In the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous sermon ever preached, Jesus explained what it means to live as children of God in the midst of a world shrouded in sin and darkness. In the portion of that sermon found in Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus addresses the question of what relationship his followers should have with the world around them. His answer? Salt and light.

A little historical context will help those of us in the twenty-first century with access to refrigeration, bleach, and electricity make sense of what Jesus was saying here. In the ancient world, where refrigeration was often impossible, salt was used as a preservative for food. Preservatives prevent rot and decay. However, when salt became contaminated with other substances, it lost its ability to preserve and purify. In a similar way, Jesus is teaching us that our presence in the world helps to prevent the world's spiritual and moral decay. In order for us to accomplish that task, however, we must not allow ourselves to become mixed up in things that would contaminate us. We cannot call the world to Jesus's better way of living if we are not willing to model it ourselves. That's what holiness is all about.

Not only does genuine holiness act like a preservative in a decaying world, but genuine holiness is also attractive and welcoming, offering hope to those who gaze upon it. That's what Jesus means by "the light of the world." For a weary traveler on the dangerous roads of the ancient Roman empire, the bright lights of a city on a hill would be an encouraging reminder that help, provision, and safety were near. This is how Jesus says our "good works" - works of love, compassion, mercy, and service - are to function for those traveling through the darkness of the world.

Our call to holiness, then, when viewed through the lens of the Sermon on the Mount, is intended to help us lead lives that attract those wandering in darkness and direct them toward the goodness, grace, and newness of life that their heavenly Father wants them to experience.