

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF CHRISTIANS

Matthew 5:13-20

As Christians we must be different from Non-Christians, both as regards the way we think and the way we live our lives; and further we must be seen to be different. We need to become more and more like Jesus every day as the Holy Spirit works within us to sanctify us. Being different in this way will not only benefit us, but will also help to purify the world and make it a better place. Jesus made this point with a couple of illustrations recorded in our reading this morning, so let's begin by looking at verses 13 to 16 of our reading:

“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. 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.” (Matthew 5:13-16 NIV)

Here Jesus uses two brief illustrations – salt and light – to indicate why his disciples must be both different and distinctive. The Jews regarded salt as one of the basic necessities of life, as is recorded in Sirach 39:26. Jesus made a similar point:

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” (Mark 9:50 NIV)

The two most important uses of salt in Jesus' time were as a preservative and as a flavouring. Jesus probably had both of these uses in mind. The disciples are to provide flavour to the world they live in and also to prevent its corruption. Paul speaks of salt losing its saltiness – which seems impossible to us. But, in Jesus's time in Israel, salt was not pure sodium chloride. The salt they used was collected from around the Dead Sea and contained other minerals as well as salt. So, we can imagine that the sodium chloride content, the

true salt, could we washed out, leaving a useless residue without any salt content. This is a powerful indictment of disciples who have lost their distinctiveness.

Matthew has already used the idea of light and darkness in chapter 4 of his Gospel:

“the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16 NIV)

Here, the light symbolises the new hope we have in Christ. Where there is light people can find their way and all is clear. Where there is darkness people are lost. Christ as light is one of the favourite themes of John’s Gospel:

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12 NIV)

In this second illustration of how Jesus’s disciples must be distinctive, Jesus begins with a single lamp and goes on to think in terms of many lamps – the city on a hill. The combined impact of the many lights which make up a town at night illustrates more appropriately than the single lamp of v. 15, the corporate effect of the disciple community on the surrounding darkness.

Returning to the single lamp, a domestic lamp of those times was a shallow bowl of oil with a wick. It would normally be stationary, placed on a fixed lampstand, rather than being mobile like the “torches” of Matthew 25:1. The “bowl” is literally a grain-measure holding about nine liters, probably made of earthenware or basket-work. While it may be true that a lamp placed under such a receptacle would soon go out for lack of oxygen, the point seems to be rather the absurdity of hiding a lamp when its whole *raison d’être* is to be visible and give light to the whole house. The metaphor is about the effect which the life of disciples must have on those around them. It thus takes it for granted that the “job description” of a disciple is not fulfilled by private personal holiness, but includes the witness of public exposure. Jesus makes this absolutely clear in verse 16 where

the light shed by the disciples is the good that they do, especially the ‘righteousness’ which is to be characteristic of them. The goal of the disciples’ witness is not that others emulate their way of life, or applaud their probity, but that they recognize the source of their distinctive lifestyle in “your Father in heaven”.

Of course, the ostentatious performance of religious acts in order to win approbation is not at all the same thing as a life of conspicuous goodness lived in the public arena so that people cannot help being impressed. The effect (and the intention) of the former is a reputation for piety; the result of the latter is the glory of God. Jesus makes this absolutely clear in Matthew 6:1:

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1 NIV)

Jesus now changes the subject to the “fulfilment of the Law” (meaning Jewish Law) in a long section of teaching. The last four verses of our reading, verses 17-20, set out the general principles behind this discussion:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil 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 practises 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.” (Matthew 5:17-20 NIV)

Whilst there is a clear unity here, each verse is actually making a different point. Some commentators have concluded from verses 18 and 19 that Matthew believed that Christians must continue to observe the strictures of Jewish Law. If that were the case then Matthew would be hugely out of step with virtually the whole of New

Testament Christianity, especially as regards the sacrificial aspects of Jewish Ceremonial Law.

