



# SALT AND LIGHT AS SYMBOLS OF CHRISTIAN CALLING: A STUDY OF MATT 5:13-16

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## Abstract

Matt 5:13-16 is an aspect of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the longest teaching from Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. It forms a transition from identifying those who are to live according to the demands of the Sermon on the Mount in the present (5:17-7:27) and those who will live the life of blessedness in the future (5:3-12). The audience is metaphorically identified as "The salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." The metaphors of "salt" and "light" in Matthew 5:13-16 serve as indicators of the expected influence of Christians in society, a concept that resonates profoundly within the context of Nigeria. This paper will examine practical applications of these metaphors among Nigerian believers, highlighting effective Christian engagement in social issues such as poverty alleviation, education, and interfaith relationships. As Christians fulfill their calling to be salt and light, they can significantly impact the moral and social fabric of Nigeria, encouraging a transformative movement toward a more equitable and harmonious society. Ultimately, this study aims to inspire Nigerian Christians to realize their potential as agents of change, fostering an environment where faith and active citizenship converge for the common good.

## Keywords:

Salt, Light, Metaphors, Christians, Influence.

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## Introduction

In contemporary Nigeria, several factors impede the effective fulfillment of the Christian vocation to serve as salt and light. These challenges are deeply rooted in the nation's socio-political, economic, and religious structures. Notable examples include Neo-paganism and systemic bribery and corruption. The selection of Matthew 5:13-16 is therefore intended to address these issues by urging Christians to exert a transformative influence.

Matthew 5:13-16 functions as a transitional passage, connecting the present characteristics of those adhering to the Sermon on the Mount with the future blessings they are promised. In this section, the audience is designated as 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world.'<sup>1</sup> Jesus uses powerful metaphors to show how his disciples are meant to live in the world. They should be like salt—adding flavor, preserving against decay, and creating a thirst for something deeper. Our role is to inspire that thirst for the life found in Jesus Christ. Additionally, we are called to be like light that shines brightly and cannot be concealed; Christians should stand out like a city on a hill or a lamp set high to light up a home. Salt is invaluable, and light is meant to be seen. Citizens of the kingdom of heaven embody both. Their ability to be like salt comes from their connection to Jesus Christ, who infuses them with their "saltiness." Similarly, they shine with light only because it comes from Him.<sup>2</sup>

This work aims to interpret Matthew 5:13-16 in the context of Christian influence on the society. By implication, this is a contextual work which tends to study Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:13-16 to show its hermeneutical relevance to the quest for flavoring the society with Christian values. The methodology adopted in the work is the historical-critical approach of exegesis which studies aspects of histories and oral traditions behind a biblical text, textual, historical and source criticisms and literary genre of text.

It argues that if Christians in Nigeria understand their worth as "salt" and "light" to the nation, they will discover their will-power to fulfil it despite the myriad challenges. The metaphor of salt and light, therefore, as applied to Christians from the metaphorical and theological perspectives signify that they must preserve the Nigerian nation and its people from the putrefying effects of hatred, violence, injustice and ethnocentrism. As salt and light Christians must purify and heal minds and hearts of corrupt and evil ways, and administer the life-giving Gospel message implied by the Sermon on the Mount to keep Nigeria and its people alive.

## The Social and Literary Contexts of Matt 5:13-16

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony I. Ezeogamba, *Christianity of Christians: An Exegetical Interpretation of Matt. 5:13-16 And its Challenges to Christians in Nigerian Context* (Awka: Fides Media Ltd, 2019), x.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001), 77.

It has been recently argued by scholars that the Gospel of Mathew may have been a product of Jewish Christian community in a bitter struggle against Pharisaic/reformative Judaism which began to grow after the so-called council of Jamnia after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.<sup>3</sup> This position since a lot of teachings of Jesus as presented in Matthew reflect a re-teaching of a lot of Jewish laws, beliefs and practices which are indicative of a community trying so hard to assert itself in the midst of adversaries.

The Sermon on the Mount, to which the pericope of 5:13-16 belong, typifies a re-teaching and re-definition of Jewish piety as popularly viewed at that time. According to Raymond E. Brown, “the sermon on the mount is Mathew’s greatest composition.”<sup>4</sup> Certainly derived from the Q and M sources, the Sermon on the Mount is the longest piece of Jesus teaching in the Gospels. It mostly deals with an ethical teaching that departs radically from popular Jewish piety at the time of Jesus. This may be why Hans Dieter Betz contended that the Sermon does not have a Christological undertone since it deals mostly with Jesus’ position on the Jewish law. The longstanding belief in Jewish piety as popularly defined in pharisaic/rabbinic Judaism, even before the coming of Jesus, forms the social context of Matthew 5:13-18.<sup>5</sup>

However, the Jewish law, practiced and defined by Pharisaic and Rabbinic Judaism, defined piety at that time mostly from a hypocritical point of view. It also failed to fulfil the demands of the law as intentional given by Yahweh in the first place. It therefore negated the very intention which underlined its given by Yahweh. Its definition of piety, was indeed hypocritical and under-serving of the new movement otherwise called Christianity which Jesus indirectly founded. Hence, the social context of Matthew 5:13-16 has a tie in with wrong view and practice of Jewish morality by Jesus’ contemporaries. Jesus, in teaching about his followers as light and salt, brings to the fore a new form of morality demanded of his followers which bettered the hypocritical definition of Jewish morality at that time and had its basis on God.

In term of literary context, what is important to point out is the use of metaphor here by Jesus. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is Literarily not applicable. It can also be symbolic or representation of an action or thing as the case may be. It sometimes provides clarity or points out unthought-of similarities between two ideas. These are what we see in the pericope of Matthew 5:13-16 where Jesus made use of metaphors which directly compares his disciples, and by extension, Christians as salt and light of the world. Jesus was a rabbi, and was common of rabbis before and during his days to make use of metaphors when teaching.

