

In an episode from the classic TV series from the 1960's, "The Andy Griffith Show," Andy Taylor, the sheriff of Mayberry, is out of town. His deputy, Barney Fife, is in charge, and he has deputized the local mechanic, Gomer Pyle. The two deputies are walking down the street one evening when they notice that someone is robbing the town's bank. They quickly duck behind a car. They are afraid and don't know what to do. Finally, Gomer looks at Barney and says excitedly, "Shazam! We need to call the police."

To which, in utter exasperation, Barney cries out: "We are the police!"

We could say the same thing about the church. We look around in this dark and troubled world and realize: *"We're the ones who have a privilege and a responsibility to do something!"*

For the last two Sunday's, we've worked through the *Beatitudes* – the attitudes that ought to be – the beginning of the Lord's *Sermon on the Mount*, where Jesus went up on a hill in Galilee, somewhere near Capernaum, and He taught those who hiked up the hill after Him. I imagine that thousands were there. Thousands of people – from all over the place – from all different kinds of backgrounds, with different kinds of struggles, hiked up this hill to hear about the kingdom of God, more specifically – how to enter into it and how to live in it. Jesus is up on a hill teaching about the kingdom – saying things they had never heard of before, and to set the tone for His sermon, Jesus zeroed in on matters of the heart.

Jesus went to the heart – He goes right to the core, where His focus was on a person's character – for a person's *character* motivates and guides their *conduct* – and then He finishes the *Beatitudes* with these words:

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Well, no one wants that kind of blessing, but because of Christ, because we identify with Him, because we follow Him, because we live in the way He wants us to live, Jesus explained this will create a negative reaction by those who live according to the principles and the values of this world – and let me say, that those of this world don't mind if we are doing good things as long as we stay hidden and silent when it comes to matters of truth, and sin, righteousness and judgment.

Don't make waves, don't stand up, don't speak up, don't make a difference, and don't try to be a godly influence, and that's precisely where Jesus leads us next.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 5** and we will begin with **verse 13** where Jesus says,

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”

In this verse, on the heels of teaching about character, Jesus makes a reference to **salt** – it's a metaphor – a figure of speech that people can relate to, and I need to remind you that when interpreting the Bible, especially when dealing with metaphors like this, we need to first understand what was being said back *then and there* before we can understand and apply what is being said to us in the *here and now*.

So, let's talk about **salt** for a moment, and what it meant to the people that Jesus was talking to back *then and there*. Someone has claimed that salt has 14,000 uses, and I don't know who said that, but whoever that was, they had way too much time on their hands. Anyway, out of mercy, I'm only going to talk about a few of the uses, and then I will get to the point I think Jesus was trying to make to His listeners.

In those days, **salt** was a necessity for everyone. To the people who were up on the hill with Jesus, they did not have refrigerators and freezers or ice makers, and in a hot climate such as they were in, they needed some way to preserve their food – such as fish and meat, to keep it from decay and spoiling, and so they would rub salt on the food or soak the food in a salt solution. That was a regular use of salt – it was used as a preservative in a time when fresh food was often unavailable.

Have you ever heard the phrase – **“That person is worth their weight in salt”**? There is a claim, that at some point in ancient Roman history, soldiers were sometimes paid with **salt** – it was used like we use money – it was accepted as pay, and it is said that our English word for *“salary”* can be traced back to the Latin word that means *“salt money”*. So, salt was a valuable commodity – valuable enough to use as compensation for a Roman soldier.

In those days, **salt** was also used as an antiseptic because it would kill germs. If a soldier was hurt in battle, if a farmer had cut himself, if a child fell down and

scraped his knee, salt would be applied to the wound to fight off infection – and kind of in the same vein, in **Ezekiel 16**, there is a reference about rubbing salt on newborn babies – using salt as a disinfectant.

Salt also spoke of friendship. According to ancient custom, a bond of friendship was established through the eating of salt. It was said that once you had eaten a man's salt, you were his friend for life. Now, out of that idea grew the concept of a *salt covenant*. Before the days of a notary, when two men entered into a business agreement, they would haggle until they had settled on the terms. Then they would eat salt or portions of food with salt on it to establish their contract – a contract that was not to be broken.

Now, just like today, **salt** was used to season food. Just a pinch makes food taste better – it enhances flavor, and for those who say *I'm not being health conscious*, my response is – *"I'm just being biblical"* for it was **Job** who asked, **"Can something tasteless be eaten without salt?"** Well, no – but of course, my wife would say, *"Well, Job didn't have Mrs. Dash in his day"* and before I respond to that, the words *"happy wife, happy life"* flash across my mind, and I stop right there.

So, with all of this knowledge about salt – and what I shared was not exhaustive – remember, someone claimed there were 14,000 uses for salt – so with all that said, **what was Jesus really saying to these people?** I mean, they could have been thinking about almost anything.

In my study, I read all kinds of answers to the question of **what was Jesus saying**, and most of the answers – and they were good answers, were associated with a specific use for salt, generally suggesting that Jesus was talking about salt as a being a preservative – and God's people through their character and conduct are to slow down the moral and spiritual decay in this troubled world. Now, I can't argue with any of that, but Jesus did not get specific like that – and I think maybe that's the point.

