

Isaiah 58 & Matthew 5 Our Job Description

I have had several job descriptions in my life. I have found that they often describe more than just the position, but can describe a way of life as well. There are other descriptions given to us that are titles and they also often are a type of job description, indicating our place in society. For many years I was known on sight by almost every child at Harrisburg Elementary school as Tony's Mom; then about three years later I was known as Heather's Mom there. That was my identity to them. It explained who and what I was. Earlier in my life, during the period I was in graduate school at Duke, I held my first official paid positions. I received a NIH grant for my post undergraduate work and so my job was to be a student. That meant attending classes, doing laboratory research and passing examination by mentors in my chosen field. When due to re-arranged national priorities, those scholarships disappeared I worked night call at Duke Hospital Blood Bank and as a Graduate Lab Assistant in the Bacteriology Department at UNC as I continued my education. As I was writing my thesis and finishing my degree, I took another position—as a research technician in a research laboratory in Minneapolis. While in Minnesota, after finishing the degree, I held several positions doing research as a technician. The positions defined my job and purpose within that context. The descriptions of my "duties" in those positions were no longer as vague as a general class, but became quite detailed as what my responsibilities were to be. Added to that, there were periodic evaluations of how well my actual performance matched the expectations listed in the job descriptions. There are many places in Scripture where we are given descriptions of what God expects of us. These expectations act to define the role we are expected to play in God's kingdom. Some of these descriptions are scattered and rather involved; others are very concise summaries of the longer descriptions. Last week our Hebrew Scripture passage contained one of the concise summaries of God's expectations for those God claimed. As found in Micah 6:8—"He has told you, O Mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Today's text from Isaiah contains much the same message. There Isaiah records the accusations of the Lord in Isaiah 58:1b—"Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins." The Lord's accusations are again about the division between what the people claim they are doing and how they are living with what God has told them is required. The Lord says of Israel in verse 2: "Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God." That "as if" indicates that the seeking being done is not resulting in righteous practices; however it appears, they are not in tune with God's desire for them as the covenant people who were formed to be a light to the nations. The people contend that God is not responsive to their offerings. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" In their mind, they are being and doing what is expected. The Lord's reply is that he does notice what they are doing. And that is exactly the problem. Verse 4: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers." Again, lip service to the Lord is not what God seeks from the covenant relationship. They claim merit because of their rituals like fasting. Again, God's description of the type of fasting desired according to Isaiah 58:6-7: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every

yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house; when you see them naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" Within this same passage God invites them to change; to return to truly following God's ordinances. According to Isaiah, what happens when they truly seek to follow God's ordinances? Verse 8: "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." Verse 9b: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness." These are texts that Jesus would have known well. Within the Gospels accounts we have Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth. So the image of God's people as being a light to the world is already present in the tradition in which Jesus lived. What Jesus declares is not new. It is not surprising then that Jesus continues the use of this image. Our passage from the gospel of Matthew comes from the teachings of Jesus which are known as the Sermon on the Mount. These teachings begin with Chapter 5:1&2: that says when Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them," That is the introduction to what we call the Beatitudes. Today's text immediately follows as Jesus sets before his disciples their identity—their purpose—their job description—what they are as his disciples. "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world. Notice that the disciples are not told they should be salt and light...or that they could be salt and light...but that they are salt and light. Instead he says both simply and directly...you are salt, you are light. He doesn't say if you want to become salt and light, do this...No, according to Jesus by being his disciples, they already are salt and light. What he says is blessing, commendation, affirmation and commissioning all at the same time. So in that context, what does it mean to be salt and light? Salt, in our time is a rather common commodity. It is no longer rare like it was in Jesus' time. Some of its uses can now be done by other means. For example, then it was necessary for the preservation of food, a matter of life or death. It was also used for seasoning and for purification throughout Scripture. It was actually so scarce in places, it was sometimes used as the currency of commerce between traders—hence the Latin root of the word salary. Today it still adds flavor to our food. It also softens hard water, melts ice on our roads and sidewalks in bad weather and even can be used to soothe a sore throat. Today it is cheap, almost ubiquitous. To understand what Jesus was telling his disciples we need to remember that when Jesus spoke this was not the case. In saying "You are the salt of the earth." Jesus was telling them that they were valuable—that who they were and what they did was important. Jesus is handing out a job description for an important task. They are to bring flavor to the world. Jesus continues, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? If you look at the properties of salt, it seems that it never actually loses its taste. It dissolves in water, but it is still there. It is still salt. It is still capable of performing the desired function. And that is the point. Salt was and is valuable because of its many uses. But in all cases, salt is useless when it is just sitting there in a pile or a container—when it is not put to use. It has to come out of the shaker, out of a container in order to have an effect on anything. The same type of point can be made about the statement "You are the light of the world." The light is only useful if it is placed somewhere it can be seen. Like salt, sources of light are much more common in our world. It is actually had to find areas of complete darkness in our culture. In the ancient world, nightfall brought total darkness and the light of a lamp made more of an impression. Here salt and light are identity statements—nametags, if you will. By telling his

disciples they are salt and light, Jesus is giving them something to live into—an identity that will demonstrate his teachings to the world. And that is where this passage leads us—to remind us that this is who and what we are—that this is what our job description is. Jesus says these words to us today—you are of great value. Who you are and what you are and all that you give to the world as his disciples makes the world a better, richer place. That is how we are salt and light. That is how we are to be and move in our surroundings. The teachings of Jesus on that hillside made it clear that this was no small thing to be kept locally—You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Not just the salt and light for the immediate area or yourself for your own gain, but the role is for the earth and the world. And the goal is not to achieve anything for ourselves; or as the Isaiah passage states our own self-interest. Our saltiness or light is to have an effect in the world: it points to God and the glory of God’s kingdom. Thinking about salt as a seasoning, you don’t want to taste the salt in the dish, or even realize it is there. Its purpose is to enhance the whole dish. The light’s purpose is not just to shine but to illuminate other objects in the room. In his teachings Jesus reminds us that knowledge about God cannot exist simply as knowledge—a knowing about God. Knowledge about God recognizes God’s presence in the world. As disciples our job description is to be the activity of God in the world. We are called to live out our identity as salt and light. When we claim the title of Christian, we are saying that we are Disciples of Christ. That identity is our job description. It defines our purpose. It makes us the light in darkness, the salt which gives life according to God’s intent for the world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.