

In Training
[Matthew 5:13-20](#)
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The Olympics are kind of strange. Every four years, athletes gather from all around the world, representing their countries to see who is the fastest, highest or strongest at some very, very particular skills. These athletes have been training non-stop their entire lives, turning away from the ordinary joys of life like napping and ice cream and instead choosing rigorous exercise and discipline, stretching their endurance to the limits, straining and training until their muscles have muscles, all so that they can become known as the world's greatest master of the luge. Or the parallel bars. Or the hammer throw. Or ice dance. And I have the greatest admiration for anyone who can achieve that kind of excellence, but I just can't help but wonder why. Why the luge? How does someone fall so deeply in love with the luge that they dedicate their entire life, every waking and sleeping moment for decades on end, to luging? When I was a kid, and people asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, lugist never occurred to me. To give yourself so completely to such a specific talent, one that is only really useful once every four years, that takes an amazing kind of commitment, and I just can't see that the luge is worth it. Maybe I'd understand if I tried luging, although I'm not sure I would survive the attempt. Becoming an Olympian requires superhuman levels of effort and endurance and talent and willpower, all dedicated to one specialized event,

and if you're going to undertake that level of effort, if you're going to commit to a life lived in training, it had better be worth it.

And I think sometimes we think of our lives as Christians as making that kind of commitment. When we commit ourselves to following Jesus Christ, to loving God and our neighbour as we love ourselves, we are committed to spending the rest of our lives in training, working out, practicing virtues, avoiding vices, stretching our spiritual muscles so that we can do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God, each and every day of our lives. And we often see this idea in scripture – when the Apostle Paul tells us that we are to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, or that he has fought the good fight and finished the race and kept the faith, he's using the language of training and physical achievement to encourage Christians like us to work hard and give it all we've got for the service of Christ. In his letter to the Ephesians, when he tells us to put on the full armour of God, he's comparing the Christian life to a life of combat, taking on the enemies of truth and righteousness with the strength that we've been given from God. The image of an athlete, diligently training their body and mind to endure the trials and emerge victorious, that image is so engrained in our culture, just as much as it was in the Greek and Roman world that Paul was writing in, so it's no wonder that we like to see our Christian journey of faith in that kind of life, as a life in training, practicing, growing stronger each and every day.

And if that's how you see your life as a Christian, as one dedicated to training, making yourself faster, higher, stronger, it's tempting to read the Sermon on the Mount in that kind of light. After all, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, the list of Beatitudes we read last week, it can sound like a checklist of all the things we are supposed to do as Christians, steps to take in our training – be a peacemaker, practice mercy, make yourself pure in heart. We can turn this list into a kind of training regimen, an eight step program to being fitter, faster, happier and holier, working out with Jesus by our side. And while it's wonderful to dedicate our lives to training as Christians, growing stronger and stronger in our walk with Jesus Christ, there is a danger in that imagery of the Christian life as a life in training, a life of endurance and performance and exceptional endeavours. Seeing your walk with Jesus in that way, as a life in training, makes the focus of your faith what you are doing, on your own achievements, your performance, your holiness, your virtue. Comparing ourselves to athletes competing for a prize makes it all about winning and losing, being the very best we can be, striving to become the next Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr. or Tony Plomp, and if that's how you measure success as a follower of Jesus, as being faster, higher, stronger than the person next to you in the pew, pretty soon it stops being about following Jesus and becomes about winning, achievement, being the best at whatever it is that you think God called you to do, and that kind of attitude is absolutely deadly. Making our faith a performance, a competition, believing that our value as a Christian is

determined by how well we pray or how much we serve, how loud we can sing or how pious our private lives, that will only lead to more pain, more misery, for ourselves and for the people around us. That's not how we're meant to follow Jesus.

