

Jesus Is Preaching Sermon Series
Salty Christians - Matthew 5:13-16
Jan. 15, 2023
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Is the world a ruder place these days? When I lived in Chicago I noticed a lot of rudeness, but I chalked that up to the geographical location and poor attitudes caused by bad weather and horrendous traffic and being a Cubs fan. But in my time here in Lexington, I've noticed that rudeness is universal and it keeps getting worse. The main difference between here and Chicago is that here we often finish our rude comments with, "Bless his heart." Like that makes it OK.

Some of this increased rudeness is intentional. You can see it in the way people treat hotel maids or wait staff. And, sadly, some of it is even perpetrated by Christians. I was driving recently on New Circle Road and I saw a car with a bumper sticker that said, "Honk if you love Jesus." I was able to read it so well because the person driving had just cut in front of me without using their turn signal. I bet they think I really, really love Jesus.

But some of our rudeness is unintentional. We don't mean to be rude, but our focus is in other places. As I was going into the drugstore this week, I held the door open for a lady who was talking on her phone. She didn't make eye contact or acknowledge my act of chivalry. No big deal. But I watched as she made her way into the store, went up and down several aisles, picked up a few items, took them to the counter, paid for them, got her change and left the store – all while still talking on her phone and not acknowledging those who were serving her. Was she intentionally disregarding the human beings around her? No, I don't think so. Was her behavior rude? You bet.

I think this distasteful human behavior is exactly what Jesus was getting at when he told the crowd listening to him that they were salt and light. These passages come near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which is the focus of our current sermon series. Jesus has just given the Beatitudes, a series of blessings for the world's underdogs, and he's about to launch into a reinterpretation the laws of Moses for this new era. But in between, he wants to remind the people listening that they have been put here on earth for a specific purpose, to help other people see the kingdom of heaven through them. And he uses two interesting metaphors to make his point.

First, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." In modern times, that phrase has come to mean someone who is decent, dependable, unpretentious, and uses their turn signal. The two funerals we've hosted here recently were for Virginia and Dan, and both of them were "salt of the earth" kind of people. While that's an admirable way to be known, that's not exactly what Jesus meant. In Jesus' time, salt had several important uses, and by calling his followers "salt" Jesus was drawing on the meaning of those functions.

First, salt was a purifier. We soak wounds in salt water because, while it burns, it also cleans and refines. The presence of salt has cleansing, purifying power. As salt, we are called to be the same. As one writer said, we are called to have an antiseptic influence on those around us. To be septic means to be infected. Something that is antiseptic is free of destructive or disease-causing bacteria. It is not infected by things around it. And it can purify whatever comes into contact with it.

I remember when I was first invited to join the new internet community known as Facebook. The invitation came from a college student at my former church. I joined and checked out his Facebook page, which included several pictures of this 19-year-old drinking at a college

party. So, I sent him a message saying, “You do realize your pastor is seeing these pictures, don’t you?” Now, I don’t pretend to think he stopped drinking, but he did take the pictures down, and I hope he thought about the kind of person he wanted to be. I wonder how many people think twice about what they post on Facebook knowing a pastor or church member might be looking?

In a world of horn-honking and cell-phone-induced apathy, we are called to be different. We are called to be the ones who give people a glimpse of God’s kingdom, a kingdom where everyone matters and are treated as such. We are called to talk about others when they are not around as we would hope they would talk about us when we’re not around. As one author said, “We should make it easy for people to be good when we’re present.” We are called to purify.

Salt was also used as a preservative. When stored with food, it would prevent bacteria from causing the food to decay. Because there was no such thing as freezers or shrink wrap, salt was crucial to helping provide food for people over a long period of time. Similarly, we pledge our faith to a story that is 2000 years old. Not many things that are 2000 years old are still relevant today. And even this story could die off if we let it. So, we are called to preserve it, not only by telling it each Sunday, but by living it each Monday. We are salt when our faith is active, alive, relevant, informing everything we do or say, preserving the gospel in our lives.

