

SALTY CHRISTIANS – MATT. 5:13

Feelings were high as Eusebius accused his neighbor before the Roman Tribunal. You could feel the tension in the air of the courtroom. Eusebius' neighbor had violated a trust that was not tolerated in the ancient Roman Empire. He had snuck into Eusebius' house and stolen the most valuable possession of his neighbor. No, it was not Eusebius' treasury of gold, but it might as well have been. For this valuable commodity was just as valuable as gold. In fact it was traded ounce for ounce with gold. As Eusebius presented his evidence, you could sense the mood of the court turning against the neighbor. There would be no mercy – for this kind of treachery could not be tolerated in the Roman Empire.

It didn't take long for the verdict to come in. Guilty – on all counts. The penalty would be severe – imprisonment for many years. All because a neighbor coveted what was not his. All because a neighbor violated Eusebius' personal property and took his most valuable possession. What was that possession that was as valuable as gold? It was not gem or a family heirloom. It was a tiny block of salt.

This fictitious story illustrates the value of salt in the Roman Empire. For during the time when our Savior lived on this earth, salt was traded ounce for ounce with gold. The major Roman highway in Palestine was called the Via Salaria – literally, the salt road. It had been engineered originally for the expressed purpose of transporting salt from the Dead Sea region throughout the Roman Empire. The Roman soldiers who routinely transported that salt in a guarded caravan were given a salarium – literally, money given to carry salt.

Most of us who receive a salary today don't associate it with salt but that is the derivation of the word. The Roman Statesman Cassiodorus made the observation, *Some seek not gold, but there lives not a man who does not need salt.*

Now it is vital that we see the critical importance of salt during Christ's days for we take salt for granted today. Salt is something that we can buy cheaply on any shelf in any grocery store in our country. Our country along with China are the 2 leading producers of salt in the entire world today. I looked at our salt container at home and it was marked 45 cents for a pound and a half. So salt is among the least expensive food items that we buy. Salt used to be difficult to mine – like coal or diamonds – but today well over half of the production of salt in our country comes from solution mining. There brine wells are holes drilled anywhere from 750 to 7,000 feet deep right into the middle of a salt deposit. Then water is forced into the deposit from a smaller pipe within a larger pipe. The water dissolves a good deal of salt before being pumped back up to the earth's surface in the larger pipe. That briny solution is then evaporated in vacuum pans and, voila, we have all the salt we need. The purer salt is further refined into the substance that we sprinkle on food, the more contaminated salt is used in chemical labs or to melt ice on roads. We have so much salt today that it literally sells for pennies an ounce. We take it for granted. We even gripe about it because it corrodes our cars. It is so easy for us to forget how valuable salt has been to our forefathers in history. As recently as 1825, the driving force in constructing the Erie Canal was the transportation of salt. If we didn't have salt, we would do anything to get it

because if we didn't have it, we would die. We would empty our bank accounts if necessary, we would work long hours digging in the earth if necessary, we would travel long distances if necessary, for while we can live without much of what we possess, we couldn't live for long without any salt.

So while it might be somewhat surprising and even a bit degrading today for someone to compare us to salt - for who wants to be compared to something worth pennies an ounce – it would have been a compliment for those who heard Christ's Sermon on the Mount to hear Him say, *You (my followers) are the salt of the earth*. Jesus began this great sermon delivered on a hill beside the sea of Galilee with a listing of the character qualities that would distinguish those who were true followers of Him, those born again into the family of God. Now before moving on to discuss a variety of other relevant subjects, Jesus uses 2 symbols to address the practical value of these character qualities to the world in which we live. Salt and Light were very common, practical symbols to describe the impact that God intends for His children to have in this world. We are entering the period of our missions emphasis this fall. This morning, we gave our missionary Christmas offering. On November 12 & 19, we are going to have two of our missionary families with us. So I thought it would be appropriate for us to prepare our hearts for this missionary emphasis by looking at these 2 very common symbols that Jesus used to picture the impact that He wants for each of us to have here in this community. This morning, we plan to look at the first of these – salt. Next week, the Lord willing we will look at the second of these – light.

