

## “Salt of the Earth; Light of the World”

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Matthew 5:13-20

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Salt and light. The seasoning you put on many foods, and the brightness that illumines the darkness. Salt and light have been extremely important for pretty much all of recorded history. Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, used both of them as metaphors to tell us *who we are*. This is his first real teaching; the Sermon began with the Beatitudes, that series of blessings that we talked about last week. Now he starts teaching. “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” These are the first things he wants to tell all these people who have gathered to listen to him. What does he mean?

Let’s start with salt. Salt is a mineral, officially known as sodium chloride, naturally present in seawater. Salt can also be found in crystalline form within sedimentary rocks, resulting from the evaporation of seawater. Salt is present in abundant quantities in the Holy Land, especially around the Dead Sea, which is one of the saltiest bodies of water on the planet, nearly ten times more salty than the ocean. It is so salty that fish and plants cannot live in it, and there are large salt deposits along much of its shoreline. If you recall the story about Lot’s wife in the book of Genesis – they were fleeing the city of Sodom, which was located near the Dead Sea – and Lot’s wife “looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” (Genesis 19:26) Tradition has it that this pillar of salt, on a hill along the southwestern part of the Dead Sea, is Lot’s wife—still standing after all these years. That entire hill is mostly comprised of salt, capped by a layer of limestone and clay. There has never been a shortage of salt in the Holy Land.

We use salt as a seasoning for food; so did people in the ancient world; it is one of the most common food seasonings. Salt can make even highly unpalatable foods taste better. In the book of Job, Job asks this rhetorical question: “Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt?” (Job 6:6) Salt was also a preservative; for thousands upon thousands of years before the refrigerator was invented, salt was the best way to preserve food, especially meat. Salt made it possible for humans to be less dependent upon the turning of the seasons to acquire sufficient food, and salt made it possible for food to be preserved and transported over long distances. Salt thus was of enormous value to ancient civilizations. It was not something that people took for granted. Some of the earliest roads were built for the primary purpose of transporting salt to people living in regions where salt was in short supply. In the Bible, there is a place called “the Valley of Salt,” which is mentioned several times (2 Sam. 8:13; 2 Kings 14:7; 1 Chron. 18:12; 2 Chron. 25:11; Ps. 60:1). There was also a small city called Nibshan which was called “the City of Salt.” (Joshua 15:62) In the book of Leviticus, the Israelites were instructed to use salt to season all their grain offerings (Leviticus 2:13). There are even a couple references in the Old Testament to “a covenant of salt” that God had made with the people of Israel (Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:15; cf. Lev. 2:13). Bottom line: salt was incredibly precious to the ancient Israelites – and it was in abundant supply.

So when Jesus said to the crowd of people gathered around him, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was making reference to something that they all would have known was *vital* for their daily living. Salt was as essential to their lives as the air they breathed. They depended upon salt as a basic necessity of life. When Jesus said those words, what he was telling his listeners was this: *You are vital. You are essential. You matter. You are important. You have a purpose. Your job is to season the earth. To improve it. To make it better. Your job is also to preserve the earth. To help make it last, to help it endure the elements, and the ravages of time and extreme conditions. Season and preserve. Those are your jobs. That’s what God wants you to do. Make this world a better place. And help it to last.*

“But,” Jesus continues, “if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” Salt can lose its salty flavor when it is mixed with other substances or exposed to moisture. It becomes pretty useless. Salt like that isn’t worth keeping around. What can be done to make it *salty* again? And what are the implications for *us*? Can *we* lose our saltiness? If we are no longer seasoning the earth, no longer making it better, no longer *preserving* it? Jesus asks the question – but he doesn’t answer it. He leaves them pondering.

Jesus moves on to his second lesson: “You are the light of the world.” Science tells us that light is a form of electromagnetic radiation that can be perceived by the human eye. People who lived in the time of Jesus didn’t have a definition like that. They just knew that light was essential to be able to see. If there’s no light, you can’t see a thing. The primary source of light, of course, was the sun. Another critical source was fire, like the flame of a candle, or a burning campfire. Both of those sources of light also have the secondary benefit of providing heat. The moon and the stars also provide some additional light, although nowadays we understand that the moon merely reflects the light from the sun, and does not generate any light of its own. Today we have many other sources of light, thanks to electricity and power systems; everything from ceiling lights to streetlights to the lights on many of our electric devices. It’s hard for us to imagine a world in which we would be dependent on things like candles and fires to provide light in our homes, but that is how people lived for hundreds of thousands of years.

