

Sermon on the Mount

May 25, 2014

## **Title: Pass the Salt...and Leave the Light On!**

Text: Matthew 5:13-16

Summary: Jesus calls to be salt and light. That means we are to preserve what is good in God's Creation and shine the light of His presence into its dark places. When we do, we fulfill our purpose as people made in His image.

### **Salt and Light**

#### **"Pass the salt, please."**

Did down in the bag with your take out meal and you'll probably find a little paper container of salt. All you have to do is tear off the end and you can sprinkle salt on your french fries. It wasn't always so easy.

Salt has been for most of human history a precious and necessary thing -- something that empires went to war over, and that for the Roman soldier became part of his monthly pay -- hence the word 'salary.' The ancient Celts mined it in Austria where the city of *Salzburg* still stands. The ancient Chinese pumped salt brine out of the ground and boiled it until only the salt remained. Camel caravans have crossed the Sahara for untold centuries bearing loads of rock salt from ancient lakes. People have trapped salt-laden water in evaporation ponds and skimmed off the salt crystals from the Dead Sea (called, in ancient times the "Salt Sea") to the coast of France.

What made salt so precious? Not only does it have the power to season food in (for some of us) an irresistible way, but more importantly, it has the power to preserve. Cultures around the world, from China to Rome and beyond, learned to pickle and preserve everything from fish to beef, eggs to vegetables, with salt. No salt, no food.

Salt was considered so valuable that even spilling a little bit of it was considered a bad omen. In Da Vinci's "Last Supper" Judas is portrayed as having just tipped over the salt cellar -- portending his betrayal of Jesus and subsequent suicide!

"You are the salt of the earth!" (Matthew 5:13) This is how Jesus described His followers, men and women through whom God would at last bring His Rule to the world. What was He saying by making this comparison? Could it be that He was reminding them that they lived in a world where things perish, spoil, "go bad." Just think of that chicken sandwich that you left in your car for a few days, only to discover that it had become a "science experiment" instead of your lunch.

"You are the salt of the earth!" And your mission is to purify and preserve. Your mission is to preserve what is good in God's Creation -- to keep good things from going bad.

**"Leave the light on!"**

"You are the light of the world!" (Matthew 5:14) The world is not only a place where things go bad. It is also a place where things can become very, very dark. The Creation Story in Genesis begins with God speaking Light into existence. Genesis 1:2 describes the world as formless, empty and *dark*. The very first thing that God does to order His Creation is turn on the lights!

Isaiah challenges his people:

**Isaiah 2:5 NIV**

**Come, descendants of Jacob,  
let us walk in the light of the Lord.**

He predicts the coming of God's King as the coming of God's light:

**Isaiah 9:2 NIV**

**The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.**

And he explains that God's People are meant to be that same light to the entire world:

**Isaiah 60:1-3 NIV**

**"Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.**

**See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
but the Lord rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.**

**Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.**

"You are the light of the world!" And your mission is to shine the light of God's Presence into all the dark places.

**Salt and Light**

Our mission in this life and in this world is nothing less than that of becoming part of the answer to Jesus' prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in

heaven." That's what it means to be "salt" and "light." We are called to *preserve* what is good in God's world. We are called as well to turn on the lights in places where darkness and deceit have taken hold, blinding people to God's goodness.

Paul puts it this way:

### **Ephesians 5:8-14 NIV**

**For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.**

**Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.**

**This is why it is said:**

**“Wake up, sleeper,  
rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”**

Just as God commanded that there be light in His still-dark creation, now He calls you and me to be the lights in His New Creation!

### **This World's Pull**

**When salt isn't salty:**

Did you ever make the solemn discovery that your freezer stopped working several days ago and all the food inside had long since thawed out? When that happens, not only does the food thaw, but it then proceeds to go bad very, very quickly. The freezer compartment now becomes an incubator, filled with lots of delicacies for every conceivable kind of bacteria and mold. By the time you dig into it, it may have already become the basis for a Nobel Prize in microbiology.

What happened? Well, the thing you were counting on to *preserve* your food stopped doing its job. Ironically, that freezer compartment, now at room temperature, became a perfect environment for spoiling your food.

