

Sermon on the Mount – Part 4

Matthew 5:13-16 ~ October 1, 2017

In the mid-1800s, women often begged and pleaded to be discharged from the hospital so that they wouldn't die during childbirth. That's right, they begged to be discharged from the hospital so they wouldn't die during childbirth.

About 5 of every 1,000 women died in deliveries performed by midwives or at home. But in the best hospitals in Europe and America, the number of deaths was often 20 or sometimes 50 times higher!

The cause was childbed fever and it was excruciating—a raging fever, putrid pus in the birth canal, abscesses in the abdomen and chest, sepsis and eventually death...all within 24 hours. No wonder women didn't want to deliver in the hospital.

Enter Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis¹ who headed the department of obstetrics at Vienna General Hospital in Austria.

¹ This story is adapted from, (1) The Way I Heard it with Mike Rowe, "Episode 4: Little Bits of Corpse." (2) Dr. Howard Markel, "In 1850, Ignaz Semmelweis saved lives with three words: wash your hands," PBS Newshour, May 15, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/ignaz-semmelweis-doctor-prescribed-hand-washing/>, accessed September 27, 2017. (3) "The Doctor Who Championed Handwashing and Briefly Saved Lives," NPR Morning Edition, January 12, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/01/12/375663920/the-doctor-who-championed-hand-washing-and-saved-women-s-lives>, accessed September 28, 2017.

Truth be told, that was not the job Dr. Semmelweis had in mind when he sought a position at the hospital. He would have preferred internal medicine or surgery but he had two strikes against him— (1) he was Hungarian and (2) he was Jewish. Nevertheless, he went about his duties in obstetrics, took the women's concerns seriously, and set out to find the cause of all those deaths.

Was it overcrowding in the hospital? No. Was it the climate in the hospital? No. Was it the mother's position during childbirth, whether she was on her side or on her back? No. He searched and searched but could not find an answer.

One day, a pathologist at the hospital died soon after performing an autopsy on one of the dead mothers...and he had the same symptoms. Dr. Semmelweis wondered if this could help him understand the problem. At the hospital, doctors performed barehanded autopsies in the morning before seeing their patients. Could there be a connection?

Thinking he might be onto something, Dr. Semmelweis instituted a policy requiring midwives and doctors in his ward to do something that is second nature to most of us today—they were to wash their hands before examining the patients. He prescribed a chlorine solution to be used...and in a few weeks the mortality rate dropped by 90%.

Ironically, many of the doctors at the hospital refused to acknowledge that they might be spreading childbed fever. After all, what doctor could accept that his practices would harm rather than help his patients? As a result, many of them returned to their old practices and death rates began to climb again.

Dr. Semmelweis did not appreciate the response and, not being known for tact, publicly berated and humiliated those who disagreed with him. In the press, he wrote, “Your teachings are based on the dead bodies of innocent women slaughtered through ignorance. I denounce you all before God and the world as murderers.”

Ultimately, he was fired for the clashes with his colleagues. As he grew angrier and angrier, he seemed to lose more and more of himself, though he couldn't see it. Eventually, he was invited to evaluate patients at another hospital...but when he arrived, he found that he wasn't there as the newest physician, but as the newest patient in the Viennese Asylum for the Insane. He resisted the incarceration and was beaten by the guards. He died in the asylum two weeks later.

Today, it's clear that Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis was a man ahead of his time. His most important work took place between 1846 and 1861...just before Louis Pasteur's formal experiments on the relationship between germs and disease

(including discovering the cause of childbed fever) and just before Scottish surgeon Joseph Lister wrote about the need for antiseptic surgery, including washing hands to prevent infection.

I see a connection between Dr. Semmelweis' story and our influence as Jesus' apprentices. Before we explore that connection, let's read the next section of Scripture in the "Sermon on the Mount" series.

Matthew 5:13-16 (page 683)

¹³ *"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 underfoot.*

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.*

¹⁵ *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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

The sermon on the mount lays out many ways Jesus' followers (his apprentices) are expected to be different from the world around them. We spent the

last two weeks considering the Beatitudes as Jesus' own description of his apprentices. Today, we're looking at the influence his apprentices are to have in the world.

Jesus said his apprentices are to be salt and light. Let's look at those ideas and then we'll see how Dr. Semmelweis' story might help us better understand.

Salt of the earth

You and I may have many different things come to mind when we think of salt but Jesus' first-century audience would have immediately thought of it as a primary means to preserve meat. In a time when refrigerators and freezers did not exist, salt was not primarily used to add flavor. It was used to stop meat from spoiling...from going bad. Jesus was telling his apprentices that they were to play the same role in the world—stop the decay that is naturally occurring.

