

## The Salt Of The Earth

Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 10

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Matthew 5:13

The beatitudes conclude with a change of perspective. **Persecution** is the way worldly people are likely to react to Christians, but Christians must not let persecution or the threat of persecution keep them from continuing to live holy lives. The final beatitude about the blessedness of persecution for the sake of righteousness could be titled **How The World Affects Christians**. This next passage could be **How To Affect The World**. The words are familiar, but the unchanging principles are forever worth our exploration and the applications of those principles to your life and mine are limitless. The metaphors Jesus used in verses 13-16 both connote the concept of **influence**.

By describing us as *the salt of the earth*, Jesus describes an invisible way believers have a cooling impact on the affairs of men. Look at the **whole section**, then today, we dip our toes into the first of the two metaphors.

Matthew 5:13-16: *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

**You** is emphatic. Just like the emphatic pronouns in each of the beatitudes, the meaning is **you and you alone**. There is also an obvious contrast between the **disciples** Jesus was addressing and **the scribes and Pharisees** He was about to use as bad examples in the next paragraph. Jesus is saying that **all** believers collectively are **the salt of the earth**. This is emphasized even more by the fact that **you** is **plural**.

That's not to say that an individual Christian is without influence in the world. But it emphasizes that God's design is for a **collective** influence by means of **all** the Christians exerting influence all the time. It's like a Mosaic. Each stone in the Mosaic is important, but the impact comes by means of the thousands of individual parts each doing their parts in harmony with the others.

**Are** is also significant, in that it is present tense—which means that this is describing a continuous state. The design of God is for all of us to exert influence **all the time**. It isn't a short-term project. It's a **lifestyle**.

**Salt of the earth** is the first metaphor. No need for an outline today. We will simply walk through verse 13.

While salt was used as a seasoning in some cases in Biblical times, that was a relatively minor use of it. But one use was **very** important to them every day. Salt was highly valued because of its ability to **preserve**. Salt was used every day, especially in the **preservation of meat**. Imagine how valuable salt would be to you if you didn't have refrigeration for storing your meat.

For salt to do its intended work it had to be **sprinkled over**, or better still **rubbed into** the meat. Its function was not readily visible. It was used primarily to **combat deterioration**. The spiritual significance isn't hard to see. Just being Christians in the world—acting out our faith and speaking the truth—combats moral and spiritual decay. Sometimes people around don't like it, but isn't it true that when a known believer is in a crowd, things are different?

The New Testament tells us that a major factor delaying the rise of the ultimate Antichrist is **the restrainer**.

*2 Thessalonians 2:3–7: Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.*

**He who now restrains** is best understood as the Holy Spirit, present on earth primarily in the lives of believers. The removal of the restrainer is twofold: (1) It is the taking of believers to be with the Lord, in the rapture of the church; (2) It is the beginning of the judgment of God and the outpouring of His wrath during the tribulation, or the 70th "Week" of Daniel.

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It's significant that salt acts **secretly**. It combats decay and provides flavor, but no one can actually see it perform its task, even though its influence is very real and significant. This is our **covert** (or secret) identity. Our influence as salt of the earth is **negative** in that it **opposes** something—the **wickedness** of the world.

The rest of this verse is interesting. **But if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again?** This is one of those sayings in the Bible that appears to be wrong at first glance, because salt (Sodium Chloride) is a very stable chemical compound that doesn't lose its saltiness. But this is also a verse which serves as a great example of one of the principles of hermeneutics—the principle of interpreting in **historical context**.

The words of the Scriptures must be understood as they were understood by the **original hearers or readers**. In this case, there is something about the word **salt** which people of Israel in the first century would have universally understood, even though we wouldn't think of it. Most of their salt was mined from the Dead Sea and the area around it. It was contaminated with gypsum and other impurities. The presence of the impurities caused the salt used in that society to react with moisture in the air and other substances in the environment so that it eventually lost its pleasant taste and no longer worked as a preservative.

When that happened, the remnants of contaminated and no-longer-useful salt would be **thrown out** into the street **and trampled under foot by men**. If disposed of any other place, it would ruin the soil because of the heavy concentration of minerals and other salts. Therefore it actually served a useful purpose when **thrown out**, because it kept things from growing in the streets.

The question **how will it be made salty again?** is rhetorical. The obvious answer is that you **can't** salt spoiled salt to make it salty again. Now consider the **spiritual implications** of what Jesus is saying. . .

The hearers of this great sermon were accustomed to seeing **Pharisees and scribes** who were regarded as the greatest examples of spirituality, and who loved to show off their spiritual status. But the brand of religion they offered was a legalistic set of rules and regulations. Not only was it a **complete failure** at changing people's lives because it dealt with external performance rather than with the heart, it was even worse because it was **spiritual poison**. Jesus was thinking of the **Scribes and Pharisees**, because in His next paragraph He mentions them:

*Matthew 5:20: For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

So on the one hand, Jesus was teaching that **man-made religion** (even if it contains elements of truth) is **worthless**, just as contaminated salt (even though it still contains sodium chloride) is worthless. Jesus is saying between the lines that people would be better off to throw out every aspect of Pharisical religion and self-righteousness than to hang on to it.

But Jesus was also talking to the people listening to Him that day—and to us, by extension—about **the need to remain pure** in our own walk with God. Let's review the context. A true believer is one whose life is being changed from the inside out, and his behavior is becoming more and more like the beatitudes.

A professing believer who responds to the heat of persecution by **caving in** is **like the salt** which is no longer useful. If you respond to the world around you by accommodating yourself to the secular attitudes and watering down your influence for righteousness, you lose your credibility as God's representative.

Just as salt becomes useless because of foreign substances mixed with it, worldliness in a Christian makes a Christian useless to God in this world. That's why it is so important to God for His children to walk consistently in this world. Jesus has no other plans for evangelizing the world.

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Here's an excerpt to ponder and consider how to apply. It's from Joseph Aldrich in his book *Lifestyle Evangelism*, originally published in 1981 (pp. 19-20).

*I think it is fair to say that the majority of Christians have lost their ability to relate significantly to non-Christians. By no stretch of the imagination can the Christian community be called the "salt of the earth."*

*For salt to be effective, it must get out of its container and into the world of hurting, dying, suffering, sinning people. There is no impact without contact, and yet, after knowing the Lord two years, the average Christian has no significant relationships with non-Christians. Often conversion opens up a whole new web of relationships and the new Christian inadvertently drifts away from his non-Christian associates. In some cases the nature of his past associations makes separation a necessity if growth is to take place. All too often, however, he withdraws from significant contact because [he] misunderstands the biblical doctrine of separation.*

*Frequently the unsaved are viewed as enemies rather than victims of the Enemy. Spirituality is viewed as separation from the unsaved. The new Christian is told he has "nothing in common" with his unsaved associates. Quite frankly, I have a lot in common with them: a mortgage, car payments, kids who misbehave, a lawn to mow, a car to wash, a less-than-perfect marriage, a few too many pounds around my waist, and an interest in sports, hobbies, and other activities they enjoy. It is well to remember that Jesus was called a "friend of sinners." A **friend** of sinners.*