

Salt and Light to the Glory of God

Matthew 5:13-16

January 27, 2019

I recently watched a program on Netflix called *Salt Fat Acid Heat*. It's part cooking show, part documentary. In it, Chef Samin Nosrat demonstrates that good cooking requires those four key elements: salt, fat, acid, and heat. No matter where you go in the world, the best food is produced in kitchens that have mastered these four elements.

I was particularly interested in the episode that dealt with salt. I was shocked by how much salt Samin used in her cooking. She added salt to her dishes not in pinches or in teaspoons, but in handfuls. This is not true of the meals prepared at our house. Salt is used in small, measured amounts in our cooking, not liberally applied as Samin suggests. In fact my father-in-law has on numerous occasions chastised us for not having salt and pepper shakers readily available on our kitchen table.

But the more I watched this program, the more I wondered if something was missing from our cooking. Have we been missing out on the true flavors of the food that we prepare all because we have neglected adding more salt to our dishes?

On her website, Samin Nosrat says of this key ingredient,

“Salt enhances flavor, and it has a greater impact on flavor than any other ingredient. Learn to use it well, and your food will taste good. Though salt also affects texture and helps modify other flavors, nearly every decision you'll make about salt will involve amplifying and deepening flavor. Add it in the right amount, at the right time, in the right form, and your food will be delicious.”

Turn with me to Matthew chapter 5 as we resume our sermon series through this section of Matthew's Gospel that we call the Sermon on the Mount. If you don't happen to have a Bible with you this morning, let me encourage you to look on with someone sitting next to you, or to use one of our blue Bibles on the shelves in the back of the sanctuary. We'll be picking up with with verse 13 of Matthew chapter 5, which in the blue Bibles can be found on page 1505.

Just by way of reminder, in this section, chapters 5-7, Matthew records the teaching of Jesus as delivered to a great crowd of listeners. It was a mixed crowd made up of the curious as well as those committed to Jesus and to his coming kingdom. So while Jesus was addressing the entire gathered crowd, his teaching was directed at those who wanted to follow him and who were seeking to adopt the values and blessings of the kingdom that we looked at in the previous passage last Sunday.

As we unpack these verses together this morning, though we will have to consider how Jesus' words would have been understood by his first century audience, we will see that Jesus' teaching is still relevant to us living in the twenty-first century. I think that

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is why Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is still one of the most well-known and well-loved sections of Scripture. Though we have to interpret the sermon in its original context, every word of it continues to speak truth to us today.

There are two points that I want to bring out from this passage as we unpack it this morning. The first is this:

Christians are useless to a dark and decaying world unless through their good works they act as salt and light.

Speaking to his followers, Jesus said in verse 13, "You are the salt of the earth." Now that phrase has become in our culture a way of referring to good-hearted, simple people. I picture a politician speaking about his or her time spent meeting with the good folks of Bemidji, Minnesota. Maybe this candidate stopped in and visited the lunch crowd at Raphael's or shared coffee with a group of nurses at Sanford. They're hard working men and women who serve their community, who love their families, and who love their country. They're the salt of the earth. But that's not quite what Jesus had in mind.

When we think of what salt is used for today, we might get the wrong impression. Doctors warn us about our salt intake, so we buy foods that are low in sodium. Salt helps to keep our roadways free of snow and ice, but it also rusts our vehicles. One commentator notes that in Jesus' day there were at least 11 different uses for salt. So what does Jesus mean here when he refers to those who belong to the kingdom of heaven as "the salt of the earth"?

More than likely, Jesus was referring to the common use of salt with respect to food. Though there may have been a dozen possible applications, the two most common uses of salt were as a flavor enhancer and as a preservative. Today, we have less need for salt as a preservative thanks to refrigeration and other advances in food storage. But as I mentioned earlier, salt is still a key ingredient in our cooking.

I like how pastor and author Tim Keller describes the word picture that Jesus uses here in the first part of verse 13. Keller says that salt is both savory and preservative. Salt brings out the best, and it prevents the worst tendencies. That is the Christian's role in this world: to be salt, to season what is good, and to stave off decay.

But Jesus' point is more than making a comparison. Look at the rest of verse 13. Jesus makes the point that salt is only good if it retains its properties as salt. If however, salt loses its saltiness, that is, if it becomes contaminated and impure, then it becomes useless. And if salt becomes useless, then the only thing left to do is to throw it in the garbage. In fact, in Luke's version of this account, he records Jesus as saying,

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“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out” (Luke 14:34-35a, NIV).

It's not like coffee grounds or other food waste that can be added to the compost pile and repurposed. Salt that can no longer do its job as a savory ingredient or as a preserving compound is completely useless.

Similarly, Jesus goes on in verse 14 to address his hearers as “the light of the world.” We might find it strange to hear Jesus say this about others when elsewhere he has said the same thing about himself. John records an occasion when Jesus declared publicly,

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12, NIV).

Jesus indeed is the true light, who, by coming into this world, has shone light into the darkness. But as those who are in Christ, those who have Christ living in them, we don't just reflect the light of Christ, we emit it through the way we that live. The Apostle Paul says,

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8, NIV).

But once again, Jesus has more to say than just the metaphor. Light is useless if it does not shine.

