The Good Life: Salt and Light

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Matthew 5:3–20

Good morning, City Alliance Church!

If you're here for the first time, I want to say welcome. My name is Nithin, and I have the privilege of serving as one of the pastors here.

Can we take a moment to welcome those who are here for the first time? And if you're watching online, welcome! We're so glad you're with us today.

You braved the elements—the rain and the grayness of fall—but we're excited that you're here as we continue our new series, **The Good Life**.

Growing Together in City Groups

If you joined us last week, we ended the service a little early so you could meet our City Group leaders. These men and women are disciple-makers in our church. They host groups in their homes to help us grow in our relationship with Jesus.

You had an opportunity to visit the different tables, meet the leaders, sign up for a group, and connect with others.

We have groups meeting almost every night of the week. Our young adult group met on Monday night, bringing together people ages 18 to 30. Groups are a fun way to connect, and we have different kinds of groups for different stages of life.

If you have kids, we have groups with kids that would love to welcome your family. And some of our groups are just plain fun. They have a good time together!

So if you're wondering, "Nithin, is there still an opportunity for me to get into a group?" the answer is **yes**.

Visit **cityalliance.org/citygroups**. Our groups are listed there, and we would love to help you get connected to community.

There are three things every follower of Jesus needs to grow in faith:

The Word of God. The Spirit of God. The people of God.

Being part of a spiritual community helps you grow in your faith.

A Journey With Jesus

Last week, we kicked off this series by talking about the good life as Jesus defines it. We're looking at one of His greatest sermons: **the Sermon on the Mount**.

Many scholars believe Jesus taught this material in different places. Think of it as His greatest hits—His "best of"—brought together in this sermon. Over the next several weeks, we're going to walk through it.

But one thing I said last week is important: **we cannot approach the Sermon on the Mount as another to-do list**.

We can't say, "If I do these things, I'm a good Christian. I'm well-behaved. I've earned my salvation. And if I don't do them, I'm a bad Christian."

There's a term for that perspective: a **bounded-set approach** to faith.

A bounded-set approach is about who's in and who's out. We draw a boundary and decide who belongs based on what we can see on the outside—their behavior.

When I was a new believer, people told me, "Nithin, you need to read your Bible every day. You need to pray. You need to go to church."

Those are good things. They're good habits and practices that we need.

But people began adding other things to the list. If I didn't fulfill those expectations, I was out.

"Nithin, you can only listen to Christian music. If you listen to anything secular, you're out."

So no more Billy Joel!

And as I said last week, no dancing, because dancing leads to **premarital hand-holding**. You have to watch out for that!

Then there was the old saying: "Don't smoke, drink, or chew, or run with girls who do."

The idea was that if you did everything on the checklist, you were a good Christian. If you couldn't do it, you weren't.

Eventually, we began basing our salvation on what **we** could do instead of what **Jesus** had done for us.

At City Alliance, we describe a disciple with three goals:

Be with Jesus. Become like Jesus. Do what Jesus did.

When we first give our lives to Jesus, we don't have to clean everything up before coming to Him. Most of us were a mess when we first found Jesus!

Our first priority is to love God, grow closer to Him, and be with Him.

The more we're with Jesus, the more He begins changing us. He changes the way we think. He changes our affections. We begin loving the things He loves and hating the things He hates.

We become more like Jesus.

Over time, as we think like Him, see the world like Him, love the people He loves, and hate things like injustice and darkness, we begin doing what Jesus did.

It starts with the heart, then moves to the head and the hands.

Last week, we called this a **centered-set approach**, because it centers on Jesus.

I drew a picture of a cross. Please don't make fun of my art—my daughter is the artist!

The cross is where we begin. We look to Jesus as our source of strength, salvation, hope, and healing.

Healthy faith is a journey with Jesus.

In a church our size, we're all at different places on that journey. Some of us are moving toward Jesus.

Maybe you're here today or watching online, and you're not a believer yet. You're not sure what to do with Jesus, but you're leaning in. Something about God's Spirit is drawing you toward Him.

Some of us are followers of Jesus, but we're struggling in our faith. We may even be leaning away from Him.

A centered-set approach acknowledges that we're on a journey and that we have a choice:

Will we lean in to what God is doing, listen to Him, and obey? Or will we lean away and keep walking away from His work in our lives?

These two approaches shape how we read the Sermon on the Mount.

If we understand it as the life Jesus invites us into and grows us into, we see it as a journey. If we see it as another to-do list, we become discouraged.

"Man, I can't do all this!"

