

Salt and Light Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." What in the world does that mean? Well, what does salt do? Most obviously, it enhances the taste of food. I made a quiche one time, and remembered almost all the ingredients: two eggs, condensed milk, the cheese and the broccoli. It didn't look like anything was missing when I put it in the oven. But the first taste reminded me - -I had forgotten the salt. It just wasn't good without salt.

But salt has another property that we modern people often forget. In the days before refrigeration, salt was often used as a preservative. It kept meat from spoiling for long periods of time, even through the hot summer months, or during long ocean voyages.

So, how can the body of Christ do both of these things? What sort of distinctive flavor should characterize our lives? How are we supposed to act as a preservative in the world?

Well, the sad truth is that we don't have to leave these questions to our imagination, for the most cursory glance at world history shows how cultures behave which are not informed by the gospel. For example, the pagan neighbors of the Ancient Israelites burned their firstborn children alive in hopes that false gods like Molech would give them more children. In Ancient America, prisoners of war had their hearts cut out while they were still alive, and their bodies were thrown down the steep steps of the pyramids. In India as late as the nineteenth century, widows were thrown alive on the burning funeral pyres of their husbands. And then of course there was the practice of crucifixion, a particularly brutal way of executing the enemies of the state that the Ancient Romans picked up from the Carthaginians. Need we doubt that the world would be a much uglier, a much more brutal place without the taste and the preserving power of the gospel?

So much is clear, but why did Jesus say that salt could lose its savor, its flavor? Well, ancient people obtained salt mainly by allowing pools of seawater to evaporate. Because they did not further refine the salt to purify it, that meant it was mixed with lots of other minerals. With continued exposure to the air, such a mixture could actually have the salt, the sodium chloride leached out of it, leaving only the undesirable minerals behind. The leftover product still looked like salt, but it had lost its flavoring and preservative properties.

So by comparing His followers to salt, what was Jesus trying to tell us? That we are to remain salty, distinctive and different from the world. Our joy in our salvation and our selfless service of others should add spice to the dreariness and despair of the godless world around us. Moreover, as we make an impact on our culture, our convictions about the truths of the gospel should serve to restrain much of the evil in the world. Our love for our neighbors should help

keep the wheels of society turning in spite of the selfishness and cruelty of those who turn away from Christ.

But what will happen if we lose our distinctive flavor? What will happen if we take our eyes off of God, becoming like the world, like those who are not part of the body of Christ?

Once again, we need use no imagination – for if history illustrates the cruelty of non-Christian cultures, it also shows us the brutality into which Christian cultures fall when they drift away from the gospel. It was the Christian West that turned away from following the Prince of Peace, and sought to spread the gospel by force in Muslim lands during the Crusades. It was Martin Luther's Germany that eventually embraced Naziism, condemning millions of Jews to the gas chambers. And as we are reminded almost daily, it was the Christian world that had stamped out slavery in antiquity that re-embraced it a thousand years later – when the profit motive was strong enough.

And what has happened to our own culture as the Church and its teachings have increasingly been pushed to the sidelines? What has happened to our own laws and institutions that are no longer allowed to be based on the gospel or the Ten Commandments? What has happened since the Law of God has left our courtrooms and the name of Jesus has left our classrooms?

Just look around. Our streets are filled with violence, and 60 million Americans have been killed before having a chance to be born. And as marriages have become disposable, and even optional, too many of the children who do manage to come into the world fall prey to poverty and illiteracy, to depression and drugs, and even suicide. In short, without the preserving salt of the body of Christ, the world is returning to the self-centered, godless ways it practiced before it heard the gospel.

But whose fault is this? While it is easy for us to blame the unbelievers who do such horrible things, remember: Jesus says we Christians are supposed to be the salt of the earth. So, does it make sense for the salt to stay in its shaker and blame the meat for spoiling? After all, what do you expect meat to do without salt?

So, here is the challenge of the gospel. Once we have been saved from our own spiritual death, once we have been transformed from dead meat into salt, we are called to go and rub ourselves back into the dying flesh of the world.

Oh, we might want to keep ourselves pure by remaining in our salt shaker. But if we do that, if we don't try to help the people in the sinful, dirty, selfish world around us, we will lose our saltiness. We will become worthless, useless to God or to anyone else.

But at the same time, while we are thus called to get involved with the sinful world around us, we must retain our beliefs, our distinctive flavor, if we are to be able to act as a preservative, restraining others from the worst of their sinful tendencies.

So, how can we possibly do both of these things? How can we be in the world, but nevertheless remain distinct from the world? Well, let's take a look at Jesus' other metaphor for the church: He says we are the light of the world. But how is that true? How are we like light?

Well, once we have placed our trust in Christ to save us and be our Lord, we know we become part of His body, united to Him by faith. And who is Jesus? In John chapter 8 He told us, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

This is the good news. If we are in Christ, we not only have His light when we are in darkness – we are called to be the light in the darkness for others. And think about it – light is not somehow sullied or compromised when it shines into the darkness – in fact, the darker the night around it, the more visible even a dim light becomes.

