

TWO COSMIC CHARACTERISTICS

[You are the world's salt and the world's light]

Matthew 5:13-16

None of "The Sermon on the Mount" can be separated from the beatitudes; this lesson as well cannot be separated from the last two, especially. Note: Kingdom of Heaven is used only by Matthew. Jesus proposes to place His disciples, on an equal plane with the prophets gone before them. See vs. 10-12

Matt. 5:13 **You** are the salt of the earth. Jesus states an undeniable fact: His disciples are this salt. Whether or not they will serve effectively in that capacity, as good salt preserves meat from spoiling, will depend upon the fervor of their discipleship; however, there is no escaping the fact that they, because of their relationship to Jesus, are already this salt. **You**: is spoken to a group of peasants, small town folk, without reputation or standing, members of a small, haughty, exclusive, hated race. For the moment, Jesus looks at His disciples not as they were then, but at what ideally they could become and do. He was trying to get them to see in themselves the ability to transform the moral tone of their age! By calling them the "salt of the earth," He set before them the most positive, far-reaching program imaginable: preservation of the world from destruction! *Of the earth* is another hint of the universality of Jesus' gospel, because it looks beyond the confines of the Jews to all the nations under God's loving care. *You are the salt* is an unexplained metaphor. What's in common between the disciple and salt?

1. Salt preserves from decay.

This is a silent but implicit judgment regarding "*the earth*:" the actual condition of society is rotteness and corruption, a judgment verified in (**Gal. 5:19-21**). Salt acts on rotten meat as spiritual salt acts on rotten humanity. But salt does not preserve by acting upon itself: it preserves by being brought into contact with every square inch of that which will corrupt without it. Jesus' disciple is of little value to the community as long as his influence remains boxed up in a church building. The salt must be shaken out of the shaker. The contact of the spiritual salt must be scattered so as to affect every part of the decomposing neighborhood. Those who have no Christ-like influence outside the four walls of the local meeting place of the Church, drastically fails Jesus at this point.

2. Salt produces its effect secretly but surely without earth-shaking commotion.

Jesus wants a man whose personal purity CONTROLS the moral tone of any group in which he happens to be in. His very presence defeats the corruption of the morals of others. This corruption shows itself in the lowering of the standards of honesty, diligence in work, and integrity, to mention a few. Every saint of God must be a walking conscience whose conduct, character and conversation bring God's law right into the evil society. The disciples' seriousness of purpose points solemnly to the reality of the judgment. Basically, our Lord's people must be anchor-like conservatives who hold the line against the corrupting bacterias of every purportedly "new theology" and "new morality." Not only is our gospel vigorously opposed, but also our very presence in the world tends to make intellectual cowards of our enemies, since men have tended to acknowledge the Christian morality as right even if unwilling to live it. But Jesus has other plans for winning the battle: (**Matt. 28:18-20**) "**And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth...'**"

3. Salt retains its value only if it maintains its distinctive character.

"**But if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again?**" This is an ominous warning of the doom of the degenerate disciple, for Jesus speaks of one who has had but lost regenerate power.

A problem arises regarding the second part of Jesus' rhetorical question: How shall **WHAT** be made salty? the *earth*? or the *salt* itself?

- a. "But if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty *again*?" God wishes to use you to save this world from its headlong plunge into moral rotteness and destruction, but if your moral stamina is exhausted, with what other means could He save it? **Eph 3:9-10** and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; (10) in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*.
No other gospel can substitute God's plan of redemption in Christ; likewise, no social uplift organization can fill the gap left by a degenerate Church.
- b. "But if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty *again*?" Modern, purified salt does not lose its quality; But Jesus was describing salt that His hearers knew only too well, "Dead Sea, Palestinian Salt." It came chiefly from the crystals gathered from the residue of evaporated water taken from the Dead Sea. It is said that this salt changed flavor if other salts other the sodium filtered into it. Exposure to the sun and too much rain also changed it. At that point it might look like salt, but it fails to do what good salt does. "Once lost, salt's distinctive character and usefulness cannot be restored." A degenerate disciple, or any group of them, is of no use to God and cannot be restored to their former character unless they repent and turn to Him who constituted them salt in the first place. This exception is an important difference between the literal and spiritual salt, since the former cannot repent. Jesus is not teaching the impossibility of repentance on their part, but the impossibility of someone else renewing them to their original state. Christ is the only source of the salt.

The lesson is clear: God's plan to use good salt to preserve the earth in righteousness has been thwarted by every case of tasteless salt. And **YET**, what is it good for?

"It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men." Here is the tragedy of uselessness: the catastrophe hides in the fact that the degenerate disciple does not even sense his failure before men and his uselessness to God. Luke (14:34, 35) uses this same figure of speech, but adds this interesting detail: **(Luke 14:35) "It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out..."** Many things which have become corrupt or decomposed are useful for making fertilizer to throw on the land. But tasteless salt destroys fertility wherever it be thrown. The only place left for it is the roadway where fertility is no problem. The fraudulent, faithless Church or individual member who refuses or neglects his duty to labor to preserve the morality of the community is contemptible in the eyes of that same community. He also undermines future efforts of genuine Christians! Not only is this a failure which is bad enough in itself, but it is a failure which embarrasses the valiant efforts of others.

