

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-20 (February 9, 2020)

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¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Historical Context

In biblical times, salt was overwhelmingly viewed as a positive resource. Not only does salt add flavor to food, it also preserves certain foods such as meat or fish from spoiling (essential before the invention of refrigeration), helps to purify or cleanse meats through the removal of blood (forbidden to be consumed according to the Torah), and is useful in healing or cleansing certain ailments. All of these uses were commonly known in first century Palestine. Indeed, such uses were likely the cause for the symbolic use of salt in offerings and sacrifice, as well as in sealing God’s covenant with Israel. Salt was a necessary element of life. And, by extension, salt was a symbolic bond of the necessary relationship between God and Israel.

Theme: Salt and Light

The Sermon on the Mount continues - and Jesus offers two simple - but very powerful - images of the role of His disciples in the world - to be salt and light. Although salt does not seem very glamorous, anyone who has had to go on a low-salt diet knows the difference it makes to a meal! The job of salt is not really to be tasted itself - but to bring out the other flavors in the meal.

In a similar way with light - the job of light is not to draw attention to itself - it is there to allow people to see things that would otherwise be hidden in the darkness. So it is with Jesus’ disciples. Like salt, we are not to overwhelm the world - but to bring out its goodness - or preserve the goodness that we find in it. Like light, we should allow the Light of God to shine through us - not so that we dazzle people with our radiance - but so that they can see the light of truth.

Another point worth noting is that Jesus was speaking about what He saw as real in the here-and-now - not something that would come about when everyone was perfect. Jesus looks at the people before Him - then and now - and says “You *are* the salt of the earth...” “You are *light* for the world...” Our role as salt and light for the world is something we are called to do now - however imperfectly. The little flavor we bring - the small light we can offer - all make a difference to the world.