

## Salt and Light

Mark 5:13-16

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We have finished with the Beatitudes – remember, they are but the preface, the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. So, we continue this morning, into the body of the sermon, looking at the simple, and well-known, instruction of Jesus on being salt and light.

Now, by way of introduction, let me point out two things that often happen with these verses. The first is they are usually cited as floating free from their context. The second, which follows from it, is that they are then taken as a general mandate for social action, or some vision of transforming culture. This happens so often, that when we hear salt & light – salt & light – we just tend to think social and political action. Twitch.

Now, and I want to be clear here, I don't think that is WHOLLY (completely) wrong. There is a good instinct at work in such a view – and surely the text is about our engagement with the world. But let me give you three caveats to protect against distortion here. The first is the condition, the second is the context, and the third, I'll call the character. Condition, context, character.

### Condition

First, the condition (by way of introduction). And here I mean the condition of the disciples and the condition of the world. Now, we've all heard this many times: We are CALLED to be salt and light. Yet, that it is not where our text begins. It begins rather with two astonishing indicatives, that is, two statements of what is ALREADY a reality. You ARE the salt of the earth. And you ARE the light of the world. Notice: We are called (not called to be) called (Designated) salt and light.

And in fact, there is only one explicit charge or imperative in the whole passage, and even that (as we shall see) is put in a rather passive fashion. The weight of the text is lies in affirming what IS objectively the case. You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world. Pliny, the Roman Historian, said there is nothing more useful than salt and sunshine. I think we all know the value and function of light (Vit. D), even if we have no idea how it actually works.

And salt, though it was a condiment used for flavoring, was primarily, before the dawn of refrigeration, a preservative in the ancient world. It was rubbed into

meats to keep them from decaying. This is what we are – our condition - before we do anything. Now, let's think about what Jesus' words say about the condition of the world. They mean the world is decaying, it's putrefying. It's corrupt and dying. At the same time, they mean the world is smothered in darkness. It talks about its enlightenment all the time, but it stumbles around blind, ignorant, and sightless.

Now, the corruption and the darkness of the world can be overwhelming. To take the full measure of it, to attempt to come to terms with it, can induce a kind of numb helplessness. The light itself came into the world, John tells us, but the world loved darkness. What can we, in our little outposts, our small lives, possibly do to arrest the forces which seem to engulf what the text calls the earth and the world?

Well, Jesus, who alone knows and felt the full force of the unsalted darkness, does not think his disciples should despair of their influence. Quite the contrary. He actually, in the teeth of all empirical evidence, calls a small band of Palestinian peasants, the salt of the EARTH, the light of the WORLD. It's an astonishing affirmation. It's believable only because the One who makes it, is the One who has overcome the world. Already you, Christ's little flock, ARE the earth's salt and the world's light. You are not called to manufacture or conjure salt and light. Or to have a strategy to be salt and light. You ARE these things in Christ, *before* all else is said in this text. (condition)

## **Context**

The second caveat is the context. We must not tear the verses out of their context. And the context is the whole teaching of the Sermon on the Mount – and more specifically, the immediate context, the verses just prior to the call to be salt and light, are these:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Persecution, insults, slander, and gladness because of a heavenly reward – this is the context that Jesus expects to abide, as you are salt and light. We are not naïve – our Lord has told us what to expect – and it is not despite, but because of, persecution, that we are to be rubbed into the world. This chastening must do its work on the free-floating, and often grandiose, calls to be salt and light.

## **Character**

Here's the third caveat – the character. Again, this is something that often drops completely out of sight when people start to talk about being salt and light – and it is this:

The virtues which we are to rub (if you will) into the world as salt, and to illumine with as light – are not the virtues of the world's activist class – they are the virtues of the beatitudes. Poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, thirsting for justice, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, joy in being slandered and persecuted – these beatitudes can never be left behind. It is just these qualities, this character of contrite brokenness, which makes us salt and light. With that, let's talk about what it means TO BE salt and light.

### **I. Salt**

First, salt. As mentioned, it's a preservative and a flavoring agent. This means the church IS arresting, and IS called to, arrest and hinder the decay in society. It is to season the tastelessness, the flavor deficit of the world. And to do this we cannot be separatists, isolated from the rhythms of the world. Salt, if it is to work, has to be rubbed into the meat of the world.

Saltiness is a humble calling. It's not a call to transform everything, to reverse the process of decay. Salt doesn't restore decaying meat, it just slows further decay. It doesn't seek Filet Mignon from the chop meat of the world. It just seeks less maggots.

It's similar to the function of the state. It doesn't seek utopia, it seeks to do some good, it's content to hinder the progress of evil. (Salt is ameliorative, not transformative) It's sober and realistic. It knows what it's up against. Salt is like a moral disinfectant or deodorant, it knows it will shortly need to be used again, and again.

But this function, lowly as it is, should not be belittled, or looked down upon. Because one cannot do all the good that needs to be done, does not mean nothing is worth doing. And it doesn't mean we sit around continually reproaching the unbelieving world and cursing the darkness. Who curses decaying meat? (Nor can we indulge in Nostalgia: Well, in the 1950's this meat was so much better). The question we are to ask is not: why is the world corrupt? That's a given. Our question is: But where is the salt?

The saltiness of the church is, here, the world-wide POWER for restraining the world's entropy and decay. And as that salt, you are to BE salty. As Jesus says in Mark 9: Have SALT in yourselves. And salt, let us remember, stings, it bites.

There is a sharp and biting quality to true Christianity. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke reminds us:

Jesus did not say you are the honey pot of the world. The unadulterated message of the judgment and grace of God has always been a biting thing.

