

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.Ivor J.W. Oakley (Guisborough Evangelical Church  
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### **Matthew 5:13**

(Additional Bible Reading Colossians 4:2-18)

## **Salt of the Earth**

### Introduction

The Beatitudes described the essential character of Jesus' disciples. Now Jesus uses the metaphors of salt and light to indicate his disciples' influence in the world for good.

We do not live our lives in isolation. But we are not to be *of* the world; instead we are to be *separate from* its spirit and outlook and values – even though we are *in* it. We are not called to live in monasteries and nunneries. We are meant to exercise deep influence. It may be a surprise for us to learn we can exercise influence. We may feel we are overwhelmed by the strength of forces against us, but Jesus is more optimistic. He says we can exercise an influence worldwide. **Salt of the Earth** and **Light of the World**. Jesus takes two simple objects to make his point. Every home, however poor, uses salt and light.

They are used to describe the Christian's function and purpose in the world. When we live and function as salt and light, we are bound to be different, to stand out and make a mark.

### Nature of the world

What can we learn about the nature of the world, the rest of mankind, from the Lord's statement? We shall not appreciate the point about being salt unless we understand what Christ is saying about the rest of mankind who are not his disciples. The Greek word used here for "You" is  $\Upsilon\mu\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ , and it is in its most emphatic form. It really means "you and you alone" are the salt of the earth. The rest of humanity needs the salt. The Church and the world are two different communities. You and they are placed in contrast and should be as different as chalk and cheese.

Our usefulness depends on recognising the difference. N.B. dangerous tendency in some theological circles to blur distinction e.g. referring to all mankind indiscriminately as "people of God". Once we become assimilated to the world, we lose our influence. When the church is absolutely different from the world, its real character is seen and it (strangely enough) becomes more attractive to the world. When we are indistinguishable, we are useless.

You are the salt – and the rest of mankind are deteriorating, putrefying, decaying, insipid and tasteless. Because of the Fall, sin in the world and Satanic activity, the direction of human nature is downwards, not upwards. Its tendency is towards decaying, putrefying and festering. It is restrained by God-ordained instructions e.g. state with authority to frame and enforce laws, homes with marriage and family life.

People are also restrained through early teaching, fear of discovery, self-interest, fear of consequences, religious teaching

But when these restraints are removed, the world and human nature shows itself in true colours. Is it any surprise that with less and less Christian influence around today, the world is becoming more and more openly and proudly vulgar, loud, violent and ugly? Decencies and even little politeness are less and less in evidence.

The world is in bewildered state about this. Before First World War, there was a spirit of optimism, the “Golden Era” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Men to develop from animal state. End of wars, disease, suffering, poverty, vice. Education, Acts of Parliament, better environment, international conferences – the world was becoming a Paradise, and a Kingdom of God on earth. We do not believe or expect this now, after two World Wars, and in view of the present sharp moral descent. The world is the same in every age though sometimes superficial differences. People ask “Where have we gone wrong?” “What has happened?”. Bewilderment. But it is not so bewildering to the Christian who knows the Bible and examines his own heart. This fallen world and all its troubles are down to the state of the human heart. Self-centredness, self-seeking, self-indulgence. Left to itself, the world festers and putrefies. Urgent need of preservative and antiseptic and disinfectant.

God’s Word to his people is that you and you alone are the much-needed salt, preserver, purifier, and the ones who give flavour. We are not to be under the world’s control. There should be a sharp difference in the Christian’s life because it is under God’s control, authority and power. We are separate, unique and different. What Jesus is saying is - only you can arrest and successfully reverse the situation in the world. Only you can turn the tide. No hope but you. This thought leads us to ask what it means for the people of God to be “salt”.

#### In what way should the People of God be Salt?

Not surprising that ancient world greatly valued salt because of its function and uses. It spoke to them firstly of purity, because its appearance was of glistening whiteness. The Romans thought salt was the purest thing of all because it came from very pure things, i.e. sea and sun.

So Christ’s choice of salt tells us that firstly the Christian is to be a model of purity and uprightness. The world has lower standards of honesty and morality, integrity and workmanship. The Christian is marked by purity in conduct, speech and thought. **Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt** (Colossians 4:6). We must be careful about our speech, that there is nothing tainted or questionable about it. But this depends on purity in thought, and that is the hardest difficulty of all. How do we control our impure thoughts? It calls for positive action; evil thoughts are not barred out, but crowded out. “To conquer we must replace”. **Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable – if anything is excellent or praise-worthy – think about such things** (Phil. 4:8).

Secondly, salt is a preservative. It keeps things from going rotten and decaying. No fridges in ancient world, therefore essential to have salt to prevent meat and fish from going bad.

