

Salt

Matthew 5:13ⁱ

Rejoice and Be Glad

As we noted a few weeks back, John R.W. Stott wrote of the Sermon on the Mount:

Jesus emphasized that his true followers, the citizens of God's kingdom, were to be entirely different from others. They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father.

Going on to say:

There is no single paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount in which this contrast between Christian and non-Christian standards [is] not drawn.ⁱⁱ

This clearly demonstrated in verses 9–12, where, as followers of Jesus (those who are “in Christ”, to use the New Testament's preferred description), we go into the world as ambassadors for Christ—peacemakers—calling the world to be “reconciled to God”ⁱⁱⁱ, highlighting the fact that while we remain in the world, we are not of the world. If we were, the world might love us, but as it is, they despised and crucified the Lord, and we should expect little better. Here in the Beatitudes Jesus described this, saying:

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:10 ESV

Going on to say:

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5:11–12 ESV

Of course, not all will be persecuted in the same way that they persecuted the prophets. Of that company, the writer to the Hebrews testified:

³⁵ ...Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

But it doesn't have to be that intense to be considered “persecution”. Jesus said,

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people **insult you** and persecute you, **and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.**” Matthew 5:11 LSBiv

Sometimes that's all it will be, but the blessing stands, and again, it marks the difference between the people of God and a world that has nothing but contempt for them, because it

has nothing but contempt for the Christ that they follow. And, as if the difference between persecutor and persecuted were not enough, Jesus went on in Matthew 5, verse 12 to describe the reaction that His people are meant to have when this occurs.

¹² **Rejoice and be glad...**

He said,

...for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11–12 ESV

And I don't think there could be any greater difference demonstrated to the world than this. It's a lesson that the apostles seem to have taken to heart, because in Acts 5 when they had been beaten and charged not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus,

⁴¹ ...they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. Acts 5:41 ESV

Of course, someone might ask, what happens when God's people respond so; What happens when we rejoice in whatever persecutions await us for the cause of Christ?

Well, the first thing that we need to understand is that there is no sudden shift in topic between verse 12 and verse 13 of Matthew chapter 5. We tend to think that there is because most of our Bibles put a paragraph break here, and highlight it with a new subheading. But The Sermon on the Mount is not a series of mostly unrelated proverbs. Each statement flows from the last and into the next, so, just as there is a logical progression from blessing to blessing in the Beatitudes, there is a logical progression from "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you," to "You are the salt of the earth."

All Y'all...

Also, before we move on, note that the pronoun "You" at the beginning of verses 13 and 14 is plural. So, "you" as individuals considered alone are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, but "you" collectively—you, the church—you (plural), the body of Christ, are the salt and light (both singular) of the world.

We'll see in a few moments that this doesn't mean that there is no individual responsibility, but the emphasis on individualism in our day often has people thinking that the Bible is a personal love letter from God to them, and that every command of scripture is an exhortation to solo action, but this is not true.

We used to sing, "I come to the garden alone...and He walks with me and He talks with me...and the voice I hear falling on my ear **none other** has ever known," but in reality, God speaks through the Scriptures, and the Scriptures are addressed to all of His people. "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," therefore "We" (first person plural), "We", as in the church, have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which "you" (that is, all y'all) will do well to pay attention, and here, Jesus is speaking to His church.

Also, notice that Jesus said, “You **are** the salt...” (and, as we will see next Lord’s Day, “You **are** the light...”), not “you *must be* the salt,” or even “you *have* the salt.” As Bonhoeffer noted in The Cost of Discipleship,

It is not for the disciples to decide whether they will be the salt of the earth, for they are so whether they like it or not, they have been made salt by the call they have received.^v

As with the Beatitudes then, this is not, strictly speaking, an exhortation to a certain behavior. It is a simple statement of fact. Those who have come to God through faith in Jesus Christ—those who are blessed of God; those who are part of the body of Christ—are by definition, exactly what Christ has called us to be.

The Salt of the Earth.

Even so,

¹³ “**You...are...the salt of the earth...**” Matthew 5:13 ESV

Now, there are a couple of different ways that this could be understood. Merriam-Webster defines the phrase as

a very good and honest person or group of people^{vi}

and the online edition of the Cambridge English Dictionary jumps in with

very good, honest, and reasonable...not thinking you are special in any way

following up with the examples:

- *He was the sort of person referred to as salt of the earth: very friendly and straightforward.*
- *It's a community with a great sense of pride, full of salt of the earth people.*
- *He's a salt-of-the-earth type with absolutely no pretensions.*^{vii}

So, in popular usage, “salt of the earth” has come to mean much the same thing as “down to earth”, or common; ordinary. But that’s not what Jesus intended; in fact, it’s almost the very opposite. See, salt is a very common element (and has been through most of history). One commentator even notes:

It is found everywhere. And hence, when Jesus said, “Ye are the salt of the earth,” He was saying, “I delight to use little things”...^{viii}

I believe that’s true, and worth noting, but I don’t think it’s the main reason that Jesus chose this common element to draw this picture. If it was just a matter of emphasizing the commonness, then Jesus might have said, “You are the dust of the earth,” but that would be something very different from saying “You are the salt of the earth.”