Here's the good news: **you were never meant to do it on your own**.

God's Spirit transforms your heart, your mind, and your actions. That transformation leads to what Jesus calls **the good life**.

What Defines the Good Life

Let's return to the question we asked last week:

What do we mean by the good life?

Harvard has spent decades studying this question, trying to put some scientific handles on it. And people offer many different answers.

Some say the good life is money, wealth, and financial security.

"If I have a lot of money, I'm good."

But what if you don't? What if you're struggling financially or working a couple of jobs just to make ends meet? Does that mean you don't have access to the good life God intends?

For some of us, the good life is family.

"My family is healthy. Everyone is doing great. Things are awesome."

But what if your family isn't doing great? What if there's addiction, tension, or conflict? Does that mean you don't have access to the good life?

For others, it's reputation. It's how others see us, how our boss sees us, or what people think about us.

But what happens when your reputation isn't secure? What if people are talking behind your back and dragging your reputation through the mud? It's incredibly uncomfortable—but does it mean you can't have the good life?

If you follow Jesus, **Jesus is the definition of the good life**.

Jesus was the happiest man on earth, yet He was poor.

Jesus was the happiest man on earth, yet He experienced conflict and tension with His family.

Jesus was the happiest man on earth, yet His reputation was dragged through the mud. People called Him a drunk, a glutton, and a friend of the wrong kinds of people.

And yet Jesus had access to the good life. He had access to the **Kingdom of God**.

The Kingdom of God is life with God.

It's a new reality that Jesus invites us into. That's why He came: so we could be part of this Kingdom movement that begins on earth and continues into the world to come.

Over these next few weeks, we'll study Matthew 5, 6, and 7. Today, we'll begin in Matthew 5.

If you picked up one of our group guides, turn to page seven. You can take notes there before going to your City Group this week. The guides are still available if you need one.

The Beatitudes

Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by calling people **blessed**.

I want us to read this passage a little differently. We're going to read it responsively.

Who grew up doing responsive readings in church? Awesome—you're going to love this!

I'll read the first part of each blessing, and you'll respond with the promise. We'll make it fun and see which section can be the loudest.

You're the biggest section, so I'm expecting a lot from you. But I have a feeling about this section over here!

Ready?

Leader: Blessed are the poor in spirit,
Congregation: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Leader: Blessed are those who mourn,
Congregation: for they will be comforted.

Leader: Blessed are the meek,
Congregation: for they will inherit the earth.

Leader: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
Congregation: for they will be filled.

Leader: Blessed are the merciful,
Congregation: for they will be shown mercy.

Leader: Blessed are the pure in heart,
Congregation: for they will see God.

Leader: Blessed are the peacemakers,
Congregation: for they will be called children of God.

Leader: Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
Congregation: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Give yourselves a hand! Well done. I can't tell who won, so I'm going to say all of you won. Everyone gets a trophy. How does that sound?

Jesus wraps up His introduction with these words:

> "Blessed 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."

These eight blessings introduce the greatest sermon Jesus ever preached.

The Greek word translated "blessed" is **makarios**. It carries the idea of being happy or blessed. Jesus is describing a happiness that lasts—a happiness that circumstances cannot take away.

You can hear these statements as, "Happy are you."

Whatever is happening in your life—whether you're poor in spirit, dealing with conflict, or facing persecution—because you have access to His Kingdom, because you have access to life with God, you can know a happiness the world cannot offer.

It's not based on situations or circumstances. It's based on what Jesus has accomplished on the cross.

As we look to Him and pursue Him, we can find joy and happiness in the midst of these things.

There Is Something Here for You

I love how Jesus introduces this sermon. He is saying:

This is for everybody.

Wherever you find yourself in these Beatitudes, there's something here for you.

Maybe you're poor in spirit, struggling to trust God with different areas of your life.

Maybe you're grieving the loss of a family member or a season of life.

Maybe you feel meek—like you're making yourself small.

Maybe you're on the receiving end of injustice and inequality, or you need mercy.

Maybe you're pursuing God and seeking Him, but you don't seem to hear His voice or feel connected to Him.

Maybe you're dealing with a difficult conflict in your marriage, workplace, relationships, or with a roommate.

Maybe you're being persecuted for your faith.

There is something here for you.

You have access to the Kingdom of God and to a happiness that lasts. That's the good news the Sermon on the Mount brings us.

With that in mind, Jesus tells us how to engage with the world.

You Are the Salt of the Earth

Matthew 5:13 says:

> "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 by men."

Jesus gives us this picture of **salt**.

