

SALTY CHARACTERS

MATTHEW 5:13

There is a centuries old Jewish saying that goes like this: "In six days God created the earth; on the seventh he threw rocks at Israel." If you have ever traversed the Holy Land by car or bus you will have noticed that rocks seem to cover the landscape. I happen to like rocks, so I think they enhance the scenery. But Jewish farmers don't share my sentiments. For them rocks are a nuisance, a barrier to productivity.

But rocks are not the only concern of farmers in Palestine. Water for irrigation is scarce, and the quality of the soil is a challenge. Over half of Israel is arid or semi-arid and only 20% of its soil is suitable for growing crops. And much of that arable soil lacks the minerals and nutrients necessary to grow high-quality grains and produce.

However, "necessity is the mother of invention." When Israel became a state in 1948, its leaders determined that they would do everything in their power to be completely self-sufficient, not having to depend on other countries for their sustenance. And so, over the years, they have developed the most sophisticated agricultural technologies in the world. Their systems of irrigation, water conservation, soil management, pest control, and genetic modification are cutting edge. Which has enabled Israel to produce 95% of its own food, and export almost as much as it consumes. What is more, its food products are not just tolerable, but are world renowned for their superior quality and taste.

Israel's agricultural ingenuity and innovation is nothing new. It has been going on for centuries, even before the time of Christ. So when Jesus was addressing His audience in a pastoral setting overlooking the Sea of Galilee, He was talking to people who understood what local farmers had to do to make barren soil fertile. Therefore, they would have understood the metaphor Jesus used in **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" (ESV).*

The first thing we need to realize is that Jesus is making a statement. He's not giving an admonition or issuing a command. 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 sustenance, and their livelihoods.

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, the 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 place His statement in Matthew 5 alongside another statement He made that is recorded in Luke's gospel. In Luke 14, Jesus has been talking about the cost of discipleship, and 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 about salt, though they were made in two different settings and have two different contexts, have essentially the same meaning.

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 salt was used in *agriculture* because it enhanced soil production.

And although in those days they could not identify the chemical properties of these phosphate salts or the scientific reasons why it 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 such as potassium, phosphorous, and nitrogen, 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 will have a profound influence on whatever or whoever they contact wherever they are. They will 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 know truth that can set them free, to know how they can be delivered from sin, to know how they can be forgiven, to know how they can have peace with their Maker, to know 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 effect that 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 Holy Spirit 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 their personalities, dispositions, talents, natural capabilities, or anything else for which Christ-followers can take credit. Christ-followers are catalysts for profound spiritual transformation solely and exclusively because the Holy Spirit 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 in the follower of Christ that creates the fertile opportunity for spiritual seeds to generate and grow and thrive and become fruitful.

Let me give some examples of how He does this. My Aunt Shirley, at the age of 12, was born again and became a Christ follower. She immediately began to pray earnestly and steadfastly for the salvation of her parents and siblings, one of whom was my mother—her younger sister. She was salt in that family, and within a year or two the whole family came to know Jesus, and I am the beneficiary of her spiritual influence. My wife and children and grandchildren are the beneficiaries of her spiritual influence. *You*, also, are the beneficiary of her spiritual influence.

It was largely due to the efforts of a Christ-follower named William Wilberforce, a member of England's parliament in the 18th and 19th centuries, that slavery was abolished in England, and eventually the United States. Wilberforce endured incredible opposition, even death threats, for his efforts. But he viewed his role as divinely appointed. He wrote, "My walk is a public one. My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me."

A man named Robert Raikes was so burdened by the poor children of England in the eighteenth century—children that worked six days a week in the deplorable conditions of the work

houses—that he established what became known as ‘Sunday School’ to give these kids moral and biblical instruction and teach them how to read.

William Booth, appalled by life in the extensive slums of England, invested his life and efforts in preaching the gospel to these neglected outcasts, establishing homes, banks, rescue missions, farms—exclusively for them. He became the founder of the Salvation Army.

These are examples of the Holy Spirit in these individuals enabling them to be salt in their families and communities. But I want you to notice the one thing they all share in common is that they had *contact* with the people in their families and communities. They didn’t isolate themselves, they didn’t withdraw from these “sinners” or these spiritually dark situations. They didn’t cower in the face of spiritual resistance. They made contact, and through that contact the Holy Spirit brought about profound spiritual transformation.

