

SALT FOR THE WOUND MATTHEW 5:13

Not long ago, when we were studying the Sermon on the Mount, we explored a very simple, yet profound statement—a statement that, in times of crises, has enormous implications for our neighbors, our communities, and our world. Jesus said, **Matthew 5:13**. *“You are the salt of the earth” (ESV).*

Of course, Jesus is referring to His followers—not just His twelve disciples, but all who believe He is the Christ, the Son of God, and who trust Him as their Savior and King. And notice that Jesus is making a statement—He is stating a fact. He’s not saying, “You *ought* to be the salt of the earth” or “You *have* the salt of the earth,” as though this were something we decide to do, or something we have that we give away. No. He says, “You *are* the salt of the earth.” There is something in the nature of His followers that gives them a salt-like quality. In fact, He wants to emphasize this so much that in the original language He uses the word “you” twice. “You, yes *you*, are the salt of the earth.”

But what does Jesus mean by this? In our culture today we occasionally use this phrase when we want to describe people who are wholesome, productive, upstanding citizens. We say, “They are ‘salt of the earth’ kind of people.”

That may be a modern-day compliment, but that’s not what Jesus had in mind. If we want to know what He meant we must first understand the nature and function of salt in first century Palestine.

I daresay, most of us appreciate salt, but chances are we take it for granted. To us it is little more than a versatile cooking ingredient that sits on a prominent shelf in our cupboards. But in the ancient world people valued salt because it was indispensable to their health, their food supply, and their economy.

The Greeks called it *theon*, a form of the word *god*, because they believed it contained something divine. The Romans held salt in such high esteem they even used it as currency. Roman soldiers were often paid with salt, and if a soldier did not perform his duty well, others would say, “He’s not worth his salt.” We still use that phrase to speak of someone who’s lazy or irresponsible.

Part of the reason salt was so highly valued was because it was used for so many different things. In my study I found at least half a dozen ways in which salt was and is used. But what we really want to know is what Jesus had in mind when he used this metaphor, and what those who heard him understood him to mean.

I believe we can discern what Jesus had in mind when we read all of verse 13, and then place that verse alongside another statement he made that is recorded in Luke’s gospel. **Matthew 5:13.** *“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.”* In Luke 14, in the context of Jesus’ instruction about the cost of discipleship, he said, *“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? ³⁵ It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out” (Luke 14:34-35).* I am convinced these two statements provide the necessary clues to discern what kind of salt Jesus was talking about and what it was used for.

There were (and are) a variety of salts in Palestine that came from a variety of sources—rock salt, salt evaporated from Dead Sea water, salt pits, and more. Most of these salts were unlike table salt (sodium chloride) used in our food. Today they are called phosphate salts, and they are a mixture of chlorides of sodium, magnesium, and potassium, with small amounts of gypsum (calcium sulfate). Because of these chemical properties, there

is evidence that long before the time of Christ these phosphate salts were used in *agriculture* because they enhanced soil production.

And although in those days they could not identify the chemical properties of these phosphate salts or the scientific reasons why they made the soil more fertile and the crops more flavorful or plentiful, archaeologists have unearthed documents revealing that Jewish farmers understood the benefits of salt in agriculture. Here are some of those benefits:

- to help the soil in arid places retain moisture
- to control weeds
- to help plants absorb vital minerals and nutrients
- to enhance the quality and flavor of crops
- to ensure a higher yield of crops

As I said earlier, modern day research has confirmed the effectiveness of phosphate salts in agriculture. Today it is common knowledge that these salts, when mixed with regular soil, can help seeds germinate and aid in the process of photosynthesis. They help plants absorb and utilize key nutrients, which enable plants to become fuller, greener, more vibrant and more fruitful.

But there was another agricultural use of salt in the ancient world. The reference in Luke 14 to a manure pile has long been a source of confusion, especially if Jesus had table salt in mind. But it is well-documented that salt was used to preserve dung in the ancient world—dung that was used for manure. Putting a layer of salt over a dung pile kept the manure from rotting (fermenting) and losing its fertilizing properties.

