

February 9, 2020
Let Me Tell You Why You Are Here
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Matthew 5:13-20

[Salt and Light]

¹³ “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ “Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

[Completing God’s Law]

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ “Don’t suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God’s Law or the Prophets. I’m not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God’s Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God’s Law will be alive and working.

¹⁹⁻²⁰ “Trivialize even the smallest item in God’s Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won’t know the first thing about entering the kingdom.

(The Message version)

Once I was making a cake to take to Scott Smart’s house for supper. Don and June Lewis were also going to be there. I didn’t have all the ingredients, so I sent Carl to my neighbor’s house to borrow a cup-and-a-half of sugar. She wasn’t home, but her husband went to the kitchen and brought back a ziplock with an exact cup-and-a-half inside. I dumped it in my batter and just happened to lick the spatula before I threw it in the sink. It was horrible. I got the ziplock from the trash and licked that too — salt! I decided it was easier to throw away cake than batter, so I baked it, thinking we’d pick up something else on the way. But my cake was so beautiful, I took it. And I warned June and Susan not to eat it. Scott, who is a cook, took a bite and looked *stunned*. He just kept swallowing. Don and Carl, however, just ate cake and never said a word.

That's the thing about salt, don't you know? Too much is revolting. Not enough tastes like—what? Bland, yes. But also empty. Another time I forgot the salt in my yeast rolls at Thanksgiving. It ruined the whole meal for me. They were both beautiful and altogether disappointing.

Salt. It causes a strange and wonderful reaction in all the food it touches, so that bread is more bready, and chocolate more chocolaty, cheese more cheesy. Mashed potatoes, fried chicken, pie – none of them come out right, if the salt content isn't pretty close to perfect. Too much or too little will ruin the dish.

It might be Jesus' best metaphor for how to give away this faith life of ours. Measure it. Calibrate it. Don't overwhelm, don't hide it. Eugene Peterson translates it: *You are here to make this life taste better to the people you affect.* You're not here to do the heavy lifting of saving their souls; Jesus has taken care of that, once and for all – for all time and all people. We know this from the epistles. Ours is the lesser calling, also older, found in the prophets: to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

The Law is an expansion on those three, all of which Jesus is careful – intentional – to say, here in Matthew 5, still holds. *Is not to be trivialized*, as Peterson puts it. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Is it, though? Is the Law more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at our feet? What do we actually DO with the Law? Or the Sermon on the Mount, for that matter?

I would offer that by and large the church has overthought it, that it really need not be as complicated as preachers like me have made it out to be. Being salt, it seems to me, is simply one way to describe how we are to live with the abundance of grace that is ours in Christ Jesus, by his life, death and resurrection. Here's how you live with that reality, Jesus says. Be salt. Be light.

Let's pray and consider it just a little more: *Ancient words, O people of God, Changing me and changing you, Let us come with open hearts, That the ancient words may impart to us new vision and new strength for being God's people in this time and place. Amen.*

How do we know how salty Jesus would have us be? In cooking, less is always better, because it is much easier to add more salt than take too much away. That cup-and-a-half of salt could not be taken out of my cake batter once I stirred it in. However, I come from a church tradition that believed people needed as much Jesus as could be poured into them from the start – no approach too assertive, no assumption about their lives too insulting, no question too personal. Hesitation like mine was considered weakness of faith. It took me a long time to separate that evangelistic style from Jesus' example in the gospel – because that's how we know what Jesus means: by watching what he does.

Once not long after our second baby was born, I was home with both kids, exhausted all the time. It was summer, but way too hot to be outside. A pair of Latter-Day Saints missionaries came by the house, both of them very young men. I was way too tired to invite them in or even be very nice to them, and as they started to leave they stopped and turned back around and said, “Ma’am, is there anything we can do to help you? You know, we could mow your grass or something.” My thought then was, “Gee, I am worse off than I thought, if 19-year-old boys are worried about me.” But mostly I felt so noticed, so loved by those two kids.

My thought now is, “Why do we think we have to guilt and overwhelm instead of notice, love and help people? As if they can’t figure out the reason we do what we do, when we offer to make them a meal or cut their grass?” You want to know why you are here? You are here to be salt. To make life better for the people around you, the people whom your life touches.

Jesus says a wrong thing about salt. He says that *if salt loses its saltiness it’s useless and is thrown out*. But salt is stable. Salt doesn’t lose its saltiness. Twenty-year-old salt, still salty. Fifty-year-old salt, still salty. But salt isn’t salty to the rest of the salt. Salt in its jar isn’t seasoning anything. It isn’t ruining anything, but neither is it making anything better or more flavorful, more enjoyable. Which, as Jesus’ metaphor goes, is apparently the same as useless. Might as well throw it out, Jesus says. It’s a good word, of course, that as his people we are forever useful, so long as we are being used.

I love reading obituaries of really old people: how they loved cooking big family meals and crocheting baby blankets; how they had three favorite dogs in their lifetime; how one worked at RCA for 30 years and was also a farmer and a preacher. Friends, isn’t it just an amazing thing to be a human being? To be set upon the earth in a certain place and time, among a certain set of other people with whom we will live out our given span of days? And to have the opportunity to choose how we will spend this time?

We can make the space we occupy gentle or chaotic. We can be content or forever irritated. We can choose to be kind or be nasty, to reach out to others or to avoid them, to help people feel welcome and included, or as if they are mostly to be tolerated. We can spend every dime and moment on ourselves and our own agendas, or we can tune our lives to what others need that we might be able to provide, like those sweet boys on my porch twenty-five years ago this summer.

I am as aware as you that Jesus was telling his first audience so much more than this. That he was speaking religiously and politically. That he was unlocking the Bible they thought they knew to a way of life they had not yet imagined. They’d always read the Bible to find out how to love. He was showing that love teaches people how to read the Bible. They kept the rules hoping someday they would one day be counted as righteous. He told them that *one day was here and now* and righteousness was a way of life. Every-

thing they needed, they already had – in the Law and prophets, of course. But even more than that, in him.

That's Matthew's message, over and over and over again to folks whose country was upside down, ruled by a king and empire who seemed unstable on a good day. They never knew what to expect. Leaders of their own religion were in cahoots with the crazies in the government. And those religious leaders couldn't get along with each other. The more history we read, the more we know for sure that nothing really changes, does it?

Today I want to draw a difference between religious leaders and religious loudmouths, and it's the loudmouths who are making a public joke of our faith. Maybe it's for the best, I think. Once we've lost all public credibility, it will be up to each one of us to be salt or light in our own little circuits on the earth. We ought not wait and hope for a new Billy Graham or some other Mother Teresa, as if the jar of salt right here isn't full to overflowing with all manner of usefulness, to make life better for the people we already know.

Amen? Amen. Let's pray.