

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 10: The Salt of the Earth

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Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Mt. 5:13-16).

After giving a series of bold and daring benedictions on what a disciple is and the great blessing that attends following Christ, Jesus next turns His attention to two metaphors regarding how the disciples should affect the world. The last beatitude forms a smooth transition to this new topic, for it describes how the world is going to treat believers, especially the apostles or preachers. Our Lord almost seamlessly moves from what the unbelieving world will do to them, to what the disciples will do for the world. While people of this world will hate and persecute the disciples, their message and lives will transform, enlighten and preserve the world from evil. By way of introduction there are a number of things to note regarding this section of Scripture.

First, Jesus picks metaphors from everyday life which everyone would immediately relate to and understand. Salt is one of the most common, familiar and necessary substances used by man. Indeed, in the ancient world man could scarcely live without it. In a culture without electricity the illumination from a lamp was greatly appreciated. Christ took these common things and used them as metaphors for Christian behavior. These vivid metaphors would never be forgotten.

Second, although Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount is the only place that we find the metaphors of salt and light side by side, Jesus obviously used these same terms in similar ways throughout His teaching ministry. When the Savior taught on the cost of discipleship in Luke's gospel, He ended with this statement: "Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (14:34-35). In Luke 8:16 after the parable of the sower and the different soils, Jesus uses the metaphor of a lamp on a lampstand in reference to His own teaching (cf. Lk. 11:33). In Mark's gospel the Redeemer's warning about not being salty is given after His solemn warning regarding hell. "For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another" (9:49-50). Mark's statement of the lamp parallels Luke's and follows the parable of the soils (Mk. 4:21).

Third, the structure of this section is beautiful and, like the beatitudes, almost poetic. For example, the two declarative statements regarding salt and light are exactly parallel in form: "the salt of the earth" is parallel to "the light of the world." "The discussion following each maxim is

parallel in content, though not in form, focusing on the uselessness of salt that is not salty and light that is hidden.”¹

Fourth, in this pericope, the stated mission of the disciples is rooted in what they already are as Christians. Christ does not say, “You ought to be salt and light” or “I am commanding you to be salt and light,” but “You are salt and light.” The word “you” is placed forward for emphasis: “You and you alone are salt and light.” Jesus states a fact which is true of every Christian. “[A]ll believers are salt; their very faith makes them salt, and if they are not salt they are not believers.”² The only imperative used in this whole section is found at the end in verse 16 (“Let your light shine”) as a statement of application of what precedes. The imperative is implied and rooted in the indicative. Salt by nature is salty and preserves meat. Light by nature pushes back the darkness. What a Christian is determines what he does or how he leads his life.

Fifth, the majority of older commentators apply this section directly to the apostles and through them all teaching officers thereafter. This interpretation is inferred from the switch to the second person plural in verses 11 and following; the general context (the Redeemer has recently called His disciples and told them that from now on they would be fishers of men [Mt. 4:19]); the comparison of His listeners with the prophets in persecution (the apostles were the inspired counterpart of the Old Testament prophets); and, the association of “light” in Scripture with the gospel (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:4; cf. 4:6. In other words, the apostles were spreading the truth of the gospel in a unique and powerful manner as public preachers; etc.). While these things may point in the direction of the apostles, there is certainly nothing explicit or clear which so restricts the scope of this passage. Further, it certainly applies to all the Christian hearers even though the apostles and ministers after them are to have a greater role in leavening society with the gospel.

The Salt of the Earth

Jesus begins the section by describing the disciples as “the salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13). As we consider this statement we need to answer a number of questions. First, what does our Lord mean by salt? How would the disciples understand this term? Second, what is meant by the word earth? Obviously, the meaning of this term will instruct us as to how to understand Christ’s metaphor. Third, what are the implications of this statement?

First, regarding the term salt there is no fixed metaphorical meaning to be found in the Old Testament. However, in Scripture and the ancient world, salt’s most prominent uses would be as a cleansing or purifying agent, a preservative against corruption or decay and as a flavoring agent for food.

The Jews would associate salt with purification or cleansing in that salt was a key ingredient in the cereal offering (Lev. 2:13). “This *salt* indicates *corruption removed and prevented*; and in the case of the meat offering, it is as if to say, *Thy body and thy substance are become healthy now*; they shall not rot.”³ Salt was added as an ingredient to the sacred incense and is linked with the qualities “pure and holy” (Ex. 30:35). When the water in Jericho was bad and caused the land to be unfruitful, Elisha cast salt into the spring of water to heal it (2 Kgs. 2:20-23). Salt here symbolized the removal of corruption. In Ezekiel 16:4 we are told of how the Israelites would normally bathe a newborn in water and then rub him with salt. This was part of the cleansing process. “The idea of purification is prominent in Mark 9:49 where the Lord says

¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 98.