<sup>3</sup> Davies W. *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1964), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An introduction to the New Testament* (Bangalore: PTI, 2014), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 146.

## The Genre of Matt 5:13-16

With the tone of the sermon now set by means of the beatitudes and their proclamation of the blessedness of the kingdom, the evangelist next presents two comprehensive statements about the necessity of living in a way that reflects the good news of the kingdom. Now following the introductory beatitudes is a statement concerning the ethical demand of the kingdom, the very essence of discipleship.<sup>6</sup> These are, in short, “kingdom” ethics—instructions for how those who are recipients of the kingdom are to live.

The emphatic *humeis*, “you yourselves,” in each maxim brings out this emphasis. It is particularly important to note that the kingdom precedes the ethics; there is no insistence that people are to live this way in order to receive the kingdom. The disciples are first identified as salt and light, and even here being precedes doing. It is because they are salt and light that they are expected to behave in appropriate ways.<sup>7</sup> The two maxims about salt and light thus serve as an introductory rubric for what is given in considerable detail in the material that follows.

## Matt 5:13-16 and Its Synoptic Parallels

Matthew is unique among the Gospels in placing these two main metaphors side by side in the form of maxims in parallel structure. The salt metaphor, however, is found also in Mark 9:50 and Luke 14:34–35. Luke 14:34 seems dependent on the Markan parallel, although, in one-word *mōranthē*, “loses its taste,” Luke agrees with Matthew against Mark. Luke’s second verse (14:35) is not found in Mark but is similar in content to Matt 5:13c, especially in the reference to “casting out” tasteless salt. Mark alone has the corresponding comment: “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another” (9:50).

The metaphor of a lamp upon a lampstand is found in Mark 4:21 and Luke 8:16 (and 11:33). In Mark 4:21 and Luke 8:16, however, it occurs in reference to the mission of Jesus. Luke 11:33 is followed, on the other hand, by material that occurs in Matthew 6:22–23. Thus, despite the similarity of language, the Markan and Lukan passages utilize the metaphor of the lamp on the lampstand in quite a different way. Matthew alone has the imperative about letting your light shine. The wording in all three Synoptic parallels, moreover, varies considerably. Rather than literary dependence between the Synoptics here, we probably have an example of independently developed oral traditions, at least in the light on the lampstand metaphor, originating from a common starting point. That metaphor, by its nature, found different applications, either in the pre-synoptic tradition or in the work of the individual evangelists.

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<sup>6</sup> Donald A. Hagner, “Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13” in *Word Biblical Commentary* 33A (Dallas:Word, Incorporated, 2002), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Hagner, 97.

### Matt 5:13-16 in its Wider Context

Matthew 5:13-16 is located in the Sermon which spans from chapter 5 to chapter 7:29 of Matthew's Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount can be divided into five constituent parts namely, the introduction (5:1-20); the antitheses (5:21-48); the three acts of piety (6:1-18); other teachings of Jesus (6:19-7:12); and finally, warnings about judgment (7:13-29).<sup>8</sup> Our interest in this study is not on the entire Sermon but on the very first section which is the introduction- 5:1-20. This introduction (5:1-20) to the Sermon contains yet fourfold division or sections namely, the setting that prepares the ground for the entire Sermon (5:1-2).

Secondly, the beatitudes (5:3-12), Thirdly, Jesus gives the identity of his followers; the essence of discipleship (5:13-16). In this section, to address them, he employs the second person pronoun, plural, vocative case “Oh! You. . .” (5: 13-14). And fourthly, Jesus makes his stand on the Law and the prophets known to the crowd and precisely to his disciples (5:17-20). Probably, this is to provide them the reason why they have to continue to follow him since he came for the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. Jesus emphasizes that his coming is to ensure the continuity with the old though with a difference.<sup>9</sup> Continuity with the past does not mean *status quo* but it means, an involvement with the past in a way that surpasses it. This fact is expressed deeply in Matthew 5:21-42.

We have exposed above that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount consists of five parts namely the introduction (5:1-20) and the rest. The introduction (5:1-20) divides itself into four sections. Our attention is on the third part of the introduction (5:13-16), where Jesus defines the identity and the corresponding responsibility of his followers. Here there are two metaphors namely, *humeis este to halas tēs gēs* “You are the salt of the earth” (5:13a); and: *humeis este to phōs tou kosmou* “You are the light of the world” (5:14a).

In the context of Sermon on the Mount (5-7), Jesus let his followers to know what he really wants them to be for the world and earth (Matt 5:13-16). The Sermon on the Mount begins with an *exordium* or poem intended as a *captatio benevolentiae*, which would dispose the audience to listen to the rest of the Sermon with goodwill towards the speaker. The Sermon begins by affirming and consoling those in the crowd who are poor in spirit (5:3-12). As the *captatio benevolentiae* progresses Matthean Jesus employs two parallel metaphors to describe his audience (5:13-16).<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the Sermon therefore, Matthew 5:13-16 makes one to be aware that Jesus was not teaching an anonymous crowd; instead, he was teaching the people he invited to follow him for the sake of the task for which he came (Matt 4:18-22). This idea is made explicit by the fluctuation of the pronouns in 5:3-16, from 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural *autoi/autōn*

<sup>8</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, “The Sermon on the Mount: What is it?” *The Bible Today* vol. 36. No.5, Sept (1998):76.

<sup>9</sup> Harrington, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Ifen Umoren “Jesus Greater than a Sage: Elements of Ancient Rhetoric and Divine Wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7)” *Jean-Bosco Matand Bulembat (ed): Pan African Association of Catholic Exegetes, Human Wisdom and Divine Wisdom in the Bible* (Makuyu- Kenya: Don Bosco Printing Press) 125-139.

