

February 9, 2020  
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Today I want to talk about *purpose*. We come to that age-old question people have been asking themselves for as long as there have been people. What is the meaning of my life? Well wonder no longer folks, because this young man will do in ten minutes what the human race's greatest philosophers have been unable to do in thousands of years!

No, that's obviously not true. I can't tell you the meaning of life. Not definitively. Sure, I have my opinions and theories about *pieces* of that question... but I can't tell you, for *sure*, the reason it *is* you're on this earth and breathing this air with a beating heart in your breast. I can't even tell you the meaning of *your* life, let alone *life* in general.

But the question remains. And it's a question that humanity's great thinkers, whole philosophical movements, and religions—including Christianity—have tried to answer.

The Greek philosopher Plato said that the purpose of life is to attain the highest form of knowledge. There's a branch of philosophy called Cynicism that claims we exist to live a simple, virtuous life, striving to live in harmony with nature. The hedonistic worldview says that the purpose of life is to find as much pleasure as possible. Utilitarianism believes that one must seek to bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.

In Islam, the purpose of humanity is to worship God. In Hinduism, meaning in life is found through self-improvement, by gradually developing and evolving upon the state of your soul with each lifetime you live. In Buddhism the goal of a person is to free ourselves from suffering and rise above the passions that control us.

Then there's nihilism, which says that life has *no* meaning. And I'm gonna level with you, if you're a nihilist, you're probably not going to like this sermon, because it's all about finding meaning in your life. Seeking the purpose of your life.

And that's exactly what Jesus is talking about in our Scripture reading today. It's part of his Sermon on the Mount, and a continuation of what Reverend Estelle preached about last week. After the Beatitudes, where Christ

listed people and *characteristics* of people who are blessed by God, he goes on to tell the people listening to him who *they* are.

He calls them “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.”

We call people “salt of the earth” all the time these days. We say it when someone is solid, or honest, or dependable, or a hard worker. Sterling, over there in the choir: anyone who’s ever seen him with tools in his hands know he’s a real salt-of-the-earth kinda guy. Cindy, who stayed in the church kitchen all through worship one Sunday to cook for the brunch we had after service—she’s salt of the earth.

Jesus originated the phrase, and he was speaking directly to *purpose*. When he talked about salt he was talking about its *usefulness*. In the ancient world, salt was sometimes more valuable than gold, because of how hard it was to get and how in demand it was. In a world before refrigerators or ice at the push of a button, salt was really the only way you could keep things like raw meat from spoiling. With salt you could transport food longer distances, and you could stockpile *more* food, which could mean the difference between life-and-death for whole settlements. It also made for a *big* change in the *taste* of food, which is a huge quality-of-life improvement for people living hand-to-mouth. There wasn’t a budget-friendly supermarket on every corner, or restaurants with a different kind of cuisine lined up in a mall or plaza. And have you ever paused to really take in the spice-racks in Hannaford? There is a ridiculous amount of spices on display there, just waiting for you to pick ‘em up and dump ‘em in your crock-pots. That would have been entirely foreign to the people of Jesus’ time. To them, the Holy Grail of food additives was salt, and, if we’re honest, it is to many of us too.

I apologize to the folks I’m leaving out whose doctors may have told them to cut *back* on the salt. Jesus never preached about low-sodium V8, so I’m doing the best I can with what I’ve got.

Salt in the ancient world had a very clear purpose. *Two*: to preserve, and to flavor. In *our* world we discovered a *third*: to melt the ice on our roads in the winter! The way Jesus saw it, each of us should strive to be like salt: find our purpose and serve it.

To that end, he switched gears, and instead of *salt* started calling us “light of the world.” When you set a lamp burning—shining its light—you don’t then

cover it with a basket and leave it there, shining its light to no-one. The purpose of light is to be seen and *used*. Light makes it easier for us to see, it guides us to our destination, it pushes away our fears, and in the case of stoplights and lighthouses, it can warn us of what's ahead.

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

I'm going to break away from our Scripture for a second to try to talk about what *Jesus* was talking about in a different way.

Does anyone here remember the myth of Prometheus? I'm not gonna test you on it, but does Prometheus ring a bell for anyone?