Salt was incredibly important and valuable in the ancient world. There were two main reasons for that.

First, salt **seasons**. When you add it to food, it brings out flavor. It enhances what's there.

Second, salt **preserves**. There were no refrigerators or freezers. People used salt to preserve meat so they could eat it later.

Jesus uses this image to say, "I want you to be the salt of the earth."

Enhance the good around you.

When you see the common good, lean into it and strengthen it.

But when you see evil, decay, and injustice, be salt there too.

Speak up. Speak out. Push back against it.

As followers of Jesus, there are two extremes we need to be careful about.

One is blending into the background of our culture, neighborhood, or workplace.

“I don’t want to cause a fuss. I just want to do what I need to do and move on.”

Eventually, we stop making a difference. That’s what Jesus warns about when He talks about salt losing its saltiness.

The other extreme is completely separating ourselves.

“We can’t engage with our schools or workplaces. We need to create our own thing—our own subculture.”

Then we lose opportunities to bless and care for the broken world God has placed us in.

We are called to be salt **in this world**. We are called to be different and distinct while engaging with the people around us.

Maybe the place you’re in is dark. Maybe it’s challenging or hard. But God has placed you there to make a difference—to be an agent of change and transformation in your workplace and neighborhood.

You might say, “Nithin, it’s just me. I’m the only Christian at my job. I’m the only person of faith. What can I do?”

It doesn’t take a lot of salt to make a difference.

If you need a reminder this week, go home, get a handful of salt, and put it on your desk at work.

Put it in a **pile**, not a line. I don’t want you getting in trouble with HR!

Let it remind you that God has placed you in your neighborhood and workplace for a purpose.

If you’re a stay-at-home parent, put it on your kitchen counter. Let it remind you that God has placed you in your household and neighborhood to bring preservation and flavor to the world around you.

You Are the Light of the World

The second image Jesus gives us is **light**.

Matthew 5:14–16 says:

> “You are the light of the world. A city 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 men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Light illuminates. It helps us see what’s happening.

We see this theme throughout Scripture. Isaiah, looking ahead to the coming of Jesus, says:

> “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Light reveals what is hidden. It helps us find our way, especially in the dark.

As followers of Jesus, our light helps people find their way to God.

People should be able to look at our lives and get a sense of what God is like—His love, mercy, and forgiveness.

If we’re called to be light, why would we cover it up?

But if you’re like me, it happens all the time.

On Sunday morning, we're singing, "Come rest on us." We're under the spout where the glory pours out! We're worshiping.

Then Monday comes.

"Can you believe what so-and-so said on Facebook? Let me go beepity-beep-beep-beep them!"

Sunday comes again.

"Jesus, I want to abide in You. I love You. I want to serve You. God, I give You every area of my life."

Then we hear that someone got a promotion.

"Can you believe that? What a jerk! They don't deserve it. You know what I heard about them?"

And suddenly, we're denying the light we're called to shine.

God calls us to shine so people can see His life, hope, and healing in us.

But too often, **what we declare on Sunday, we deny on Monday**.

This is where we need Jesus to transform us.

What do we do when our workplace is hard, difficult, or spiritually dark?

That's what Sarah struggled with. She worked in dental hygiene in a challenging environment and wondered how to be salt and light in a place that seemed to drain it out of her.

Let's hear her story.

Sarah Shares Her Story

I got a job as director of dental hygiene at a large company that managed several offices. I was overseeing employees, and I was asked to tell them to do things I knew weren't ethical.

That's when I realized I was in a really dark corporate world of healthcare. The workers weren't happy.

Every day presented an opportunity to be light. A coworker might ask, "Why are you so happy? What makes you happy? Why do you come to work happy? Why are you positive?"

I would tell them, "Because of my faith. I believe in Jesus, and He gives me hope."

It was about being a light in a dark place.

There was pressure from my boss to do unethical things. For instance, I was told to have hygienists clean a patient's teeth in ten minutes.

Hygienists were rushing through procedures, and I worried about whether that could injure patients. Things weren't being cleaned or sterilized properly.

My boss made it seem as though, "This is how things are done. If you won't do them this way, you might as well walk out the door."

But when I prayed, the Holy Spirit gave me strength to talk to him about what was happening. I told him I couldn't do some of the things he was asking, even if it meant losing my job.

Even after I brought those concerns to the owner, it was still about the bottom line. Each patient was seen as a dollar sign.

That's when I decided it wasn't worth it. The role, the position, the money, the notoriety, the prestige—none of it was worth it.

