



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Salt and Light”

Matthew 5:13-16

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Matthew 5:13-16. ¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

When our daughter Eleanor was starting to eat solid foods, we, like most new parents, became pretty conscientious about what was going into her meals. We learned that babies’ kidneys can’t process much salt, so we avoided adding any extra salt during those early months of weaning.

We had a baby-led weaning cookbook with some pretty great recipes, including a goulash that Eleanor really liked. But at first bite? To her parents, it was *bland* to say the least. Without salt, it just didn’t have any noticeable flavor. Once Chris and I added salt to our own portions, it was a completely different dish. It reminded us just how essential salt is, not just for flavor, but for transformation. In cooking, baking, even preserving, salt plays an outsized role despite its small size.

Salt matters.



When my husband Chris was in high school and college, he worked during his winter breaks at Williams Bakery in Mechanicsville, Virginia (it's still there!). The bakery was owned by his best friend's dad, Ronnie Williams, who ran a tight and fast-paced kitchen, especially during those November and December weeks. Chris helped make huge batches of pie dough, enough for 200 pies at a time. He still remembers the recipe called for 45 pounds of pastry flour, 24 pounds of shortening, 1 pound 8 ounces of milk powder, and 1 pound 2 ounces of salt.

Ronnie had all the regular recipes memorized. As the employees baked through the night, he'd shout, "45 of flour, 24 of shortening!" Then, "1-8 of milk, 1-2 of salt!" The veteran employees knew exactly what that meant. But one year, a new guy misunderstood "1-2 of salt" to mean not one pound, two ounces of salt, but *twelve pounds*.

The pies were baked; the crew kept working. Around 3 a.m., Ronnie sliced into a damaged pie for a snack, and immediately realized something was off. Way off. The new employee had used ten times too much salt. They had to stop everything and dig through the hundreds of baked pies to find and discard the ruined ones.

Salt, as Jesus says, is powerful. When it's used rightly, it transforms. But if it's missing, or misused, it can leave things tasteless... or even ruin hundreds of pies.

To our ears, salt might not sound like much. We live in a culture of abundance, where salt is pretty cheap and practically everywhere - on every restaurant table, in every grocery store, in every kitchen cabinet. But as Debie Thomas reminds us in her reflection on this passage, this wasn't the case for Jesus' listeners. In the ancient world, salt was precious. People fought wars over it. Entire economies were built on it. The ancients believed salt could ward off evil spirits. Religious covenants were often sealed with salt. Salt was used for preserving food, for medicinal purposes, to disinfect wounds, check bleeding, and treat skin diseases.ⁱ Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt, hence our English word, "salary." Around 10,000 years ago, scientists believe dogs were first domesticated using salt. People would leave it outside their homes to entice the animals to their doors. Roanoke's original name "Big Lick" was for the natural salt lick that attracted deer and other animals to this ancient Native American hunting ground.

In more modern times, we still use salt for all kinds of purposes. It enhances flavors, melts ice, softens water, and speeds up boiling. It can soothe sore throats, clean sinuses, reduce swelling, and disinfect wounds. Our bodies can't survive without it; yet too much salt can be dangerous for us - can even kill.

Now, it's certainly possible to take a metaphor too far. No single descriptor from scripture - salt, light, vine, branches, sheep, clay - can quite capture all it means to be a follower of Christ. But when Jesus calls his followers the "salt of the earth," he's saying something profound.



Jesus is telling us who we are. We *are* salt. “We are not ‘supposed to be’ salt, or ‘encouraged to become’ salt, or promised that ‘if we become’ salt, God will love us more. The language Jesus uses is 100% descriptive; it’s a statement of our identity. We *are* the salt of the earth. We *are* that which will enhance or embitter, soothe or irritate, melt or sting, preserve or ruin. For better or for worse, we are the salt of the earth, and what we do with our saltiness matters. It matters *a lot*.”ⁱⁱ Which means the question isn’t *whether* we will have an impact. The question is: what kind of an impact are we making?