The Word is a sword, not a nerf ball. Salt, not sugar, and sweetness and light. And this biting salt DOES flavor. It seasons and spices life up. As Paul says in Col. 4: let your speech always be gracious, SEASONED with SALT, that you may know how to answer each person. Your person and your speech are to season the world, to flavor it, with what Leviticus 2 calls the salt of the covenant.

Here salt is equivalent to something like wisdom, a timely ability to stimulate and graciously provoke. Call it stinging tactfully – w/ love and gentleness. As salt, and as called to by salty, we must be aware that, as verse 13 continues, that salt CAN lose its saltiness. Retention of saltiness is not automatic. It must be pursued. The verb translated “loses its saltiness,” means “to be made foolish.” Christians, who ARE salt, make fools of themselves, when they become defiled and lose their given saltiness.

And when the text asks: how can it be made salty again? The implied answer is, dreadfully, it cannot. So, we must be rubbed into the world AND keep ourselves – as James says -- unstained by the world. For once saltiness is lost, it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. The paradoxical phenomenon here is this – and we’ve seen this played out in corrupted, salt-less churches throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> c.:

You seek to win the world’s approval, to tone down your distinctiveness, you compromise your bite and sting, seeking the world’s acceptance.

And the world simply ignores you. It knows you are good for nothing. What good is a church which is always breathlessly panting to keep up with editorial boards of the elite newspapers (latest wokeness dictate)? What good is a church, or a Christian, who does nothing but affirm the latest cultural decadence? (Agree: that it is the machinery of the power politics of this age which is the real prize) You get thrown out and trampled underfoot, rejected by the very persons you sought to compromise with. You end up with all the empty churches of the mainline denominations.

## **II. Light**

Let’s turn to light. At the Feast of Tabernacles, according to Jewish tradition, four 75-foot candelabra, stood within the court of the women. Each candelabrum had four branches, and at the top of every branch was a huge bowl. Four young men bearing big pitchers of oil, would climb ladders to fill the golden bowls, and set

them alight. Picture sixteen large, fierce blazes leaping toward the sky, from those enormous golden lamps. The light was to remind the people of how God's glory had once filled his Temple. And it looked forward to a time when that glory would return.

And it was into this scene that Jesus entered in John 8. Jesus was teaching in the court soon after the Temple illumination ceremony. And standing right next to those magnificent candelabra, He declared to all who were gathered there, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me, will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus is, as the creed says, God of God, Light of Light. And this light has come into the darkness, and the darkness did not overpower it.

Our status as light, then, is derivative. Jesus is the Light of the World. We shine with his light. As Paul puts it: you were darkness, but now you ARE light IN THE LORD. He is the sun; we are the lamps. He is the bright Morning Star, and we are to shine as stars or lights in the world.

This is our status, we ARE light, and it is our calling, we are TO SHINE as light, and it is our destiny, the righteous, Daniel tells us, will shine as lights in the resurrection. This means we must walk in his light, bathe in the light of his word, confess our sins in the light of his mercy, we must not only retain our status as light, and we must seek to move from glory to glory (to glow in dark – exposed to light – meditation and gazing).

To rephrase Jesus here: You are the GLORY of the world. And here we must say that light is a complement to salt. And it is the more positive and optimistic of the pair. Salt preserves, light illumines and dispels. Light disperses the darkness. Light means you may not *merely* preserve, good as that is, you just *might* transform, you might scatter the powers arrayed against you. You might reverse the entropy for a while.

We shine as stars in a black firmament – a perverse generation, Paul says. And we pierce, and we attenuate the blackness which would otherwise be absolute. That the church *is* this light is seen as v.14 continues: A town, that is, a city built on a hill cannot be hidden. The city here is the city of God, the church, the fulfillment of the OT promises, which speak of God's city blazing forth and lighting up the dark nations. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 42 is light to the nations, and the city he founds, reflects that glory out to ends of the earth. It is unnatural, against the very design of this city of light, to be hidden. It would be like lighting a lamp and putting it under a bowl.

No one does that. Rather they put the lamp on its stand, so it can provide light to the whole house. We can smother, hide, suppress and suffocate our light. Repentance, continual repentance, is window cleaning for your soul. In the same way as one puts a lamp on its stand, we are to, and here is the only explicit, and passive, command in the text: LET your light shine before others. You are light. It

is your nature to shine. Sin is the grotesque and unnatural suppression of who you are in Christ. To hide our light is a denial of the call to follow Jesus, the light of the world.

Like salt, which must be rubbed into the world, light does not flee the darkness, it confronts it, it illumines it, it makes things visible. It allows others to see your good deeds (word for good: beautiful deeds), your concrete, practical, deeds of compassion and mercy, the deeds which are in keeping with the fruits of repentance. Not our pronouncements. But the deeds done from the ethos of the beatitudes. This is the mode of shining. And not out of the desire for human approval, which Jesus condemns later in the Sermon on the Mount – not to be seen by men – But so that the darkened world, might glorify, not us, not the lamp, but the original, the God who IS light, our Father in heaven.

Salt and light. Complementary features of who you ARE in Christ. One preserves, one illumines. Both are gifts, present realities, yet they have one other thing in common, one thing rooted in their nature: they give, and they expend themselves. Illumined by the Word and Sacraments, by the face of Christ, let us regain our bite. Let us restore our luster. Let us give and expend ourselves. For we ARE the salt of the EARTH, and we ARE the light of the WORLD. Go, be who you are. Amen.

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