

THE SALT OF THE EARTH Matthew 5:13

Sodium Chloride – SALT - gets a lot of bad press. It is blamed for everything from hypertension to obesity to heart disease. The need for salt is questioned. Its use is discouraged. The presence of salt on many tables is often more decorative than anything else. But that was not the case when Jesus announced to his disciples, *"You are the salt of the earth."* In the cultural world of the ancient Near East, salt was an essential and valuable commodity. The Roman government often paid soldiers their wages in salt. A good, faithful man was said to be "worth his salt." Our English word "salary" comes from the Latin word, *salarium*, which means to trade or barter with salt. Salt served a wide array of purposes in the ancient world. And scholars have just as many interpretations of what Jesus meant by this statement about salt in **Matthew 5:13**. There are three primary interpretations that deserve our attention.

First of all, **SALT PREVENTS DECAY**. In the ancient East, families did not have refrigerators or deep freezers. To prevent meat from spoiling, they packed it in salt. The salt would slow down the process of spoiling. That is what it means for Christians to be the salt of the earth. The presence of the saints in the world is a sovereign act of restraining grace. We are the salt of the earth, without which the forces of evil would have little or no resistance in the world. Secondly, **SALT PROMOTES THIRST**. When you intake a lot of salt; you become thirsty. And that is what it means for Christians to be the salt of the earth. We ought to live in such a way that we cause people to be dissatisfied with the passing pleasures of the world and become thirsty for the living God. In **Matthew 5:16**, Jesus says, *"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

The most obvious use of salt, in both the ancient and modern world, is a flavoring agent. **SALT PROVIDES FLAVOR**. It seasons. It makes things taste better. One little boy said, "Salt is what makes food taste bad when it's *not* on it!" I believe this is the primary point Jesus makes when he says, *"You are the salt of the earth."* The end of the verse supports this view, as Jesus warns about the consequences of salt losing its flavor. Christians are to the earth what salt is to food. As salt makes food taste better, followers of Jesus Christ are to influence this sinful world for the kingdom of God. We are to be kingdom condiments. We are to be sanctified seasoning. We are to add godly flavoring to this insipid world. To be the salt of the earth that Christ calls us to be, we must live for God, not for this world. We are the salt of the earth. But we are salt *for* God. We live for the pleasure of God to make a difference in the world.

Here's the issue. God is holy. This world is sinful. And our holy God cannot tolerate sin. So he has left the church on earth to salt it so that he can tolerate this sinful world. Of course, that does not mean that Christians are without sin. Rather, we are people who have experienced the goodness of God in Christ and who, as a consequence, live to glorify God and enjoy him forever. The

presence of citizens of the kingdom of heaven makes this corrupt world palatable to the holiness of God. We are the salt of the earth. This principle is illustrated throughout scripture.

- We see this in Noah and the flood.
- We see this in Joseph and Potipher's house.
- We see this in Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- We see it in Paul and the pagan sailors who were shipwrecked with him.
- And we ultimately see it in the church of Jesus Christ.

We are the salt of the earth. But are we living and serving and representing the kingdom as Christ has called us to? **VANCE HAVNER** wrote, "For too long we have been tickling palates with fancy flavors, spicy relishes, and clever recipes borrowed from the world. Too many pulpits serve gourmet theology with menus from Hollywood and are trying to please the jaded appetites of the fed-up humanity. But what we really need is some old-fashioned salt. And if we do not start producing more of it in our churches, we shall be good for nothing." In short, let the church be the church! What is the church? You are the salt of the earth. In the scientific chart of elements, salt is sodium chloride. In **Matthew 5:13**, Jesus gives us the place of salt in the kingdom chart of elements.

I. JESUS DESCRIBES HIS FOLLOWERS AS THE SALT OF THE EARTH.

The first two words of **Matthew 5:13** are crucial: "*You are...*" This statement is a description, not a prescription. It is not a command or exhortation. Jesus is not challenging his followers to some ideal behavior. He is stating the nature of kingdom citizenship: *You are the salt of the earth*. Jesus does not say, "You should be salt." He does not promise, "You will be salt." He does not command you to be salt. He does not exhort us to act like salt. He does not encourage you to strive for saltiness. He doesn't exhort us to pray that God will make you salt. He says, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" In this statement, our **function** as salt is assumed. But our **nature** as salt is explicit. In fact, it is **emphatic**, "You, and only you, are the salt of the earth." The fact that Jesus says salt is what you are makes a vital point about maximizing kingdom influence. The Lord considers who you are to be more important than what you do. And the Lord is only pleased with what you do when it flows from who you are.