It is always important for us to interpret any passage of Scripture in light of the historical and cultural context in order to grasp its intended meaning. But in light of our view of salt today, the way that we take it so for granted, it is especially important for us to try to see salt through the eyes of those who first heard Christ's words in order to understand why our Savior would use salt as a symbol to describe His followers. What thoughts would likely come into the minds of Christ's hearers as they first heard His words *you are the salt of the earth?*

Well, certainly, as we have already seen, these people would be affirmed in their realization of their importance here on this earth.

One of the enemies greatest attacks on the church is an attempt to degrade or minimize Christians. This is a relentless attack. Most often when Christians are portrayed in the media, they are shown as weak, ignorant, hypocritical people. Most often when Christians are written about in print, they are depicted as mindless robots who just follow the Word of God literally because they don't have the capabilities to think on their own. If another minority group is discriminated against, hundreds spring into action in defense. But if a Christian group is discriminated against, the general attitude is to let it go because after all, they are just Christians. We often forget that this is a carefully calculated and planned attack of the enemy. It is an attempt to minimize Christians, to get them to think that they are less important than they really are. And it often works. The dozens of subtle attacks that are relentlessly made each week add up. Many Christians feel beaten down, worthless, not important to society.

Jesus said, *We are the salt of the earth*. In saying that, Christ was indicating in part that this world could not function today as it does without the Christians that are in it. Our nation would not be the world-power that it is today without the citizens who are Christians living in it. Just as a human body cannot function properly without salt intact, as small a percentage as salt is to the human body – only about 8 ounces in the average human body, so this world would be a vastly different place if there were no followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in it even though true believers make up a small minority of the population. The difference between Sodom and Jerusalem was not in population or industry or raw materials. If anything, Sodom situated on the southern edge of the Dead Sea, had much more going for it in industry and raw materials than Jerusalem did. Sodom had great potential in every area except for one. Sodom didn't have enough righteous people in it. So Sodom imploded, first morally in its citizens and then literally with fire and brimstone. Jerusalem has remained one of the oldest living cities in the entire world.

Following this church age, the Bible says that a period of intense Tribulation is going to descend here upon this earth. Unless these days are shortened, Jesus Himself said, this earth would not be able to survive this period of time. There is just one difference between today and the Great Tribulation that is to follow in human history. Before the tribulation occurs, we believe the salt is going to be removed. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica:

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead

in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess. 4:16-17)

After this event that we call the rapture of the church, we believe this world is going to enter a 7 year period of tribulation. I would encourage you to look around yourself at the world that we live in today, then read the biblical account of what the world is going to be like during the Great Tribulation and then ask yourself the question – is the church important in the world today?

Jesus told His followers that they were the salt of the earth. Part of what he was emphasizing was their indispensable nature to this world. This world would just not be the same without the Christians who live in it, without believers interceding before the Throne of God Himself on its behalf, without disciples of Christ in the marketplace dealing honestly and truthfully, setting a standard of righteousness in this fallen and sinful world.

But let's move now to a second point. Without question when these people heard Christ say that they were the salt of the earth, they would think of salt's medicinal and preserving features.

You see, these farmers and fishermen knew all about using salt as an agent of preservation. Now we don't normally use salt in this way although we still could. But we have refrigerators and freezers that preserve our food without adding that salty flavor. But these people didn't have chest freezers in their homes. When a fisherman toiled all night out on the sea of Galilee, he would sell what he could the next day. But whatever he didn't sell wouldn't last long

out in that hot, Palestinian sun unless he salted those fish down. Especially the fish that were shipped down to Jerusalem and other Judean cities – for there was a huge market for fish down there – but they had to be salted down first. One of the gates of the city of Jerusalem is called the Fish Gate. That’s because fish were brought and sold there. Now nobody is going to buy smelly fish that are half rotten from sitting under a hot sun for several days. But when the fish were salted, they would be preserved. And it wasn’t only fish that salt was used on. When farmers slaughtered a sheep or goat, the meat that wasn’t eaten immediately would be salted. And salt was used for all kinds of medicinal purposes as well. That’s why it was so valuable in these days. Salt was more than just a food additive to bring flavor to meals eaten, it was the refrigerator, freezer and medicine cabinet of Jewish homes as well.