John Stott helps us understand: *God has set...restraining influences in the community. He has...established certain institutions...which curb man's selfish tendencies and prevent society from slipping into anarchy. Chief among these are the state (with its authority to frame and enforce laws) and the home (including marriage and family life). These exert a wholesome influence in the community.*

Nevertheless, God intends the most powerful of all restraints within sinful society to be his own redeemed, regenerate and righteous people.²

Jesus' assertion that we are to be the salt of the earth was so sure that he went on to say, *"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 underfoot."*

Now, it's impossible for salt to become "unsalty," so what did Jesus mean? He was referring to a common ancient problem of salt being mixed with impure substances and becoming useless as a preservative.³ So too, as Jesus' apprentices, we can become useless in the world.

Again, John Stott helps us understand: *Christian saltiness is Christian character as depicted in the beatitudes. To be effective, Christians must remain Christlike. If they become too much like non-Christians and contaminated by the impurities of the world, they lose their influence. Their influence on society depends on their being distinct from it, not identical to it. The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first. If we Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians, we are useless.⁴*

² Stott, John. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (The Bible Speaks Today Series) (p. 59). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Blomberg, Craig. (1992). *The New American Commentary: Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 22). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴ Stott, 60.

Let's recap—because the world is going bad morally, those of us who are apprenticed to Christ must be salt to slow the decay. Let me put it more bluntly, because the world is going to hell in a handbasket, those of us who are Christ's apprentices must step in and try to disrupt the journey. We don't do that by jumping in the basket. We don't do it by pointing our fingers and attacking those who are in the basket (you can't blame unsalted meat for going bad).⁵ Instead, we interrupt the journey by intentionally traveling in the opposite direction. If we don't we're useless...and the world goes to hell!

Light of the world

Jesus also said his apprentices are to be the light of the world. It's interesting that Jesus used that same phrase to describe himself in John 8. Obviously, we are to be reflections of his light.

Verse 16 gives needed context to help us understand verses 14 and 15. The light we shine are the good deeds we do for others. They must be expressions of our faith in Christ and done to bring attention to him, not to ourselves.

Jesus condemned the Pharisee of his day because many of them did good deeds to be publicly recognized by their peers and placed on pedestals. That is not

⁵ Stott, 65.

our motivation. Whatever we do must reflect what Christ has done for us. We are not to hide or be ashamed of our motivations for good deeds.

Now, some will say, “But Rob, there are plenty of people who do good deeds who are not Christians.” I agree...and I would add that whenever folks who don’t know Christ as Savior do things that could be considered Christ-like, they are reflecting the character of their Creator whether they know it or not...and that raises the bar for those of us who do know it.

Let’s recap this part—because the world is stumbling along in darkness as it goes to hell in a handbasket, those of us who are apprenticed to Christ must reflect his light so the world can see the reality of its condition and see how to get back where it’s supposed to be. We don’t do that by shining the light so brightly that we blind them in their blindness. Rather, we interact with them and serve them in a Christlike manner so that hopefully we might one day get their attention and lead them to ask why we’re going in a different direction. And when that happens, we have the light to show them the way.

Now, let’s go back to Dr. Semmelweis because I think his story helps us understand the influence we’re supposed to have on the world.

Dr. Semmelweis acted like salt. He was trying to stop the useless death of expectant mothers by getting doctors to see the error of their ways in not washing their hands between autopsies and patient examinations.

He also acted like light. He proposed a better way—washing hands to stop the spread of childbed fever.

He went about it the wrong way. He was right and he knew he was right...and there's nothing wrong with that. However, when others didn't fully adopt his methods because they hadn't come to terms with their own guilt, instead of patiently demonstrating and helping them understand, he berated them, humiliated them, and called them names until they were no longer willing to listen. In the end, it led to the unnecessary deaths of even more expectant mothers.

Let's be like Dr. Semmelweis—trying to stop ungodliness and encourage godliness.

And let's not be like Dr. Semmelweis—berating and humiliating and assigning names to those headed in the wrong direction because that's all they know from this world. Instead, let's love them and serve them in a Christlike manner that accurately reflects the Savior who died for the world...not just for those of us who are already in the family.

Here's what we need to start doing (if we're not already doing it): We need to *get out of the saltshaker and into the darkness* so that the world can know Christ the same way we know him.

Prayer