

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, February 27, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:13

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #9 PASS THE SALT

Was there ever a time in your life where you wanted to be someone else?

For whatever reason, you felt extraordinarily normal, and maybe you thought that it would be fun to be special, to be unique, to stand out in a crowd. Well, my normal friends, if normal is a word that describes you, you would have fit in well with Jesus’ first century disciples; for they were in every sense of the word, normal.

Some liked to argue the political issues of the day. Some were fisherman, an honorable, but noble way to make a living. Some were teenagers. At least one was a young husband. Some liked finance. One was a good manager of funds and managed the collective funds of the disciples. Another had made a career out of collecting the taxes of the people. These were normal men, who before they met Jesus were engaged in normal activity. They were like you and me.

There was something about Jesus that intrigued these men. Sure, they loved the miracles. Who wouldn’t love following someone who could raise the dead, heal the sick, and turn water into wine? But it went beyond the miracles. They loved His teaching. No one had ever taught with the authority and power that Jesus taught with. But, it wasn’t just His teaching that drew these men to Christ. It was also the fact that Jesus saw something in these men that they couldn’t see in themselves. He brought out the best in them. He believed in them. He poured life into them.

On the day that the disciples listened to the Sermon on the Mount, they heard Jesus’ heartbeat for them. They witnessed the passion with which He spoke. The Sermon on the Mount was a manifesto in Christian living, and the disciples were front and center for Christ’s wisdom. They were the infant church, being prepared for great things. The Sermon on the Mount was given early in Christ’s ministry. Over the course of the next two years, these disciples’ lives would be turned upside down by Christ. Early in His ministry, Jesus was preparing His church for what lie ahead.

Last week, we completed the first section of Jesus’ teaching on The Sermon on Mount. The Beatitudes literally mean “beautiful attitudes.” In paradox after paradox, Jesus taught the disciples what a true follower of Christ looks like. And, He began and ended the Beatitudes by telling His disciples who would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. The Sermon

on the Mount is instruction for citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now, Jesus begins to teach the disciples how that citizen must live his or her life in the world.

Look at Matthew 5:13, “13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”

Remember in the Beatitudes when I said that the Greek word describing those who are “blessed” in each of the Beatitudes was best translated “they and they alone?” Jesus does a similar thing here. In Matthew 5:13 he is addressing His disciples, His infant church. And, he says, “You and you alone are the salt of the earth.” Jesus teaches this relatively small band of followers that they are **the salt of the earth!** How absurd this must have felt to his disciples. After all, most of them were poor, uneducated men, who wouldn’t have thought that the world would ever be seen by them, let alone impacted by them. But, Jesus words rang true in their lifetime. In the course of a few years, these men literally turned their world upside down.

In our English language we sometimes call decent people, “salt of the earth” type people. You may have heard it said of someone, “That, John, he’s a salt of the earth type person.” It means that you can trust that person. It means that they are dependable, solid people. But, Jesus wasn’t using this phrase the way that we use it in our English language.

So, why would Jesus compare his followers to salt? Well, there were three primary uses of salt in the Ancient Near East world. One sermon I read this week in preparation for today, pointed out over forty different uses of salt. But, the three that would have stuck out to Jesus followers are as follows.

Number one, the primary use of salt during the day of Jesus was as a preservative. Refrigeration wasn’t possible, so the only way to preserve meat was to salt it down in a preserving mixture of salt and water. It was a common practice up until the time of the 20th Century. Phillip Keller describes the practice this way, describing what pioneer missionaries went through when it came to meat.

“This was absolutely imperative. Under the high temperatures and hot weather of the region, decay and decomposition of meat was astonishingly rapid. We had no winter weather or cool, frosty nights to chill the flesh.

Besides this, swarms of ubiquitous flies soon hovered over the butchered carcasses. The only way to prevent them from ruining the meat . . . was to soak the slabs of meat in a strong solution of salt.”¹

In a fallen world that is constantly decaying both physically and morally, Jesus wanted his followers to live as a preserving influence. Their lives would stand in contrast to the lives of

¹ W. Phillip Keller, *Salt for Society* (Waco: TX: Word, n.d.), p. 100.

those around them. They were to preserve truth, to uphold righteousness and to allow those watching to get a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about.

