

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are seasons of life where you we just don't give much attention to the question of the meaning and purpose of life. Especially in the first part of life, you're just kind of pushed along and you go with the flow. Your government and your parents make you go to grade school. You don't really ask why at that stage of life, you just go to school. Then high school. Then people either start working or they go on to college. Again just kind of pushed along a plan that they didn't really consciously choose with a purpose that's not always entirely clear. You concern yourself with what you're doing, who you're doing stuff with, and where you're going to do it. SO we the who what and where questions are asked regularly. But we don't always stop and ask the bigger question: why? But at some point in your life, that question is going to come down on you like a load of bricks. For a lot of people it's in mid life... and we have a name for it. A midlife crisis. Because this is the first time a person may have actually stopped and started to think: WHY? Why am I doing what I'm doing where I'm doing it and with whom I'm doing it? What is the purpose of my life? What is the meaning? Where is this all ultimately going?

And to avoid being consumed by the question why, people renew their intensity on the who what and where. They decide to get a divorce and get into new relationships, or get a new car that they think gives them a new image, or move to a new location and start fresh. But these behaviors still mask a deeper need to have an answer to the question: why? Why are you breathing air on this planet. Why has God put you here? What is the meaning of life? What is your purpose in life?

Maybe you've never really given much thought to such questions. Maybe you've started thinking, but didn't like it. Maybe today can be the day you both think about and find God's satisfying answer. What is your purpose in life?

Now before we answer this question, I just want to clarify that today's message is really targeted toward those who already consider themselves a follow of Jesus. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, but you're here to check things out, or someone invited you and you came because they promised to take you out to a restaurant afterwards... we're really glad you're here. But this message isn't going to directly apply to you, because the words we are about to look at were spoken to Jesus' disciples... his followers... not to the general crowds. But I would still like you to listen. Even if you're not a Jesus follower, you will learn what Jesus considered to be the purpose for those who are. So you get to make uncomfortable whoever invited you today. You can put them on the spot if you don't see their life lining up with God's purpose for their life.

Okay, so this is a huge question: As a follower of Jesus, what is your purpose in life? Are you fulfilling your God-given purpose in life? And what would happen if every member of Good Shepherd would refocus on living our life in line with our God-given purpose?

What would Jesus preach about this topic? Let's listen:

Matthew 5:13-16 "You are the salt of the earth." Let's pause there and figure out what Jesus means. Jesus was a master teacher. The best teachers know that the most effective teaching takes place when you start with what your students already know, and then you explain what they don't know in terms they already do know. You've all had professors or teachers that were

extremely intelligent and experts in the field they are teaching. But they were horrible teachers. What made them horrible was not their lack of knowledge, but their inability to teach you by starting at your level of knowledge, using terminology that is in your vocabulary, and examples familiar to your experience. Instead they used words and concepts you were not yet familiar with to teach concepts you didn't know. You were lost.

Jesus was not that kind of teacher or preacher. Jesus was a master. He told parables and made analogies that were familiar to the people. He took what they already knew and used to explain what they did not yet know.

Now the problem for us today, is that we don't always have the same common knowledge that Jesus' original listeners had. You are probably aware that Jesus spoke these words in a historical context. He spoke these words 2000 years ago to people of Jewish descent who were living in the land of Palestine. So although everybody of Jewish descent in 1 century Palestine knew Jesus' point of comparison, people living in 21st century America may not know. And that is the case with Jesus comparison using salt.

When we think of salt, we think of flavoring and nothing more. Add salt to many foods and it just tastes better. Have you ever tried unsalted peanuts? So bland! My dad would even put salt on cantaloupe. And instead of sugar on grapefruit, he would put salt. It's a flavor enhancer.

But in Jesus' day, when people thought of salt, they thought of it as a preservative. Jesus lived in a day before refrigerators. So how do you keep food from spoiling so quickly? The answer: salt. People would rub salt on meats, vegetables and many other foods. Doing so dries out the food and creates an environment that inhibits the growth of harmful mold and bacteria. A concentration of 20% salt kills bacteria which enables you to store food at room temperature for much longer periods of time.

Salt was so valuable that in Jesus' day, Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. In fact, our English word "salary" has the Latin root "sal", meaning salt. We still have the phrase today, "to be worth your salt." That means your good at your job and worthy of the salary you receive.

So put yourself in the mind of a first century Jewish person. For you, salt is a precious, much-desired commodity that preserves food and keeps it from spoiling. And Jesus says to you: **You are the salt of the earth.**

You followers of Jesus are in this world, something precious to God and your purpose in this world is like **salt** in meat... it is to preserve it and keep it from spoiling. Salt always makes a difference, and a little bit of salt goes a long ways. Jesus is saying that you, as a follower of Jesus, who live in the joy and peace of God's full and free forgiveness... as you follow the Lord Jesus Christ and conform your life to his. As the love of Christ fills you up and then overflows into your life... as the goodness of Christ is lived out in your life in your goodness to others... you followers of Jesus will be the ones that preserve this sinful world from going bad and spoiling. You will make a difference in a world of selfishness, wickedness and rebellion. You are the salt of the earth.

Now again, put yourself in the shoes of a first century Galilean Jew. You are not a person of influence in the world. No one outside of your family and friends cares about your opinion. You are not rich. You don't make laws... the Romans do. You've never traveled outside of Israel. Yet Jesus says to you "You are the salt *of the earth.*" Amazing!