In ancient Greek mythology, Prometheus was a titan, one of the immortal beings that predated gods like Zeus and Hera and Poseidon. According to myth, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and snuck it away to give to humanity, so that humans could thrive and fight off the dark and the beasts that came with it.

In some versions of the story he also taught them agriculture and science and technology, the kind of knowledge reserved only for the gods. Prometheus became a symbol for the ancient Greeks as kind of the source of civilization. He brought secret knowledge and life-changing innovation to humankind, and this wisdom and power allowed humanity to flourish.

To Jesus, *God* is our Prometheus. God is the source of all good things—life, knowledge, power, and love. God lit the lamps of our hearts, and it is up to us—it is our *purpose*—not to cover our light or ignore our light or misuse our light, but to let it shine and do what it was made for.

And when we do that, when we shine the light God has placed inside of us, we are doing God's will and filling the world with God's beauty and goodness.

The question becomes, of course, what does that look like in our lives? We don't have a knob on the side of our heads that turns up the fire behind our eyes. We don't have a twist-top like the flashlights that you can turn to make the beam wider or more intense.

How do we *be* the light of the world? How do we *be* the city on a hill, shining its light out so that all can see, be guided, and find safety?

I think it has a lot to do with Prometheus, actually. Not the mythological *figure* Prometheus, but the idea it represents. God lit a fire in us when we were born. God brought fire to us and placed it in our hearts. Lighting a fire in you: light and passion. Passions to fill you with purpose, and light to shine to the world.

I can't tell you what the meaning of life is, but I think a part of *making* meaning in life is discovering *purpose* in our life. Did God forge us like a piece of machinery to fulfill one specific purpose in the great contraption of destiny? Maybe. Or did God see in us—like the great sculptors saw in a featureless block of marble—great potential? Did God place inside of us the raw materials we needed to achieve great purpose of *some* shape, or maybe *multiple* shapes? Multiple *purposes*. Maybe.

Salt has a clarity of purpose we can all envy. It may be made up of Sodium and Chloride—poisonous on their own—but when it's true to itself, salt is just *useful*. It flavors, it preserves, and it keeps our roads safe in the winter.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is telling us that we should strive for the *purpose* that makes salt so valuable. We may be made of blood and bone, but when we're true to ourselves, we can do incredible things. Holy things. We can take the torch God handed us and run with it.

See Jesus Christ wanted us to fulfill our God-given potential. To fulfill our purpose. *Christ* came *himself* to fulfill the promises and the *will* of God. We catch glimpses of that will through the pages of what we call the Old Testament. Glimpses of God's will for us and our world. Christ's God-given purpose was to make God's will a reality, in us and in our world.

And we, each one of us, have purpose inside of us too. Purpose we can—and *should*—spend our whole lives seeking. Maybe you've even already found your purpose, and you're now seeking ways to live *into* it.

Or maybe you found your purpose, and you've already *achieved* it. Or maybe... maybe you feel you're too old, or too poor, or too weak to *have* a purpose anymore, let alone to achieve it.

Well if you think that you're wrong. No one is without purpose. No one has no purpose left. Christ said it himself: "*you* are the light of the world," and far be it from any of us to disagree with him. For each one of us, no matter our situation or our status, there is a purpose. And probably multiple purposes. It

may not look like any purpose you've ever had, it may not even look like what you imagine a purpose *should* look like for you. But I promise you, if you can wake up in the morning, you have a purpose somewhere inside you. I don't know what it is. I wouldn't have guessed that a little white grain of sodium chloride could change the world, but it did, and does to this day.

And so can you.

The philosophers are welcome to the big, impossible questions like "what is the meaning of life?" They can have them.

What we're concerned with, what Jesus wanted us to be concerned with, is the purpose of *our* lives. What is our *light*, and how can we be *salt*? What is it that God has lit in our hearts, and how can we *use* it? What fire do we have, what passion, what power? What, with the guidance of Christ and the holy love of the Spirit, can we send out into this world?

If we ask that question, if we *keep* asking that question... to ourselves in the silence of the night, to mentors we respect, to God in prayer... we may be surprised by what we find. And if we can find that God-given purpose, those purposes that Christ lived and died to wake us *up* to... well *then* the rest of our Christian lives can begin.

It's never too late to reshape our lives—God gives us the strength to do just that... and it's never too late to reshape the world. If a grain of salt can do it, so can you.

Amen.