And make no mistake – Jesus says His followers are like a city on a hill, the lights from whose welcoming windows and streetlamps are visible for miles and miles away even on the darkest nights. We are thus called to draw people to Christ, to participate in the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy when he said that all the nations would stream up Zion's hill to live in the peace and justice of God's truth.

Now, of all congregations, we should have no trouble understanding how this sort of attraction should work. After all, you can see the golden hand on top of this church steeple from anywhere in town. Day or night, it is a beacon to everyone passing by on Highway 61. Oh, they may not come inside to worship with us, but everyone knows where we are – and who we are.

But even apart from our prominent buildings, the people who make up the church are also like a city on a hill. We are living examples of Christian morality and ethics whether we want to be or not – we are walking, talking advertisements of what it means to be a follower of Christ. I've heard it said that our lives may be the only sermon some people ever hear – so what are we proclaiming about Christ by how we live?

For the sad truth is that we can conceal, we can obscure the light Christ has placed within us. It is possible to hide a light, you know. Even in ancient days, anyone could light a candle or an oil lamp and then turn a basket over on top of it – that's the image that Jesus used.

But what would be the point of such an undercover light? It wouldn't do anyone any good, right? That's why Jesus says that a candle is intended to be put on a candlestick. A lamp is

supposed to be on a lampstand, lifted up high so that it can provide light for everyone in the house – that’s why we let chandeliers dangle from the ceiling instead of leaving them on the floor.

So, what does all that mean for us? It means that we can in fact allow the remnants of sin in our lives to obscure the light of the Christ Who lives within us. It means we can allow our selfishness or our pride or our stubbornness or our lustful desires to conceal the love and the truth that God wants us to demonstrate to everyone around us.

I don’t know if any of y’all remember the days before electricity, when homes were lit with oil lamps or gaslights. I have read that one of the constant chores in those days was the cleaning of the glass globes, which were necessary to protect the flames from being blown out, but in the process gradually became covered with soot. If the globes were not regularly cleaned, eventually even the brightest lamp would be obscured, unable to do its job.

In the same way, we must strive to put to death the remnants of sin within us every day. We must continue to clean the globes of our lamps, so that the light of God’s truth and love can shine bright and clear from every part of our lives, so that all the nations might see Christ and want to come to Him.

So much is clear. But before we rush off to rub salt into our dying world and before we head out to shine the light of the gospel into the darkness all around us, Jesus gives us one more word of caution. For even if we spend our lives doing all sorts of things for God and for other people, the world around us can still come to the wrong conclusion. For it is all too possible for them to think that we are the ones who should be admired. It’s possible for them to give us the credit for our Christlike deeds.

In contrast, Jesus says that He wants people to see our works and glorify God. That means that our light must shine in such a way, our works must be done in such a way that people wouldn’t give us the credit, but instead would only see the character of Jesus in us.

But how can we do this? We can’t control what people think. We can’t determine their reaction to our works. So, how can we display the love and truth and justice of God in a way that brings Him glory, in a way that causes the nations of the world to stream to Him, learning and walking in His ways?

Well, of course we can explain our motivations. We’re accustomed to earnest young football players giving God the credit for their victories – that’s really the last sort of Christian testimony that is routinely broadcast on national TV. But you seldom hear the sports analysts go on to discuss how God intervened in one way or another to change the outcome of a game – instead, they talk about the skill of the players or the wisdom of the coaches. And when players

try to become more demonstrative of their faith, as Tim Tebow famously did, they are more often met with ridicule than with admiration.

So, how can we make sure God gets the glory as we spread our salt and shine our light? Well, we're going to have to do more than demonstrate the kind of mercy and kindness that worldly people display. Perhaps we need to go further than just giving away the leftovers of our time and money and talent. After all, such giving out of our abundance may reflect the goodness of our character, but it doesn't necessarily show Jesus to the world.

For Jesus didn't give us just the leftovers of His power and forgiveness, did He? He didn't give us just a little bit of His love and grace, and keep most of it for Himself, did He? No, He gave up all of His abundance – everything He was, everything He had. In fact, He gave Himself away completely. He humbled Himself before His enemies and laid down His life for those who despised and rejected Him. It was that radical sort of self-sacrifice that left no room for doubt about His love. It was as He abandoned Himself completely to the will of the Father that He brought all the glory to God.

And so it is only when we give of ourselves as fully as Christ gave of Himself, it is only when we truly humble ourselves before God and other people, loving others unconditionally in the same radical, self-sacrificial way that Christ did – that's when the light of God's character will shine in and through us as brilliantly as the light shines from the hand atop this steeple. That's when people will see in us the love and grace of Jesus just as clearly as we can see a city on a hill, even from miles away. For it is only in dying to ourselves and living only for the glory of God and the good of others that we can truly follow Jesus. It is only then that we can truly walk the way of the cross.

And so a choice lies before us today. Will we remain in our salt shaker, or will we rub the salt of the gospel into the sin-stained rot of our society? Will we be content to remain undercover Christians, or will we strive to put sin to death in our lives so that the light of Christ might shine more consistently and clearly through our words and deeds? Will we give up the effort to be admired and instead seek to give God all the glory for whatever good He allows us to do? In short, will we walk in the ways of the world, or will we follow Jesus?