

We are in week three of a summer long series on the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7, which means that all summer long we will preach sermons about a sermon, but it just so happens to be the greatest sermon ever told. There's a lot to unpack, a lot for us to dig into and pray over.

Have you ever set out on a journey, hoping to get to a certain destination, only to end up in the wrong place, or somehow surprised at how far you veered off course? There was a story I read a few weeks back of someone who lives here in the Bay Area who'd apparently wanted to go visit an old high school friend living in Australia, where he had taken up ranching. This friend would come back from Australia on a regular basis to lecture at UC Berkeley to talk about what he was doing in Australia. So whenever he was in town, these old friends would reconnect and rekindle their friendship.

As the story goes, this friend who was living in Australia had a wife who unexpectedly passed away, so this local guy decided he wanted to travel there to support his friend in the grieving process. He wasn't very experienced as a traveler, but he got online and bought a plane ticket to go to Horsham, Australia. As the day came, he went to SFO and got on the plane. While in the air, he started looking around and realized something didn't quite seem right. He didn't know what to do or how to put his finger on it, but he started to dig into it and look a little closer.

That's when he realized that in his rush to buy tickets, the city had autocorrected from Horsham, Australia to Horsching, Austria, and he was now headed to Horsching, which means that if this story were true, this guy was a mere 9,721 miles off course from where he wanted to be. So, suffice it to say, he did not make it to the funeral. While this would certainly be an extraordinary example, we have all experienced some version of this in our lives.

So whether we have traveled to the wrong destination or we've lost focus on a goal, drift is an inevitable part of the human experience and when it happens, it's quite a surprise. Because the very nature of drift is that it's almost undetectable until we have that one shocking epiphany where we're left scratching our heads, wondering how on earth we missed it this entire time.

I remember being in high school when my dad decided he wanted to take me saltwater fishing out of Berkeley. We spent all day on a party boat with 50 other people fishing for striped and halibut. It was a miserable day as we did not have much success at all in catching fish. However, sometime around 2:00 pm, as the tide started to come into the bay, the captain did what all

the other boats were doing and parked us right underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. He killed the motor and told us to go drop our line all the way to the bottom of the sea floor, which is probably a few hundred feet deep in that spot. So I did.

When you're fishing, you get mesmerized by what you're doing. I was looking at the line, looking at the water. The goal was fish, and fish were in the water, so that's where all of my attention went—all of it. Men can be simple creatures. I just stared straight down, waiting for something interesting to happen, hoping that, finally, we might catch something because it had been such a lousy day.

About 10 or 15 minutes later, the captain got on the speaker and told us to go ahead and start reeling in. I was excited. I want to see if I got anything. I'm reeling, reeling, reeling, reeling, you know, three or 400 feet of line. A bunch of people on our boat are starting to pull up all of these beautiful fish. I got excited! But I will never forget my shock and amazement when I finally looked up and realized that not only were we not where we'd started underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, but we had, somehow, in those few minutes, managed to float all the way past Alcatraz, which was like three miles. You couldn't drive past Alcatraz that fast.

I was shocked by how far we had drifted. In some sense, as I look back, I was in two places at the same time without ever realizing it because, mentally, I thought we were still very much underneath that bridge. But, in reality, we were nowhere near there.

That experience and reality that we have is an important one to remember in light of where we're going in the text today. Because if you're anything like me, you may be so familiar with these words that you think you know exactly what they mean already. So, there's a tendency to tune out because we already know where this message is headed. I hope to help you see it with new and fresh eyes and an open heart.

Maybe you've heard these words for years and were always confused about what they mean and never quite sure what to make of them. I hope to bring some clarity to the often-quoted text that maybe you've wanted but never found. The Sermon on the Mount continues in verse 13.