(which most likely signifies that Jesus was speaking generally to the crowds that gathered around him) to 2nd person plural *humas* (which signifies that Jesus is becoming specific therefore emphasizing those the instruction is meant for). Matthean Jesus was really addressing all but with emphasis on those he called, hence the pronoun employed fluctuates from the crowd to the disciples/followers of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Matthew 5:13-16 gives meaning to the introductory part of the Sermon and the entire Sermon. Matthew locates 5:13-16 within the sermon and it came immediately after those beatitudes which bless the disciples when they are persecuted (5:11-12) so that in their mission and witness “those persecuted by the world are nevertheless the world salvation.”<sup>12</sup> “Jesus teaches the beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12) to the disciples who are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (Matt 5:13-16).<sup>13</sup>

### **Matt 5:13-16 and its Textual Issues**

On the study of the textual problem of the above passage we shall rely on the Greek text: *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27<sup>th</sup> edition by Nestle- Aland. A closer look at the text reveals that Matt 5:13-16 has been relatively well preserved for it has only three textual problems in verses 13, and 16. In verse 13 we have an omission and an alternative reading, while in verse 16 we have also a sign of omission.

In verse 13 there is the omission of *eti* (adverb meaning “still, yet, even”) by the following manuscripts D, W, it, sys.c.p, Cyp. Though these are old manuscripts but they are not as old as those that are behind the Greek text as recorded by Nestle-Aland. Its presence in that verse is for the sake of emphasis but never superfluous as those witnesses are trying to show by its omission. Still in this verse, there is also an alternative reading of the phrase *blēthen ezō* “being cast out” or “having been thrown out” by a great number of manuscripts like P86c, D, W, Q, f 13.

They have *blēthēnai ezō kai* “to be thrown out and.” This is an infinitive. *blēthen ezō* is attested to by the following manuscript which are more ancient than the ones against it: original edition of P86\*, 8, B, C, f 1, 33. 892 pc. It literally means, “having been thrown out.” *Blēthen ezō* is aorist, passive participle from the word *ballō*. But the alternative reading would be of major theological significance within the text if it were to be the original; for it tells us what would happen if the insipid salt is thrown out on the ground.

In verse 16 there is an omission of the word *erga* “works” by the original edition of Vaticanus (B\*). Perhaps this omission may be as a result of homoioteleuton (i.e. the repetition of endings in words, similar sound. It is also known as rhyme). But it can be implied by the adjective *kala*, “good” (deeds, things, works). The writer prefers the addition of *erga* to its omission. It makes more meaning with the adjective *kala*. However, these

<sup>11</sup> Umoren in the above, mentioned article emphasizes that the audience of the sermon were the crowd that followed him from 4:23-5:1 and because of the reaction of the crowd on 7:28. But one discovers that the crowds followed because of the healings and teachings they have enjoyed. Jesus saw them and taught his followers in their midst.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (New York: Fortress Press, 1990), 121.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, 179.

omissions found in verses 13 and 16 have no theological import to the text as such. It is no exaggeration to say that they add little or nothing to the meaning intended by the evangelist though their presence ensures proper understanding.

### Literary Translation of Matt 5:13-16 (NRS)

<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste (become tainted), how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good (strong) for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.” <sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.” <sup>15</sup> “Nor do they (people) light a lamp and place it under the bushel but on the lamp stand and it lightens all in the house.” <sup>16</sup> “Thus, let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works and glorify your father in the heavens.”

### Delimitation of Matt 5:13-16

This section examines the remote and immediate contexts of Matthew 5:13-16. Verses 11-16 form an *inclusio* because of the second person plural pronoun. This stand seems to be contrary to the general opinion that 5:3-12 is a unit of its own. Matthew 5:3-12 is a unit because it deals with the beatitudes. But a closer look at verses 3-12 reveals that verses 3-10 is more together than verses 3-12 this is because verses 3-10 has 3rd person plural pronoun whereas verses 11-12 in union with verses 13-16 has *humōn* which is second person plural pronoun. Verses 11-16 is a unit because verses 11-12 like verses 13-16 speak of the sharp contrasts between the disciples whose virtues are extolled in verses 3-10 and other people. The *humōn* of verse 11 is also seen in verse 16 thus forming an *inclusio*.

Furthermore, if not that Matt 5:11-12 rightly belong to 5:3-10 in content, one would have linked the structure seen in 16:17-19 with 5:11-16. This is because in 16:17-19 there is benediction (16:17), there is bestowal of a name (16:18), and there is also commissioning or giving of responsibility (16:19). Comparing it with what we have in 5:11-16, in 5:11-12 we have the benediction, verses 13-15 is the bestowal of name (salt,

light) and verse 16 is the commissioning or responsibility. Though some scholars take 5:11-12 as introduction to 5:13-16 and not part of the Beatitudes<sup>14</sup> the present writer wants to treat 5:11-12 as part of the beatitudes because of the serious affinity between it and 5:3-10 as a result of the presence of the word *Makarioi* in verses 3-12 which is not so in verses 13-16.

Verses 13-16 present us with the identity of Christ’s followers as well as what ought to be their responsibility towards the rest of society. It tells us that the disciples are the light (salt) of the world through their good work; this good work has to be done in such a way that attention will be directed to God and not to themselves. This unit (5:13-15/16) has a parallel in Matthew 16:17-19 where we notice description and responsibility, that is. “You are . . .” and a new commission.

<sup>14</sup> R.T. France, “The Gospel of Matthew” in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 171.

## Remote Context of Matt 5:13-16

The remote context of Matthew 5:13-16 is the arrest and persecution of John the Baptist and the call of the disciples. The persecution of the prophets was an established feature of the Jewish people's memory. This idea was alluded to by Stephen in his speech that led to his death in Acts 7 (see vv 51-53); it was also alluded to in Hebrews 11:36-38. This is stated in general terms in 2 Chronicles 36:16 and Nehemiah 9:26. This idea is also variously presented in OT for instance, Jeremiah's persecution is eloquent enough to buttress this point (Jer 20:10; 26:10-19; 36-38, etc.) even Jeremiah's contemporaries (Jer 26:20-23; 1Kings 18:4; 19:1-3; Amos 7:10-12). Jesus, apart from the appearance of this idea of persecution in the presentation of the Sermon on the Mount, incorporates the theme of persecution in the parable of the vineyard (21:34-36) and develops it in 23:29-36. The implication of all that is that those who have spoken out for God have always been liable to the violent reprisals of the ungodly. In the light of that heritage, to be persecuted for the sake of Jesus is a badge of honour (Matt 5:11).

