# The Constitution of the Kingdom

*A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain*

## SESSION TEN — Salt and Light

*Part Two: The People and the World · Texts: Matthew 5:13–16; Luke 14:34–35*

### The Texts

> **Matthew 5:13–16** *You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden… let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*
>
> **Luke 14:34–35** *Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?… Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*

## From Who You Are to What You're For

Something turns here. For nine sessions we have listened to Jesus describe who the Kingdom's people are — the poor, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted — the strange, blessed, upside-down company that God calls his own. But a portrait is not a purpose. And now, in two of the most famous images he ever spoke, Jesus turns the whole thing outward. He stops telling them who they are and starts telling them what they are for.

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

And notice the direction of both pictures. Salt is not for salt. Light is not for light. Salt exists for the meat, the meal, the thing it is rubbed into. Light exists for the room, the road, the ones who were stumbling in the dark. Both are, by their very nature, for something other than themselves. Which means that in one sentence Jesus has told the blessed community exactly what all that blessing is for: it was never meant to be kept. It was meant to be spent.

*Let's search the Scriptures together.*

## "You Are" — Not "You Should Be"

Before we touch either image, hear the grammar, because it changes everything. Jesus does not say, "you *should become* salt," or "try hard to be light." He says, "you *are*." It is a statement of fact, not a command to achieve. And the "you" is plural — he is not handing out solo assignments; he is naming a people, a community, what it already is by grace. You do not manufacture your saltiness by effort any more than you earned your way into the Beatitudes. You already are salt. You already are light. The only question the passage leaves open is whether you will be what you are — or negate it.[1]

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew gathers salt, light, and lamp into one sustained passage (5:13–16); Luke scatters the same sayings across his Gospel—salt (14:34–35) and the lamp not hidden but set on a stand (8:16; 11:33).

## Salt of the Earth

Start with salt. In the ancient world salt did two things, and both of them were outward. It preserved — rubbed into meat, it held back the rot. And it flavored — it made the bland worth eating. Either way, salt only does its job by being spent, worked into something not itself. Salt sealed in the shaker, admiring its own purity on the shelf, is worthless. So when Jesus calls his people the salt of *the earth*, he is saying: you are what keeps the world from rotting, and you are what gives it savor — but only if you get out of the shaker.[2]

Then the strange warning: "if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything." Now, chemically, salt can't actually stop being salt — and that's rather the point. Jesus is describing an absurdity, a contradiction in terms: salt that isn't salty is just… nothing. Useless. And there is the quiet danger of the whole Christian life — not that the church becomes wicked, but that it becomes bland. Indistinguishable. A community that has quietly lost its savor, its preserving bite against decay, its difference from the world it was meant to season — and no longer does anything at all except take up space in the shaker.

## Light of the World

Then the second image, and it works the same way. "You are the light of the world." Light, like salt, exists entirely for others — nobody lights a lamp for the lamp's sake. And Jesus drives it home with two pictures. First: "a city built on a hill cannot be hidden." Picture it — a town on a ridge at night, its lamps spilling out across the dark valley; you couldn't hide it if you tried. Second: "no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket" — that would be ridiculous, a lamp deliberately smothered — "but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house."

Both pictures make the same point from opposite sides. The city can't be hidden; the lamp mustn't be. Visibility is not optional for the people of the Kingdom. A private, invisible, keep-it-to-yourself faith is, in Jesus' own words, an absurdity — a lit lamp shoved under a bucket. The blessing was always meant to be seen.

## Reclaiming the City on a Hill

We have to pause on "a city on a hill," because it is one of the most stolen phrases in the Bible. For four centuries — from the Puritan John Winthrop, through generations of American political speeches — it has been lifted out of Jesus' mouth and pinned onto a nation, used to declare one country uniquely blessed, exceptional, a shining example above the rest. Hear this plainly: that is not what Jesus said, and it is very nearly the opposite of what he meant.[3]

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[2]Both images are grammatically declarative, not imperative: "you ARE the salt… you ARE the light." Jesus does not command his hearers to become salt and light; he tells them what they already are, then warns against negating it. The emphatic Greek "you" (hymeis) is plural throughout—a people, not a collection of individuals. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and Jonathan Pennington, on Matthew 5:13–16.