Salt *is* common, but it’s not dust. Salt is useful as a seasoning for instance, imparting flavor and pungency to foods that might otherwise be bland and unappetizing and this aspect

can't be overlooked in Jesus' statement. He will go on to say, "if the salt loses its flavor...It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men."^{ix} Boice wrote:

The Christian, through the life of Jesus Christ within and the verities of the Gospel, is to lend flavor to a flavorless, insipid world.^x

And another aspect of this is that salt will make people thirsty. Some people, when they see what it is to be seasoned with the righteousness of Christ will long to know Him for themselves, and, as the salt of the earth, it is our task to be so seasoned with the gospel that we make people thirst for the living water that can only come from the life of the Spirit within.

It's also true that salt is a preservative, and in this aspect, Jesus calling His disciples the salt of the earth has as much to say about the earth as it does about the salt. Through most of history salt has been used to preserve and keep things, especially meat, from going bad, so in this sense, when Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth,"

It clearly implies rottenness in the earth...

wrote Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

...it implies a tendency to pollution and to becoming foul and offensive. ^{xi}

Into this world, the Lord Jesus sends His church as salt, a substance completely distinct from the world, to combat the moral and spiritual decay, to slow the corruption, by proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. The old puritan, Matthew Henry wrote:

Mankind, lying in ignorance and wickedness, were a vast heap of unsavoury stuff, ready to putrefy; but Christ sent forth his disciples, by their lives and doctrines, to season it with knowledge and grace, and so to render it acceptable to God, to the angels, and to all that relish divine things.^{xii}

Salt and Holiness.

And this aspect cannot be ignored, because it speaks to something less obvious to the 21st century reader. Many, as noted before, have picked up on the idea that Jesus used Salt and Light as illustrations in this section of The Sermon on the Mount because these things were so common and easily understood by His hearers. This is probably true, as far as it goes, but Jesus may also have had something different in mind.

See, He was not ignorant of the Old Covenant, as many are today, so instead of assuming that He was just taking a couple of very common elements and elevating them metaphorically as descriptions of the role of the church in the world, we need to ask if salt has any significance in terms of the Scriptures which would have been so familiar to both Jesus and those who gathered to hear him. And we find that they do.

Salt is mentioned on several occasions in connection with the sacrifices that were presented to the Lord in the tabernacle and the temple. In Leviticus chapter 2, speaking of the grain offerings in particular, God told the people,

¹³ You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering... Leviticus 2:13 ESV

In Ezekiel 43, this was applied to the burnt offerings as well, so it seems that end of Leviticus 2, verse 13

...with all your offerings you shall offer salt Leviticus 2:13 ESV

was understood to apply to all offerings, whatever the nature of the sacrifice, so much so, that the expression “a covenant of salt” entered the lexicon as a synonym for an eternal covenant—one that could not be broken. The salt then was essential. It set the sacrifice apart as holy to the Lord. Without it the sacrifice was unacceptable. Now Christ’s disciples will serve the same function in the world, living and proclaiming the Gospel until the whole world has been set apart as holy to God.

If the Salt Has Lost Its Savor.

Of course, there’s another possibility, at least in a local sense. Jesus said,

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? Matthew 5:13 ESV

In other words, there’s the possibility that salt might cease to function as salt; it might cease to season, preserve, and set apart the world into which it is dispersed, and, as Matthew Henry pointed out

Salt is a remedy for unsavoury meat, but there is no remedy for unsavoury salt.^{xiii}

Our Lord said:

¹³ It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out to be trampled under foot by men. Matthew 5:13 LSB

Even so, may God give us grace to examine ourselves in this light; to ask whether our society may be what it is because the church in seeking to be a friend of the world has lost this quality of saltiness—this savor that sets us apart to God—and has ceased to function as the salt of the earth. If the Lord is willing, there will be more to say about this next Lord’s Day, but let me conclude with words from Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first.^{xiv}

May we, then, have salt in ourselves, and truly be, the salt of the earth.

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 18, 19.

iii Cf. 2 Co 5:20.

iv *Legacy Standard Bible* (Three Sixteen Publishing, 2022).

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- v Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1959, 1995), 116-17.
- vi "Definition of the SALT of the EARTH." 2020. Merriam-Webster.com. 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the%20salt%20of%20the%20earth>.
- vii Cambridge Dictionary. 2024. "Salt of the Earth." @CambridgeWords. May 8, 2024. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/salt-of-the-earth>.
- viii James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1972), 75-6.
- ix Cf. Mt 5:13, *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).
- x Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 74.
- xi D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Volume One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 151-2.
- xii Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1630.
- xiii Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, 1630.
- xiv Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 37.