Near Hutchinson, Kansas is the world’s largest warehouse. Despite the fact that there is no other warehouse anywhere that comes anywhere near it in size, this warehouse is completely invisible unless you are inside it. It is called the Underground Vaults and Storage Company. This single warehouse includes 300 acres of storage bays. But located some 650 feet below the earth’s surface, it actually is a worked out portion of an old salt mine.

Right now, there are a couple of bags of seed from almost all our seed companies down there. Every year when a new strain of seed is developed, the seed companies send a couple of bags to the Underground Vault and Storage Company for safe keeping. Most of the originals of the classic movies that Hollywood has produced are down there. *Gone with the Wind*, the old silent movies – they are all there, some 100,000 reels in all. Antique books are down

there, many fur coats, stamp and coin collections. Michael Gingerish, the warehouse director, gives a written guarantee that his company will store a bride's wedding gown for 25 years and that gown will be in the exact same condition for the original bride's daughter to wear on her wedding day. And then if the daughter wants, he will give another written guarantee for the next generation. There are wedding gowns at the Underground Vaults and Storage Company that have been there for generations.

Now how can they be so confident in giving out these guarantees. You see, they have worked around salt long enough to know its preserving powers. Salt preserves against corruption.

Not only does salt act as a preserving agent, but it also has extraordinary medicinal powers. It was common in Jesus' day for a small amount of salt to be dissolved in water as a disinfectant. The water would then be used to cleanse cuts or wounds. A study done on healthy work environments in Puerto Rico found the salt mine to be the best place to work in the whole country. There were no cases of lumbago or rheumatism recorded. Workers gave testimony of cuts or wounds literally healing up overnight. The workers even had a notably less instance of common colds and flu. All because they worked in an environment that was naturally disinfected – a salt mine.

Now when Jesus said that His followers were the salt of the earth, He was symbolizing their preservation and medicinal powers. Just as a butchered animal is a lifeless carcass, so this world is dead in trespasses and sins, a lifeless carcass spiritually rotting away. And just as salt rubbed into the meat of that lifeless animal can arrest its decomposition so that the meat will not

spoil immediately but be useful for weeks and months to come, so Christians can have a similar influence in this world, saving it from complete disintegration, preserving it from the natural consequences of sin and wickedness.

Now 2 things must be true if Christians as salt are to accomplish this kind of work. First, followers of Christ must be distinct from the world. That's why Jesus said if the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. Salt must remain distinct from the meat in order to have any preserving powers. You can rub two pieces of meat together and they will just decay faster. But when salt is rubbed into the meat, the preserving work begins. The salt, however, must remain distinct from the meat; it must maintain its distinctive nature. So followers of the Lord Jesus Christ must walk closely with the Lord, growing in His likeness and character if they are to have His intended affect in this world. Frankly, one of the major reasons why our society has slipped so quickly morally and ethically in recent years is the simple fact that too many Christians have become too much like the world. If you listen to a lot of music that claims to be Christian today, you can't really tell it from secular music. If you walk into many churches today, you would think you were walking into the VanAndel auditorium. If you see many Christian's lifestyles today, you wouldn't see any difference from their unbelieving co-worker. The mantra of many professing followers of Christ today is that we must relate in order to be effective. Be so much like the world that the world feels comfortable. But in

many cases, the salt has lost its saltiness. The salt has lost its distinctive nature. There is no difference anymore. The power of the salt is gone.

But followers of the Lord Jesus Christ must not only be distinct from the world, they must also be in contact with the world. Salt does not perform its function unless it comes into contact with the meat. You can put the meat on one side of the barn and salt can be sitting on the other side, and the meat will rot on the hook if the salt is not rubbed into it. Even when it's rubbed into the meat, it continues to remain distinct from the meat, but it must come into contact with the meat in order to be effective.

