

"Salt"

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Date: 01 September 2024

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[0:00] Good morning. There we go. User error. Sorry about that. It's good to see you all here this morning as we gather together on the Lord's Day to worship Him. It's a little hot and muggy.

I do want to remind you, if you are feeling overwhelmed, there is a meeting room downstairs that has the service live streamed and has air conditioning. So if you need that, don't feel any shame in getting up and moving down there.

The delay is probably enough that if you move quickly, you won't miss anything at all. So salt has many uses. I put it on my broccoli and my chicken to bring out its flavor or on my caramel chocolate ice cream sundae to make it salted caramel chocolate, which is really yummy, right?

Some of us might use salt to throw over our shoulders for good luck. Many of us eat food that is salted for preservation.

In the winter, if it snows, we throw it on our paths to melt ice, or at least we used to before they created those chemical pellets that work better.

[1:18] But it's one of the uses. It can be used to kill weeds in your garden or on your path when they're growing up between the bricks. Salt has many uses.

In the ancient world, salt was so precious that it was actually used as a form of currency. And so the phrase that we have in English today, he's not worth his salt, actually comes from the fact that he's not worth what we're paying him.

Because salt was used to pay workers at times. Why am I talking about salt? Well, because Jesus talked about salt.

In our passage this morning, if you've been here for the summer, you know we've been preaching through the Matthew chapter 5. And if you want to turn there now, it's page 759 in your pew Bible.

We've been going slowly through the first 12 verses, verse by verse. The Beatitudes, as we explored what it meant to live in the kingdom of God, and what it would look like in our personal character.

[2:26] And as we transition into the fall, we're going to keep going. We're going to do the rest of the Sermon on the Mount through the end of chapter 7. Again, it will probably extend beyond Christmas.

We're not going to take it one verse at a time exactly, although today we are. But typically, we're going to let Jesus' words break up our passage from one topic to the next.

So the passages will get a little bit longer as we go. And again, if you're new here and you have, what is God doing or what is Jesus doing in this sermon?

Well, if you go back to chapter 4, Matthew says this, and he, that is Jesus, went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

So it said, Matthew says, Jesus is going around preaching and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. And what we then have is a teaching section that helps fill in what is it that he was teaching.

- [3 : 33] He was teaching about the nature of God's kingdom. That is, what does it look like when God rules and reigns, whether it's in a person's heart or in a society or a community, what does it look like for God's kingdom to come?

And this is really good news that he's preaching. It's a gospel that is good news of the question. The question I want us to be asking as we go through this passage all fall is, how is it that God calls us to live distinctively as Christians in God's kingdom?

What are the ways that he wants us to understand and live distinct from the kingdoms of this world and the worldviews of this world?

How is it that he calls us to be set apart, distinct in the way that we live? And so this brings us to chapter 5, verse 13, which will be our passage today on salt.

But I'm just going to read the context. So I'm going to start in verse 2 of chapter 5 for our reading. So let me read through this, and then after I pray, we'll take a look particularly at verse 13.

- [4 : 54] So let's read God's word. As he opened his mouth and taught them, and he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. When others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

- [6 : 06] You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

So this is God's Word. Let's pray for His help as we look at it today. Lord, help us this morning. Lord, I pray for Your help, that You would help me to speak as I ought with clarity, and Lord, with truth.

Spirit, help me this morning, and help us as a congregation to sit under Your Word, to receive this Word, to allow Your Spirit to work it into our hearts and into our lives.

Lord, use this Word this morning so that we might love You more, so that we might obey You more, so that we might know You more.

- [7 : 13] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So in some ways, verse 13 is very straightforward. It's a very simple image.

It's a very straightforward idea. But I think there's a lot of richness to it. So we're going to try to tease out some of the implications and meanings of it this morning. We're going to ask three questions of the text.

The first is, what does it mean that we are the salt of the earth? The second one is, why does Jesus warn us about losing our distinctive saltiness? And the third question is, how does the gospel shape and fuel that distinctive saltiness?

So, what does it mean? Why does He warn us? And how does the gospel interact with this idea of distinctive saltiness? So, that's our question.

The first one then, what does it mean that we are the salt of the earth? Jesus, in this context, has gathered His disciples, and His crowd is listening, and He looks at them and He says, you are the salt of the earth.