Jesus makes much the same point when He talks about being salt in this world:

### **Matthew 5:13 NIV**

**"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."**

The salt of Jesus' day came from mineral deposits left over from the evaporation of the water of the Dead Sea. If the salt somehow leached out, other minerals would still remain, but would have no preserving power. Like the broken freezer, these salt-less minerals would do nothing to keep meat or other foods from spoiling. They would be useless except as gravel for a walkway.

We live in a world where things run down, spoil, go bad. And the same can happen to us if we take our eye off our mission and allow ourselves to go with the flow.

### **Who turned out the light?**

The same is true of being a light in a dark world. Jesus says:

#### **Matthew 5:14-15 NIV**

**"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."**

The people listening to Jesus no doubt understood that the "town built on the hill" was a reference to Jerusalem -- the city where God had chosen to dwell, and the place that was to serve as a kind of lighthouse to the whole world. Hadn't God promised Abraham that through him and his family He would bless the entire world? To be "the light of the world" meant to be God's Light shining into the world's darkness. And the place where that was most supposed to happen was in the Holy City: Jerusalem.

But just as salt could lose its saltiness, so, too, lights can be covered up. In a day when you couldn't flip a switch to turn a light off or on, the easiest way to "turn the lights out" without having to relight an oil lamp would be to simply put a basket or bowl over the light.

And Jesus is saying that if we aren't careful, we can be like lights that don't shine into the world's darkness.

### **This world's pull:**

Everything in this world tends to "run down" if not attended to. For example, last fall's leaves will keep blowing around and piling up all around your yard until you rake them up. Likewise, your lawn will get more and more shaggy unless you go out and mow it. A dark alley never lights itself up when people walk down it. Every night it gets just as dark as the night before. The only way to fight back is to turn on the lights.

What happens in the natural world happens in our lives as well. An untended relationship will gradually go sour. Old hurts all too often fester just beneath the surface of our thoughts and conversations, waiting to erupt at the worst possible moment into a full-fledged infection that can destroy a relationship once and for all. When we leave an area of our lives unexamined -- in the dark, as it were -- we open the door for all sorts of bad things to take hold. Bad habits, lies, inconsistencies -- things that will one day burst into the open for all to see.

No wonder, then, that Jesus is so insistent that we make it our first priority to stay salty and keep the lights on!

## **God's Reflection**

### **Made for good works:**

Jesus says that we were created and placed here in this world for one great purpose:

### **Matthew 5:16 NIV**

**"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."**

We are God's salt and light. We are the heavenly Father's reflection into this corrupted and darkened world. We are the way He speaks life and light into His world. He does so through people, people who have come to trust in Him and have begun to be re-created by Him.

### **God's Reflection:**

Think about your world: what is there in it that needs *preserving*? Is it a child who needs to grow up in a healthy and wholesome environment, knowing that she is loved, that he is God's creation? Is it a marriage that this world would tear apart like an old tissue if given the chance? Is it some aspect of your God-given talent and potential that needs to be nurtured so that it can bear fruit?

And where in this world does God want to shine His light through you? I remember exploring an old mine in New York as a teen. We went in with our flashlights and poked around in places that never saw the light of day. Our lights didn't make a sound. They didn't knock holes in the ceiling. But wherever they shined the darkness vanished. What part of your life or your wider world is like an old abandoned mine: eternally dark unless someone brings light?

People are only going to see God through people who have become His reflection in this world. And to do that we have to pass the salt...and keep the lights on!

**Keeping our edge:**

So, how do we stay "salty" in a world that will wash out our saltiness? How do we keep the light on -- so that it stands out and points the way forward in a dark and confusing world?

Isn't that what you and I need to do in order to be effective in a disordered and corrupted world? We need to make sure that we have "acquired" a connection with God through His Holy Spirit before we try to preserve or shine! If not, even our best efforts will fall flat and we will end up contributing to the problem instead of pointing the way to God's solution. Our "saltiness" comes from God's purity and power to preserve. The light that shines in us is a reflection of the One who "dwells in unapproachable Light."