Jesus said, **"You are the salt of the earth."** **So, who were these people?** These people who hiked up the hill to listen to Jesus thought the kingdom of God was out of reach. They could not keep up with the legalistic system imposed upon them by the self-righteous religious leaders who were supposedly representing God. These people were told they were worthless – they weren't important – they were useless, but up on the hill, when speaking about those in the kingdom, Jesus called them

“**salt**” of all things – something widely known by everybody for being important and valuable and useful in so many ways – in effect I think Jesus was saying this:

“You thought you were nothing, but in the kingdom, you are everything to God. You are the salt – that’s who you are, you’re that important, you’re that valuable, you’re that useful, and because that’s who you are, then be who you are – just like salt, make a difference in whatever you touch – be a godly influence in the lives of people around you.”

That’s what this is about: making a difference, being an influence, being a godly influence in a fallen world, and speaking of being an influence, Jesus goes on to say,

“but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”

This is a difficult statement to understand because **salt** – sodium chloride, which is a very stable chemical element, does not lose its saltiness, but it can be diluted or contaminated with other minerals to the point that it becomes tasteless, and I think that’s what Jesus means here.

As salt, we are to influence the world around us instead of being influenced by it, but if we become diluted and contaminated by the principles and the values of this world, then we cannot function as God intended – and instead of being used as pure salt fit for the table, our influence becomes nothing more than salt that is thrown on an icy sidewalk.

A woman once wrote the editor of Christianity Today with this story: “One afternoon, my four-year-old niece Paige and my six-year-old daughter Ashley started an argument, which grew louder and louder. I was about to intervene when my daughter stormed down the stairs. “Mom,” she yelled, “Jesus wants us to be the salt of the earth and Paige is being the pepper!”

You are the salt of the earth. **Are you being who you are meant to be?** And, with that question, let’s continue on beginning with **verse 14**.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in

such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

In this passage, this time using the metaphor of **light**, Jesus speaks to the people in a way they would certainly understand.

In those days, when people traveled at night, they depended on the glow of the oil lamps in the windows of houses to help direct them, and when cities were built on a hill, the glow of these lights could be seen from a great distance. For those who were out in the Sea of Galilee, those who were fishing at night when the fishing was good, they could navigate using the moon and the stars, but if the sky was overcast, they could find their way by using the shining lights of the city.

Men don't light an oil lamp just to put it out, instead they put it on a lampstand to shine. Everybody knew it was the nature of **light** to shine, and just as true, it is also the nature of those in the kingdom to shine as well. Jesus said, **"You are the light of the world"** and I need to clarify that a bit. In **John 8:12**, Jesus said,

"I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."

Here, Jesus said He is the Light, but He just told the people on the hill they were the light, **so how are we to understand this?** Well, when putting this all together, Jesus is the Light, and those who follow Him, are reflections and bearers of His light to make God visible in a very dark world.

Think back to the creation story in **Genesis**. On the first day, God said **"Let there be light" and there was light**. So, there was light – God just made it, and it's not until we get to the fourth day, that God created the sun, the moon, and the stars.

So, there was already light on the first day, it was already present, and the sun and the moon and the stars in heaven were to bear the light. God set it up this way, it functions this way, and likewise, for those in Christ, for those who follow Him, we are to be light bearers – reflections of Christ, bearers of spiritual and moral light in a world of darkness. Jesus says in **verse 16**,

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Let your light shine by your character and your conduct so that you draw attention to God rather than to yourself. You are the light of the world.

Author Robert Fulghum tells this story of one of his professors, a wise man whose name was Alexandros Papaderos.

Papaderos was born on the island of Crete. During the Second World War, his hometown was destroyed by the Nazis, and as a child, he was sent to a concentration camp. After the war, Papaderos was determined to be a force for peace and forgiveness. He studied theology in the Orthodox church and in 1965, he opened an institute designed to promote peace and reconciliation. He located it at Maleme, the site where German paratroopers landed and one of the wars worst atrocities was unleashed. The paratroopers met resistance from islanders bearing nothing other than kitchen knives and hay forks, and the consequences of their resistance was devastating. The residents of entire village were lined up and shot.

One day while taking questions at the end of a lecture, Papaderos was asked, "What's the meaning of life?" There was nervous laughter, and as people stirred to leave the classroom, Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room.

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter, and what he said went something like this:

"When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light truth, understanding, knowledge is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world into the black places in the hearts of men and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of life.”

And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” and as His followers, we are to be like that little mirror, reflecting the light of Christ into the dark corners of the world. That is the meaning of the Christian life.

Jesus did not say, “*become the salt or become the light.*” No, He said “*You are the salt. You are the light.*” That’s who you are in Christ and it implies that you are to have an influence – not so that people will glorify you, and let’s be honest, we like that – but in light of what God has done for you – you want Him to get the glory and the honor and the praise.

How often have you said or heard someone say that they have known a person for many years and just discovered they were a Christian?

What’s wrong with that picture?

If we cannot recognize our own brothers and sisters in Christ by their character and their conduct, then how can we expect those who are lost in darkness to do it?

So, in the context of influence, **salt** is good for nothing if it’s diluted or contaminated, and **light** is good for nothing if it’s hidden; therefore, it begs the question: Do those who know you – know that you know Jesus?

Listen, before we can influence others as God intends, we must be under His influence – seeking His will and direction, following where He leads, and being where we’re supposed to be so God can use us. And one more thing, if you are following God’s lead, understand that someone is probably following you.

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