Are we enhancing the world around us, or embittering it? This is the spiritual weight of being salt: we affect the flavor of the lives we touch.

When Jesus looks out at a crowd of the poor, the overlooked, the rejected and hurting, and says *you* are the salt of the earth. “*You*,” he told them, “*you* are the salt of the earth.” You who have been ignored and dejected, you who are sick and lonely and poor; you who are tired, overworked and underfed. You are the salt of the earth. You are essential. You are worthwhile. You are precious.” It’s not just poetic. It’s radical.

Salt was priceless then. So, when Jesus names his listeners “salt,” he’s telling them, and us, that we matter more than we know – not because we’ve earned it, but because we are loved and chosen.

Salt does its best work when it’s poured out. It is only effective when it’s used. You don’t bring flavor to a dish by keeping salt in the shaker. And Jesus didn’t call us to cluster for comfort, or huddle in safe corners of faith. He called us to scatter, to share our presence, our grace, our light, with a world in need of healing and hope. This doesn’t mean burning ourselves out. It means being willing to give of ourselves—our compassion, our time, our presence, our truth—so that the world might taste and see the goodness of God.

Salt exists for the good of what it touches.

It’s meant to enhance. It isn’t supposed to dominate.

But I’m afraid that is the reputation Christianity has all too often these days. We are known as the salt that exacerbates wounds, irritates souls, and ruins goodness. The voices claiming to be Christian on the news aren’t voices that share the salt and light we see in Jesus Christ. No, too often the voices the world hears are arrogant, domineering, obnoxious, and uninterested in enhancing anything but themselves. Sadly, so much of what the world sees and hears are voices that shame instead of bless, burn instead of heal, hoard power instead of giving it away. That is the tragedy of so much of Christian history – we’ve confused dominance with faithfulness.

When Christians become known for judgment instead of grace, for exclusion instead of welcome, for noise instead of wisdom, we’ve lost our saltiness. And salt that’s lost its taste, Jesus says, is good for nothing.



But it doesn't have to be this way. Not for us. Not for Second Presbyterian Church.

So, what do we do?

- We remember what Jesus says we already are.
- Live wisely, walk humbly, and act generously.
- We check for salt. We stay connected to our purpose.
- We remember that our call is not to preserve ourselves, but to preserve what is good in the world around us.

Brothers and sisters, there is a lot of noise and irritation in the name of Jesus Christ today. Sometimes, it feels like there is little we can do to stand against it. But I believe – I am here to tell you – we can resist the abuse of salt that irritates and wounds by being a source of wisdom and grace in our own small circles. I have heard more scripture taken out of context in recent months than I have in my whole life. I've heard Jesus' own words used to justify abuse, power grabs, and even war.

I just finished a paper for one of my Doctor of Ministry classes that focused on the Southern Presbyterian Church during the era of desegregation. The same racist arguments that were used then to keep black children out of "white schools" are the same ones I have heard on social media soundbites and manosphere podcasts this year alone. What's the saying? Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it?

So, what can we do about it? This may sound trite, but I promise you it's not - read your Bibles. Come to Sunday school. Join a Bible study. Know our Scripture, use your energy and intelligence to be a voice for reason in the room. We can't let the narrow, uninformed interpretations have the only microphone for our faith. Parents, don't let those voices be the only ones who tell your children what it means to be a Christian.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus says. The question isn't *whether* we will have an impact. The question is: what kind of impact are you making?

In these days, when fear can feel high, hope seems thin, and trust in others is low, we are called not to retreat, but to flavor the world with grace. To let our light shine. To live lives that give others a taste of the kingdom of God: full of justice, mercy, compassion, and truth.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus says.

May it be for better.

May your pouring out—and mine—be for the life of the world Jesus loves so well.

ⁱ Debie Thomas, "Salty," *Journey With Jesus*, 02 February 2020, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2515-salty>.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