Now there are 2 extremes that Christians have often chosen historically. One is to become just like the world in order to relate. When this happens, the salt usually loses its saltiness and is good for nothing. But the other extreme is just as bad. Many Christians out of fear of being contaminated by the world withdraw into little Christian communities where they cease having any contact with the world at all. So they avoid all contact with non-Christians. This really shows a weakness and lack of faith of their part. And the end result is the same as the first extreme – there is no Christ-like influence on the world.

You see, if the salt maintains its distinct nature, the meat will not corrupt it, it will preserve the meat. The salt has much greater power in it than a decaying slab of meat. So a Christian living for the Lord with the power of God flowing from within will have an influence of the world around him. But he must be both distinct from the world and be in contact with the world. Jesus stated this balance in a brief statement describing His followers that they were to be in the world but not of the world.

Now the world is not looking for salt to be rubbed in its wounds. We have an expression – don't rub it in. This is a throwback to earlier days in our country's history when salt was used for antiseptic purposes. Salt was actually rubbed into cuts to kill germs. This stung, it was irritating. But it was necessary for greater health.

The wound of this world is sin. Rub salt into these wounds and it stings. It shouldn't surprise us that the world ridicules and persecutes Christians.

The folksy old preacher, Vance Havner, used to say, *We are not the sugar of the earth, nor the vinegar of the earth. We are salt. And we ought to be what we are. It's not up to us to make the salt non-irritating.*

There is a third emphasis that is not so readily apparent, but I just want to briefly mention it in closing this morning. As salt, Christians form a covenant people.

It was common during Biblical times to speak of a covenant of salt. In fact, the word *salt* in the Aramaic language is the same word for treaty or covenant. Even to this day, the Bedouin people who are nomadic shepherds in Palestine still carry on this tradition. If you are welcomed into a Bedouin's tent and offered food sprinkled with salt, you enter into a covenant of salt with that host. There is a promise on your part understood that you will not harm your host family or steal from him and it is understood on his part that he will protect you while you are a guest in his home. This covenant of salt was an important part of Biblical culture. It shows why hospitality was so emphasized and respected. It also helps to explain some otherwise difficult situations in the O.T. when such extremes were taken when guests of a home were threatened.

When Lot entertained the angelic beings in Sodom or the Levite was invited to stay with the old man in Gibeah in Judges 19, extreme measures to taken by the host to protect his guest because of this covenant of salt that was an important societal value back in these Biblical times. Even to this day in Persia, the word for traitor literally means one who is faithless to salt.

When a person becomes a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, he enters into a covenantal relationship with God and with all others who are members of God's family. There is a unity, a togetherness that only Christ can give. God calls members from a variety of backgrounds and personalities and races and abilities. They are bound together in a body, Christ's own body. God makes a promise to us to forgive all our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness so that we can fellowship with Him throughout all eternity and we make a commitment to become a follower, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Himself alluded to this covenantal relationship in Mark 9. Some of his disciples came up to him quite upset that someone else was performing some miracles in the name of Christ. They wanted Jesus to rebuke this maverick who was naming the name of Christ, but not following after him in the manner that they were. Christ's response to them was surprising. He said, *Do not stop him; no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me. For whoever is not against us is for us.* And then Jesus added these words, *Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourself, and be at peace with each another (Mark 9:39,40;50).*

Jesus here was obviously referring to this covenant of salt, an agreement made that brings unity and peace and protection and fellowship.

Now we don't have time to develop this further, but let me just wrap it all up as I conclude. Jesus said that His followers were the salt of the earth.

*Christians are indispensable to the earth as we know it. Just as we cannot live without salt, so this earth could not function as it does today without Christ's body here as salt.

*The way that Christians function is by acting as a preserving and medicinal element to the earth. Followers of Christ retard the corruption of sin and wickedness in this world. They do this by setting forth a standard of righteousness, they do this by being a conscience to this world, they do this by personally living righteous lives, they do this by function in this world while remaining distinct from it. Jesus has called us to be in this world, but not of this world.

*And we can only function as salt as we maintain this covenantal relationship that we have with the Lord Jesus Christ and with one another as fellow-members of His body. This is how we maintain our spiritual strength and power – through our union with Christ and our edifying fellowship with one another.