[8 : 21] Now, this is a metaphor, right? But what does it point to? Now, biblically, if we teased out salt in the way it's used in other places, it's used sometimes for, as an image of destruction or judgment.

Sometimes it's used, particularly in the Old Testament temple, as purification, as it was a part of offering in the temple. Certainly, preservation is one of the ways that we see it used as well.

But the fourth one is the one that I actually think is most in view in this passage today, and that is flavor. Now, flavor feels kind of weak, but I think it's actually the idea, and one of the reasons I think that is because of the second half of the verse, right?

You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, its other versions, loses its saltiness, lost its flavor in the New King James, has become tasteless in the New American Standard.

So, this idea is pretty, and it's a really interesting word. Sorry, word nerdery for a little bit. When you look at this in its original, what it actually says is, it has become foolish.

[9 : 43] If your salt has become foolish, which clearly was an idiom in the day, but I think the idea is, and one of the ideas is that rabbis often used salt as an image for wisdom, and so Jesus is making a really cool play on words here.

But what he's saying is that if we lose our essential nature, becoming foolish is somehow being separate from who we were, who we are meant to be biblically, right?

So, this idea of flavor, we are meant to have the flavor of God and His kingdom in our lives. This is what it means that we are meant to be the salt of the earth, that you and I bring as followers of Jesus, a distinctive taste of God's kingdom to the world that we live in.

And it's a flavor, it's an aroma, it's a taste of something better, of a kingdom that, as C.S. Lewis says, a kingdom we've never been to, a music that we've never quite heard, a story that we're meant to bring this flavor to the world that is enticing, that is inviting, that at times may be challenging or confronting to the world, but we're meant to bring the flavor of the kingdom of God.

But you may ask, okay, that sounds nice. Well, what does that mean? Well, starting with, it means we live out the Beatitudes.

[11 : 19] In the context, this comes right after Jesus has just said, this is what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God, right? Poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, persecuted for righteousness' sake.

If we want to think through, what does it mean to be the salt of the earth? Let's start here. We look at this and we think, when we live in the kingdom of God, when God rules and reigns in our hearts, these things are characteristic, or should be characteristic, of us.

When we live this way, it allows us to be the salt we are meant to be. And we'll see that this doesn't just look backwards in the Sermon on the Mount to say saltiness looks like this.

Looking ahead to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, I'm not going to preach the whole thing today, but what is it? It means that we have a morality that is heart-centered and not merely skin deep. It means we have a heart of costly service and humility before others.

It means we have a single-minded devotion to God who is the King of our kingdom. And it means we have a radical devotion to Jesus and following Him in sacrificial love for those around us.

[12:45] We'll see all of those themes played out in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. So Jesus gives us these character qualities. And listen, if you're not sure what that looked like, put Trinity on your podcast list and listen to the sermons from earlier this summer.

And then keep coming back. And throughout the rest of the fall, we'll get a picture fuller and fuller of what it means to have this salt. I do want to make sure I say this too.

Like when we talk about having a flavor or aroma, we always think of this as a positive thing typically. Oh, I love the taste of fresh-cooked bread when we make bread at home.

You know, I love that aroma. But we need to recognize that the aroma isn't always pleasant to everyone, right? Verses 10 through 12, right before this, have told us that when we pursue righteousness, that is right living in the kingdom of God, at times we will get persecution and rejection for it.

It will provoke reviling and hatred from those who hate God and who despise His kingdom. All right, so that's still conceptual.

[14:03] You're still saying, okay, Matt, what does this look like? I could, we could be here all day with me trying to paint a portrait. But let me give you a few ideas.

When I was in high school, before I was a Christian, there were a couple of my friends in high school who were Christians. And I knew that they went to some meeting somewhere on Wednesday nights and it was exciting and I didn't want to go.

But they went. But what I saw in my relationships is that they were faithful and they were trustworthy and they were humble and they were joyful and they were grounded in a way that I wasn't.

And they talked about Jesus being the source of all their lives. And they weren't perfect and they made mistakes and all sorts of things. But there was a picture there.