In many instances, churches emphasize performance and ignore character. We give positions of influence to people based on their talents, longevity, or connections. And we often fail to factor in the things that matter the most – like conversion experience, spiritual vitality, Christian maturity, biblical qualifications, godly wisdom, moral purity, and Christlike humility. But God will not settle for salt substitutes. God is not as concerned with your gifts, talents, and abilities as he is your holiness, godliness, and Christlikeness. With God, character precedes and predetermines performance.

D. MARTIN LLOYD-JONES said, **“Christians, by being Christians, influence society almost automatically.”** Indeed, you can make a difference in this world by just being who you are. Just be salt. Act like a Christian. Conduct yourself as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. What does that look like in practical terms? Jesus describes the God-blessed, Christ exalting, and kingdom focuses life in **Matthew 5:3-12**. It is to be poor in spirit. To mourn. To be meek. To hunger and thirst after righteousness. To be merciful. To be pure in heart. To be peacemakers. To rejoice in undeserved persecution. To be the salt of the earth is to live in such a way that your life makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more attractive to this lost world.

There is both good news and bad news here.

I'll give you the good news first. The good news is that God uses salt. That is, God uses ordinary things. Aren't you glad Jesus didn't describe those he uses as the gold of the earth? Or the silver of the earth? Or the jewels of the earth? Then most of us would not be fit to represent the kingdom of heaven in this world. But God in his sovereign grace uses ordinary people like you and me. **1 Corinthians 1:26-29** says, *“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, nor many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”* Thank God he uses salt. That means that God can use you.

- **God can use you without great talents.**
- **God can use you without a seminary degree.**
- **God can use you without a lot of money.**
- **God can use you without social prominence.**
- **God can use you without physical beauty.**

Have you struggled to find your spiritual gifts? Be encouraged and know that God's personnel department has a wise variety of available jobs. Jesus told us to be the salt of the earth. There are some fourteen thousand industrial uses for salt. That's a lot of possibilities! All God needs of you to use you is all of you. And that is the bad news. The good news is that God can use you. God wants to you use. In fact, God will you use. In **John 15:8**, Jesus said, *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”* In other words, it is God's will to use you. **Joni Eareckson Tada** writes, “Frankly, I think we're being redundant to ask God to use us. We're requesting him to do something he already desires to do.” So if God is not using you to influence this world for his glory, it is not because he does not want to use you. But it may be because you have not made yourself usable. You may not have made yourself useful. You may not have made yourself available.

Suppose you buy a house, and the former owner comes to you with the keys. There are twelve rooms in the house. But he only gives you six keys. You say, "Where are the other keys?" "Oh," he says, "You can't have them! There are some rooms I don't want you to see. There are some things I want you to move." Of course, you say, "I purchased the whole house. And I want all the keys!" Likewise, God cannot use you if you do not make yourself totally available to him. So sometimes God will start shaking things up in your life to make you useful. You are the salt of the earth. But God cannot use you to influence the world for the kingdom if you never get out of the saltshaker. So there are times when God has to take you out of your comfort zone, turn your life upside down, and shake things up to make you useable for his glory.

II. JESUS WARNS HIS FOLLOWERS ABOUT THE FAILURE TO BE THE SALT OF THE EARTH.

Notice **Matthew 5:13** again: *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."* After describing his followers as the salt of the earth, Jesus raises a dilemma. What if the salt loses its taste, flavor, or savor? What do you do if the salt is no longer salty? At this point, commentators scramble to rescue Jesus. Salt is a stable compound. It never loses its taste. But the commentators, determined to protect Jesus from reproach, explain that the salt made in the granaries near the Dead Sea were actually unstable and could lose its saltiness if adulterated by other substances. When this happened, they say, the salt would be tossed out as useless and trampled under the feet of those who passed along the way.

That sounds interesting. But that kind of cultural reinterpretation of the text gives Jesus protection he does not need. Jesus intentionally turned this word picture on its head to make an essential point about the kingdom influence his followers are to have in this world. Here it is: **Salt is different**. For salt to influence the taste of food, it must first have intimate contact with it. So much so that the salt dissolves and disappears as it infiltrates the food. But even though the salt becomes so thoroughly entrenched in the food, you know there is salt in the food because the presence of the salt makes the food taste different. But what use would it serve to put salt on food if it tastes no different than the food? What good is salt that is not different? If salt becomes tasteless, what do you do, salt it? This ridiculous scenario is meant to be a divine warning about the great contradiction and severe consequences of worldliness in the believer's life.