[3]Salt in the ancient world preserved against decay and gave flavor; both uses are outward-facing and self-spending. Salt "losing its saltiness" is a vivid impossibility—the point is that salt that is not salty is simply useless. See R. T. France on Matthew 5:13.

The city on the hill in Matthew 5 is not an empire. It is not a superpower, and it carries no flag. It is the community Jesus has just finished describing — the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted. That is the city that cannot be hidden: a people so marked by mercy and justice and cross-shaped love that the watching world simply cannot look away. The light that draws the world is never the glare of power. It is the strange, visible glow of a community that lives the Beatitudes out loud. Let us not hand this verse back to the flag-wavers. Let us live it, and take it back the honest way.

## "That They May Give Glory"

But now a real tension, and Jesus resolves it in one careful line. If we are supposed to be visible — a city that can't be hidden — how is that not just showing off? He will warn, only a chapter later, against doing good "to be seen by others." So which is it? Listen to exactly how he ends: "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to *your Father in heaven*."[4]

There is the whole difference, and it hangs on one word: whose glory. When we shine to be admired ourselves, the light has curved back inward — it has stopped being light and become a mirror. But when we live so that people see the good and look straight past us to God, the light is doing exactly what light does: it points to something beyond itself. The salt disappears into the meal. The lamp is not admired; it is used, so the room can be seen. The measure of true Kingdom visibility is not "did they notice me?" but "did they glimpse God?"

## Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread — and here it is almost the whole point of the passage. Salt and light are freedom-for-others made into metaphors: things that exist only by being spent on someone else's behalf. A church that hoards its blessing, that keeps its light for its own comfort, that stays safely in the shaker, has simply stopped being what Jesus said it is. So ask with me: where is my light — our light — under a basket? Where have we gone bland, indistinguishable, savorless, keeping the gift to ourselves? And what would it cost to get out of the shaker and into the world God so loves? *Freedom for others may cost us our safe invisibility — what can we lay down?*

## Around the Table — For Discussion

- Jesus says "you are" salt and light — not "you should be." How does it change things to hear this as a fact about you already, not a task to achieve?
- Salt only works by being spent; a lamp is useless under a basket. Where have you been tempted to keep your faith private, safe, in the shaker?

[4] "A city built on a hill cannot be hidden" (5:14) has been co-opted since John Winthrop (1630) and later American political rhetoric to baptize national exceptionalism. In Jesus' mouth it is not a nation's superiority but the community of the Kingdom—the poor, the meek, the peacemakers of the Beatitudes—whose visible, self-giving life cannot be hidden. On reclaiming it from empire, see Wes Howard-Brook and Warren Carter, Matthew and the Margins.

- Where has the church — or you — gone "bland": no longer noticeably different from the world it was meant to season?
- "City on a hill" has been used to bless a nation. What changes when you hear it, instead, as a description of the Beatitude people?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Where is your light under a basket — and what would it take to set it on the stand?

## This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, get out of the shaker: do one visible, tangible good this week where the world can actually see it — not to be admired, but so that someone catches a glimpse of God through it. Let your light shine in a place you'd normally keep it dim. Second, check the glory: after you do it, notice honestly where you wanted the credit to land — on you, or on God — and practice pointing past yourself. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

## Looking Ahead

Next session, Jesus turns to the question every reader of the Sermon eventually asks: what about the Law? "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." We'll ask what it means that Jesus does not cancel Israel's Scriptures but completes them — a crucial word, and one we'll handle with great care, because how the church has read it has too often done real harm to Jesus' own people.

## Benediction

So go this week and be what you already are. You are salt — so get out of the shaker and season the world God loves. You are light — so come out from under the basket and let the room be lit. And when they see the good, make sure they can see straight past you to the God who is the source of it. You are a city on a hill; you cannot be hidden, and you were never meant to be. Let your light shine.

*Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.*

Blessings,
**Pastor Mick Finch**

SESSION TEN

# Introduction Video Script

*Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried*

*[Begin still.]*

Welcome back to the table — and welcome to a turn in the road. For nine sessions we've listened to Jesus describe who the Kingdom's people are: the poor, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted. But a portrait isn't a purpose. And now, in two of the most famous images he ever spoke, he turns the whole thing outward. He stops telling us who we are, and starts telling us what we're for.