The last use of salt that Jesus draws upon here is salt as a flavor additive. Salt, when added to a food, draws out its natural flavors and enhances the dining experience. By calling us salt, Jesus is saying that our job is to enhance the living experience by drawing out the divine in the world around us, or as one writer said, “We are to serve as kingdom seasoning.”

This goes against how Christians have become known in our world. A lot of people think Christianity is bland and boring, that being a Christians means you can’t do anything fun, like drink or dance or watch R-rated movies. Is this right? Are you bland and boring? I don’t experience Crestwood as bland and boring. Instead, I think God is doing exciting things through us, and we are living our faith with joy and enthusiasm. Maybe salt isn’t the best metaphor these days. Maybe a better translation would be, “You are the smoking hot Jalapeno pepper of the earth!”

One important thing to note about salt as a seasoning: it doesn’t draw attention to itself. Have you ever been to a meal and heard someone say, “Wow, that’s some good salt! What brand of salt is this? We’ve got to get this recipe!” If salt is doing its job, no one notices it, but instead notices the flavors it evokes. If we are doing our job, we are not drawing attention to ourselves, but to the love and mercy of God in us. As the salt of the earth, we are to purify, to preserve and to provide flavor.

Jesus then goes on to call us the light of the world. This is significant because in John 8, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” SO, he is passing the torch of that title to his followers, calling them to radiate God’s love as he has done. He says since we have this light within us, the last thing we want to do is hide it. In Jewish households of the time, a candle would be the only source of light, yet it could easily light up the one-room structures in which they lived. The last thing you would want to do is hide it.

That highlights one of the dichotomies of this metaphor. First, the primary duty of a light is to be seen. If a light is shining, you can’t help but notice it. The only way to keep it from being seen is to hide it or extinguish it. Therefore, if we are to live the light that is within us, it should shine everywhere and in everything we do: in the way we treat the clerk at the counter, in the way we order our meal, in the way we drive our cars, in the language we use. We should not only be Christian in the church, but also in the store, the schoolroom, the kitchen and even –

gasp! – in the church parking lot and while watching UK basketball games. This Christian stuff is not always easy, is it?

And yet, even as we are called to let our lights shine so that others may see it, the end goal is not to draw people to us, because it's not our light. No one kindles their own light. This light we bear is not ours; instead, it is a reflection of Jesus, just as the moon reflects the sun's light. We are not the source of the light, we are the windows through which the light is seen. Just as salt doesn't draw attention to itself, so the light inside of us isn't meant to be used as a spotlight shining on ourselves, but as a flashlight guiding the path to Jesus. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, Jesus says. But...we're not. There are days when we are not salt or light, days when we tear down instead of build up, days we focus on ourselves instead of others, days when our attitude or our words add to the darkness. I get it. It's not always easy to be who God created us to be. There are times when our faith fades, our commitment wanes, we lose our saltiness, our light dims. God may take a backseat and our thoughts and actions are guided more by the world than the image of God inside of us. But Jesus doesn't say, "Try harder to be salt and light." He doesn't say, "You are like salt" or "You can become a light." He states, very plainly, "You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world." He names in us what he knows is already there, just waiting to be discovered and put to use.

The point is that it doesn't matter how confident we are in our beliefs or how faithful we are. You can't earn your saltiness. You are salt and light. Whether you're a life-long Christian, a seeker, an agnostic, a fence-sitter, a new believer...doesn't matter. We know plenty of people who attend church faithfully on Sunday and then act like world-class jerks on Monday. The decision isn't whether or not you are salt and light. The decision is what you're going to do about it.

The next time you have a chance to help someone, will you be salt and light? The next time someone starts to tell an offensive story, will you be salt and light? The next time someone wrongs you and asks forgiveness, or even doesn't ask for it, will you be salt and light? The next opportunity you have to criticize someone or assert your own way, will you be salt and light? Our world evokes from us rudeness, anger, self-righteousness. I saw a shirt the other day that said, "In a world where you can choose to be anything, be kind." This world so desperately needs kindness. It needs to be preserved from the sinfulness and evil that pervades it. It needs to be flavored by the fruits God gave us, things like grace and mercy and love. This world is so infected, so dark. Can anything be done? YOU are the salt of the earth. YOU are the light of the world.