So, what does this agricultural reference to salt mean? Why does Jesus call His followers the “salt of the soil?”

Remember, prior to the Sermon on the Mount we are told that Jesus went throughout Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom (4:23). In the Sermon on the Mount He talks about kingdom attitudes, kingdom ethics, and kingdom values, and He was telling His audience what people who belong to the kingdom would be like, how they would be treated, and what kind of influence they would have.

Jesus calls His followers salt in verse 13 because He is asserting that they have a profound influence on whatever or whoever they contact wherever they are. They have an intrinsic quality—something in their *nature*—that enables them to stimulate life, growth, health, and productivity in people, families, neighborhoods, communities, and even nations. So, in principle, when they move into a neighborhood, when they are employed at a business or company, when they join an organization, when they are assigned to a particular class at school, when they are a member of a club or a team, they are going to have a profound influence on that team, club, class, business, organization, or neighborhood simply by virtue of who they are.

They are salt! That means they turn what are otherwise spiritually *barren* settings and circumstances into ones that are spiritually *fertile*. They infuse those settings and circumstances with spiritual *nutrients* that provide spiritual *nourishment*. Their *presence* in those settings and circumstances *activates* spiritual life. They are *catalysts* for spiritual *transformation*. And the implication is that without their influence these settings and circumstances would remain spiritually barren.

I want to be clear. Jesus is telling us that His followers are going to have a profound spiritual impact on whatever or whoever they contact, wherever they are. And when I say *profound spiritual impact*, I'm not referring to Christ followers merely being nice, wholesome people, or upstanding citizens, or productive members of society. I'm talking about Christ

followers being catalysts for spiritual transformation. I'm talking about the people in those neighborhoods and communities being able, as a result of their contact with Christians, to encounter the unconditional love of Christ, to know truth that can set them free, to know how they can be delivered from sin, how they can be forgiven, how they can have peace with their Maker, and how they can have eternal life when they die.

But there's more. When I talk about Christ followers being catalysts for spiritual transformation, I'm also talking about the effect it has on a community, not just individuals. In principle, because of the salt-like effect Christ followers have, poverty can be alleviated, corruption can be eliminated, conflict can be resolved, justice can be upheld, rights can be valued, human dignity can be restored, and racial tension can be healed. Christ-followers, by their very presence, make communities better—profoundly better.

Why? What is it *in* Christ followers that does this? What gives them this salt-like quality?

Jesus does not say what it is in verse 13. But that is not unusual. Jesus often made statements that could only be fully understood after He had fulfilled His mission on this earth—primarily the mission of dying in our place for our sins, defeating the spiritual powers of darkness, rising from the dead, ascending into heaven, taking His seat on a throne at the right hand of God, and then sending His Holy Spirit to indwell His followers to complete the work on earth that He had started.

I want to suggest to you that what gives Christ-followers a salt-like quality is the Spirit of Jesus living in them—the Holy Spirit that would be sent only after Jesus had died on the cross, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven. So, this salt-like quality has nothing to do with personalities, dispositions, talents, natural capabilities, or anything else for which Christ-followers can take credit. Christ-followers are catalysts for profound spiritual transformation solely because the Spirit of Jesus lives in them.

It is God Himself, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, working through those whom He has regenerated and then indwelt, who stimulates and activates spiritual life in people, families, neighborhoods, communities, even nations. It is His life and energy and power and love in the follower of Christ that creates the fertile opportunity for spiritual seeds to generate and grow and bear fruit.

So, what are the implications of this for the current crisis we are now facing? What does it mean to be salt in the midst of a global pandemic?

You are probably aware that this is not the first time the church of Jesus Christ has faced plagues and pandemics of epic proportions. But you may *not* know that it has been during these times, amid chaos and mass hysteria, that the church has distinguished itself by its love, courage, and wisdom. According to both Christian and non-Christian accounts, one of the main catalysts for the church's explosive growth in its early years was how Christians navigated disease, suffering, and death. It was so conspicuous; so counter-cultural that many of those who witnessed it were compelled to conclude that Jesus was real, and Christianity was true.