Listen to what else Jesus says: "**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 by men.**" This verse has produced lots of commentary, because salt, that is Sodium Chloride,

cannot lose its saltiness and more than gold can lose its gold-ness. But this isn't a case of Jesus not knowing his science. Some explain this by saying that Jesus is talking hypothetically. Of course salt can't lose its saltiness, but what if it did? What use would it be? It would be a useless rock or mineral that would be thrown on a street for walking on. That's one explanation. Here's another one: in Jesus' day, they did not have pure salt like we have today. Well, they did, but it was very expensive. Jesus' audience would not have been using pure salt. They would have gotten their salt along the Dead Sea, or from inland salt marshes. Sometimes they would gather reeds or stalks or leaves from alongside those salty areas. Covered in salt, they would rub them on their food to make the food salty. When they lost their saltiness, they were tossed out and trampled on. Sometimes they also just scooped up the sand and salt from those areas, put them in something like a teabag. When the salt dissolved out, all that was left was useless minerals or sand. It was thrown out in the street.

Whichever of these Jesus had in mind, the meaning is clear: If salt isn't salty, it is useless. And his point is: if one of his followers does not act as one of his followers, then he is not fulfilling his purpose in life. God made you to be salt. He made you to preserve this wicked world from spoiling. And if you are not doing that, then you are not fulfilling your purpose in life. You are not of use in the kingdom of God. If you think you are salt, but you are not salty, then you are a hypocrite. You will be cast out.

Jesus makes a second comparison. This one doesn't require so much explanation:

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.”

The original here actually has another word here: A city *set* on a hill. In other words, the placement of this city is intentional. It's location is strategic. That city built up on a hill can't be hidden. The white limestone they built with made it easily visible by day. Lamps and torches at night also made it visible from miles away.

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.

If it's night time, you turn on a light. And the placement of the light is intentional. It might be in the middle of the ceiling to provide light for the whole room. It might be a floor lamp in the corner to reflect out into the whole room. But one thing you don't do is turn on a light and then completely cover it up. The light would no longer serve its purpose if you covered it up. It's there to give light to everyone in the house. Also note that it doesn't take a lot of light sources to light up a room for everyone. So here's Jesus' point:

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

God wants your light to shine out into the world. And what is your light? He doesn't leave us to guess. Your light are your good deeds shining forth and evident to the people of the world. God is not content that you believe in your heart, and that's it. God is not content that you know his truth. That's not all. As a follower of Jesus Christ, God wants you to shine forth with good deeds. God wants you to love. God wants you to speak kind and encouraging words. God wants your life to reflect the love of Jesus Christ. Why?

So that people will **praise your Father in heaven**. God wants your good deeds to cause people to give the Father in heaven attention, to acknowledge him, to acclaim him, to praise him.

This is different than the world thinks. Do good so people will acknowledge and give attention and praise YOU. No, Jesus says. Our good works are to the praise of our Father in heaven. And that means you will often need to connect the dots for people. When people see

what you do and praise you, you have to correct that and redirect the praise to your Father in heaven. It's all to him and his glory.

Conclusion:

So here's the point of what Jesus is teaching us today: **You have been strategically placed to do good deeds to draw people's attention to your Father in heaven.** [Repeat.] This is your ultimate purpose here on earth. To do good deeds, to love other people, to do kind things, to say encouraging words, to pour yourself out for others... why? To lead people to praise your Father in heaven. God has strategically placed you in this world for that purpose. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

You might push back: "No! My positioning is not strategic. It's random! I'm didn't want to go to college here in Omaha. It wasn't my first choice. I just am. I didn't want to live in this apartment complex. I didn't want to work at this company. Where I'm at right now is not really my plan.. it's random." It may appear random, but it's not. God placed you where you are on purpose that you might do good deeds to the praise of your Father in heaven.

You might push back and say, "I have no influence, power, authority, leverage!" God will still use you. Jesus' original listeners could say the same. Yet somehow God launched the good news of Jesus out of ancient Israel and out of the 1st century to become the world wide movement that it is today. God will use you in your position to be a beacon of hope to our world. Jesus put you where you are. You are making a difference.

To close today, I want you to imagine... what if every member of Good Shepherd and I'm talking to the kids too. This applies to everyone. What if every single one of us would shine brightly, doing good, and helping people connect the dots that those works are not for my glory, but the Father's glory. What if each of us was moved by God's love and generosity to us in Christ to do good deeds to the praise and honor of his name! How far and how quickly would the name of Jesus be spread in Omaha and beyond?

So this is my challenge for you this week and beyond. To intentionally recognize who you are as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And so that is indeed what you are. In fact, let's say it. "I am the salt of the earth. I am the light of the world." So go out this week and be who you are. Make an intentional effort this week to good deeds in response to Christ's love. And help people connect the dots... that you are doing these things not for personal acknowledgement, but for the praise, acclamation, and attention of your Father in heaven.

Friends, this is your purpose in life. If you will embrace this purpose and live your life accordingly, you will find new joy in your daily living. You are the salt and light of your family... of your company (salt and light of First Data, Conagra, PayPal, TD Ameritrade, or wherever you work), you are the salt and light of your school or college, you are the salt and light of Omaha. Now intentionally this week, go and be in the world what God has made you to be. Do what God has purposed you to do. You are salt. You are light. Amen.