The Christian is meant to arrest the decay in society and have a cleansing effect. We ought to make it easier for people to do the right thing. Even without using words, our very presence and respect for the things we stand for is a discouragement to evil. Because we are in the room, impure things are not said, improper things are not done. There are occasions when it is difficult to speak out, but we can get up and walk away. Often another person is looking for a lead to be given, and the Christian should take the lead.

Finally, salt lends flavour. Food without salt is tasteless, insipid and uninteresting.

Christianity is to life what salt is to food. Life as it is is insipid. The great reason for pleasure mania and attraction of entertainment and drugs and alcohol is that life is boring and dull. Emptiness of life is nowhere more clear. It is also very clear when the non-Christian is old and on deathbed.

Christ in the centre of life changes all this. When we walk with God, life centres on him, will is yielded to him, and we find heart satisfaction and real purpose of life. True life in Christ brings radiance and fullness to life. In a worried world, the Christian is serene. In a depressed world, the Christian knows joy. In a dissatisfied world, the Christian is content. **You will fill me with joy in your presence** (Psalm 16:11). **I have told you this that my joy may be in you** (John 15:11). If you do not share this testimony, if you lack this flavour, then you confirm the world in its opinion that Christianity makes people more miserable than ever.

O.W.Holmes said he might have entered the ministry if a certain clergyman had not acted and looked like an undertaker. Robert L. Stevenson's diary records "Been to church today and was not depressed!".

Why do Christians let down the side, and confirm the world in its opinion about Christianity? According to Hudson Taylor, the real secret of an unsatisfied life is an unsundered will. When Christ is in the centre of life and he rules that life, then it is enriched, made strong, made joyful, and has a flavour, and imparts a flavour to others that is found nowhere else. Jesus said to the woman of Samaria **The water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life** (John 4:14).

And so as salt we are agents of purity, we act as a preservative, and we enjoy and impart flavour to life. These things are done when the Church is true to its calling, and not merely making pronouncements on political and economic matters, but preaching the good news of Christ. These things are done when indwelt Christians live a truly Christian life, doing God's will, bringing Christian influence to bear in homes, work and society, and as citizens use vote and play part in public life.

Nowhere is this more conspicuously seen than in times of revival. Not only are people converted and churches grow, but also one of the by-products is that public conscience is stirred. As a result of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodist revival, and the 1859 Revival, there was an end to slavery, the suffering of children in mines and factories, the founding of orphanages and mental homes, care for the poor and unwanted, and the penal code was humanized. Even parks, allotments, public libraries, night schools, slum clearance, and Saturday afternoon off for workers – these introductions have

their origin in Christian influence in society. Overseas, cannibalism, slavery, degradation of women, all reduced or abolished through the work of Christian missions.

What practical steps should we take to be, and continue to be, the salt of the earth?

We have again to remember our condition and situation in Christ. Called to be his, under his control, in his will, and for his glory. This will make us different and distinctive. This difference is not something to boast of or flaunt before people to antagonise them. We should display character described in Beatitudes in word and deed. Beware lest we lose saltiness by lowering standards and compromising position. Once we are indistinguishable, we are useless. We shall challenge and attract only when we are different. We do not serve God, ourselves, or even the world by minimising the effect God has made in our lives. The difference in our conduct, reactions and outlook should be a problem to others – causing them to examine their own hearts.

Apparently, sodium chloride is very stable and cannot lose its saltiness, but when mixed with impurities, it can become useless – even as manure – and become dangerous. So the Christian needs to be warned about contamination.

If a Christian was ejected from the early church because he had to be disciplined, he was compelled, before being received back into membership, to lie at the door of the church and invite people entering with these words “Trample on me who am the salt which has lost its flavour”. How many of us would have something to say if we had that practice?

So we face our responsibility, since Jesus says: You, and you alone, are the salt of the earth. If you do not function as salt in the family and the office and neighbourhood where God has put you, no one else will. Realise responsibility before the Lord. Retain confidence in Gospel, its truth and its power. God has placed us in a secular and increasingly godless world, not to be honey-pots to soothe and sweeten, but to be salt. Salt needs to have its tang, and to be rubbed into the community. It bites and stings when it does its job. Salt is not to be kept snugly little exclusive saltcellars, but to be poured out and used.

The great hope and only hope for society is that increasing numbers of Christians will be prepared to be used by God to deliberately influence and purify and preserve. Alas at present there are few Christians really prepared to act as salt. It happened before in the history of the church, and it can happen again.

May God face us with our responsibility, and stir up gifts within us, and may he make us that we shall be like Christ and influence all who come into contact with us. The closer we walk with Christ, the more influence we will have in the world. May God remind us wherever we are this week and in whatever company – “I am a Christian. I am to be salt in this situation. Only Christians can be salt. And if I fail there is no one else to do the job for me”.

Have this confidence, that if only one godly man or woman radiates his influence, it will permeate any group in which he or she happens to be. This is our privilege and our responsibility. You, and only you, are the Salt of the earth.