For example, from AD 249 to 262 (thirteen years), Western civilization was devastated by one of the deadliest pandemics in its history. It is called the Plague of Cyprian. Though the exact cause of the plague is uncertain, the city of Rome was said to have lost an estimated 5,000 people a day at the height of the outbreak. Historians tell us that it when a person contracted the disease, they were often deserted by their family members and neighbors, taken out of their homes, onto the streets, and left to die. And even after they died, loved ones would not go near their bodies for fear they were still contagious. So, they left the corpses unburied.

But the Christian response to the suffering of family members and neighbors was different. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, reported: “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.”

Instead of giving way to fear, they loved, even though it meant putting themselves in harm’s way. They wouldn’t—they *couldn’t* ignore or avoid those who were sick and dying. They sought them out and cared for them and ministered to them, so that they could experience the love of Christ and the hope of eternal life.

Why? Because Christians are the salt of the earth. Christians, by their very nature, have the love of Christ in them, and that love, according to the Apostle John, has no fear in it at all (1 John 4:18). And so, while the default mode for an unbeliever is self-protection and self-preservation, the default mode for a believer is selflessness, which is a synonym for love. The default mode for Christians is to have the mind of Christ, which, according to the Apostle Paul, is to consider others as more important than oneself and to look not only to one’s own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). It is doing unto others what you would have them do to you (Matt. 7:12).

And that salt-like quality turns otherwise spiritually *barren* settings and circumstances into ones that are spiritually *fertile*. It infuses those settings and circumstances with spiritual *nutrients* that provide spiritual *nourishment*. It *activates* spiritual life. It is a *catalyst* for spiritual *transformation*.

The response of Christians during the Plague of Cyprian was the major reason that “the obscure, marginal, Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world” (Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*). People were so amazed at the love Christians displayed, so amazed at their lack of fear, so surprised by their joy in the midst of suffering, and so astonished by their peace, even when they themselves were dying, that they were compelled to investigate what it was all about, and then join.

And this was not just a one-time occurrence. A hundred years after the Plague of Cyprian another pandemic spread through the Roman Empire. Christians were so conspicuously loving and sacrificial in their service for others, that the Roman emperor, Julian, who despised Christians, led a campaign to establish pagan charities that modeled what the Christians were doing. In an AD 362 letter, Julian demanded that Hellenists match the Christians in virtue, and he blamed the explosive growth of Christianity on their “benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives.” Elsewhere he wrote, “For it is a disgrace that . . . the impious Galilaeans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well.”

Julian’s reaction to Christians reminds me of what the Apostle Peter said in his first letter. He said, “*Live such good lives among the pagans, that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us*” (1 Peter 2:12).

We don’t have time to talk about how the church responded to the Black Plague in Europe that wiped out half of Europe’s population, or how the Church in England responded to the Cholera epidemic in the nineteenth century.

Suffice it to say, the church has grown and thrived during pandemics and plagues because followers of Jesus have been the salt of the earth. Not only have they stunned the

unbelieving world by displaying a selfless, sacrificial love for one another, but their love for non-Christians resulted in exponential growth as non-Christian survivors, who benefitted from the care of their Christian neighbors, converted the faith en masse. That is a fulfillment of Jesus' statement, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

So, what does it mean to be salt in our current situation? How can Christ followers distinguish themselves in their response to the growing epidemic?

I think it's important for all of us to know that we don't *try* to be salt. Because we have been born again, because we have been given a new nature, because we have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we *are* salt. If we are living as Jesus has enabled us to live, we will be salt wherever we are, and we will have a profound influence on the people, the neighborhoods, and the communities where we live.

Perhaps the more appropriate question for us to consider is, are we living as Jesus enabled us to live? Because Jesus made it clear in both Matthew 5:13 and Luke 14:34 that the kind of salt He is referring to can *lose its saltiness*, in which case it becomes ineffective and useless.