I experienced in my interactions with them something. And I thought, whatever it is, I can taste something that I want more of. It was part of how God brought me to Christ.

[15:11] And I think they were living out the verse that we looked at earlier in Colossians where they were ready to pray for an open door to share about their faith and then that they were going to live their lives with their speech seasoned with salt that is seasoned with the flavor of the gospel.

Even if it's not the whole gospel told all at once, they could plant seeds and give invitations for people to talk more about what's most meaningful and what do we do when we fail and where is there forgiveness and what does it mean to love and all these things lead us to the gospel.

And that's what happened to me. So that's one kind of saltiness that I've experienced in the world. There are also people who are doing salty things in their workplace.

Some of you remember Lydia Dugdale who was a member here for a while who's now a professor down at Columbia. She's written a book called The Lost Art of Dying.

And it's a beautiful book that's engaging with the question of how do we as a culture think about dying from a Christian perspective.

[16:23] And some of you are academics in here. Some of you are scholars. Some of you are going to go on and have opportunities to write books and to teach others.

How can you bring your Christian worldview and integrate it into your subjects so that you can bring a saltiness to your job and to your thinking and to your worldview?

Sometimes saltiness simply means faithfulness to obey God in unusual, in circumstances where everyone else is doing something different.

I remember working in campus ministry and I disciplined a guy who was on the lacrosse team. And if you don't know anything about lacrosse teams, they're not always the most savory guys on campus.

Or maybe they're super savory in all the ways you don't want them to be. They can be a bit rough and tumble and a bit of the party crowd. And he had a girlfriend who really wanted to sleep with him.

[17:34] And he kept saying, no, I don't feel like that's right. That's not what God wants me to do. And he kept saying no. And the grief that he got from his teammates on this, like they would make bets every week, like maybe this is the weekend, he's going to not do it.

And he didn't do it by condemning them or telling them they're all terrible people. He didn't do it by separating himself out and saying, if you're going to be like that, I'm not going to be part of this team.

But he just humbly, steadfastly lived out a calling to follow Jesus in that particular way. There are lots of other ways this might look.

Think about the value of hospitality. We're actually going to do a Sunday school on it later this fall. Hospitality is a lost art in our culture today. People are moving fast and they think of their home as a private space and you don't invite people in and it's weird to go to each other's houses.

But Christian hospitality is such a beautiful way of connecting and loving people. How do we be salty by inviting our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, our classmates into our homes, into our worlds?

[18:55] William Wilberforce is another example who spent his whole lifetime in politics. 53 years in total.

No, actually, 45 years in politics. 27 of them to get to the point where his bill to abolish slavery actually passed.

Let me rephrase that. To abolish the slave trade in England passed. And then another 26 years, if my math is right, before Britain actually outlawed slavery in the country.

he spent his whole life being salt in trying to change the societal values through the laws of the land, bringing the hope and the light of the kingdom to the British Empire.

And again, many of us live mundane lives and we may not change the world. Some of you might. Some of you might go on to have those opportunities. Will you maintain your saltiness?

[20:08] So I hope that's a little bit of a picture. And our saltiness can be in all sorts of things. How we parent and how we care for our aging parents. How we engage in political discourse with one another.

How we engage with the PTA in our school district. How we deal with gossip in our workplace. How we love our elderly neighbors and single parents among us.

And so on and so on. I could continue to lay out different contexts and different ways in which we need to think about how are we being distinctively Christian, which means we need to study God's Word, think about how it applies to all of these contexts, and then living faithfully in that.

Being a foretaste of the kingdom of God. And people will see it and they'll know it. John has a great bunch of friends that he knows at the gym.

And they have great conversations with him because they taste the kingdom of God in him, I believe. And they see something in the way that he loves them and listens to them and engages with their questions that they're hungry for and they want more.

[21 : 24] And they don't even necessarily know they want God. They might, but they're there. Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth.

This is definitional. If you are in God's kingdom, you are the salt of the earth. It is also an invitation and a calling. Be the salt of the earth in the world.

Jesus then goes on and he warns us. He warns us about losing this. Right? And we've talked about this idea that you are the salt of the earth, but if the salt become, this might be a more literal translation, but if the salt might become foolish, in what way can it be salty?