The Hebrew scriptures give light a central place. The first words out of God’s mouth in the Bible are “Let there be light.” (Gen. 1:3) Light was used as a metaphor for God, like when Isaiah declared, “the Lord will be your everlasting light.” (Isa. 60:19-20) In the Psalms, God’s word is described as “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Ps. 119:105) Isaiah called God’s chosen servant – whom we understand to be Jesus – “a light to the nations.” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6) Light was the brightest metaphor of all.

So when Jesus said to the crowd of people gathered around him, “You are the light of the world,” he was telling them that they are as essential to the well-being of the world as light itself is. They make the world a brighter place. None of the people listening to this sermon were famous or important – at least, not yet – but with these words Jesus tells this ragamuffin group they are more important than all the people who hold important positions of power and authority. *Those* people, Jesus is implicitly saying, aren’t the people who make the world brighter. *You* are. These were *powerful* words! They elevated these people. Jesus was giving them a sense of self-worth that they probably never had before. They would walk away with a sense of purpose: to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is *our* purpose too. To make the world better. To preserve it. To *brighten* it with the love of God.

Jesus then compares his listeners to “a city on a hill.” You may have learned that phrase in a history class when you were young. “We must consider,” said John Winthrop to the Puritans who were

migrating to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, “that we shall be as a city upon a hill.” He borrowed that metaphor straight from Jesus. John F. Kennedy picked up that metaphor to challenge and inspire our nation when he was President. Most Presidents after him – of both political parties – have done the same, including Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. All of them were talking about our nation. But Jesus wasn’t talking about a nation; he was talking about his followers, about a *movement*, a group of people dedicated to listening to Jesus and embodying the values and principles that he taught and embodied. So here’s another job for us Christians to do: be a city on a hill. Inspire people. Be a beacon of hope.

But what if we fail to do that job? What if, instead of holding up our light for all to see, we hide it? We cover it up? We put it under a basket? Jesus says: “People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” Light is essential to our well-being. And it’s *easy* to share – all we have to do is turn it on and hold it up. Why would we want to hide our light? Our goodness? Our acts of caring? Our love? Our hope? “Let your light shine before others,” Jesus said, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” You have so much to offer; you have so much hope and joy and peace you can bring to this world, because you embody Jesus, because you are filled with the Holy Spirit – don’t you dare hide that from the world! Later in his sermon, Jesus will stress that we shouldn’t be boastful or prideful; the goal isn’t to draw attention to ourselves. The goal is to take the gifts and graces that Jesus gives us, and share them with the world, so that everyone can bathe in that marvelous light. It’s not about “Look at me!” It’s about, “Let me help you. Let me share with you. Let me love you. Because you matter. Because God loves you. Whoever you are. No matter what. Let me show you just how much God loves you.”

Unfortunately, people outside Christianity often do not experience us Christians as “the light of the world.” Many do not believe that we are *brightening* the world. I know far too many people outside Christianity who have felt *judged* by Christians, or who have received unwelcome opinions from Christians about how they should be living. Judgment and unwelcome opinions aren’t exactly *light*. What many people have experienced from Christianity hasn’t *brightened* their lives. It has made them feel criticized, or condemned, or ashamed, or unseen, or unloved. The unfortunate reality is that far too many Christians have done a lot of harm. Some churches spew hatred in the name of Jesus. Some priests and pastors sexually abuse vulnerable people, including children. In our country more people are turning away from Christianity than towards it. I believe that’s because we have failed to be the light of the world. We have failed to put our light on a lampstand in a way that makes people’s lives *brighter*.

I believe this is one of the major reasons why so many churches in our country – of almost every denomination – are shrinking. We are not shining *brightly* enough. I know a lot of churches that are *desperately* wishing more people would join them. I think the answer to the problem is pretty simple. We need to shine *brighter*. *A lot* brighter. We need to make it abundantly clear, to *all* people, no matter who they are, no matter how they live their lives, no matter how they express themselves, that we offer *light*, not darkness; *love*, not hate; *goodness*, not evil; *acceptance*, not judgment; *humility*, not pride; *forgiveness*, not condemnation; *compassion*, not cruelty; *kindness*, not callousness; *hope*, not despair.

The bottom line: What is Jesus telling us to do? *Season* this earth. Make it *better*. *Preserve* it well. *Brighten* people’s lives. So go: be a ray of sunshine. A beacon of hope. An ambassador of love.

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