As a result of the above, when Jesus heard that John had been arrested (4:12) he knew already the implication of that. He had to start his own ministry bearing in mind what will happen to him also at the appointed time (16:21). Jesus bearing in mind that he could not reach the whole world/earth alone, needed followers on whose hearts he would write his message hence he started by calling followers (4:18-22). These followers (disciples) he intends to make like himself so that they can make others like him too. The phrase, "The prophets who came before you perhaps suggest that Jesus' disciples are now the prophetic voice on earth (see 10:41; 23:34). The call to accept persecution with joy is now followed in 5:13-16 by a series of images which explain why it is important that disciples should both be different and be seen to be different"<sup>15</sup> from the rest of mankind.

So, the Sermon on the Mount (5-7) where 5:13-16 is located portrays Jesus' teaching and disposing his called followers on what may befall them in the world or human society and what they should hope to gain should they raise their heads high despite all odds. Therefore, Jesus bearing in mind the type of task he wants to assign to his disciples, identifies them as he says, *humeis este to halas tēs gēs* "You are the salt of the earth. . ." (5:13); and: *humeis este to phōs tou kosmou* "You are the light of the world" (5:14) . . . (15-16).

## Immediate Context of Matt 5:13-16

We have established above that the remote context of 5:13-16 is the arrest of John the Baptist, the influence it has in the psyche of Jesus and the Jews as explained above. The arrest of John the Baptist made Jesus to begin his public ministry immediately, bearing in mind that there is no time to waste. It was also clear to Jesus that if he must make any deep impression that will be lasting, he must select few people who must learn the message and make such available when he is no longer there. He knew the mindset prevalent in Judaism as it affects the interpretation and application of the Torah. It was clear to him that their interpretation, application, and living out the Torah have a lot of flaws; anyone therefore who

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<sup>15</sup> France, 173.



claims to have the better way of doing the interpretation and application will most likely have his blood spilled. He needed people who would be very close to him and stand as witness as he corrects the wrong interpretations and wrong applications of the Torah. The idea expressed is self-evident in some chapters of the gospel especially in Matt 23. But he needed to make the chosen courageous and aware of what awaits them in the nearest future, hence, the beatitudes.

As from Matthew 5:13-16, the discourse turns from a general statement about the good life (Matt 5:3-12) to a specific address to the disciples gathered around Jesus on the hillside. Because they have committed themselves to follow Jesus and so to adopt the new values of the kingdom of heaven, they are now going to stand out as different from other people.<sup>16</sup> So, following the beatitudes which is introductory is a statement concerning the ethical demands of the kingdom, the very essence of discipleship. These are, in short, kingdom-ethics-instructions so that all those who are recipients of the kingdom are to live in the world.<sup>17</sup>

The Beatitudes follow Matthew 5:13-16 directly; and are part of the introduction to the whole Sermon which aims at preparing the hearers of the Sermon. To clearly

present the immediate context of Matthew 5:13-16 Davies and

Allison says,

The reader is not told how to be salt or light. This is because 5:13-16, as a general description or superscription, stands above the detailed *paraenesis* proper. It is a transitional passage in which the speaker moves from the life of the blessed future (5:3-12) to the demands of life in the present (5:17-7:12), in which the theme switches from gift to task, and in which those who live as 5:17-7:12 will direct are summarily characterized. In short, in 5:13-16 descriptive names are bestowed upon those who live as the Sermon on the Mount demands.<sup>18</sup>

From the above submission, it is obvious that Matt 5:13-16 stands as a transitional passage between the promised or future blessings and the life in the present. 5:13-16 therefore summarizes the characteristics of those who are going to live the content of the rest of the Sermon. The immediate context of Matthew 5:13-16 is the instruction of the followers of Jesus which is shown in the promised life of blessedness.

### **Literary Structure of Matthew 5:13-16**

The two declarative maxims of this pericope (vv 13 and 14) are exactly parallel in form: *to halas tēs gēs*, “the salt of the earth,” is parallel to *to phōs tou kosmou*, “the light of the world.” The discussion following each maxim is parallel in content, though not in form, focusing on the uselessness of salt that is not salty and light that is hidden.

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<sup>16</sup> France, 171.

<sup>17</sup> Hagner, 97.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, 471.

The metaphors divide Matthew 5:13-16 into two parts: verse 13 and verses 15-16. Davies and Allison divide Matthew 5:13-16 into two metaphors (vv 13a and 14a) and three parables. The three parables are organized into two primary portions. Section one has a parable (verse 13), while section two contains two parables (vv 14-16). The forceful second-person personal pronoun plural, *humeis*, starts each section and ushers in the metaphors.<sup>19</sup>

The second maxim is followed by another metaphor (v 14b) that makes the same point as the discussion that follows: “a city on a hill cannot be hidden.”<sup>20</sup> Verse 16 contains the imperative application of the second maxim (and the first by implication). This imperative is the subject of the entire sermon: to belong to the kingdom necessitates reflecting the light of the kingdom through one’s good deeds. The imperative, however, receives its force from the indicative: that is, you are the light; let your light shine.<sup>21</sup>

In this study, we will look at Matthew 5:13-16 as two metaphors, as indicated above, rather than three parables. The analysis below is based on the literary translation of 5:13–16. Having reviewed the content of our text, let us now consider the textual analysis of Matthew 5:13–16.