I prayed, “God, I tried. Did I fail You in some way? I tried to be a light. I know I could stay here and continue to do that if this is where You want me.”

Then I got a call from an office where I had worked before.

“Sarah, when you were gone, we realized how much you meant to the patients and to the company. We want you back, and we’ll give you a raise.”

I called my boss and said, “Thank you for the opportunity to work here. But I’ve prayed a lot about this, and I cannot compromise what I know is right and ethically sound for employees or patients.”

I told him I wouldn’t be coming back.

My faith is fundamental. It’s who I am. It’s my life every day.

I know God is using me. I’m here for a purpose. I’m a vessel He’s using.

Are You Salty and Lit

Sarah could have kept her head down, done her job, and collected her paycheck. She could have covered up who she was and allowed her saltiness to be trampled.

Instead, she chose to be **salt and light**.

“I’m going to speak up. I’m going to tell my boss what needs to change. I’m going to be a source of light in a dark place.”

Here’s my question for you:

Are you salty and lit?

I don’t mean it the way your teenager means “salty” and “lit.” Please understand that!

Are you going to be salt and light in your neighborhood, workplace, and interactions throughout the week?

Our ushers are handing out a little bag with a packet of salt and a tea light. It’s a reminder of what God has called you to be.

Put it somewhere you’ll see it as you begin your day. Put it on your dresser while you get ready, or on your desk at work.

If someone asks, “Why do you have salt and a light?” you can tell them, “I’m here to enhance the good in our workplace and push back against decay and evil.”

If you’re a student, put it in your book bag. Wherever you place it, let it remind you of God’s call to be **salt and light in the world He has placed you in**.

Jesus describes the Beatitudes and what it looks like to belong to His Kingdom. Then He tells us how to live in this world.

Next, He tells us that we are part of something thousands of years in the making.

Jesus Fulfills the Law

In Matthew 5:17–20, Jesus says:

> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

> “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
>
> “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Say that word with me: **fulfill**.

What is the relationship between the Law and the Prophets and this new way of Jesus?

The first five books of the Bible are known as the **Torah**. They contain the laws God gave His people. The prophets called the people back to faithfulness to God and His law.

As we continue through this sermon, you’ll hear Jesus repeat a phrase:

“You have heard that it was said… But I say to you…”

He quotes Old Testament passages and then explains them.

Sometimes Christians ask me, “Nithin, what do we do with the Old Testament and all these laws, especially in light of the gospel?”

There are two purposes I want us to see.

First, **the law reveals that we cannot fully obey everything God calls us to do on our own**.

Because of our sin and selfishness, we cannot be completely faithful to the life God calls us to live. We can’t do it through our own grit.

Second, **the law prepares us for Jesus**.

It prepares us for the One who can be completely faithful to God and obey every command.

And Jesus doesn’t simply obey on our behalf. He enables us to live faithfully to God.

When Jesus comes, He gives us a different way to understand the law. We read the Old Testament **in light of Jesus**.

Some parts are completed in Him, including the ceremonial requirements. Other parts related to Israel’s life as a nation belong to that setting. Some commands are reaffirmed and extended in the New Testament. Other principles are expressed differently as we follow Jesus.

The moral principles flowing from God’s character still matter.

We don’t ignore the Old Testament or throw it out. We look at it through the eyes of Jesus.

The Blueprints and the Finished House

I was trying to find a way to explain this, so let me try. We’ll see what happens!

Imagine the Law and the Prophets as **blueprints for a house**.

If you’ve built a house, you know you begin with an architect. The architect gives you blueprints showing how the house is meant to look.

Then you hire a general contractor and people to construct the building. The construction takes time. Eventually, the building is finished. You celebrate and live in it.

If the Law and the Prophets are the blueprints, think of the nation of Israel as the construction process.

In Israel’s story, we see that they cannot fully complete or fulfill God’s will, rule, and reign on earth.

Jesus is the One who completes it.

He is fully faithful and completely obedient to God. He does what we could not do.

Here is the good news of the gospel:

When you give your life to Jesus and put your faith in Him as Lord and Savior, **you receive the righteousness of Christ**.

It's just as if you've never sinned and just as if you've always obeyed.

When God sees you, He sees His beloved son or daughter, fully and completely accepted by Him.

When we approach the Sermon on the Mount, we're asking:

"Am I living according to the new life God has enabled me to live? Where am I falling short? Where do I need to invite Jesus to bring more transformation?"

As pastor and author Rich Villodas explains, the Sermon on the Mount is how we demonstrate salvation, rather than how we achieve it. It is a litmus test that helps us assess whether we are following Jesus or something else.