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a

bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:13-16

I'm guessing you've probably heard a lot of sermons that have hemmed and hawed over the meaning of salt and light. They might say, "Well, you see salt as a preservative, and Jesus is telling the disciples that they are there to preserve the world or preserve the gospel." Or maybe salt is for flavor and seasoning, and Jesus is telling his disciples that they're in some sense like a flavor additive to the world and so on.

I've probably heard some version of all of these different teachings before, and I found them all to fall a little flat. Because as I've grown in my own biblical literacy over the years, I've come to appreciate the robust literary masterpiece of the Bible. I've come to expect that there's usually some layer of meaning, some hyperlink back to previous imagery, to previous stories or previous people that are intentionally put there to help us better understand these words in context.

These words that Jesus preached on this mount have a context. They have a literary context in terms of what immediately precedes them and what follows them. They have a historical context in terms of what is happening in the world all around them. Jesus' teaching has a context. And that context reveals much about how we are to understand these words.

The words that Jesus was speaking did not come out of nowhere; rather, they invite us to ask some familiar questions that we should always ask of a text. Why this? Why here, why now? In other words, why does Jesus say this? Why is Jesus saying this now? Why is Jesus saying this here, and more specifically, why is Matthew telling us this in this way? Those are all very, very important questions for us to ask and answer. Those questions come at a key intersection in history between two traditions and two intersecting cultures, which should be familiar to us in a place like we live in here on the Peninsula where we are a melting pot of traditions and cultures.

On the one hand, Jesus and his disciples are Jewish men living in and observing common Jewish traditions and rhythms of life. They go to synagogue; they listen to the Torah being preached. They go to the temple. They observe the holidays, feasts, and festivals. They go on pilgrimages to Jerusalem for these events, just as they believe they should, which is to say that they were well-versed in the Torah. They were well-versed in the prophets. They knew their Old Testament well.

On the other hand, Jesus and his disciples were not living in a land that was under Jewish rule. They were living in the Roman Empire, which came on the heels of the Greek Empire and what was known as Hellenization. This essentially means that Greek language, philosophy, and thought were intentionally spread

all throughout the Greek and Roman empire. This is why you'll hear us mention Greek words because the New Testament was written in Greek for this very reason.

Greek culture and thought permeated Jesus' world. It still permeates ours to this day, and so you've likely read, or learned a little about Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle and so many others. You may remember that much of what they were seeking to understand and many of the questions that they were seeking to answer were questions of what makes people truly happy. What is this life that we live and how do we find meaning and happiness and fulfillment in this life?

So that forms one part of the backdrop of Jesus' words in the beatitudes that we covered last week, which is what does the truly happy life look like? Jesus says it looks a lot like hungering and thirsting for righteousness and being merciful and being pure in heart and so on. These are questions that the world all around them were asking and Jesus was offering a new and better framework for how to begin to answer those questions. That's the Greco-Roman virtue tradition intersecting this story.

Now let's go back and look at a more familiar Jewish tradition of Jesus' words here, which has many facets to it that are going to pay dividends for us to revisit.

First it is no mere coincidence that Jesus would teach these words from the mountain, because of how important mountains are all throughout the broader God story. I could revisit many of them, but there's one primary image that the Jewish reader of Matthew's gospel is intended to have as Jesus went up on the mountainside in verse 1—Moses. They are absolutely supposed to be thinking of Moses here.

All throughout scripture, mountains were where people encountered God. And Moses on Mount Sinai, receiving the 10 Commandments is likely one of the most notable of those mountaintop experiences. It was there that God met with Moses and handed down a set of laws, a set of rules, a set of guidelines that hint at or intend on right living. So when Jesus, God incarnate, God in human flesh, goes and sits down on a mountain and begins the sermon, it is a very important and intentional hyperlink to Moses on Mount Sinai. Read Hebrews 3, when you get home today, you'll see the writer hinting at these same things, that Jesus is the new and greater Moses.