4. Let us briefly notice some of the warning signals of salt losing its savor:

1. When there is a loss of distinction between the Christian and the world he is supposed to save.
2. When we find a Church or Christian that maintains the forms of religion.
3. The purpose of salt is to preserve from corruption every square inch of that with which it contacts.

5:14 You are the light of the world.

Christ Jesus Himself is the only true Light of this world. **(John 8:12)** Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life."

His disciples, according to Jesus' metaphor here, do not merely reflect His light, but burn as lamps lit from His fire. (John 12:36) "While you have the light, believe in the light, in order that you may become sons of light."...

1. **Light makes *sight* possible in the darkness.** Darkness is often used in the NT to mean:
 - a. Ignorance which is the lack of opportunity to learn, or the failure to see the connections. **John 9:39** And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."
 - b. Moral perversity which refuses to admit truth which condemns it: **John 3:19-20** "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men **loved** the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. (20) "For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.
 - c. The state resulting from ignorance and unwillingness to learn the truth: **John 1:5 [AMP] And the Light shines on in the darkness, for the darkness has never overpowered it [put it out or absorbed it or appropriated it, and is unreceptive to it].**

Therefore, the *light* that is intended to **give sight** to darkness is primarily the revelation of God Himself seen in the face of Jesus; secondarily, the disciples of Jesus who are being changed into His glorious likeness from one degree of brilliance to another, becoming as His kind of light and capable of **illuminating** as He did. **2 Cor 3:18** But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed [*met-am-or-fa'-o*] into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

Here's the game plan: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." [1 Tim 4:16]

The gospel calls evil and worthless almost everything that the worldly man thinks valuable. The worldly man can react in one of three ways: he can humble himself and accept his condemnation and be saved to walk in the light too, or he can ignore the gospel claims, or he may do all within his power to turn off the light and crush its source.

2. **But light cannot help if not placed in a prominent position.**

5:14b "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." The city and the hill have no particular significance except as the one serves to make the other visible. All Jesus means by this is that the Christian, by his attitudes and actions, will be a man who stands out in a crowd. Jesus declares: "You just cannot hide the obvious!" **Matt 5:15** "Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house.

The word (*modios-moud dee os*) refers to a grain measure somewhat equivalent to our *peck* measure. At any rate, it is not intended for hiding lighted lamps! **On a hill . . . on the stand:** these phrases bespeak the most advantageous position for performing this greatly needed service. There is no secret discipleship here! There are no covert Christians here. There are too many who would retain much of their life for their own use. He knows that we are tempted to pretend not to be salt, so as not to irritate the rotting, selfish flesh around us, for such annoyance will mean persecution for us. It is a temptation to scurry about searching for anything that will hide our light, or to wish that our city were not so clearly visible. Here Jesus gently urges His hearers to count the cost of discipleship, for it will mean being in the public eye either for good or for ill. Later He will begin to put the pressure on. [See Matt. 10]

But why must the disciple **stand out** so publicly even if it means he will be an easy target for abuse? So that lost men may look up and see a Christian standing firm against the storm of life's uncertainties, take courage and rejoice that righteousness and true life are yet to be had. **Why stand?** Because some might repent and be saved because of the unadulterated Christian witness of one godly man who dared to stand. **Why stand?** Because in the message of Christ, Christians have wisdom that is indispensable for solving humanity's greatest questions.

Matt 5:16a "Let your light shine before men..."

Paul observes that anything we do is **conspicuous** to someone whether we wish it so or not. Therefore this is not a question of parading our virtues for men's admiration. But the museum of human history is quite cluttered with the wrecked lives of men and institutions who could not resist the temptation of **self-glory**. What motives will save the Lord's devotees from the same peril?:

1. The realization that the world, to which we are the light of God, is **LOST** and groveling in its darkness. The compassion of our heart will reach out to the lost to try and fix their predicament with the gospel **without seeking our own glory**. Further, if we see the world through Jesus' eyes as it really is: dishonest, corrupt, fickle and incapable of permanent satisfaction, then we will not seek its praise. **Rather, we will tend to see through its hollow applause.**
2. The true motive of our actions must be **"in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."** (Matt 5:16b)

The purpose of God, **in our light shining efforts**, is to allow any other intelligent being to see God in us as we live in a proper relationship with Him. The world is quick to sense hypocrisy and selfishness in those who profess devotion to the Master.

This means simply that the goal of our deeds must be to get them to glorify God because of what they see us do. We will need no bell-ringing or trumpet-blowing to call attention to our Christianity. Just the sheer novelty of a man practicing exactly what he preaches immediately focuses the world's gaze upon him. People usually begin an immediate and critical inspection of his life to see if he really is all that he would have them become. ***[You are the world's salt and the world's light]***

"Two Cosmic Characteristics"

God's got all of His eggs in one basket; we are the eggs!