It's an invitation to the good life—the life that flows from relationship with God Himself.

When you commit to following Jesus, **He changes you. He transforms you.**

Crossing the Faith Line

Maybe you're here today or watching online, and you've never experienced that kind of life—a life anchored in Jesus, surrendered to Him, with hope, healing, meaning, and purpose.

The good news is that you can begin a relationship with Jesus. You can experience the good life He offers.

It begins when you decide, "Today, I want to follow Jesus. I want the good life as He defines it."

Wherever you are on your journey, there is a point when Jesus asks you to surrender your life to Him. We call it **the faith line**.

Crossing the faith line means recognizing:

"I can't do life on my own. I don't have the grit, ability, or power. I need something beyond myself."

When you surrender your life to Jesus, you move from exploring and trying to figure Him out to saying, "I'm with Him. I'm becoming His disciple."

You won't be perfect. But you will know that He is with you no matter what.

If you want to begin a relationship with Jesus today, think of **A, B, C**.

A: Admit that you're a sinner. Admit that we fall short of God's glory and His standard.

B: Believe in Jesus. When you put your faith in Him, you receive the righteousness of Christ—just as if you've never sinned and just as if you've always obeyed.

C: Commit to follow Him. You won't be perfect, but He will work in you, transforming you day by day.

Ten years from now, you may look back and say, "I'm not the same man or woman I was before I started following Jesus."

If you haven't taken that step, I want to encourage you to begin today.

Would you pray with me?

If you want to begin following Jesus, pray this in the quietness of your heart. These aren't magic words. This is an opportunity to surrender your life to Him.

Prayer of Surrender

Lord Jesus, I admit that I'm a sinner and I need a Savior. I've been trying to do life on my own.

The things I've considered the good life are not the true good life. Father, I want the good life that comes from following You.

Jesus, would You fill me with Your Holy Spirit? Would You give me the power I need to live for You—the life You made me for?

In Jesus' name, amen.

Can we give God praise for our new brothers and sisters in the faith?

If you prayed that prayer for the first time or rededicated your life, come to the baptismal area at the end of the service. We have people who would love to pray with you, give you a Bible, and help you on your journey with Jesus.

Returning to Jesus Through Communion

Now I want to speak to those of you who are followers of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount is a litmus test because we are constantly at risk of drifting in our faith. Forces around us pull us away from the light of Christ.

We need to return to Him and readjust. The Bible calls this **repentance**.

One way we do that is by celebrating communion.

Communion brings us back into union with Jesus. We remember what He has done for us, surrender our lives to Him, and ask:

"Lord, where am I falling short? Where do I need to be readjusted?"

And God meets us there.

I want to invite those serving at our communion stations to come forward. The ushers will dismiss you row by row.

Take the bread and dip it in the grape juice. Please—**dip, don't sip**!

Then bring it back to your seat. We'll pray and take the elements together.

[The congregation receives the communion elements during worship.]

One of our board members is joining us to help lead communion.

Jesus told us to remember Him whenever we share this meal.

On the night before He died for our sins, He was with His disciples. He took ordinary, everyday bread—the kind they used for their meals—and said, "This is My body, broken for you. Remember Me."

Then He took the wine, blessed it, and said, "This is My blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sin."

Every time we gather, we remember what He has done.

We also remember that He will come back.

In this time between what Jesus has done and His return, we are called to be **salt and light—salty and lit**—so the world can know God's goodness through our words and the way we live.

Let's take this time to align our hearts with Jesus and with the life He calls us to live.

A Prayer of Confession

Our response is to confess our sin.

In Christ, sin no longer defines our identity. But we still sin, and we need to respond honestly:

"God, I messed up. Forgive me."

We allow Him to reconnect with us.

Sometimes when we read a confession together, I find myself simply reading the words rather than allowing them to affect my heart.

Today, we'll do it a little differently. I'll read the words, and you'll respond afterward.

Feel free to close your eyes or look at the words on the screen. You can say them aloud or whisper them.

This is a prayer between you and God.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
 we confess that we have sinned against You
 in thought, in word, and in deed,
 in what we have done
 and what we have left undone.

By the grace of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
 forgive us all our offenses.

By Your Spirit,
 grant that we may serve You in newness of life,
 that we may delight in Your will
 and walk in Your ways,
 to the glory of Your name.

Amen.

Let's partake of the elements together.

As we continue with our last worship song, our prayer team is available if you need prayer.

Let's come into God's presence.