So here's why that matters. If Jesus would intentionally hyperlink to Moses and the law, it's a strong hint that the beatitudes from last week, that the salt and light imagery from this week and everything else that follows will find some degree of clarity there. In order to understand what follows, we have to understand what preceded this moment.

Second, the words that Jesus uses to begin this sermon also form an important hyperlink in several different ways. We covered them last week, but I want to revisit them again because I think

it's important in understanding today's text. Jesus begins this Sermon on the Mount with a series of the word blessed. But we also know that despite the English translations almost universally using this word, blessed, it's not a great translation. It's not a great understanding of what Jesus was trying to convey to his audience.

We often hear the word blessed and think of something more like prosperous. "I'm blessed because I have health, or I'm blessed because I have wealth, and so on." In other words, we often connect blessings with what one commentator, Jonathan Pennington, calls Active Divine Favor. I'm blessed because God is hooking me up with all sorts of good stuff. That's how I know I'm blessed.

But when we go back into the Old Testament as the lens through which we understand and read Jesus' teaching, we get a more nuanced, but a critically important understanding of the words and phrasing that Jesus is using. We understand how they're hyperlinking back to places like Psalm 1. "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers," (Psalm 1). And on it goes.

As you survey Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophets, you're going to see this "blessed is the one" language peppered all throughout those texts. What we begin to see in that language is that blessing in Jesus' sermon is not about material prosperity. It's not about active divine favor, and it's more in line with a paradigm of what Pennington would call the flourishing life, which is exactly what was beautifully articulated last week: true blessing isn't found in what we have. It's found in who we're becoming in him.

So Pennington and other commentators would say the same thing in some different words, but I like how they articulate the meaning of this word blessed. They say it's something more like: The ones who are flourishing are those who are poor in spirit. The ones who are flourishing are those who mourn. The ones who are flourishing are those who are meek. The ones who are flourishing are those who are hungry and thirsting for righteousness. You get the idea.

So Pennington says that what makes a blessing, a blessing is God's relationship with and his favorable attitude toward a person or a group of people. The blessing is secondary to the relationship.

It's a way of saying that those who are on the right track in life, those who are on the narrow path, to borrow language from Jesus, are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, and the pure in heart. They're the peacemakers and the persecuted.

But with those descriptions in mind, it's also important to understand that those characteristics and that language also doesn't just emerge for the first time out of nowhere here in Jesus sermon. Rather, it has an important hyperlink, in this time, to the

prophet Isaiah. We get a little hint of this in Matthew 4. Isaiah is already being quoted by Matthew the gospel writer, and he's going to continue to do that throughout his gospel.

So in this case, Jesus is hinting at language from Isaiah chapter 61. Which begins to use many of these familiar words, and it envisions a time in the future. Keep in mind that Isaiah happened a long time ago, but it envisions a time in the future when good news is proclaimed to the poor and when mourners are comforted and when righteousness is held in high regard and in high esteem.

So this was spoken by Isaiah 800 years before Jesus gave this sermon, but these are words that the crowds would know. They would recognize. These are words that the disciples who were sitting there would recognize and know. So with all of that in mind, we can finally shift our attention to the third facet of Jewish tradition piece, which is, how we properly understand the usage of salt and light in this text.

Is there some hyperlink to anything else in the Old Testament law and prophets? Yes, there is, but seeing it and understanding it truly hinges on all the other stuff that we've talked about this morning. Because by itself, if we start doing a word study on uses of salt and light throughout scripture, we will get lots of interesting imagery, we'd get lots of truth. But it wouldn't necessarily be coherent in revealing what Jesus is saying here.

Case in point: In 2 Kings, God commands the prophet Elisha to take some salt and throw it into a spring of water because the water we are told was bad and the land wasn't producing vegetation. So he does, and the text says that the water was healed. So you might read that and think, "Oh, okay, salt must be for healing. That's the imagery that we're supposed to take from this."