Listen to what Kent Hughes writes about this. “. . . the underlying implication of his saying, ‘You are the salt of the earth’ is that the world tends toward decomposition and is actually rotting away. Jesus was under no illusion about the world apart from himself. When the world is left to itself, it festers and putrefies, for the germs of evil are everywhere present and active. This is the consistent teaching of Scriptural teaching and Biblical history. The world began as a perfect creation, but when sin came, decay set in, and as a result the world became rotten, so that God eventually removed nearly the entire population of the world by the Flood. Given another chance, man fell into immediate debauchery, leading after a time to Sodom and Gomorrah. We live in a world that constantly tends toward decay. Some of the Christless structures of the world may look okay, but inside they are rotting away, and it is just a matter of time before they fall. In today’s disintegrating world only the most extreme Pollyanna would contradict this.

This suggests to us the function of the church: The church, as salt, functions as a retardant to decay and a preservative in a disintegrating world. Jesus was saying in effect, ‘Humanity without me is a dead body that is rotting and falling apart. And you, my followers, are the salt that must be rubbed into the flesh to halt the decomposition.’”²

Is the church today a preserving force in our land? Or, have we become so much like the rest of the world that it is impossible to distinguish Christ’s church from any other group that concerns itself with issues of social justice and reconciliation? There is something different about the church! We have the answer. We have the hope for the world. Where Christians are, crime should decrease, abuse should be dealt with, the poor should find hope, the oppressed should find a voice. But, most important, we ought to be proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ, the salvation that is offered in Him and Him alone. Are we a preserving force on our land?

The second way that salt was used was as a purifier. When someone received a wound, salt would be applied to it to purify the wound. It was thought that salt could help get rid of diseases, germs in food, and more. Jesus wanted his followers to live as people who had been purified by the touch of God within them.

This meant that their life would look different than the rest of the world. Have you ever been around someone and seen them change their language because of you? Maybe a joke isn’t told because when you are around them, you bring Christ. They see Christ in you. And, there is a certain level of discomfort that comes from that.

I love that I have friends who don’t yet know Christ who are comfortable enough around me to use the language that they use everywhere else. But, they also know what I stand

² Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), pp. 78-79.

for. And, I hope that I bring out the best in them. Because that is part of what being salt does I people's lives.

The third way that salt was used in the time of Jesus was as the way that we traditionally use it today. Salt was used as a seasoning. Salt brought out the flavor in bland food. Some of you have seen celebrity chef, Emeril Lagasse cook. When he adds salt, or another seasoning to a food he says, "Where going to kick it up a notch. Bam!" Well, here, you can see for yourself (Video – 1:01).

Christian, we have been called by God to kick it up a notch in our world. We are the salt of the earth. We ought to be writing the best books, the best music, producing the finest films. We ought to be making an impact in society. We ought to bring life to a world that has been made bland by sin. A little bit of salt goes a long way.

Several years ago, the film "Amazing Grace," was released. It told the story of William Wilberforce, the man whose advocacy and persistence helped bring about the end of slavery in England. Wilberforce was a Christian who served in Parliament, but he had all sorts of strikes against him. Kent Hughes writes, "Dwarfed by disease, he did not appear to be a person who would accomplish anything. However, (Boswell) another member of Parliament wrote of him, after listening to one of his speeches, 'I saw a shrimp mount the table; but as I listened, he grew and grew until the shrimp became a whale.' Tiny, elfish, misshapen, he was salt to British society, not only bringing preservation but enticement to Christ by his beautiful life. A little salt will make its presence felt."³

So, what does a lot of salt do? What would happen if Emeril put too much salt in his food? It would ruin the recipe. And, it would definitely make you thirsty. Listen, when it comes to God's recipe for the church, you can't have too much salt. Christians' lives ought to make people thirsty for God. When people see your life, do they want the Jesus that they see in you?

