

**“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour,  
wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing,  
but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.” (Matthew 5:13)**

After blessing his disciples, Christ proceeded to instruct them concerning the nature and purpose of his church in this world. His instruction was — and is — very needful (especially in light of that final beatitude: *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake*).

The world is no friend to the church. It never has been and never will be. The world is not only opposed to the church, but it is oftentimes found actively attacking it. No one likes to be attacked, so sometimes the church just retreats. It hides out in a little building somewhere, doing some stuff on Sunday morning, but never daring to step out into public or allowing its prophetic voice to be heard.

This is a great tragedy and Jesus wants us to know that. So he offers two illustrations of what his people are supposed to be like in this world: Salt & Light.

These two illustrations do teach a similar lesson concerning the place - and purpose - of the church in this world, but I thought it would be best to treat them separately [mainly because of how misunderstood this phrase — *the salt of the earth* — is in our modern day].

When someone uses that phrase today — *salt of the earth* — they usually mean something like this: “Yeh, he’s a really good guy. He served his country, works hard at the factory, and would give you the shirt off his back. He’s good people.” Yes, I’m glad people like that exist, but that is most definitely not what Jesus had in mind when he said, *Ye are the salt of the earth*.

The word “salt” appears many times in the Bible (actually, in 21 different books). The word is used in a lot of different ways, so in this sermon, I’m going to connect some of those ways with Jesus’ words here. This, I trust, will help us understand our place - our purpose - in this world as the church of Jesus Christ.

**1st Salt & Flavor - Flavor.** This very basic use of salt is mentioned in Job 6:6, *Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt? or is there any taste in the white of an egg?* Yes, you can eat *unsavoury* food without salt, but we typically don’t. I mean, who here has not sprinkled salt on the white of a hardboiled egg? Salt makes bland foods more flavorful and desirable and

that's one aspect of the illustration here: *Ye are the salt of the earth*. The church is a savoury presence in this world.

Explained: Life without God is empty. It is vain. It can sometimes feel like pure drudgery. You get up, go to work, go home, zone out in front of the TV (or the phone), go to sleep, wake up, and do it all over again. For many, there is no deeper purpose — no chief end — no true and lasting joy.

That's why people sin. Sin offers at least some excitement because it breaks up the drudgery. But its pleasures are only fleeting and most people find that out rather quickly. But we, as Christians, have something better to offer — something real to offer: A life with purpose. A life that can be enjoyed. A life that is savory, if you will.

I mean, think about it in a historical sense. Who wrote all the most beautiful music? Christians. Who built all the most beautiful buildings and cathedrals? Christians. Who painted all the most beautiful art? Christians.

And why? Because Christians know God. They are citizens (as Jesus has been saying over-and-over again) of *the kingdom of heaven*. Therefore, they see the world differently. They see it as God's handiwork. This then leads them to live differently within it. Just like salt.

Salt is essentially different than what you sprinkle it upon. That's what makes it work. And it does work. It makes that which is bland, better. And not just in a superficial way. Those who have studied chemistry know that salt also works on a cellular level. Actually, you don't even need to study chemistry to know that. Jesus knew that and so did everyone who was listening to him this day. They probably understood this better than we do, because they used salt differently than most people do today. Explained in my next point:

**2nd Salt & Preservation** - In the ancient world, there were no electric refrigerators or freezers. They had not yet been invented. So most of the food people ate was fresh. But, as you know, meat doesn't stay fresh very long. So if you kill the fatted calf or caught a hundred fish, you now had a problem to solve, namely, "How do I keep all this meat from rotting?"

SALT — It is one of the most effective preservatives in the natural world. Most of you probably know that some of you might not. People in my house do. Every time they see me bag up some crappie or walleye filets, they will see me pour salt into the baggie before

sealing it up. Salt is a very powerful compound and people in Jesus' day depended on it daily for the preservation of their food.

Applied: The church also functions as something of a preservative agent in this world. To state it very plainly, if it were not for us, the world would rot very quickly and stink way more than it already does. And yes, some might think, "Well, it seems to rotting pretty quickly to me." and I might agree, but it is definitely not as rancid as it could be (and that is due to our presence within it).

In a world full of lies, we confess sound doctrine. In a world with no standard of morality, we preach the law. In a world without hope, we preach the good news of the gospel. We live clean lives. We get married and stay married. We raise godly children. We engage in civic life. We support just causes. We strengthen the hand of the poor. We vote for good policies.

And, back to the previous point, as we do all these things, the entire world benefits. It becomes a better place. Or, to stay with this point, it rots less quickly. But perhaps one clarification might be needed: That's not the reason we do these such things. We are not mere philanthropists or humanitarians. We do what we do, because of who we are as Christians.

Yes, the world does benefit from our presence and our actions, but that is not what motivates us. The good that we seek to do, is done in service to our Master and our King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our obedience to him is rendered as something of a "sacrifice" of worship (which is, in fact, the next use of salt in the Bible):

**3rd Salt & Sacrifice** - In OT times (as most of you already know), people demonstrated their allegiance - and faith - and love - and dependence upon God by sacrificing animals; but this was never to be done without salt.

Leviticus 2:13, *And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering; with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt.*

Why? Well, first of all, because God said so. That should always be a sufficient reason for obedience. We don't have to understand every detail of a commandment before we decide to obey it.