### Textual Analysis of Matt 5:13-16

The exegesis will be carried out based on the linear structure discussed above.

#### Verse 13

Jesus said to his disciples: *humeis este to halas tēs gēs* (v. 13a). *Humeis* is emphatic and restrictive: Jesus is not talking about people in general but specifically about his disciples. He says, *este* (you are): he is making a statement, not giving a promise. He does not explain the salt of the earth, but we should bear in mind that “Salt has no beneficial effect upon soil” (see Deut 29:23; Judg 9:45; Ps 107:34).<sup>22</sup> This metaphorical statement came as a sort of warning to the disciples against scandal and half-hearted discipleship. The emphatic second person plural pronoun *humeis* makes it clear that Jesus has turned directly to his disciples which means, it is the disciples alone who are the salt of the earth. It is their task and responsibility alone but since the idea of being the “Salt of the Earth” means making others to be “Salt” too, then it means that this characterization involves those that will become disciples through them (see Matt 28:18-20).

Scholars differ on the meaning of *tēs gēs*, which broadens its application. In biblical tradition, *gē* contains the following subtleties in meaning and application: soil, earth, ground, as seen in Matt 5:18; 10:29; 13:5, 8, 23; Mark 8:6; Luke 6:49; 13:7; J 12:24; Col 1:16; Heb 6:7; and 2 Pet 3:13. It can also refer to the (dry) land, as in Mark 4:1; 6:47; John 6:21; Act 27:39,43-44; and territory, region, or nation, as in Matt 2:6; Mark 15:33; Act 7:3f, 6, 36. Luke 21:35 and

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<sup>19</sup>Davies and Allison, 470.

<sup>20</sup>Hagner, 98.

<sup>21</sup>Hagner, 99.

<sup>22</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 104.

Act 1:8 refer to the populated earth, while Luke 18:8, Rom 9:28, and Rev 14:3 use it to refer to humanity.

This work interprets *gē* to indicate the last alternative, which is widely accepted among experts. So, when Jesus calls his students “the salt of the earth,” he implies they are the salt of humanity. He was not considering the uninhabited portions of the planet or the animal kingdom, even though if the inhabited sections of the earth are cared for, all other areas of the earth will also be well. *gē* refers to Earth’s inhabitants. So *gē* refers to the inhabitants of the earth. This is an example of synecdoche when one part reflects the entire. This usage is also seen in Genesis 11:1 and Matthew 10:34. Jesus was referring to the disciples’ role as a collective among the earth’s people.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note at this point that in Matthew, the terms “earth” (v 13) and “World” (v 14) refer to the entire human race (v 16). This is similar to the OT use of the term “Earth” (Gen 11:1; Matt 10:34; Luke 12:49). The Greek-speaking community typically uses the phrase “World” (Wis 6:24; 10:1; 14:6; Mark 14:9; Matt 13:38; 18:7; 1 Cor 1:27-28) to refer to all of humanity.<sup>24</sup> By Earth therefore Matthew was referring to human inhabitants of the earth.

#### Verse 13bc: The Tasteless Salt

The next question is asked in verse 13b- *ean de to halas mōranthē en tini halisthēsetai*? “But if salt has lost its taste (become tainted), how shall its saltiness be restored?” This is a conditional statement with prostaxis and apodosis. It is introduced by the particle *ean de*. It is used here with aorist subjunctive - *mōranthē* in the prostaxis and with the indicative future passive - *halisthēsetai* in the apodosis. The implication of the above hypothetical question is that the speaker envisages a situation where salt may lose its taste. The speaker is asking, “should it happen, how shall its saltiness or power of being salt restored?” Such a situation seems unimaginable, and would provide awkward situation should it happen. Salt is salt if it has its distinctiveness and that distinctiveness is saltiness. Hence, tainted salt is no salt at all but chaff.

The descriptive affirmation (Matt 5:13a) is followed by the hypothetical question: *ean de to halas mōranthē*. . . (v. 13b). Matthew and Luke have the same word *mōranthē*/ or *mōrainein* which literally means “becomes foolish” (see Sir 23:14; Rom 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:20) whereas Mark has *analon genētai* which literally means “becomes saltless” or “desalted.” The explanation for this difference is probably to be found in the Hebrew or Aramaic root word *tāpēl* which means “worthless”, “whitewash”, “tasteless”, “unseasoned” “to be foolish” (Job 1:22; 24:12; Jer 23:13) or to be *analog* (Job 6:6). It seems that it was that word that they were trying to capture its translation. So, we appear to have translation variant. The supposition is supported by the possibility of a word-play in Aramaic: If salt has lost its *tāpēl* (taste) how

<sup>23</sup> Davies and Allison, 472.

<sup>24</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) 100.

shall it be *tābbblunnēh* (seasoned)?<sup>25</sup> It is used here because disciples losing their value as disciple are equivalent to becoming foolish. It would in effect be to lose their identity.

The situation of salt becoming insipid implies that the derailed disciples, apostate disciples, or disciples that are not living according to their vocation are valueless to the society. If the writer says that there is no conceivable manner in which the desalted salt can be re-salted, it is not an over statement. The earth is in need of disciples, it needs attention of the disciples, if then the disciples are of poor quality or, of low grade, then the earth, the abode of humans itself will suffer the loss. The implication of all these is that if the quality of the disciples or Christians on earth including Nigeria, or if they are merely pretending to be what they are not, then, the earth including Nigeria as the case maybe will suffer greatly. Followers of Christ were originally known as disciples everywhere but it was because they were living a life contrary to that of their fellow Jews and manifesting a life very similar to that of Christ, that they were therefore christened “Christians” in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

This verse (13b) is followed by the answer immediately: *eis ouden ischuei . . . katapateisthai . . .* (v.13c). Jesus did not waste any time in telling his disciples how saltless salt could be handled and thereby giving them warning of what awaits them if they happen to derail from their God given vocation. This idea of throwing the saltless salt away has a connotation of the last judgment which is replete in some other parts of the Gospel: 8:12; 22:13; 25:30. In those passages the Matthean Jesus makes reference to what will happen on the last day. When the salt that is no longer valuable is thrown away it receives suffering all the more for it will be continuously receiving pain in form of disdain under the feet of mankind.

