

Salt And Light

Matthew 5:13-16

We are working our way through the teachings of Jesus, which Matthew collects together as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus repeated his teachings on different occasions in different contexts. So we find Jesus saying similar things in Mark and Luke but in completely different contexts. Here Jesus takes two illustrations of salt and light to make a single point.

This follows straight on from the 'Beatitudes' in which Jesus gives us his own version of the blessings of Deuteronomy 28, so familiar to the Jews. Blessing was for the righteous, the reward for full obedience to God and for keeping all his commands. But Jesus radically changes the goal posts by saying that his kingdom is not for those who obey him by following a set of rules, but is for those who have written themselves off, who grieve at their sinfulness, who recognise their inability to please God and inwardly yearn for a righteousness they have no hope of attaining. Their only hope is the Lord and his mercy and so they don't look down their noses at other people like religious people tend to do, but act as peacemakers. They expect to be misunderstood, criticised and persecuted particularly by the self-righteous for believing in a righteousness that has been given as a free gift. Religious people, like the Pharisees, believe that God is on their side and imagine that God's Kingdom has to do with national ethics and laws that force unbelievers to comply with Christian morals, which of course is impossible.

Today there are groups such as The Christian Voice, the Christian Institute and Christian Concern who think that to be salt & light we have to stand for our rights as Christians and take a firm stand against moral decline in this nation. "*Christians should be able to stand up in every area of public life and proclaim Jesus – without being marginalised in society or having to suffer legal consequences.*" But is this what Jesus preached? Do we see Paul campaigning or protesting against the idolatry and immorality in Roman society or against religious persecution?

Jesus addresses his words to those who know how blessed they really are that God's Kingdom belongs to them, even if they are persecuted for following Jesus. He says they are salt and light. Again, as Dave

explained last week, these are descriptive not prescriptive. Jesus did not say, "be the salt of the earth, be a light to the world." No, he says to those who believe in him, YOU ARE the salt of the earth, YOU ARE the light of the world. We have no option, we do not have to try and be salt and light. We already are the salt of the earth and the light to this world. Anyone who has put their faith in Christ is now by definition salt to the earth and a light to the world. This is entirely due to what Jesus has done in us.

We have been so blessed by being incorporated into his Kingdom and now we have a role to fulfil and a mission to accomplish in this society in which we live. God forgave us and cleansed us from our sin in order to make us salt and light to the communities in which we live. Whether we chose to accept it or not we have a mission to infiltrate this world with his Kingdom. We often see mission as something we are called to do, 'to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations;' so we often find this hard and react because we have never understood what Jesus is saying here. Our mission is to be what we are. Wherever we go, and whatever we do, God's Kingdom is in us, his Spirit is with us and we represent the Lord. We are his witnesses. We have seen what his resurrection has done in us.

So let's take a closer look at these two illustrations.

1. The Salt of the Earth. Today salt is a very cheap commodity, mostly used for seasoning food. We know that too much salt is not good for us so try to reduce our salt consumption. How different to the biblical use of salt! It was an expensive commodity in much of the Middle East, but Israel had a ready source of good quality salt, because they had the Dead Sea. In Lk 14 Jesus says salt is used for the soil and the manure heap a fertiliser and a disinfectant. It was used to rub into wounds and new born babies. Before refrigeration, salt was used to preserve meat and fish. So don't think of it as a condiment, but as a fertiliser, preservative and disinfectant. This earth is spiritually pretty polluted but Jesus has put us in society in order to fertilise it, preserve it and disinfect it. Our presence keeps sin at bay to some extent. Godly living has a powerful effect on ungodliness, injustice and selfishness in a society that has no regard for others. The way we live challenges this and as long as we are present we can restrain it by bringing in some of the saltiness of the Kingdom of God.

But if salt gets wet, it loses its strength, its bite. Soluble vital minerals leach out and leave only insoluble stuff that is of no value.

Its saltiness cannot be restored. Then it's only use is to be thrown onto pathways to be trodden underfoot.

2. The Light of the World. The world is a place of darkness. It is in a permanent night. But we are lights that shine into that darkness. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Eh? So is Jesus the Light of the world or are we? The answer is found in John 9. where Jesus said "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Jesus is no longer in this world but he has left us to shine brightly with his light. We are not like Jesus; we don't have any light in ourselves to shine into the darkness. But, like the moon, we reflect the Son's light into this dark night giving some light to the world. His light of life shines out from us. 2 Cor 3:18 "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." This is not something we have to try and do. If he is in us his light will shine out of us and change us it does so. It brings light to those who know nothing except darkness; who are spiritually blind. Our light is not like the blazing sun, not like the brilliance that knocked Saul from his horse, but his light reflected from us penetrates the darkness and people begin to see. They see their own spiritual squalor; they see a glimmer of hope, of forgiveness, of new life, of God's Kingdom, of what Jesus has done on the cross for them. Some don't like what they see and will react and oppose and attack the light-bearers. But others will be drawn by our light will come to the light, Christ Jesus himself. Our bit of light shows them the way to Jesus the great Light.

But Jesus' point in these two illustrations is a warning. What if salt loses its saltiness? What if, instead of shining like a city on a hill, we hide our light under a bowl? We don't have to try and be salt and light but we must never lose our saltiness, nor hide our light under a bowl. Rather Jesus says, "Have salt in yourself" and "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they see your good works and glorify your father in heaven." If we shine for the Lord we may lose our job or even be arrested but Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be very glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you," as they did to Jesus himself!