

Salt and Light
Exodus 20:1-17, Matthew 5:13-20
February 9, 2020

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Here at the beginning of the entire New Testament, Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" gives to the Church the ethical content of the Gospel. It is Jesus' own teaching on the Law of God, which he came not to abolish, but to fulfill an extraordinary way. Six centuries earlier, the prophet Jeremiah foresaw this: "The days are surely coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new Covenant with the house of Israel...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Jesus himself brings this New Covenant into the world not as a rejection of God's law but by offering himself as the means of its fulfillment. Listen to what he says... "You have heard it said, 'Do not murder' (that's the Sixth Commandment), but I SAY to you, if you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

Jesus is teaching us not just to outwardly obey the Commandments, something the Pharisees do — he's urging us toward a regeneration and renewal of our hearts, where we let go of anger, and envy, and lust, and hate in order to become new persons altogether. It is he who says this to us. Believing

in Jesus, it is the work of the Holy Spirit which accomplishes this transformation — even when it takes a lifetime. But even as we strive to embrace this new humanity, we ourselves become agents of change in the world, or, as Jesus put it, “Salt and Light.” “You are the salt of the earth,” he said. “You are the light of the world.”

At the beginning of the sermon, these two “You Are” statements are placed between the GRACE of the Beatitudes which precede them and Jesus’ exposition of the LAW which follows. This placement is supremely important: first comes GRACE—the grace of being loved, called and chosen by God through the person of His Son. Then comes our response to GRACE: our embrace of who he says we are and what he says we’ll do as we seek to love our neighbor as ourselves.

At the center of the sermon stands you and I: people who have come to hear Jesus’; to be with Him and to learn from him; whether by walking for miles across the hills of Galilee or by walking into this church. We are the people he is addressing in this sermon, and what he is saying is extraordinary: “YOU are the salt of the earth.” “YOU are the light of the world.”

Not “you should be, you ought to be, you must be.” “You ARE,” he says. What a high affirmation this is of the regard in which he holds us! “You are these things,” he is saying, because I AM — the light of the world.

So let’s talk about salt, since Jesus uses it as a metaphor for his disciples.

SALT... the Seven Seas are full of it — the cradle of life on earth. So are the waters of the womb. Our bodies need salt to survive. Salt preserves food from corruption. Without it, Magellan could never have sailed around the world. Salt is antibacterial...if you have a sore throat, what is the best thing to do? Gargle with salt water. Salt preserves, salt kills what is bad, salt enhances the taste of food.

Salt brings forth food’s inherent goodness and taste. O taste and see that our food is good! Without salt, food tastes insipid. Without the salt of the Gospel, life is insipid too.

Jesus is teaching us to be Salty People, and this is what he means:

Salty people focus on changing themselves before changing others. They are slow to judge or condemn.

Salty people are humble people who know their need for God. They are slow to anger and quick to forgive.

Salty people are joyful people. They rejoice in the Lord — not in themselves.

Salty people are sorrowful people who shed their tears for the suffering of others – and then work to alleviate it.

Salty people are lovers of truth, understanding that knowledge of the truth is what makes people free.

Salty people are meek: which is to say, they are self-disciplined, standing their ground when trouble comes, returning not evil for evil but turning the other cheek.

Salty people carry people's burdens — they carry them in their hearts.

Salty people walk the second mile, pray for their enemies and leave vengeance to their God.

Salty people are kind people. Their words are gently yet powerful. They speak the truth in love. As St. Paul put it in his letter to the Colossians, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.”

Salty people are generous people. They'll give you the shirt off their back and if you ask them for your coat, they'll give you their coat as well.

Salty people work hard for the things which make for peace: things like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming strangers, remembering those in prison, and visiting the sick. They know that as they do these things for “the least of these,” they do it for the King.

Salty people strive to do what’s right as God shows them the right. They honor God’s commandments and they keep them by God’s grace; they are content with their possessions.

Salty people don’t steal, murder, lie or cheat.

That is what it means to be salty.

Finally, Jesus warns us in his sermon that if salt loses its taste, it is no longer good for anything. I’m not sure how that works, but I do know this: salt’s no good for anything if it’s just sitting here in its box — any more than we are if we spend our whole lives just sitting here in this church. In order to be effective, salt has to make contact. As Dale Brunner wrote, “We should not miss Jesus’ main meaning: as salt exists for food, so disciples exist for the world. Salt does not exist for itself. Christians should not exist for themselves. Salt’s main mission is penetrating food. Christians’ main mission is penetrating the world.”

So, let me end this sermon by illustrating this point in a hopefully memorable way. *Clint brought out a pheasant that he shot two weeks ago while hunting.* Pheasants are tough birds, especially the rooster, and that's what this is. We have lovingly prepared to brine the bird...8 quarts of water and ½ cup of kosher salt. He put the meat in the salty water to brine it. The salt will penetrate them eat and grow tender and succulent, you will be able to cut it with a fork and will become delicious.

Then he brought out an oil lamp and lit it. This is a table lamp. It's meant to be seen — because it helps us see better. That's what your light is for, too. You are meant to help people see Christ better: not by how bright you are but by how you reveal and glorify God. That's what this lamp is for: to hold and reveal the light.

Salt...and light. That's who we are — and who we will be.

Salted by the Gospel. Walking in the Light. "O taste and see that the Lord is good," says the Psalmist. "Happy are those who take refuge in him." Happy indeed.

Happy, salty and bright!