But then you are reading on another day and come across Leviticus 2, where the people are told to take their grain offerings and to season them with salt and add salt to all of their offerings. You may read that and think that salt is for flavor, then.

Then you keep reading and come across Jeremiah 17, where God warns people not to put their trust in any man because the people who do will not see prosperity but will live in a salt land where no one lives. This imagery, if you've ever been through the salt flats in Utah, shows that there's nothing living there at all. So salt must be for desolation.

You get my point. Salt is all of those things in scripture, and yet simply doing a word study sometimes doesn't quite paint the right picture. I don't know if anyone plays the New York Times daily games that come out, like Wordle and whatnot, but one of the games that I play from time to time is Connections. Every day, you log in, and there are 16 random words. The idea is you're supposed to get four words into four different thematic groupings. But they try to make this tricky because often those

words feel like they could belong in lots of different categories, depending on the context.

The art of the game is in figuring out what that word means that day in relation to all the other words around it. That's the data you're looking for. So, if salt has lots of meanings and light has lots of meanings, what is that connection? What is that intersection between the two that Jesus would use them together in parallel that way on that day?

I could spend a bunch of time in the weeds to answer all those questions, and there are answers to those questions. So we could journey all over the Old Testament together, but the reality is I'm not sure that the juice would be worth the squeeze. You might get a good nap out of it, but you know, I'm trying to get you to lunch or breakfast.

Instead, I want to start to reconstruct this passage in a way that makes sense of this salt and light language that Jesus uses without getting lost in the proverbial weeds. The reality is that on an island on their own, these words are nuanced, and they're complex to understand. They involve a deep dive into Isaiah and Leviticus, 2 Chronicles, and more.

They're really only understood in the context in which Jesus is giving them in Matthew. So, let's go back to Matthew 5. *"Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them"* (Matthew 5:1-2). This Moses imagery is meant to evoke the 10 commandments in the sense of righteous living and justice. And then he speaks into the Greco-Roman virtue tradition of the Hellenized world. Such as what does the happy life look like? This is the question the culture wants to know, and frankly, it's a question that we're still asking to this day. So Jesus begins to answer that question. The crowds are gathered, they're curious, they're listening, but he frames it in familiar language from the Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophets.

He says the ones who are flourishing are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The ones who are flourishing are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. The ones who are flourishing are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. The ones who are flourishing are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and they will be filled. The ones who are flourishing are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. The ones who are flourishing are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The ones who are flourishing are the peacemakers. Jesus says they will be called children of God. The ones who are flourishing are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus explains to them what life on the right track looks like. What life on that narrow path that follows him operates like. It's not a promise of material blessing, and in fact, it's quite the opposite. It is what Eugene Peterson calls a long obedience in

the same direction. It doesn't revere what the world reveres, it doesn't do what the world does. The world's way, Jesus is saying, is not the flourishing life. It's the opposite.

Blessed [the ones who are flourishing] are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11-12

So what is Jesus saying? The ones who are flourishing are sometimes persecuted. Yeah, that's what he's saying. What I want you to notice is how Jesus changes that verbiage ever so slightly from the very first eight uses of the word blessed. "Blessed are you." That change is important because, as you'll see, it builds the bridge from the first eight beatitudes to this salt and light piece in verses 13 through 16. You can't understand one without the other. They go together. They're part of the same thematic block of teaching. Jesus turns his attention from Psalm 1, wisdom, literature, and understanding of flourishing, to a much more personal one, and he reminds them that the flourishing life sees its reward. Where it sees its reward is in heaven.

It's with that context that Jesus continues the same vein of teaching to his gathered disciples. He says you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. It's two parallel phrases meant to make the same point. He's saying the same thing twice. And when Jesus repeats himself, we ought to pay attention. It's important. The crux of understanding this passage has less to do with hyper-focusing on what specifically salt means or what specifically light means, though they do have a meaning.

