

The Sermon on the Mount

Part 9

“Salt & Light”

Matthew 5:13-16

Today, we exit one of the most glorious passages in all of Scripture – the Beatitudes. Throughout church history, saints, scholars, and pastors have agreed in unison that nowhere in Scripture is there such a clear and convicting portrait of authentic Christianity. If you have ever wondered what genuine Christian discipleship looks like, submit your inner life to the “Beatitude Test.”

The Beatitudes emphasize inward transformation; they highlight character that has been radically reshaped by the Holy Spirit for the glory of Christ and His kingdom. By focusing first on the transformation of one’s character, Jesus reminds the Christian that conduct is a byproduct of character. If a person’s character hasn’t been transformed into the likeness of Christ, their conduct will not exalt His righteousness and glory. Christian conduct is informed by Christlike character.

Thus, thru the Beatitudes, Jesus reveals the genuine marks of Christian character that produce godly conduct.

- Instead of being overconfident and prideful in self, Christians come to grips with their poverty of spirit and total depravity. *Are we poor in spirit?*
- Instead of delighting and celebrating in sin, Christians mourn over their proclivity to sin and rebel against God and His Word? *Do we mourn over sin?*
- Instead of quickly coming to one’s own defense, Christians are meek and humble. *Are we meek?*
- Instead of craving the passions of the world, Christians hunger and thirst for righteousness. *Do we crave holy living that exalts Jesus Christ and His cross?*
- Instead of judging and condemning those living under the effects of sin, Christians extend mercy and grace. *Are we merciful?*
- Instead of promoting worldliness thru actions, words, thoughts, and motives, Christians exhibit a heart of purity. *Are our actions, words, and thoughts pure?*
- Instead of contributing, or even causing, strife and division, Christians are peacemakers who seek reconciliation. *Are we peacemakers? Are we ambassadors of reconciliation?*

When these marks of a transformed character display themselves in a sinful world, Jesus promises the Christian that he or she will be persecuted. In fact, the Christian will be “reviled and have all kinds of evil falsely uttered against them.”

Introducing the TEXT

As Jesus closes the Beatitudes, He teaches us how the world will react to authentic Christianity. The world will revile the Christian who hungers and thirsts for holiness more than anything the world has to offer. The world will persecute the Christian who mourns over sin, instead of celebrating and enjoying it. The world will utter all kinds of false things about the Christian whose words, motives, and actions are pure, instead of lustful and self-centered.

This is the world's attitude and response toward the Christian who lives a radically holy life for the glory and fame of Jesus Christ, His Word, and His coming Kingdom.

Now, as Jesus leaves the Beatitudes, He shows us the other side of the coin. On one side, we see a depraved world's attitude and response toward holiness. On the other side of the coin, the side we look at today, we see the Christian's attitude toward and impact on a sinful and wicked world in desperate need of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus proclaims...

"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.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 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."

If the world's response to Christian holiness is revilement, persecution, and evil words, the Christian's response is antithetical. The world's response is oppression and darkness. The Christian's response is liberation and illumination.

By incorporating two simple metaphors, Jesus reveals the profound purpose and impact Christian holiness should have on a wicked and sinful world. When the Holy Spirit transforms our character into the likeness of Christ, our living will have a two-fold impact on the world – saltiness and brightness.

Challenging Perspective

The widely respected British theologian John Stott writes in his book *Christians: Salt and Light...*

*“If the house is dark at night, there is no sense in blaming the house. That’s what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is, **‘Where is the light?’**”*

*If meat goes bad, there is no sense in blaming the meat. That is what happens when the bacteria are allowed to breed unchecked. The question to ask is, **‘Where is the salt?’**”*

*If society becomes corrupt like a dark night and a stinking fish, there’s no sense in blaming society. That’s what happens when fallen society is left to itself and human evil is unrestrained and unchecked. The question to ask is **‘Where is the church?’**”*

Jesus has called us to live in world, not like the world.

Christians have not been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ to live lives that breed the worldly bacteria of sin and unrighteousness. On the contrary, our lives are meant to be salt. Our lives are meant to counteract sin and unrighteousness.

Christians have not been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ to live lives that flounder in worldly darkness. On the contrary, our lives are meant to be light. Our lives are meant to reveal the Light of the World – Jesus Christ.

Is your life having a salty impact on a decaying world? Is your life illuminating the glorious light of Jesus Christ and the Gospel?

Understanding the Metaphors of Salt & Light

The logical question is this, “What is the significance of salt and light?”

We’ll answer that question in just a moment. But, first, I want to make sure you grasp a significant principle regarding this text.