Who knows? Maybe it was a matter of seasoning. I mean, why would we offer bland obedience to God? Maybe it was a matter of preservation (but sacrifices were offered on the same day they were killed, so probably not).

Maybe it was just a matter of costliness. Salt, as we are starting to see, I trust, was a very valuable commodity in the ancient world. In fact, our English word “salary” comes from the word salt. Soldiers were paid a *salarium* (which was their allowance to purchase salt). This is also where we got the saying about someone, “Not being worth his salt.”

Main point being: OT sacrifices were costly (and rightfully so). God designed it that way and he loved it so much that he called it: *the salt of the covenant of thy God*.

Now, under the New Covenant — and because of the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross — we no longer sacrifice animals, but we do offer a true sacrifice. We read about it in Romans 12:1, *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

When we do this — when we live this way — God looks down from heaven and is pleased with what he sees. He accepts the sacrifice of obedience that every Christian offers in humble gratitude for his grace. This also benefits the world, by the way. As the LORD said to Abraham (speaking of Sodom), *I will not destroy it for ten's sake.*

Yes, sometimes the presence of just 10 righteous people is enough to restrain God's hand of judgment. And that leads us to yet another way that *salt* is used in the Bible:

**4th Salt & Judgment** - When Lot's wife demonstrated that her heart was still in Sodom, God judged her. He turned her into a *pillar of salt*. Moses threatened that one of the *curse of the covenant* was that *the whole land would become brimstone, and salt, and burning... just like the overthrow of Sodom, and Gomorrah.*

In the days of the judges, the Bible says: *Abimelech fought against the city [of shechem] all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt.* Sowing a city with salt was a permanent judgment and curse. It destroyed the food supply. Nothing would ever grow there again.

Jesus also alluded to salt while warning people about the final day of judgment, saying, *Remember Lot's wife.* And elsewhere — speaking of being *cast into hell fire* — *where their*

*worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched* — he concludes: *For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.*

Those examples are probably sufficient to establish the point that salt, in the Bible, can also be a symbol of judgment. So how does that apply to us? How does that inform our presence and purpose in this world? Let me put it this way: The church is no joke. It is the visible kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and as such, it should not be trifled with.

Its mission in this world is a very serious one (as we read at the close of the gospel): *Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.* Or, to quote the words of Paul: *we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.* (2 Cor. 2:15)

The presence of God's people — and the preaching of Christ's church — seals judgment to those who obey not the gospel.

This too is one of the purposes of Christ's sermon on the mount and even of his comment here about *the salt of the earth*. We need to keep in mind the fact that not everyone standing there that was a true citizen of his heavenly kingdom. That's why he adds to this illustration a rather arresting conclusion. Explained and applied in my final point:

**5th Salt & Purity** - The words of Jesus: *Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.*

You have probably never seen the salt in your pantry go bad and that is because sodium chloride is a stable compound and this has led many to wonder at Jesus' statement; but if we remember when he was preaching this — and where he was preaching this — it becomes a lot less confusing.

Back in Jesus' day, you could just visit the Dead Sea, walk its shores, and fill up a basket of crusty salt. Free salt! With all salt's uses in the ancient world, who could complain?

Here was the problem: It wasn't pure. That crusty salt was formed by evaporation and therefore had all sorts of other minerals and substances within it. If you stored it improperly - or if moisture got to it - all the real salt would leech away and there was no way to put it back. That's why Jesus said, *wherewith shall it be salted?* It can't be. All you had now

was pile of worthless white stuff. That's why people would just throw it out into the street: *it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.*

Main point: If salt isn't pure, it's not real salt. It's not authentic. It doesn't last. It ends up useless and here's how that applies to us as the church: Purity. The maintenance of purity is a top priority in the kingdom of God, for when the church loses it, it becomes good for nothing.

Now, this usually does not happen overnight. It usually starts somewhat slowly. Like Dead Sea salt, the savour slowly leeches away, but eventually, it's gone. It's then good for nothing.

A lot of so-called churches in this world are good for nothing. The best thing they could do for the world is to shut their doors and lock them permanently. A hard saying? Maybe, but it's perfectly true. That is why true churches are so earnest in maintaining the purity of their doctrine, and worship, and preaching, and government.

But sadly, and as much as the world benefits from having a pure church within it, it does nothing but scorn us for our interest in purity. Our forefathers, you will remember, were given the name "puritans" as if it were an insult!

The scorn continues to this very day. As far as I know, American high school students are still assigned readings from fictional books [and yes, they are fictional] like "The Scarlet Letter" or "The Crucible." And why? To condition them against "puritanism." To prejudice them against "puritanism."

And here's the saddest part: Many high school students were raised in the church. They were taught as children to identify as *the salt of the earth*. But the world will not have it. So it chips away at that identity; undermining it day-by-day until that salt loses its savour.

And here's the deepest irony of it all: Once again, we, as *the salt of the earth*, are actually what the world needs most. We add flavor to a life filled with drudgery. We arrest (or at least slow down) the rot of societal decomposition. Because of our presence (again, even if there are only 10 of us), the hand of God's swift judgment is sometimes stayed.

So don't listen to what the world has to say. You listen to what Jesus says. And here, he assigns to us our identity in this world, saying, *Ye are the salt of the earth*. Embrace that identity — and allow it to affect every area of your lives — and every aspect of our ministry as the church of Jesus Christ. Amen.