David Johnson gave an illustration in a sermon that he preached about salt. "Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride--common table salt--the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor. Love and truth can be like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is flighty, sometimes blind, willing to combine with various doctrines. On the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive, sometimes even poisonous. Spoken without love, it can turn people away from the gospel. When truth and love are combined in an individual or a church, however, then we have what Jesus called "the salt of the earth," and we're able to preserve and bring out the beauty of our faith."⁴

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80

⁴ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/salt.htm>

Jesus has called us to be salt. But, the instruction didn't end with, "You are the salt of the earth." Look at the second half of verse 13.

Jesus warned His followers to stand firm (vs. 13b)

"But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

Jesus knew how easy it would be for people who were once on fire for Christ to lose their passion and sometimes lose their testimony. How many men and women do you know who once lived for Christ, but are now dim reflections of who they once were? I remember a guy I had on my volunteer staff team who loved students and had a significant impact on their lives. He was passionate about seeing them come to understand what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Somewhere along the line he lost his focus. He began to make compromises in his personal life that soon had an impact on his ministry. His influence as a leader on the students had not waned, but his relationship with Christ had. Today he has fallen so far from where he once was, and instead of leading students towards Christ is leading people far from Christ. The only way to get his saltiness back is to come back to Christ, confess, and ask Christ to use him again.

Remember, these disciples were the infant church of Jesus Christ. In their lifetime they would see one of their own completely betray Christ, handing Him over to be crucified. They would see Christians who were once faithful in following Christ, fall away from their faith. They would be tested and go through trials. They would have crises of faith. But, they would stand firm. I think they reflected on these words often. In the difficult times they remembered that Jesus said of them, "You are the salt of the earth." It's not anyone else's job. It's yours. And, if you lose your saltiness, you become good for nothing.

Praise God that He can restore us, even when we have failed Him.

In Revelation 2, we can read several letters that Jesus gave John to deliver to churches located in modern day Turkey. To the church at Ephesus, Christ wrote, "4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

If you have lost your passion for Christ, repent. And, do the things you did at first. What were you doing when you first met Christ? Read His Word. Fellowship with other Christians. Make church a priority in your life. Share what God is teaching you with others. Tell others about your relationship with Jesus. Be salt! Let me tell you something revolutionary about salt. Salt was never meant to look pretty and pure in a saltshaker. Salt that sits in a saltshaker is good for nothing. Christians who keep quiet about their faith are good for nothing too! Get out there.

My niece is an eighth grader at Franklin Middle School in Wheaton, Illinois. On Thursday night of this week, something extraordinary happened at her school. It was talent show night. Like any junior high talent show there were skits and comedy routines. There were junior high bands, and junior high show choirs. But, there was also a most unusual quartet that sang a song that took guts to sing at a public school. I want to show you 30 seconds of their song. (Show Video – I Have Decided :34).

At the end of their song, the girls received an amazing ovation. My brother would write me the following e-mail: "I send this second link because the song the 4 girls chose to sing is "I Have Decided To Follow Jesus".

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xv2_Qw3yiVA Not only was it a great testimony to sing this song at the public school variety show, it is also interesting how much respect the girls received from their junior high peers and the audience. Finally, it's interesting to note that the 2nd girl from the right obviously comes from an Islamic home as she is seen wearing a burka while singing a song about deciding to follow Jesus."

I wrote my brother back, and told him how impressed I was that the girls would sing this song. He wrote back and told me that the girls sang the song because of a Christian who volunteers with Youth for Christ on the school campus. The impact of that volunteer helped these girls decide to sing a song about Christ. I'm not sure if all of them are believers or not, but their volunteer is making an impact.

So, how will you be salt this week?

I want to close by asking you to do a self-evaluation. Answer the following questions on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being low and 10 being high.

- 1) I am choosing to live my life as the salt of the world.
- 2) I need to regain my saltiness for Christ.

Now fill in the blank on these three questions.

- 1) I choose to live my life as a preserving influence on my generation in this way
_____.
- 2) I choose to live my life as a purifying influence on my generation in this way
_____.
- 3) I choose to live my life as a seasoning influence on my generation in this way
_____.

It's time. Let's get out of the saltshaker and into the world.