It’s possible that some of you have the philosophy, “Well, I just try to stay as far away from the world as possible. I surround myself exclusively with Christians and godly influences, so I won’t be contaminated by the world.”

That is not a biblical rationale. We are here on this earth to penetrate the world, to have *contact* with unbelievers, to influence the culture, to be change agents for the kingdom of God. We’re salty characters. If we are not being salt, then Jesus actually says we are good for nothing.

Look at the rest of **verse 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” (ESV).*

This is another reason why we know Jesus was not referring to table salt in this verse. Sodium chloride cannot lose its saltiness. However, the salt compounds used in agriculture could, in fact, disintegrate over time. It was common for farmers who used these salts to stockpile them behind their homes. When left uncovered and exposed to the rain and sun, the gypsum and other nutrients in these stockpiles would leach out of the salt, causing it to lose its “saltiness,” and thus rendering it ineffective as a fertilizing agent.

In that case, the farmer was left with a pile of useless white minerals. They couldn’t throw it on their fields because it had a hardening affect upon the soil. Instead, they used it on the paths in front of their homes, where it was trampled by men, making the paths firmer.

When Jesus talked about losing one’s saltiness, He was talking about them losing their ability to bring about life and growth and transformation.

So, it is possible for Christ followers who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit to suppress the Holy Spirit’s influence in and through their lives, either by ignoring His promptings or by making choices that prevent them from having contact with the world.

For example, a person could suppress the Holy Spirit’s influence by moving into a neighborhood and not getting to know His neighbors. Because it is impossible to be salt unless there is contact. It’s possible to suppress the Holy Spirit’s influence on a community by refusing to live in that community, if the Holy Spirit has prompted or directed a person to do so.

When we lived in Nairobi many years ago, we were assigned to live in a neighborhood that probably would have been the last neighborhood in the whole city we would have chosen to live. It was ugly, dangerous, violent, spiritually oppressive, decrepit, and impoverished. And because of that there were no other missionaries living there.

We didn’t like living in that neighborhood, and there were a lot of unpleasant things that happened to us because we lived there. But everyone in the neighborhood knew who we were, and why we were there. Because they knew that no white person would voluntarily choose to live there unless they were missionaries.

So we often had people knocking on our gate asking, “What must I do to be saved?” We were often asked to pray in homes where there was demonic activity. We were often asked to mediate in neighborhood conflicts. We were often invited to people’s homes for dinner, because they told us they thought our presence in their home would bless it.

Why were we asked to do these things? Not because we were Americans. Not because we were wholesome and winsome. But because we were salt. The Holy Spirit living in us enabled us to have salt-like role in that neighborhood.

That is also true of you, if you are a Christ-follower. And it applies to whatever or whoever you contact, wherever you are. So there are two principles I want to leave you with in terms of application.

First, 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. As kingdom people this world is not our home, we are citizens of heaven, and our lives are all about preparing for the arrival of our King. Our purpose for being on this earth is not to be comfortable or safe, and it's not to build little kingdoms for ourselves. Our purpose is to expand the kingdom of our Lord Jesus. And we do that by being salt—by turning otherwise spiritually barren settings and circumstances into ones that are spiritually fertile; by infusing those settings and circumstances with spiritual nutrients that provide spiritual nourishment; by activating spiritual life, and by being catalysts for spiritual transformation.

This is our job description for the brief amount of time that we live on this earth.

Second, Christ-followers are *expected* to be present in "barren" places. This is the Great Commission. Jesus said just before He ascended into heaven, "*Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations...*" (Matthew 28:18). That is our mandate.

And simply by going into barren places, places that have never even heard the name Jesus, places that are spiritually resistant to the Gospel, places that are desperately wicked, we, by virtue of the Holy Spirit who indwells us, *will* have a spiritual impact if we obey the Spirit and do not suppress Him. The barren soil can turn fertile just by our presence. And spiritual seeds can be planted that will germinate and grow and bear fruit.

We are the salt of the earth, by God's design, because of the Spirit who lives in us, for the glory of Christ and the progress of His kingdom.

"Salty Characters" 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