And I think that's why Jesus follows up the Beatitudes with the passage that we read this morning. Right after this long list of blessings, Jesus tells the crowd gathered around him, You are the Salt of the Earth, and You are the Light of the World. And just like in the Beatitudes, Jesus is speaking in the present tense here – You ARE the Salt of the Earth. You ARE the Light of the World. This is true right here, right now. It's not a future goal you need to aspire to, it's not something you have to work hard at, dedicate your life to training and exercising so that some day you can be salt and light, this is who you are. Right here, right now. You are the Salt of the Earth, you are the light of the world. And that's the thing about both salt and light – they aren't really something you can get better at. Salt is either salt, or not salt, there isn't really anything in between – you can't really make salt saltier. If it's salty, then it's salt – and if it isn't, it's worthless, fit only to be thrown out and trampled under foot. Light is light – light shines, that's all it does. It doesn't have to think about it or work at it, it just shines. A lamp is either lit or unlit, and if it's lit, it shines. You can cover a lamp up with a bushel basket, but no one in their right mind would do that, because that's not what a light is for – it's meant to shine – but even if you did put a basket over it, it wouldn't stop the light from shining. Inside that basket, it would

be as bright as day – the basket wouldn't affect the light, just keep it from reaching the rest of the room. Both Salt and Light are valuable not because of the effort they put into being salt and light. They are valuable because of the intrinsic value of what they are, of what they were made to be. Salt is good because it is salt – light is good because it is light. Salt doesn't need to try to be salt – it just needs to be. Light doesn't need to train or practice to get better at being light – it just needs to shine.

And that's what Jesus is trying to tell the crowd gathered there on that hillside – they ARE the Salt of the Earth. They ARE the light of the World. Not because of anything they've done – not because they themselves are especially holy and pious and good. They are Salt and Light because that's who they are meant to be. That's who God created them to be. Their only purpose – their reason for existing, the one job they are called to do each and every day, is to be salt and light, to let their light so shine before others so that the world will see them and give glory, not to them, but to the Father in heaven. Because that's what we were created for. Our chief end – our only purpose – is to glorify God, to shine our light so that people see God, and then spend each and every day enjoying how good it is to be loved by God. If the light we shine is all about ourselves – about our own abilities or achievements, all the things we've trained and worked hard for, then the more we shine, the more glory we will win for ourselves, instead of bringing glory to God. If we see our good deeds as something we work at, something we accomplish through our own strength, then our righteousness turns into

the same kind of self-righteous, self-glorifying, self-idolizing piety practiced by the scribes and the Pharisees, and all we end up building is a temple to our own glory that turns out to be our tomb. But when we see ourselves as salt and light, when we see our goodness not as something we have achieved, but something that is intrinsic in us because God is in us, then we stop glorifying ourselves and start giving glory to God.

And this doesn't mean that good deeds don't matter, that we're not supposed to try to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God, that we don't need to keep training and striving to grow as followers of Jesus. It just means we need to remember what it's all for – why we train, why we shine – it isn't for ourselves, it's for Jesus. It's all for his glory, so that others will see him when they see us. And when we remember that, it actually makes those good deeds easier. When you're trying to do everything for your own glory – when you're trying to work so hard to make yourself look good, all of a sudden life is a slog of rules and obligations, you spend half your time feeling smug and self-satisfied because you think you're better than everyone else, and the other half miserable in despair because you know you'll never measure up. But when you stop trying to work and achieve and accomplish and just be salt, be light, just shine, all of a sudden all the pressure is gone. You just shine. St. Augustine once said that the life of a Christian is simple – Love God, and then do whatever you want. And that is only true because when you Love God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, you will only want to do things that are good,

things that bring God glory and help others see God in you. When we stop trying to achieve and just focus on loving God and letting our light shine, it sets us free to live lives of joy and freedom – when we learn that our chief end is to glorify God, it sets us free to enjoy God, enjoy God’s love and presence and power, each and every day and forever more. When we lift our eyes away from the world around us, when we stop trying to compete with our neighbours and instead fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, then we discover what it means to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and then we discover the joy that comes when we let our light shine. Today and everyday, may the light of Jesus Christ shine in us. Amen.