Just as it will be the case of the sons of the kingdom should they not make the kingdom at the last day, they will be thrown to a place of weeping and gnashing of the teeth (Matt 8:12). The word employed here to portray the fate of the valueless salt is *katapateisthai*. This word appears about four times in the whole Bible, three places in the synoptic and once in the Letter to the Hebrews (Matt 5:13c; 7:6; Luke 12:1; Heb 10:29). In each case the emphasis is in the treatment of whatever that is trampled or trodden on the ground with disdain. It is like Matthean Jesus says, “Just as the human spit is rejected and forgotten by all, a saltless salt is also rejected and forgotten.” In the same way disciples that are not living according to their vocation (i.e. not living like salt in the midst of others) are treated as such.

#### Verse 14a: *The Metaphor of Light*

This section introduces us to the second half of our material. It begins with the metaphorical remark about the disciples in the form of a “descriptive affirmation”: In verse 14a, it is stated that “you are the light of the world.” The aforementioned verse is most likely referencing Isaiah 2:2-5. The light picture is part of an invitation to Israel. Isa 42:6 and 49:6 indicate Israel’s role as a “light to the nations.” It is also the same message Paul used while addressing Jewish Christians in Rome (Rom 2:12-24). The function of the disciples as light is to be detached from the world, but their very being forces them to influence it (Phil 2:15-16). “The

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<sup>25</sup> Davies and Allison 474.

light of the world” is a common phrase in both the Old and New Testaments (Isa 49:6; John 8:12).

In this verse, Jesus continues to address his disciples, or followers. This time, he approaches them using the metaphor of light. He used the Greek word *phōs*, meaning “light”. The light mentioned assumes specific conditions, including darkness. In biblical tradition, darkness is primarily associated with the rule of evil, which manifests itself as corruption and disorderliness. Hence, “Where there is light, people can find their way, and everything is clear; where there is darkness, they stumble and are lost; the imagery is strongly developed, especially in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus himself is the light of the world” (John 8:12). The light that Jesus gives is also provided by his disciples, who will shortly be commissioned to partake in his ministry of proclamation and deliverance.<sup>26</sup>

This descriptive affirmation, *humeis este to phōs tou kosmou* (You are the light of the world), would never have surprised Jesus’ Jewish hearers because they are accustomed to associating light with Torah, Temple, Jerusalem, Israel, or even a group within Israel (Isa 60:1-3; Bar 4:2). David is the lamp of Israel (2 Sam 21:17), and his descendants are called lights in 1 Kgs 11:36; Psalm 132:17; Luke 2:32. The surprise may come to the disciples only from the point of view that they were being referred to as light. Matthew added the emphatic pronoun *humeis este*<sup>27</sup> before each of verses 13 and 14. This is followed by the frequent use of “your” in the following verse: Your light, your good deeds, your father in heaven (v. 16). These personal pronouns “you” and “your” bring out the personal and positive qualities of discipleship and what Jesus expects from his followers. Some commentators take *humeis este* in verses 13 and 14 as referring to the apostles<sup>28</sup> while the majority of scholars see it as referring to the disciples.

Peter Cardinal Turkson interprets the metaphors of salt and light as referring to the disciples, who represent the church today. He interprets the pronoun *humeis* as standing for the church; hence, with the African continent in mind, he argues, “The Church must protect the continent and its people from the putrefying effects of hatred, violence, injustice, and ethnocentrism. To keep the continent and its people alive, the Church must purify and heal minds and hearts of corrupt and evil ways, as well as administer her life-giving Gospel message, which includes virtues like reconciliation, justice, and peace.”<sup>29</sup>

In verse 14a, Jesus does not say that his students are light in general, sources of light, or the home of the divine, but rather that they are light figuratively. That means they are light that has already been produced by the source and has been lit to brighten their surroundings. Jesus did not describe his disciples as lamps, torches, candles, suns, or moons, but rather as “ready-made” lights. The inference is that the followers are not the source of their own light, just as a bright object is not the owner of the light it emits but of the light it absorbs from the primary

<sup>26</sup> France, 175.

<sup>27</sup> Davies and Allison, 472.

<sup>28</sup> George Arthur Butrick (ed.) *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press Nashville, 1951), 289.

<sup>29</sup> Cardinal Peter Turkson “Call to Work for Justice and Peace” *Synod of Bishops, II Special Assembly for Africa* <http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/joomla>. Retrieved on 16/8/2024.

source of light, the sun. God, through Jesus, is the source of the light that has lit them, and they can use it to illuminate others.

The path in the OT and NT traditions is from God (see Ps 4:6; 18:28; 26:1; 31:16; Job 29:2-3; 2 Cor 4:6), through Jesus (John 8:12), to the disciples (Matt 4:16; 5:14a), and lastly to people who would be touched by their teachings (Matt 28:20). Light is a powerful metaphor in biblical tradition. God is light (1 John 1:5), and Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5, and 12:46). God is also referred to be light in eschatological settings (Isa 60:19-20). God sent Christ to bring light into the darkness (John 1:4-5, 9; 12:46). This is what Matthew underlines in Matt 4:16 when he quotes Isaiah (Isa 9:2) and says, “The people who were sitting in darkness have seen a great light.”

St. Paul extends the metaphor to Christians, referring to them as “children of light” in Ephesians 5:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:5. Isaiah 42:6 states that Israel’s mission is to be a “light to the Gentiles.” Qumran Covenanters also called themselves “sons of light.” “Light is thus linked to God, his Messiah, his people, the Law, the Temple, Jerusalem, and the realization and experience of salvation... Paul refers to “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4). He says that Christians “shine as lights” in this fallen world (Phil 2:15). For Matthew, the metaphor of light refers directly to God’s new people, symbolized by the disciples.