We live in a time when electric light is in abundance. Just as Jesus says in verse 14 that a town built on a hill cannot be hidden, so too do we now live in an age when entire continents are completely visible from space because of the amount of light that human beings now produce.

[Show world map]

We can't imagine living without light. We crave light, especially in the dark of winter. We will have 2 minutes and 37 seconds more daylight in Bemidji today than we did yesterday. And tomorrow we will gain 2 minutes and 40 seconds more! There is hope for spring! And when a storm rolls through, and it knocks the power out, we scramble for flashlights and candles to add some light to our pitch black homes.

That's what it was like in the first century, obviously long before Thomas Edison changed the world with the invention of electric light. When the sun went down in Jesus' day, you either lit your oil lamp and set it on a stand, or you sat around in the

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dark until morning. It would be absurd to take the only source of light in the house and cover it up. Just as salt is useless if it is not salty, light is useless if it does not shine.

And so with these two word pictures, Jesus makes the point that **Christians are useless to a dark and decaying world unless through their good works they act as salt and light.** Jesus' message is both a call for Christians to beware of losing their distinctness as the salt of the earth as well as a exhortation to remain visible as the light of the world. We lose our saltiness as Christians not only we take on the impurities of this world, but also when people can no longer distinguish between those who claim to be Jesus' followers and those who don't. We no longer shine brightly in this world when either we fear the darkness of this world, or we find ourselves falling back in love with the darkness we once lived in before coming to faith in Christ.

But when salt and light are used for their intended purposes, when salt is salty and light shines forth brilliantly, their impact on the world is profound. The second point that needs to be brought out from this passage is this: **Our Heavenly Father is glorified when we season what is good and shine on what is true in this world.**

Look with me at how Jesus finishes this section in verse 16. The Lord exhorts his hearers on the mountainside,

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Jesus only speaks of light here, but I think the command can extend to both metaphors. Christians, let your light shine before others and let your saltiness come into contact with the world around you. When we live out this calling as the salt of the earth and as the light of the world, two things happen as a result.

The first result is that the world sees our good works. We might think that this is an obvious result: light shines and people see. But our human tendency, our sinful tendency is to turn a blind eye to what is clearly seen. The Apostle Paul described it this way in his letter to the Romans:

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. **For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.** Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal

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God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (Romans 1:18-23, NIV).

When sinful men and women suppress the truth and reject the goodness of God, they neither glorify Him as He deserves, nor do they thank Him for his goodness. But when we act as salt and light in this world, we season what is good, bringing out the best in what God has made, and we shine on what is true, exposing what sinful men and women have sought to suppress about God.

And when salt seasons and light shines, Jesus says that the second result is that our Father in Heaven is glorified. It’s the exact reversal of what Paul speaks of in Romans 1. Of course, it is not our good works that overcome the power of sin in a person’s life. Only the saving work of Jesus Christ can do this. But through our witness to Christ as salt and light, God breaks through the decay and darkness of this world and redeems rebellious sinners who were once enslaved to sin.

Good works or good deeds are more than just acts of kindness or charity toward others. Good works are good because they bring out the best in what God has made, and because they put on display the truth of who God is and of what He has done.

So how do we do this? Let me draw this sermon to a close this morning by asking you a simple question. **What do you do?** More than likely when someone asks you what you do, they are asking about what you do *for a living*. Where do you work? What is your job? What are you trained to do? That’s certainly a valid and important answer to the question, but it can’t be the only answer. You could also answer the question by sharing what you do for fun. What are your hobbies? What do you like to do in your free time? Perhaps also you have skills, abilities, and talents that are unrelated to your job or to your current role in life, but these things give shape to who you are. You of course are not defined by what you do, but we must recognize that God has uniquely wired each one of us in ways unlike the person sitting next to us.

So, what do you? I’ve included space on your sermon notes insert for you to start making a list. Go ahead and write down your job title, but also write down what else you do. What are you good at? What skills do you have? What do you love to do? Do you sing, dance, or play music? Are you an artist or a craftsman? Do you love to cook or bake? Are you good with numbers or abstract concepts? Are you outdoorsy? Are you a techie? Do you play sports? I think you get the idea. What does this have to do with salt and light?

Scripture says,

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“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17, NIV).

Whatever you do, season your works with salt so that in your work the world gets to taste and see the best of what God has made. In all that you do, let the light of Christ shine in you, so that in your work, others will get a glimpse at God’s goodness. You don’t have to be a pastor, a church elder, or a Global Partner to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus didn’t address his sermon just to the twelve men who would become his apostles. Jesus called upon all of his followers to be salt and light.

At the same time, as you take a good look at all that you do, you may discover that some of what you do has been tainted by worldliness, and that your salt is no longer salty. There may be some things in your life, some things that you do that need to be jettisoned because they do not bring glory to God. There may be areas of your life, things that you do that are effectively hiding the light of Christ in you. In order to be salt and light in this world we must be willing to lay these areas of our life, these works of decay and darkness before the Lord that he might do a renewing work in us.

Jesus used two very basic word pictures to illustrate a very important message. Christians are useless to a dark and decaying world unless through their good works they act as salt and light. But, our Heavenly Father is glorified when we season what is good and shine on what is true in this world. May you be salt and light in all that you do this week.