That is, if it loses its fundamental essence, then it's no longer salt and it can't do what salt does. Now, some of you are chemistry majors here and you're thinking, okay, so NaCl is a stable compound and it doesn't degrade.

Salt doesn't actually become unsalty. It can't happen. So, first of all, in the first century, a lot of salt that was used wasn't actually mined salt that was that stable, but it was often evaporated salt, say, from the reeds on the sides of the Dead Sea and the evaporated salt would be mixed with other minerals and things and so it could degrade over time.

[22 : 59] So, this is one thought that some people have, but others just have, it might just be worth saying, don't push the imagery too far. Jesus isn't talking about chemistry.

He's using an idiom of a particular substance that everybody knows, but he says, if salt is no longer salty, then what good is it? It's not good.

It's not worth anything. If you put non-salty salt on your food, your food still tastes like whatever it did before you put the salt on. If you try to use it to preserve your food, it's not going to work.

When salt loses its distinctive character, it becomes useless. And he says, all you can do is throw it on the path and trample it under your feet because that's really, that's all it could do.

Maybe try to keep the dust down a little bit, like gravel. But it's not worth anything. Jesus says, in reality, this is a danger.

[23 : 59] You might lose this. You could lose this. How might that happen? Well, I want to point out two ways in which I think we lose our saltiness, our distinctiveness in the world.

The first one is by becoming just like the world. This is a proverbial frog in the kettle, right? You put a frog in a cold kettle and you turn up the heat and the frog will stay in the kettle happily and it will boil to death, right?

Because it doesn't know that it's becoming affected by the environment around it. So, we live in the world and we often become just like it. There are some terrible examples of this from the past.

The church at times has supported slavery and using, owning people. The church has at times done things like ban interracial marriage.

These were morals of the day, commonly assumed among the culture and the church swallowed it wholesale, much to our shame.

[25 : 12] There are other ways in which we can lose our saltiness. Theologically, we lose our saltiness. If you read the history of the 1800s and 19th century, you look at theology, the importing of enlightenment principles into the work of theology led some or many to believe that a scientific process and a scientific worldview and even a naturalistic scientific worldview was the right and proper and dominant way to think about things.

And so, they went back to the Bible and they said, well, God can't do miracles because that's not the way the world works. that's a very broad brush. John could give you all the details.

But it was one of the outworkings was that this naturalistic worldview then grew to such a point where churches were just saying, well, God can't do miracles because that's not the way the world works.

Much to our shame and to our laws. Here's the third example. Enculturation and missions. Right? God has called us to take the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth and to all peoples everywhere.

But He didn't call us to take coats and ties or organs. Those are cultural expressions of Christianity. But you go to equatorial countries around the world and the Western church has exported certain things that have nothing to do with the gospel.

[26:55] They've exported culture instead. And in doing so, they've become, they've embraced the world around them that said, we need to, in the 19th century missional view, we need to civilize people who haven't, haven't yet embraced Western European culture.

Much to our shame. So we need to recognize the danger is real. Where are the pressure points we feel today?

What are the ways in which we might become like the world and not even be aware of it? Well, here's an idea. How about radical individualism?

Let me ask you some diagnostic questions. Do you plan your schedule around your community or around your own life goals? Do you value group success over individual achievements?

Do you value gathering as God's people more than your own personal plans for spiritual growth? I think radical individualism has the danger of undermining and destroying the church that God and we often just absorb it and just think this is normal when it's not.

[28:23] I promise you we won't talk about this every week but good heavens the church's engagement with politics right now is a mess and we have become like the world in anger and attacking lacking humility in the way that Christians have engaged in political discourse and listen I'm not saying that there's something there is good we'll talk about that there's good in engaging in political discourse but we must do it distinctively as Christians and here's my guess there are probably some people who are doing it but they never make the headlines because it's not splashy and it's not it's not controversial because they're working humbly and carefully and lovingly and persistently and faithfully but friends we need to consider how on a large scale organizationally and on a small scale individually can we engage with others about politics in a way that's going to have the aroma of Christ can we can we feel like Jesus to others when we're talking about elections policies principles principles