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

And notice the direction of both pictures. Salt isn't for salt. Light isn't for light. Salt is for the meal it's rubbed into; light is for the room, the road, the people stumbling in the dark. Both of them, by their very nature, exist for something other than themselves. So in one sentence Jesus tells the blessed community what all that blessing was for: it was never meant to be kept. It was meant to be spent.

*[The grammar — lean in.]*

Before we touch either image, hear the grammar, because it changes everything. Jesus doesn't say "you should become salt" or "try hard to be light." He says, "you ARE." It's a statement of fact, not a command to achieve. And it's plural — he's not handing out solo assignments, he's naming a whole people, what it already is by grace. You don't manufacture your saltiness. You already are salt. You already are light. The only question the passage leaves open is whether you'll be what you are — or cancel it out.

*[Salt.]*

Start with salt. In the ancient world salt did two things, both of them outward. It preserved — rubbed into meat, it held back the rot. And it flavored — it made the bland worth eating. Either way, salt only works by being spent, worked into something that isn't itself. Salt sealed in the shaker, admiring its own purity on the shelf, is worthless. So when Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, he's saying: you're what keeps the world from rotting, you're what gives it flavor — but only if you get out of the shaker.

Then the strange warning: if salt loses its taste, how do you make it salty again? Now, chemically, salt can't actually stop being salt — and that's the point. Jesus is describing an absurdity: salt that isn't salty is just nothing. Useless. And there's the quiet danger of the whole Christian life — not that the church turns wicked, but that it turns bland. Indistinguishable. A community that's quietly lost its savor, its bite against decay, its difference from the world it was meant to season.

*[Light — and the city.]*

Then the second image, and it works the same way. "You are the light of the world." Nobody lights a lamp for the lamp's sake. And Jesus drives it home two ways. "A city on a hill cannot be hidden" — picture a town on a ridge at night, lamps spilling across the dark valley; you couldn't hide it if you tried. And "no one lights a lamp and sticks it under a basket" — that would be ridiculous — "but on a stand, so it gives light to everyone in the house." Same point

from both sides: the city can't be hidden, the lamp mustn't be. A private, invisible, keep-it-to-yourself faith is, in Jesus' own words, an absurdity — a lit lamp shoved under a bucket.

And we have to pause on "city on a hill," because it's one of the most stolen phrases in the Bible. For four hundred years it's been lifted out of Jesus' mouth and pinned onto a nation — used to call one country uniquely blessed, exceptional, shining above the rest. Hear me plainly: that's not what Jesus said, and it's nearly the opposite of what he meant. The city on the hill isn't an empire. It carries no flag. It's the community he just described — the poor, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers. That's the city that can't be hidden: a people so marked by mercy and justice and cross-shaped love that the watching world can't look away. Let's not hand that verse back to the flag-wavers. Let's live it, and take it back the honest way.

*[Whose glory.]*

But here's a real tension, and Jesus settles it in one line. If we're supposed to be visible — a city that can't be hidden — how is that not just showing off? Listen to exactly how he ends it: "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." There's the whole difference, and it hangs on one word — whose glory. When we shine to be admired, the light has curved back inward; it's stopped being light and become a mirror. But when we live so people see the good and look straight past us to God — that's light doing what light does: pointing to something beyond itself. The measure isn't "did they notice me?" It's "did they glimpse God?"

*[The thread and practice.]*

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: where is my light, our light, under a basket? Where have we gone bland, savorless, keeping the gift to ourselves? And what would it cost to get out of the shaker and into the world God so loves?

Two things to practice. First, get out of the shaker: do one visible, tangible good this week where the world can actually see it — not to be admired, but so someone catches a glimpse of God through it. Second, check the glory: afterward, notice honestly where you wanted the credit to land, and practice pointing past yourself.

Next time — the question everybody eventually asks: what about the Law? "I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." We'll handle that one with great care, because how the church has read it has too often harmed Jesus' own people.

*[Slow. Land it.]*

For now, go and be what you already are. You are salt — so get out of the shaker and season the world God loves. You are light — so come out from under the basket and let the room be lit. And when they see the good, make sure they can see straight past you to the God who is the source of it. You are a city on a hill. You cannot be hidden — and you were never meant to be.

*Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.*

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**Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.**