The Letter to the Hebrews is clear that these can have no further place after the one perfect sacrifice was offered by Christ. Paul, speaks of ‘freedom from the Law’ (Galatians 5:1-6) or ‘dead to the Law’ (Romans 7:1-6; Galatians 2:19). Let me be absolutely clear here, Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for all the sins of the whole of mankind that have been, are being, or will be committed and there is nothing more that needs be done with regard to human sin.

Under the guidance of Peter and Paul, the NT church acknowledged that OT food laws were not binding on Christians (Acts 11:2-10; Romans 14:14). I don’t believe that we can take verses 18 and 19 of our reading as a statement that he believed Christians are to be bound by the totality of Jewish Law. A little later, Matthew records Jesus as saying:

“What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean’, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean’.”
(Matthew 15:11 NIV)

Clearly, this undermines the whole Jewish food law system of clean and unclean foods.

While v. 19 of our reading sounds like an endorsement of the scribal concern to ensure that every detail of the law should be observed to the letter and in the smallest detail, v. 20 speaks of the “righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees”. Their righteousness consisted of a scrupulous observance not only of the OT laws recorded in scripture but also of the ever increasing elaboration of those laws developed by the Pharisees. Verse 20 makes it quite clear that this legalistic righteousness is something other than the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven, and warns that that sort of legal observance leaves one outside the kingdom of heaven altogether.

I believe the key to this apparent contradiction is to be found in what it means to ‘fulfil’ the Law and the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets effectively means the whole of OT scripture. The third part

of the OT – ‘the Writings’, does not need to be specifically included. No doubt the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law did believe that Jesus wanted to abolish the Law – for example, Jesus disregarded their view of Sabbath Law (Matthew 12:1-14). The same charge persisted with regard to the followers of Jesus (Acts 6:11). By the time Matthew was writing his Gospel (probably between 64 and 69 AD), the view of pre-eminent Christian teachers as to ‘freedom from the Law’ would have been a strong and widespread influence. It appeared that Jesus had set himself up against the written word of God. The issue is not simply an accusation of failing to keep the law in practice, but of aiming to “abolish” scriptural authority

The issue is thus not Jesus’ personal practice as such, but his attitude to the authority of the Law and the Prophets. I believe Jesus is teaching that he is the fulfillment of OT scripture which predicts and speaks of his coming. The question is not about Jesus’s observance of, or teaching about, the Law, but rather of his fulfilling the redemptive purpose and predictions of the OT. I think an odd saying of Jesus recorded by Matthew sheds much light on this issue: “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.” (Matthew 11:13 NIV)

In speaking of the pivotal role of John the Baptist as the point at which the time of fulfillment has dawned, Jesus is saying that the law is thus linked with the prophets as looking forward to a time of fulfillment which has now arrived. The Torah, then, is not God’s last word to his people, but is, in a sense provisional, looking forward to a time of fulfillment through the Messiah.

Jesus is saying that, far from wanting to set aside the law and the prophets, his role is to bring into being that which these scriptures have pointed forward to; to carry them on into a new era of fulfillment. On this understanding the authority of the law and the prophets is not abolished. They remain the authoritative word of God. But their role will no longer be the same. Now what they pointed towards has come to pass, and it will be for Jesus’s followers to discern in the light of his teaching and practice what is now the right

way to apply those texts in the new situation which his coming has created. From now on it will be the authoritative teaching of Jesus which must govern his disciples' understanding, and indeed our understanding, of the practical application of the Law.

So, there is much to learn from our reading this morning. The last four verses teach us that we must interpret OT scripture through the filter of Jesus's teaching. Although it is no longer Law as such, the OT has much to teach us about the values which we must uphold in our lives.

Secondly, we realise that, as followers of Christ, we must be distinctive - "in the world but not of the world" and that this distinctiveness must be maintained and not be lost or diluted. Furthermore, this distinctiveness must be presented before mankind in order that Christian values may be imparted to those around us. This will surely make the world a better place. Let us be true Christians whose Christlike lives continually present Christian values to the world.