To be more specific, I want you to make note of the “order.” It is no mistake that Jesus commands Christians to be “salt” before He commands them to be “light.” Don’t miss this! Salt comes before light. Before you can be a holy luminary that exposes sin and reveals Jesus Christ in a world shrouded by sin’s darkness, you must first be an agent of salt.

The order by which Jesus introduces these two metaphors is critical to understand. Salt dissolves quickly and is rarely seen but for just a moment. However, salt’s impact and influence remains – you just can’t see it. On the other hand, light cannot be contained; it does not dissolve. Light is visible for everyone to see.

The metaphor of light, far more so than salt, is appealing to many Christians. We like the idea of being light. And because so, we tend to skip over the command to be salt in preference for being a visible and audible testimony of Jesus Christ as the one true Light of the world.

But, here's the problem with that line of reasoning. Being salty in a festering and rotting world precedes becoming a light that radiates Christ in darkness. Salt comes first. We can't be light without having first functioned as salt.

The "salt" is who we are as Christians. The "light" is what we do as Christians.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it this way...

*"Scripture, in dealing with the Christian, always emphasizes first what he **is**, before it begins to speak of what he **does**. Our lives should always be the first thing to speak; and if our lips speak more than our lives it will avail very little. So often the tragedy has been people that proclaim the Gospel in words, but their whole life and demeanor has been a denial of it. The world does not pay much attention to them. Let us never forget this order deliberately chosen by our Lord; 'the salt of the earth' before the 'light of the world'. We **are** something before we begin to **act** as something."*

Understanding the Influence of Salt

Now that we've established the significance of order, let us turn our attention to metaphors of salt and light. First, let's examine the influence of salt.

In particular, I would like for us to consider four obvious influences of salt.

First, **salt is a preservative that prevents decay and rot.**

Jesus' audience would have been inclined to connect His reference of salt to its preservative nature more than any other influence. Whether those in the audience were Jewish or Roman or Greek, they would have easily made the connection between salt and its function as a preservative. Quite obviously, in the days of Jesus, there was no refrigeration. Thus, in order to preserve the edibility of meat, salt was used to preserve the meat and keep it from rotting. As you can imagine, salt was therefore very valuable. Without salt meats would breed bacteria and spoil quickly.

When Jesus calls Christians to be the "salt of the earth," He commands us to live our lives as a preservative that prevents moral and spiritual decay in our culture.

Now, let's go back for a minute to the opening quote I read from John Stott:

"If meat goes bad, there is no sense in blaming the meat. That is what happens when the bacteria are allowed to breed unchecked. The question to ask is, 'Where is the salt?' If society becomes corrupt like a dark night and a stinking fish, there's no sense in blaming society. That's what happens when fallen society is left to itself and human evil is unrestrained and unchecked. The question to ask is 'Where is the church?'"

I agree with John Stott.

Our society stinks of corruption and immorality and materialism and pride in part because Christians have failed to be the salt Jesus commands us to be. We have failed to be holy preservatives in a rotting world.

One of the reasons Jesus Christ instituted the church was for this very reason - so that we would function as a preservative of integrity, holiness, morality, and humility in our culture.

Is your life being used by the Holy Spirit to be a holy preservative against the bacteria of sin and unrighteousness?

Second, **salt is a healing agent.**

As some of you know, over the course of five years, I have had two major sinus surgeries. Following each surgery, my rehabilitation process involved torturous saltwater nasal solutions. Twice a day for several weeks, I was instructed by my surgeon to irrigate my sinus cavities with a saltwater solution that was shot out of a syringe. Although the burning and stinging sensation was almost unbearable at times, these saltwater irrigation treatments healed my wounds.

Let me be honest with you; I despised these irrigation treatments. The combination of salt and baking soda launched into the back of my head thru an eight-inch syringe was painful. The salt burned. The pressure made my eyes feel like they were going to explode out of my head. There were many days after my surgery, where, if not for the persistence of my wife, I would have abandoned these treatments. Launching saltwater into your cranium is not pleasant.

But, it is healing.

Salt not only functions a preservative; it also burns and stings when applied to a wound.

When Christians live righteous and holy lives for the glory of Christ, their lives will sting and burn – their lives will bring painful conviction – to the world’s open and festering wounds of sin and immorality. No wonder we will be persecuted and reviled.

The good news is that although salt burns and stings, it also accelerates healing.

Have you ever gone to the beach with some sort of wound on your body? Spend a day or two swimming in the ocean and all of the sudden, the wound is gone. Why? Salt!

One commentator writes, as the salt of the earth, Christ desires to use the church as a healing agent that “stings our culture with truth, pricking its conscience and making it uncomfortable in the presence of God’s holy Gospel!”

Is your life being used by the Holy Spirit to sting, burn, and ultimately bring healing to people who are suffering from the open and infected wounds of sin and immorality?