#### Verses 15-16: The Good Works of Disciples

Jesus used the phrase *polis keimene epanō orous* to emphasize the importance of visibility: “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” The city referred to here could be any city because there is no definite article following the city mentioned by Matthean Jesus in the preceding verse. This is likewise the situation with the lamp described at 5:15. It does not have a definite article either. So, any city or lamp might stand in their place. This means that it might be any city or lamp, respectively. The statement implies that any city placed on top of a hill will always be visible, and it would be illogical to conceive a city on a hill seeming hidden. It conveys the idea that whatever is set up on high should always be visible to everyone. Anything on a hilltop is beyond the reach of regular light, but what could be seen despite all odds because nothing would stand in its way of absorbing light and emitting that light?

A city is recognized to be made up of numerous buildings that have been constructed together. A house, like a tree, does not constitute a city or a forest. By saying this, Jesus is referring to a certain assembled group rather than an individual. So, if different houses are built on a hilltop and each one, or perhaps the majority of the houses, is lit, the city will radiate in the night from all angles. The suggestion is that Jesus was creating a picture of unity in which every disciple, no matter where he or she is, shines, and every space is filled with light. But if the individual lights are not on, then the idea of a city will be defeated.

One may also ask if Matthew meant a city in verse 14b; it would have been more suitable to add, “A light placed on a hilltop cannot be hidden,” similar to the lamp in Matt 5:15. If the lamp is on its stand, it will provide light to the entire home; however, if it is hidden, it will not provide light and its purpose will be defeated. A glowing lamp on a stand could not be concealed, although an unlit city on a hilltop could be hidden at night. We believe that the

text utilized the phrase “city on a hilltop” to convey the community nature of what is expected of the disciples.

Verses 15-16 consist of three parts: (1) negative generalization (*oude kaiousin luchnon*), (2) positive generalization (*all epī tēn luchnian*), and (3) application in the form of a command or imperative (*lampsatō to phōs humōn*). Let us have a look at them one by one. Negative generalization: *oude kaiousin luchnon* (nor do they light a lamp...) v. 15a. This is a negative question with an obvious response. This is because people rarely light a lamp just to cover it again, as doing so would be the same as extinguishing it. To turn on a lamp implies to remove darkness; to light a lamp and place it beneath a bushel says a lot about the person who lights it. The person may be hiding something, suffering from a psychiatric issue, or seeking safety.

France confirms this fact, stating that a home lamp was a shallow basin of oil with a wick. It would typically be immobile, resting on a permanent lamp stand. The lamp stand (*tēn luchnian*) could be built of clay or metal (Exod 25:31-40). The “bowl” is a grain measure that holds around nine litres and is most likely fashioned of pottery or basketwork. Although it is true that a lamp placed under such a receptacle would soon go out due to lack of oxygen, the point appears to be the silliness of hiding a lamp when its entire purpose is evident.<sup>30</sup> Any light, therefore, placed under a bowl, is out of use.

In verse 15, Jesus was not speaking metaphorically about the lamp, but actually. A lamp’s purpose is to provide light, hence it is put on a stand to allow everyone in the home to see.<sup>31</sup> Thus “All those who are in the house” (*pasin tois en tē oikia*) should not be understood in a restricted sense, but parallel in meaning to Matt 5:16-- “the people” (*tōn anthrōpōn*) who will see your good deeds and give glory to your father who is in heaven (*dozasōsin ton patera humōn ton en tois ouranois*).

In verse 15, people in the room will see the lamp and know that there is a lamp there, whereas in verse 16, people will see your good acts and so glorify your Father in heaven. When a light is turned on, it is put on or hung from a stand to maximize its effectiveness.<sup>32</sup> This should also be the goal of Jesus when he gives the imperative in verse 16. The individuals being alluded to this are the nonbelievers, or people in general. They are those who will see your good actions and glorify your Father in heaven. The house depicts the world.

*Houtōs* (in this manner, thus, so) in verse 16 connects verses 14 and 15: a city placed on a hill (v 14b) and like a lamp on a lamp-stand (v 15). *Phōs* is derived from verse 14 and *lampei* (shines) is from verse 15. The emphasis is on the need for the light to shine so that all men might see it and give honor to God. *Houtōs* has the same meaning in verse 16 as it does in the following passages: Matt 5:19, 12:40, Mark 7:18, 10:43, 14:59, Luke 11:30, 24:24, John 3:8, 11:48, 21:1, Acts 8:32, Rom 1:15, 12:5, Gal 3:3, and Rev 16:18. The adverb *Houtōs* highlights the unity of the text in Matt 5:13-16.

<sup>30</sup> France, 178

<sup>31</sup> Davies & Allison, 476.

<sup>32</sup> Hagner, 100.

The instruction *lampsatō to phōs humōn* (let your light shine, v. 16) is particularly noteworthy. It is the only hortatory line in 5:13–16. It clarifies the meaning of verses 14 and 15, as well as verse 13. The light imagery introduced in verse 14 is expanded upon in Jesus' sayings in 5:15-16, in which Jesus' disciples are exhorted to actively participate in their "good work." The purpose of these works is for others to come and glorify God (v.16). Thus, in verse 16, the metaphor of verse 15 is translated more prosaically, with the "light" emitted by followers read as the good that they perform. The word "good deeds" expresses the traits outlined in the beatitudes, particularly the "righteousness" of life, which is expected of followers (vv. 6, 10, 20); the phrase and concept are reiterated in 1 Peter 2:11-12. It is only when this particular lifestyle is obvious to others that it can have its desired effect.<sup>33</sup>