It has a lot more to do with staying the course. In context, salt and light are good things, but if in the pressure of persecution and the misery of suffering, they lose what it is that makes them salt, and if they cover up what it is that makes them light, if they drift from being what they are, they may yet discover that they've become something else entirely. They may have thought they were fishing under the bridge only to look up and discover they were fishing in completely different waters, living a completely different life than they thought they were living.

So when Jesus talks about salt losing its saltiness, the word for losing saltiness is actually the Greek word *mōranthē*, which is where we get the word moron. Jesus is quite literally describing an oxymoron, which means oxy=sharp, moron=foolish. It's like saying someone is a smart idiot. The point doesn't require a deep theological focus on what salt means or what light means. The point is that if something is violating what defines it, then it's lost its purpose.

Now, if you're my age or older, you probably remember a time when you had the freedom to roam all over the city and neighborhood. The only rule you had was to be home when the street-lights came on. So we did. And how did we get around town? We

had bicycles. We rode our bikes everywhere. So that was true of my childhood as well. As long as I was home on time, I had almost free reign to go and do whatever I wanted to do within reason.

However, my parents used to get so frustrated with me and scold me for how I rode my bike. I never looked for the ramps or the easy way to get around things. I was up and down curbs all day long. They wanted me to take care of my bike. At first, it was like, what's the big deal here? I went up the curb. Everything's the same, flawless exercise. Nothing happened. Mom and Dad looked like they didn't have a clue what they were talking about, but can you remember what started to happen? A little over time, there was this little wobble in your wheel. You do it some more, and that wobble gets a little bit more pronounced. Eventually, it isn't a wheel anymore at all. It's a miserable, miserable ride.

This is what Jesus is saying, that if a bicycle loses its roundness or its bicycle wheel, it's no longer very useful as a wheel. It's on its way to becoming that square circle. One of the things that I've observed in my years of life is that over time there is an observable moral drift that occurs in so many well-meaning Christians or followers of Christ.

I've grown up, like many of you, being taught by people in children's ministry or youth ministry to focus on being this and not that. And then I remember going off to college and thinking that I was going to live out these words. I was going to live out the words of Jesus in very literal, practical ways with such sincerity and idealism. So I remember going off to a Christian school, and there were all these people who were trying to do communal living and trying to make their own clothes, taking vows of poverty and pacifism or whatever they felt moved to do to be more like Jesus.

They really wanted to live this out. It was a hard way to live because it was counter-cultural, but it was beautiful at the same time, because you envied and admired how seriously they were trying to take this stuff. It was rooted in a deep conviction in the transforming power of the gospel of the already, but not yet kingdom of heaven.

I loved that time in my life, but then I kept watching, and slowly but steadily over the years, I'd see people who had once been a rock solid, iron-clad example of following Jesus begin to make these small compromises. It wasn't anything notable at first, but over time, they became more frequent and more obvious. They began to add up and led to more significant or even catastrophic rifts. Sometimes, it was into addiction, and other times, it might be divorce, and sometimes, it was the language they used or the discrete Trojan horse of workaholism that creeps in as you start your career.

I watched and wondered what happens to people as they age where what used to seem black and white becomes gray? Why is

it that what used to seem wrong becomes tolerable, acceptable in some way? It was so easy to look at them and see it, but so much harder to look in the mirror and see it in myself. However, it happens to you and me in the same way.

It's like a rock on the seashore where wave after wave after wave of temptation and fear and insecurity, wave after wave of Satan's deceit, comes rolling in. It seems like nothing happens. It comes in, and the wave goes out. Nothing changes, but you revisit that situation sometimes months, years, or decades later, and that erosion is now obvious. The waves have made an impact. I live in Pacifica, where houses fall off the cliffs every once in a great while because of that reality.

