives.

and suddenly focusing on works in that moment seems a bit inconsistent with the what Jesus just taught in the beatitudes and then here with salt and light. Until you realize that the Greek word here Jesus uses is the word “kalos” which actually means “beautiful” and the word “works” is the word “*ergon*” (air gon) and it means whatever it is that you undertake. Whatever you take on.

Jesus is saying, let your light shine... not because you are justified by your works but because your life is a reflection of what I did in you and it is beautiful.... and beauty attracts.

And when they are attracted to you they will see the Father.

May everything you do be *beautiful* because Jesus is in you.

Because everything about our lives that should be rotting, that should be decaying... he is bringing new life to. He is bringing new hope to.

Through you.

Because you don't put your light under a basket but instead you let it shine. Because you don't bury your talents but instead you use them for the glory of God.

it is the core of the gospel. The core of the gospel is I was dead, but now I am alive. I once was lost, but now I am found. and its not because I found myself, but it is because I found the end of myself.

And I let Jesus take care of the rest.

Because my world is far too broken for me to fix.

Its just like every building in Detroit that you drive by and you say "What happened to that?"

How is it ever going to be fixed?

Have you ever seen a building that is completely broken... it looks like someone took a monster size sledge hammer to it and just broke it into a million pieces... and you go online and google the address and you see what it used to be... it used to be amazing. It used to be beautiful. It was probably owned by someone of prominence.

But like everything else in our world, it began to decay. and it was left to the dust and to the scrappers.

and you have to wonder... what happened? When did the light get put under a basket? When did people stop caring?

and you probably look at the picture of the house that you took quickly as you drove by it, and then compare it to a picture online of what it used to be and you wonder, what happened? How did all of that glory just disappear?

A light just went out.

and then another. and another. and another.

and as the lights of those buildings were going out, it seems there were some lights that were maybe under a basket somewhere doing nothing.

Last Saturday we shot a video for our discipleship program... you are going to start seeing the video on Facebook and other places in the next week or

two, and please when you see it, share it with your friends... we want to get the word out about the program to potential students everywhere. But that's just a side note...

I am going to give away the video to you guys now in advance.

What we did was we went to the James Scott Mansion... it is a castle in midtown on Peterboro at Park. And this building is just one of those buildings that when you look at it, it just looks so far gone... so far gone to ever do any type of restoration to it. It has entire chunks missing.

But when we got there to do our shoot, there was a huge crane sitting in the front yard... which was a nuisance to us because we had to shoot around this huge thing... trying to make it look like it wasn't there... but the fact is that even that building, so incredibly broken, really with nothing more than a shell... and even that shell is missing pieces, even that is not beyond repair. Is not beyond people coming in and doing something amazing there...

and the concept of the video shoot was simple... the idea is to implore people to come be a part of what God is doing here... but it's not for everyone... You have to be able to see what nobody else sees.

That is kind of a crucial part of making it here... In Detroit. You have to be able to see what nobody else sees.

So what we did was we had Jimmy set up a canvas and he began painting the castle. And he painted it just as it is. He cut out the sections that were missing...

and then he stepped back, and he looked at the castle again, and he came back to his canvas and he began to paint what the building might look like if someone actually were to restore it.

He painted what could be. And we had planned this long before we ever knew that they actually were doing something to restore the building.

and while we were filming, and while he was painting it, a few people passing by came up and asked if they could see the painting... and of course we let them... but one man in particular stuck out to me... Because he looked at the picture, then he looked at the castle, and he said:'

“Oh. You finished it. You finished the castle.”

and we told him, yes.

and then he said, “thank you for restoring it. Instead of burning it down.”

Because we live in a city where a lot of things burn down don't we?

This became even more obvious to me when I went to put insurance on my house. I asked the agent, “why is it so high?”

and told me, “dude, you live in the arson capital of the world.”

He may have been exaggerating.

but Detroit is a city that used to be filled with houses that lit the streets every night.. but one by one the lights just started going out. And the structures began deteriorating. And before long, there would be a fire.

Something to do away with it once and for all.

Nobody cared to preserve it. They didn't think it was worth preserving.

But now everybody is coming in on the back end of the blight and they are trying to fix it. Because suddenly those same places that for years seemed worthless... suddenly seem valuable. People are beginning to see it.

and so people are investing in Detroit again.

But others including many of you... have been there all along spreading what salt they could where they could to preserve whatever they could.

Because they saw the value of something that the rest of the world saw as rotten.

But it is not rotten.

Being the salt and the light of the world means that we see how valuable people are even when maybe nobody else sees it. It means you don't bury your talents but instead you use your talents to bring new life to dying people. New hope to broken people.

It means you don't put your light under a basket, but instead you use it to show people to their cars. You use it to light the pathways that have no light.

You use it to show people the only hope that preserves. The only future that will not end... and that is the future of a person who knows Jesus.

We have been very clear so far I think... but The sermon on the mount is about a Kingdom. It is about what a life looks like that has been transferred from the Kingdom of darkness, to the Kingdom of light and that transfer only happens with Jesus.

And a lot about the sermon on the mount, like we said last week, involves persecution... there is a reason for that. Did you notice this? Right before Jesus tells us we are salt and light, he tells us "blessed are those who are persecuted for my names name."

and here is why. Because the gospel is offensive. It is so so so offensive. Because true salt and true light in our world will always go beyond the social justice that we work to achieve and it will always point to an eternal Father who sent his only Son to earth to die for our wickedness and our sinfulness...

Thats the first reason it is offensive. Because it says that we are all sinners. It says that man has a nature that is not good. That there is right and there is wrong, and that we are wrong.

And even as Christians who have accepted that we are sinners who have been made righteous only by the righteousness of Christ...

we are the lamps, and not the source.

and the only reason there is a lamp at all is because there is a light so bright, and so filled with hope, that it can not be contained. The gospel of John ends by saying that the bible only tells us some of the Jesus stories. It tells us that if everything he had done had been written then the world itself could not contain the books. (John 21:25)

That is a light that is worth spreading.

But it all points to one man. Who also is God. There is one way.

And that is the second reason that the gospel is so incredibly offensive.

The Kingdom of heaven belongs to those who come to Jesus. Those who boldly approach the throne of grace. Its an exclusive message but it is inclusive to all people.

That is not a popular message.

and knowing that our message is without a doubt the most offensive message on the planet to our world, being salt and light means we still spread it.

Because it is hope.

Because Jesus is for everyone. He wants to save everyone. He loves everyone. His grace is for everyone.

and not everyone will take it...

but may it never be because of us. May our salt never lose its saltiness and thus become the reason that a person refuses to come to Jesus... because we have distorted the gospel into something that it is not.

It is plain and simply “hope in saving the blood of Jesus Christ.”

So what am I telling you?

If you are going to be salt and you are going to be light, then you better get ready. Because it is not going to be easy.