Third, **salt is a thirst accelerant.**

How many of you enjoy salty foods?

I love salty food. I love salty potato chips. I love salty French fries. I love a medium rare filet mignon covered with a thin layer of salt. On the flip side, is there anything worse than saltless popcorn, potato chips, or French fries?

Guess what happens when I eat salty foods? My thirst accelerates. The greater my salt intake the more accelerated my thirst becomes. The greater my salt intake, the greater I desire to have my thirst satisfied.

One of the reasons our culture does not thirst for God and His righteousness is because their salt intake has been, quite honestly, minimal at best. Jesus says that we are the “salt of the earth” and by functioning as so, He can use us as thirst accelerants in the lives of those whom He is calling to redemption. If we will commit our lives to being the salt of the earth, people will become thirsty for the Truth and Jesus Christ will quench their thirst with His everlasting water.

Is your life being used by the Holy Spirit as a thirst accelerant? Are friends, coworkers, schoolmates, and children made thirsty as they watch you live a holy and righteous life for the glory of Christ and the cross?

Finally, **salt is a flavor enhancer.**

Why do so many of us enjoy using salt? Quite simply, salt enhances the flavor of food. More poignantly, sometimes, salt, and only salt, makes certain food palatable. Take whole wheat pasta for example.

I love my wife and I appreciate her commitment to preparing healthy meals for our family. Yet, every once in a while, Cathy will buy and prepare whole wheat, whole grain pasta. Honestly? Whole-wheat pasta is terrible. My kids actually cry when they discover that mom is making whole wheat pasta. And, if the truth were known, I want to cry too.

Whole wheat, whole grain pasta may be good for you, but it has no flavor. So, what do I do? I add salt – lots and lots of salt. If I use enough salt, the cardboard textured whole-wheat pasta becomes flavorful.

Listen carefully! The Gospel is not palatable to a depraved, wicked, and immoral world. We live in a world that rejects absolute truth and abhors purity, holiness, and Christian morality. The Bible and its message are bitter to the world.

We should not be surprised. The world craves the sweet taste of sin and immorality. Yet, unbeknownst to them, although sweet for a moment, sin and immorality produce bitterness, inner decay, and eternal heart disease that leads to death.

How does the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ become palatable and sweet to a lost world? Holy and righteous living under the indwelling presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit empowers us to live holy lives for the glory of Christ, the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ become flavorful in the minds and hearts of sinners in need of grace, forgiveness, and salvation.

Is your life being used by the Holy Spirit to enhance the flavor of the Gospel?

Closing Challenge

As we conclude our examination of what it means to be the salt of the earth, it would be negligent of me to pass over the warning Jesus gives in this text.

Jesus says...

“...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.”

Scientists will tell you that, in its pure form, salt cannot lose its taste. This is undeniable.

Yet, if we understand the demography and audience Jesus was working with, it should come as no surprise that Jesus speaks of salt losing its taste and effectiveness as a preservative.

Not far from where Jesus was preaching this message is the Dead Sea – otherwise known as the Salt Sea. On the banks, marshes, and lagoons neighboring the Dead Sea, the Jewish community had unlimited access to salt reserves. Yet, there was a problem. Due to being mixed with impurities like gypsum, salt from the Dead Sea possessed a stale and alkaline taste. It lost its taste.

This salt was useless. Because it was mixed with impurities, it couldn't be used as a preservative. Nor could it be used to enhance flavor. When salt was discovered to be compromised by impurities, it was thrown out.

Let this be a sobering reminder to every Christian. Christianity and the world do not mix. When we take the salt of our Christian redemption and holiness and mix it with the sin (i.e. gypsum) of the world, our lives lose their Christian flavor and become ineffective in glorifying Christ and advancing the Gospel.

As redeemed followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live in this world – but not like the world. We must resist the temptation to mix the salt of our salvation with the impurities found in the tepid marshes and lagoons of this sinful world.

Jesus makes it clear, you cannot be a preservative; you cannot be a healing agent; you cannot be a thirst acceralant; you cannot be a flavor enhancer as long as you are mixing your precious and costly salvation with the impurities and sin of the world.

When we mix our salt with the impurity of the world, we lose our effectiveness to be used by the Holy Spirit in God's master plan of redemption.

Are you mixing the salt of your salvation with the impurities of the world?

Is your salt pure?

Thru the blood of Jesus Christ and faith in Him as the resurrected Lord, you been called to be salty for the glory of Christ.

May the redeemed of the Lord by salty saints who preserve a decaying world, bring healing to infected souls, accelerate a Gospel-thirst among the lost, and enhance the flavor of God's glorious Gospel.

Amen!