So, please be aware that Christians can and do lose their saltiness—they don't live as Jesus intended them to live, and so there is nothing about them to distinguish them from unbelievers. In times like these they give way to fear, they panic, they are all about self-preservation and self-protection. And that is tragic!

In order to live as Jesus intended us to live we have got to abide in Christ (John 15) so that his life is constantly flowing into us, and then can flow out from us. To say it another way, we must be filled and controlled by his Spirit. I said earlier that we are catalysts for spiritual transformation *solely* because the Spirit of Jesus lives in us.

And so, besides being devoted to prayer for the people infected by COVID-19 and their families, for the health professionals who are putting themselves into harm's way, for our government leaders who are being forced to make difficult decisions, pray that you will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Pray that the Spirit of God would take over your faculties—your mind and heart and will. Pray that He would give you the mind of Christ to let you see this situation and other people as He sees them. Pray that He would give you His heart that you might love other people with His love. Pray that He would direct your will that you would spontaneously and naturally respond to His promptings in whatever situation you are in. Pray that you would be the hands and feet and mouth and heart of Jesus wherever you are.

If you are filled with the Holy Spirit you *will* be salt. You will display the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You will have extraordinary courage. You will have supernatural wisdom that will enable you to do exactly what he wants you to do.

By the way, I need to say one more thing. It is quite possible (and I think probable) that God's will for us is to abide by the advice of medical professionals to help slow the spread of the disease. Instead of just our own health we should prioritize the health of the wider community, especially the most vulnerable citizens, by exercising an abundance of caution without perpetuating fear, hysteria, or misinformation. We need to remember that "there are many factors that set our age apart from others. Before modern hospitals there was no specialized, professional health care. What's more, previous generations ministered to the sick with little knowledge of how their diseases were transmitted. Carers can also be carriers, even when asymptomatic. In such scenarios, self-isolation can be the most loving thing to do, rather than infecting the ones we're seeking to love. While the outworking of love may

look different in different ages, love must still be the aim—a love directed by the Holy Spirit, not our self-centered flesh” (Glen Scrivener).

This can be a time of great progress for the faith and the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. This can also be a time of great spiritual growth for each of us. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, said of the epidemic of his day, “Far from being a time of distress, it is a time of unimaginable joy.” To be clear, Dionysius was not celebrating the death and suffering that accompany epidemics. Rather, he was rejoicing in the opportunity such circumstances present for testing our faith—to go out of our way to love and serve our neighbors, spreading gospel hope, in both word and deed, in times of great fear.

“Salt for the Wound”

Matthew 5:13

Main Idea: Jesus’ followers have the capacity to make spiritually barren people and places fertile and fruitful

Declaration: “You are the salt of the earth”

The meaning of the metaphor

The varieties of salt in the ancient world

The agricultural use of salt in Palestine

Enables arid soil to retain moisture

Facilitates the absorption of vital nutrients by plants

Enhances the fertilizing capacity of manure

The implications for Christ-followers

The profound effect on whatever or whoever they contact wherever they are

An intrinsic quality that enables them to stimulate life, growth, health, and productivity in people, families, neighborhoods, and communities

They turn what are otherwise spiritually *barren* settings and circumstances into ones that are spiritually *fertile*

They infuse those settings and circumstances with spiritual *nutrients* that provide spiritual *nourishment*

Their *presence* in those settings and circumstances *activates* spiritual life

They are *catalysts* for spiritual *transformation*

What gives Christ-followers this salt-like quality?

Warning: If salt loses its saltiness...it is good for nothing
The meaning of the metaphor
How salt becomes ineffective

Thrown out and trampled under foot

“Fit neither for the soil or the manure pile” (Luke 14:37)

The implications for Christ-followers

Application:

- As the salt of the soil, Christ-followers measure their effectiveness by the growth of others and the impact to a community, not by their personal well-being or vocational success
- Christ-followers are expected to be present in “barren” places