I think there's also a danger today of us losing a distinctly Christian sexual ethic again I don't want to beat this horse over but we need to recognize how much assumptions about sexuality how we work why we work it is seen as the right and good human flourishing for people to be sexually active in whatever way they want to that is what our culture says and the Bible says something very different the Bible says that sexuality was given as a gift with a very particular purpose in a very particular context and yet the church in a misguided attempt to love everybody without regard is starting to say well maybe we don't actually have to hold to those things some of you are college students you know what your friends think you know and it's very tempting to say well maybe it's not such a big deal but do you see in doing that we lose the distinctiveness we lose our ability to be salty when we do these things those are a couple of examples of where we might lose it we could probably think of a bunch of others how we view marriage parenting family how we deal with money there are so many ways so many areas of our lives where we can lose our

Christian distinctiveness by becoming like the world I think there's a second way and I need to be careful in how I say this but I'm going to go here because I think it's worth saying the other way we lose our Christian distinctiveness is by being distinct but not Christian in what we are and by that I mean we become distinctive for the wrong things when people look at us and what they think about us and what they see in us is not the kingdom and the gospel but something else there are some historical examples monasticism is an interesting way of saying hey we're going to be distinct from the world we're going to withdraw and live within our own insular community and interact only tangentially with the outside world right and what did they become known for celibacy tonsures burlap sacks it seems you know it's so that's one historical another historical example and again

I want to be careful here because you can be a real follower of Jesus but maybe lose your saltiness by becoming a monk the other example I'm going to use is the Amish and because the Amish I think there can be true believers within the Amish community I'm not judging their spiritual but what are they known for the way they dress they don't drive cars they don't use electricity they want to separate themselves from the world in a particular way that seems very culture bound and that's what they're known for and again we want to say what are what are we if we're distinctive for things that aren't about the kingdom and about Jesus don't we also lose our distinctiveness then we just to be blunt we just become weird we just become odd maybe we like revel in our distinctive otherness because we see the evils in the society we have but if we're not distinctive about the kingdom the things of the kingdom then we also lose our saltiness

Christians can become distinctive about diet plans and money management and what movies we watch and don't watch we can be distinctive about all sorts of and listen there are great opportunities for us to think Christianly about all of those things right none of those things are bad topics for us to think Christianly about but we want to make sure that when people meet us our distinctiveness is characterized by and points to the thing that we're meant to be most distinctive about and that is the gospel for ultimately our distinctiveness is that we are no longer ours but we have been bought by a price that we were dead in our sins and trespasses and God has made us alive with him in Christ the distinctiveness is that we now live and engage in the world because of the message of the gospel that God has come to us to rescue us from sin and the condemnation we deserve that by his life death and resurrection

[35 : 14] Jesus has freed us from sin so that we can know God unlike other religions it is that not our works that save us but it is his freely given grace that we receive by faith this is the good news of the gospel and God calls us to repent of our life in the world and to come into his kingdom and be a citizen of his kingdom and a child of the one true God having together Christ as the head of us our community to follow him living as members of the kingdom and this is the thing that should be most distinct about us and this distinctness shows itself in different ways it's distinct because we know we're sinners so we can say I'm sorry and ask for forgiveness we know we're saved by grace so we don't have to be self righteous about what we do we're distinct because we know we deserve judgment so we don't look at ourselves as better than others around us but instead we are people who know we've received mercy and that gives us great joy and mercy for the people around us we're distinct because we know a savior who did not count his glory with God something to be held on to but who humbled himself and showed his glory through his humility and his sacrifice and his death and so we follow him in the way that we love others in that way one of the most fundamental things that I think is we in his kingdom know that the world is not about us anymore it's about him and so everything is changed everything is reoriented about knowing and loving and following

Jesus this is the distinct thing and when we love and trust in and obey and delight in Jesus this distinctiveness will be seen and we will be the salt of the earth let's pray together oh Lord we pray as we have reflected on this simple passage and on its challenging content Lord search our hearts we pray show us if there are ways in which we have become too much like the world or become distinctive in ways that we ought not and Lord help us to become distinctive in increasing measure by returning to the core of our faith the person of Jesus and his work of salvation for us

Lord I pray this would be true for me I pray it would be true for us as a community at Trinity I pray it would be true for your church throughout the world pray this in Jesus name amen to you you you you