

Series: The Words of Jesus (His Public Teachings)

Today: Words on His Followers

Text: Matthew 5:13-15

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, September 28, 2008

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

If you missed last Sunday, we began a series of sermons which will take us through next Summer on *The Words of Jesus*. I had thought about calling it *The Red Letter Jesus* in honor of all of you who have a “red letter” edition of the Bible where the words of Jesus are highlighted in red. However, not everyone who will be visiting us during the coming year will be familiar with what “red letter” means, so we decided to simply go with *The Words of Jesus*.

I have had at least five phone calls this week asking me the name of the book I mentioned which was the impetus of the series, and I had intended to print it in the bulletin this week. However, the printing deadline for the bulletin came and went without me taking action, so let me say it again: The title of the book is The Words of Jesus: A Gospel of the Sayings of Our Lord. The editor is Phyllis Tickle—spelled just like it sounds; like tickling your feet.

I say that Phyllis Tickle is the editor because, except for the first 50 pages, all she has done is simply group the actual words of Jesus into themes: his public teachings; his private teachings; his words on healing; his words after he was resurrected from the dead (post resurrection appearances); and his intimate conversations. She has then taken those words and set them into categories.

We will deal with all five of the themes in the next 51 weeks, but we will not have time to deal with all of the categories. So, if your interest is in what Jesus actually said, there are two ways you can go to the source. You can turn to the four gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Or, you can buy Mrs. Tickle’s book which is available at the

Berean Book Store in Lancaster Shopping Center (the former Provident Book Store). I get no commission on book sales, but many of you were interested, so I share this information with you.

By the way, when one of you heard my story from last week about never owning a “red letter” edition of the Bible, you were kind enough to go out and purchase one for me—a “red letter” pocket New Testament and The Psalms. It has already been used at the bedside of a dying person and at Lancaster County Prison when I made a visit there. I am deeply grateful; not only that you listen so well, but that you are so generous in your response. Thank you!

This Fall we are focusing on the public teaching of Jesus, and last week we focused on the words he used to define his mission. Today our focus is the words he used to describe his followers. What did Jesus believe was the mission of his followers? At the very beginning of his ministry, what did he say about those who wanted to be identified as his disciples?

In his very first sermon, the one we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has just finished laying out his agenda for those who want to be his followers. We call the first twelve verses the Beatitudes, and they describe the blessings we will all receive if we put our relationship with God front and center in our lives. In verses 13-15 he tells disciples who they are if they choose to follow him; not what they will become, but who they are. This morning I want to lift up that identity by focusing on two gifts we receive if we accept the words of Jesus about his followers: 1) The Gift of an Identity, and 2) The Challenge of an Identity.

The Gift of an Identity

Let’s begin with the first two words which Jesus said to his disciples: **YOU ARE**. He didn’t speak in the future tense—*you will be*. He didn’t speak in the past tense—*you were*. He speaks in the present tense—*you are*. You collectively and you personally are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It is a message to the whole church, and it is a message to each

of us as individuals. It is our identity. It is our reason for being. It is a gift to the disciples to know who they are.

Several years ago I did a little survey of the things that mothers used to say to my friends and my family as they left the house. My wife, Cherie, said that her mom always said, *"Have a good time."* What a gift of trust! My mom was different. She was a worrier, and every time I would leave the house she would say, *"Be Careful!"* She died two years ago, and even though I was 61-years-old, every time I would leave her after visiting her at Willow Valley, she still said the same thing, *"Be Careful!"* However, it was a colleague of mine who had the best mother admonition. He said that every time he left home, his mother would give him this benediction: *"Always remember who you are!"*

At his baptism Jesus received his identity from God: *"You are my beloved son"* (Matthew 3, Luke 3). Jesus knew who he was, and his God-given identity laid the foundation for his ministry. Now, at the beginning of his ministry, he returns from his sojourn in the desert where he has been tested by the devil, and he lays the foundation of identity and ministry for those who want to be his disciples with two words: *You are!*

Thomas Merton knew what it meant to have this kind of identity. He wrote fifteen lines that have become known as "the Merton Prayer": ***My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the***

shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. [Source: *Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 79*] Our identity is given to us by Christ himself: YOU ARE!

The Challenge of an Identity

Once we know that we have an identity, we have to live into the identity which Jesus gives us: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

What we are is a gift from God. Who we are is the demonstration of God's care for the world which God created. It is God's gift that the followers of Jesus are intended to be the salt of the earth and the light of world.