## Verse 16

This verse is the culmination of the entire pericope. *Houtōs lampsatō to phōs humōn emprosthen tōn anthrōpōn* (v. 16a) (Let your light shine before people), and the reason for letting your light shine before people is for them to see your good acts and therefore glorify your father who is in heaven. Because the disciples are the light of the world (v. 15), they are now encouraged to let their light shine, that is, to allow the light to fulfill its function. There are no known parallels to this imperative use of *lampein* "shine" in the Old Testament or Rabbinic literature, though Isaiah 42:6 may be the source. Allowing one's light to shine is giving "glory to the Father" (v. 16). Verse 16 integrates light with good acts. Betz believes that good deeds are the beaming of the light. The Sermon on the Mount expressly contains the virtues listed in the Beatitudes (vv 3-12) as well as everything in 5:17-7:12.<sup>34</sup>

Disciples are commanded to shine their light so that the world can notice their good works and give honor to their Father in heaven. James, the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, emphasizes the need of believers actively participating in social activities to praise God, expressing faith via acts and good deeds (Jam 2:14-22). Apostle Peter also advises believers to "keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pet 2:12, ESV).

Good works refer to the holiness of the disciples for the glory of God, as their witness will draw others to honor God as well.<sup>35</sup> Doing and seeing acts of kindness should be motivated by a desire to glorify God. As a result, the goal of shining is to draw attention to God's wonderful acts and glorify Him. Jesus' good acts are not limited to battling corruption and injustice; they may also focus on improving people's quality of life. In addition to that, Stott argues that even "evangelisation must be counted as one of the 'good works by which our light shines, and our Father is glorified.'"<sup>36</sup> It is agreeable, as Tehan stated, "Verses 3–16 look

<sup>33</sup> France, 177.

<sup>34</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*. First Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 163–64.

<sup>35</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1st Ed. Edition (USA: Banner of Truth, 1988), 65.

<sup>36</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Illinois, USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 61.



both back and forward: they continue describing qualifications of those entering the kingdom and introduce the duties of those in the kingdom.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Matt 5:13-16 and the Christian influence on the Nigerian Society**

Christianity as a religion, has had a positive influence on Nigerian society. Matthew 5:13-16, commonly referred to as the “Salt of the earth and light of the world” pericope, emphasizes the responsibility of Christians to be influential and impactful within society. The demands of Matthew 5:13-16 are very hard though not impossible to be practiced by Christians in Nigeria when one puts the challenges emanating from the Nigerian Christian context into consideration. To follow Christ means to imitate his life-for-others in complete self-abnegation. It means standing on the right all the time even when it is against you. The difficulty of living out Matthew 5:13-16 is self-evident when one considers the social, economic, religious and political situations of the Nigerian nation. It would have been easier for Christians to practice the demands of Matthew 5:13-16 but Nigerian Christian context makes it almost impossible for the majority.

In Nigerian context, the christian can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, as described in Matthew 5:13-16 thus:

- i. Live a Christ-centered life: First and foremost, prioritize relationship with Christ and live according to His teachings. Seek to imitate His love, kindness, and righteousness in your daily life.
- ii. Embrace one’s identity: The Christian needs to recognize that he/she is a child of God and that his/her faith carries weight. This should find expression through actions and words.
- iii. Be a positive influence: The Christian should act as a positive force in his/her community, workplace, and relationships. Show kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to others, even when it is difficult. Let one’s actions reflect the love of Christ.
- iv. Stand for justice and righteousness: Do not be afraid to speak out against injustice and inequality. Advocate for fairness, integrity, and the rights of the vulnerable in your society. Be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves.
- v. Be a peacemaker: In a country like Nigeria, where religious tensions sometimes arise, be a bridge-builder and strive for unity. Seek peace, reconciliation, and understanding among different religious groups. Encourage dialogue and show respect for differing beliefs.
- vi. Share the Gospel: Spread the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Share the faith with others in a gentle and respectful manner, being mindful of cultural sensitivities. Engage in conversations that help others understand the hope and transformation that comes through a relationship with Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Tehan, and David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of The Sermon on the Mount*, 2nd edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 29.

vii. Serve others selflessly: Look for opportunities to serve those in need. Contribute to community development, support the less privileged, and participate in outreach programs. Let your actions demonstrate the love of Christ by meeting both physical and spiritual needs.

viii. Pray and intercede: Continually pray for Nigeria, its people, and the challenges it faces. Pray for wisdom, guidance, and protection for your leaders, and for unity among Christians. Intercede for the peace and prosperity of your nation.

## Conclusion

Christianity offers Nigerians a moral framework that shapes their ideals and guides their conduct. Christian teachings stress honesty, integrity, compassion, and justice, which influence individual behaviors and decisions in society. When a disciple embodies the essential nature of being a disciple of Jesus: “salt” and “light” for the world, they become witnesses to God’s love for humanity. At the same time, the disciple’s excellent behavior in his life, conduct, and love of concern for everyone is intended to “glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16), rather than seeking glory for themselves. Only until a disciple understands how to commit to a self-sacrificing love of service like Jesus will the human species recognize that God is the disciple’s loving and beneficent Father. Only compassion, love, and a service heart can shine light on others.

Given the difficulties confronting the church, particularly among the faithful and the Lord’s disciples, it is vital to learn how to witness with unwavering faith, love, and compassion. People who learn to forgive help to make the world a more peaceful and pleasant place. More than anyone else, Jesus’ committed disciples, both clergy and religious, must bear witness in today’s world. Consecrated people must be “salt” in the face of today’s injustices, sufferings, and wounds, alleviating anguish, making their life less unpleasant and embarrassing, and helping them to live with dignity as God’s children. Not only that but by living a life of gratuitous love and service, as well as choosing to stand by society’s vulnerable and abandoned individuals, we may shine a light on those who are committed to the world. Most essential, with the strength of unwavering faith in God, consecrated persons assemble to raise lives trapped in the darkness of sin and to guide them into God’s light and love.

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