Suppose a person accidentally left a steak on the kitchen counter just before leaving on vacation. Upon returning home, he would be welcomed with a horrendous odor. He would stumble to the kitchen, trying to imagine what could cause such a stench. When finding the meat he would not blame the meat for being a rotten slab of beef. He would kick himself for failing to preserve the meat

in the refrigerator. Unfortunately, we Christians are often not that logical in our response to this sinful world. We make plenty negative comments and vent great frustrations over this rotten society. But our culture is simply doing what comes naturally. As hard as it is to admit, we should quit leveling blame of decadence on pagans and start asking why the church is not more effectively preventing decay from setting in. The only way we can make a difference is if our lives demonstrate the difference that Jesus Christ makes. Mark it down.

- It matters how you conduct life each day.
- It matters how you lead your family.
- It matters how you treat your neighbor.
- It matters how you perform your job.
- It matters how you manage your material possessions.
- It matters how you respond to trials and temptations.

Jesus says, *“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.”* Notice the severe consequences for losing one’s saltiness. Jesus said you are good for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. Think about that. Some things that lose their original purpose can still be used for other things. But you cannot do that with salt. There is no such thing as recycled salt. Unsalted salt is worthless. A rabbi at the end of the first century was asked how one could make saltless salt salty again. He replied that one should salt it with the afterbirth of a mule. The problem with this answer is that mules are sterile. But that was exactly the rabbi’s point. Moreover, that is the warning the Lord Jesus issues to nominal, worldly, and unfruitful disciples. **Luke 14:34-35** says, *“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be resorted? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”* A disciple who does not live like a disciple is worth about as much as tasteless salt or invisible light.

This warning about the peril of unsalted salt should lead us to examine our profession of faith. Salvation comes when you repent of your sins and put your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It has nothing to do with anything you do. It is all about what God has done for us through the righteous life and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. Salvation comes to those who put their trust in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sin. But true assurance of salvation does not come by merely remembering some day in the past when you professed faith in Jesus Christ. It does not come by tallying up all of the religious things you do. True assurance comes as God conforms you into the image of his Son by the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit. **2 Corinthians 5:17** declares, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”* More than just remembering the day when you walked down the aisle and gave the preacher your hand, you ought to be looking into the mirror of God’s word to see if there is evidence of real change taking place in your life.

In his little book, *Stop Dating the Church*, JOSHUA HARRIS lists ten “must-haves” you should factor in as you search for a church home. The ninth question listed is quite provocative: *Is this a church that is willing to kick me out?* That may seem to be a harsh factor that would cause you to avoid a church. But that is the kind of church you ought to be looking for. When a person who claims to be a Christian lives in a way that blatantly contradicts all that it means to be a disciple of Christ, a faithful congregation’s responsibility is to begin the process of removing that person from membership and to treat him or her like an unbeliever in the hope that he or she will repent and ultimately be restored.

Now, that may seem unloving to you. But what is really unloving is for a person to live in a way that contradicts the way of Christ without repentance and be in a church that allows them to think that they are right with God when they are not. I hear people say, “I’m saved and on my way to heaven anyhow?” But that is not the truth. You don’t go to heaven anyhow. You get to heaven God’s way. You do not get assurance of salvation in spite of how you live. You get assurance of salvation by how you live. If you are saved, there will be a difference in how you live.

Let me close with a word to unbelievers and a word to believers.

A WORD TO UNBELIEVERS. Maybe you have refused to accept Christ because of the way you have seen Christians live. “Church people are just hypocrites,” you say. But let me tell you that Jesus Christ is not a hypocrite. And as long as he is who he said he is and as long as he did what he said he did, he is worthy of your trust, love, worship, service, and obedience. In **John 14:6** Jesus declares, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* Look to Jesus and be saved. Unlike salt, too much of Jesus will not make you sick. To the contrary, he gets sweeter as the days go by!

A WORD TO BELIEVERS. Jesus warns his followers about the consequences of failing to be the salt of the earth. The severe consequences are that you will not be able to influence others for the kingdom. In fact, just the opposite takes place. You are thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. But notice that it is people who will reject you, not Jesus. If you fail to be what God calls you to be, you rob yourself of the opportunity to be a godly influence in the lives of others. And people may want to have nothing to do with you. But that doesn’t mean that is how God will treat you. God majors in using people who are good for nothing. The emphasis of the text is not the warning. It is the calling: You are the salt of the earth. The message of the text is that the Lord has placed a calling on your life. The Lord believes in you.

An artist went to visit a dear friend. When he arrived, she was weeping. He asked why. She showed him a handkerchief of exquisite beauty that had a great sentimental value, which had been ruined by a drop of indelible ink. The artist asked her to let

him have the handkerchief, which he returned to her by mail several days later. When she opened the package she could hardly believe her eyes. The artist, using the inkblot as a base, had drawn on the handkerchief a design of great beauty with special ink. Now it was more beautiful and more valuable than ever. And sometimes the tragedies that break our hearts can become the basis for a more beautiful design in our lives.