Jesus' words on the mount are aware of and sensitive to the human condition. Jesus, in Matthew 5, just spent 40 days out in the wilderness being tempted. So he knows better than anyone that even those of us most committed to living the flourishing life are not immune from drift. Jesus knows that when persecution comes, when difficulty comes when trials and tribulations come, there may be a tendency in our flesh to hold back and protect ourselves from the hurt and difficulties of living this life as a true disciple or follower of Jesus.

I don't know if you're a football fan, but there's a term in football called alligator arms, and it depicts a wide receiver who has run across the middle of the field enough times and been absolutely clobbered to the point where the next time he goes for the football, he can't quite fully extend his arms to make that catch. He brings his arms a little closer to his body to protect himself to make sure that this time he doesn't get hurt like that again, without realizing it.

It's easy to miss that sometimes we, as Christians, become so enamored with the idea that salvation is just something that we attain and then we relax from. And we go on this proverbial vacation rather than seeing it as something that you continue to work out as Paul alludes to in Philippians 2. It's like a bicep. We keep working it out.

Last week, Sandy taught from the Beatitudes and beautifully reminded us of what true blessing is. She said that true blessing isn't found in what we have; it's found in who we're becoming in him. So as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount continues, and as Jesus incorporates salt and light imagery into his teaching, I want you to remember and believe about Jesus' goal in his continued teaching is not to stop once we've become what we think we're becoming, but to remain in it. Don't stop when you become what you're becoming.

Think of it this way. The flourishing life seeks less to attain and more to remain. Jesus' chief concern is not just that his disciples get curious or that they start the journey with him. His chief concern is that they finish the journey with him. This is where that Moses imagery and Mount Sinai imagery becomes so important.

The Israelites were so focused on getting out of slavery and getting out of Egypt that once they attained this, they didn't know what else to do.

Moses walked up one day up Mount Sinai and had this encounter on a mountain with God, and when he came down to join the rest of the community, he found that the very high priest over all of the people had an idea. He said, "Hey, everyone, melt down all of your jewelry. Let's make ourselves a nice little golden calf here and worship it. We'll say that these are our gods, Israel, who brought you out of Egypt." Was that true? No. And so what do we do in this life, in this journey that we're on with Christ? How do we remain? How do we abide? How do we stay the course and live the flourishing life?

Jesus' exhortation, his encouragement is to let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Let me be clear that I don't think this means we make sure we go out into the streets and pray to be seen by men. Jesus spoke about that, and I don't think this means that we go stand on the street corners and shout Bible passages at people as they walk by.

This means that salt stays salty, and light stays illuminating in community. On my own, I may yet get those alligator arms. I may get timid in the face of difficulty and persecution. But do you know where I get emboldened? Do you know where I get strong? It's right here in community.

When Jesus says, let your light shine that you is a plural you, it's a let y'all's light shine. It's something we do together. On those days when I am weak and in those moments where I may be adrift, if we are together, we can spot it together. We can re-orient together. We drink from the rock together. We enjoy manna and quail. But alone, we drift. We starve. We wither. The flourishing life seeks less to attain and more to remain. It's about staying the course.

The waves of sin and temptation and stress and heartache will always crash around us. That never stops. As anybody who's been living knows that it just keeps coming over and over and over again. Our goal is not just to leave slavery to sin. It is that, yes, but it's also to stay gone. Would you agree? We don't want to go back to what we left. Our goal is not just to leave Egypt and then lose our way in the desert; it is to get to Canaan and see the beautiful future that God has promised and created for us.

So, being poor in spirit and meek and hungry and thirsty for righteousness and merciful and pure in heart is not something that we attain. It's something we put faith in, abide in, and remain in. I want to leave you with the words of the psalmist in

Psalms 34:8, which I think is the most poignant response to Jesus' words about salt and light.

"Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Psalm 34:8).

And so may your salt be tasty and may your light allow you to see that God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good. The ones who are flourishing take refuge in him. The flourishing life seeks less to attain and more to remain. Let's remain in him, Church. Let's stand and worship him. God bless you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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