Salt was a highly valued commodity in the world of Jesus. Roman soldiers were often paid in salt, and thus the word is the root word for salary. Its value was primarily for three reasons according to all of the commentaries I consulted suggested: purity, preservation, and flavor.

In the Roman world of Jesus, salt was connected with purity. Perhaps it was its whiteness, or perhaps, as the Romans said, it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. It was very highly valued. It was used as an offering to the gods, and even when the Jews offered their sacrifices, they offered them with salt. The implication for the follower of Jesus is to strive to live a life which is an example of purity. What a message for the times in which we live! Leaders in business and in government who claim to be followers of Jesus seem to say and do whatever will make them a buck or get them elected, and we see it but we feel helpless to do anything about it. What would happen if we would simply hold up the image and ask the question: *Is this your understanding of what Jesus meant when he said, "You are the salt of the earth?"*

Salt was also the most common preservative. It was used to keep things from going bad. So salt serves the function of keeping things from going bad. I love what Wm. Barclay points out in his commentary: *“We all know that there are certain people in whose company it is easy to be good; and there are also certain people in whose presence it is easy for standards to be relaxed...The Christian must be the cleansing antiseptic in any society...; he/she must be the person who, by his/her presence defeats corruption and makes it easier for others to be good.”* [Source: *DSB*, p. 120].

Salt was also used for flavor. We are created to bring flavor to life. The image of the Christian as one who is dour and stern is not the identity which Jesus gives his disciples.

We have been doing more than our share of memorial services this year, and I am always taken back when a family comes to me saying that they want to be sure that the service isn't a “downer.” They obviously don't know me and they obviously don't know this church. We believe that death is an entry into what cannot be less than this life because we belong to God.

Disciples of Jesus Christ are supposed to add flavor to life. As one author has noted: *“We ought to be the kind of people who, that as we walk up and down the streets of life, people will be struck and attracted. People turn and look at a well-dressed person. ... They should be struck by us, and look at us, and think, “What is this person? I have never seen anybody quite like this before!” ...That is the kind of people we can be and the kind of people that we must be. And when we become such people, believe me, the revival we are longing for will start, and the people outside will come in and will want to know about it.* [Source: D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in *Growing in the Spirit*. Christianity Today, Vol. 36. No. 3]

Finally, Jesus says that his followers are the light of the world. We are created to illuminate the darkest corners of our world and allow the light of God to be reflected through us. We

can curse the darkness, or we can claim the identity which God has given to each of us who choose to be followers of Jesus and allow God's light to be reflected through them.

Bryan Willkerson tells the story of a couple he knows who allow the light of God to be reflected through in their lives. Charlie is a bright, energetic, hard-working man who could have been successful at just about anything he set out to do. What he set out to do was mission work. He spent his entire career working with some of the lowliest people on earth—alcoholics on skid row. For many years he was director of Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago, and then in his retirement years he went to work for another mission in New York.

At a time in life when most people his age were playing golf or taking cruises, Charlie would commute every day to minister to homeless men on the streets of New York. You don't get rich doing mission work your whole life, but every once in a while, Charlie and his wife, Agnes, would get to do something special.

One year the Wilkerson's were invited to join Charlie and Agnes for a night on the town. Someone had given them tickets to hear Handel's Messiah at Carnegie Hall—velvet-covered seats in a private booth. It was a great night, and they all enjoyed it. As they drove us home that night, the Wilkerson's were sitting in the back seat admiring Charlie and Agnes. They were all dressed up for their big night out. She was sitting close to him, like they were high school sweet-hearts. It struck him in that moment as two of the happiest people on earth. Just then he noticed a little plaque that Charlie and Agnes had stuck to the dashboard of their old Chevy. It explained everything: "God always gives what's best to those who leave the choice to him."

Charlie and Agnes had long ago given up striving, fretting, and demanding things from God and from life. Instead they had surrendered to God their talents, their careers, their safety, their material needs, and even their retirement. They took Jesus at his word and reflected the

light of the world for those who lived in darkness. (Source: Bryan Wilkerson, in his sermon "In God We Trust")

Conclusion

So here is the summary of all you have heard this morning: The good news is that as a follower of Jesus, you are! You have an identity. You belong to God through the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. When you know who you are, and you are responsible to make a difference as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Go from this place and live into the identity which God has given you.