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 199.

³ Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus*, 45.

that in the final judgment ‘everyone will be salted with fire.’”⁴ “Although Jesus’ saying is cryptic, it is probable that it originally was a metaphor describing the process of purification, or purging, through which everyone must pass in order to gain entry into the kingdom of God.”⁵

The world or earth is full of sin, uncleanness, impurity and defilement. The disciples’ ministry will act as a cleansing agent and antiseptic on an ethically darkened and filthy planet. If a Christian is to be salt to this earth, then he must live as an example of purity and he must spread the good news of the gospel—that Jesus Christ by His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection removes the guilt (justification) and power (sanctification) of sin. Thus, the statement, “You are the salt of the earth,” is equivalent to: “As Christians you are the instrument for bringing salvation and it effects upon this corrupt world.”

Closely related to our preceding point is salt’s use as a preservative. Before the invention of refrigeration, the only method for preserving meat and fish was to rub salt into it to kill the bacteria and keep the meat from spoiling. The ancients did not know why salt worked; they just knew that it did. It preserved meat from decay or corruption. Thus, our Lord’s statement is a call upon Christians to counteract the growing ethical corruption of mankind. This statement not only presupposes that the fall of Adam has rendered mankind spiritually dead and totally depraved, but also that, if unregenerate men are left to themselves, their corruption will grow worse and worse. This reminds us of what happened before the flood when only one family served God and there was no restraining influence upon mankind. Mankind grew so foul, rotten and corrupt that God washed this filth off the earth with the flood. “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (Gen. 6:11-12).

Salt is the great purifier and preservative. It combats filth and deterioration. Thus this metaphor of salt is being used primarily in its negative or counteracting function. This small band of peasant disciples and all those who follow in their footsteps are given the great responsibility of setting back and conquering the moral and spiritual corruption of this world. We must remember that our Lord’s emphatic statement assumes that all true Christians, or a faithful church, by nature accomplishes this task. If we are true to our calling, we will make the world spiritually a purer, less rotten place.

Salt was also used to flavor food. Without salt food is bland, insipid and undesirable. If this use of salt is part of the meaning of our Lord’s metaphor, then Jesus is saying that believers’ doctrine and example will season the world, making it more acceptable and inoffensive. This is likely Paul’s use of the term in Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:6). The world is tasteless and unpalatable in God’s sight. But if it is thoroughly seasoned with the salt of heavenly doctrine, then it will be flavored with holiness, with people whose faith and life are pleasing to God. As Job so eloquently asked, “Can flavorless food be eaten without salt? Is there any taste in the white of an egg? My soul refuses to touch them; they are loathsome food to me” (6:6-7).

Second, the word “earth” clearly represents the whole world of fallen man enslaved and corrupted by sin. Our Lord uses the term earth in the same sense as Genesis 6:11: “The earth was corrupt before God.” By this term is meant the whole human race or men of every nation, tribe, tongue or family that is not Christian. When Jesus uttered these words the whole world of men was a mass of moral wickedness, rottenness and stench. Rank paganism, idolatry, sexual perversion, violence and vices of every kind overstretched the whole earth. Apart from

⁴ J. H. Bratt, “Salt” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:220.

⁵ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 73.

Christianity and its effects on men today, our era is no different. The world is unbelieving. It continually suppresses the truth about God and is ravaged by sin and ethical decay. This passage tells us very explicitly what God thinks of unbelieving humanity. It is compared to a dead carcass that is rotting and growing more foul and disgusting day by day. The world, apart from Christ, is perishing. The seeds of its corruption, disorganization and ruin are part of its very fabric. All unsaved mankind is regarded by Jehovah as rotting garbage that is in desperate need of the salt of the gospel. And without Christ this foul mass of moral rotteness will be cast into the garbage pit of human history—Gehenna or the pit of hell—the place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Third, there are a number of things that are taught or implied by the Savior's statement at the beginning of verse 13.

(1) The Lord's statement assumes that the gospel will be carried by His disciples not only to Israel, but also to the whole world. The fall has corrupted the inhabitants of the entire earth. Therefore, the remedy for sin and corruption must be carried to the four corners of the globe. This was a radical statement to a first century Jew. The salt is to be offered to all men without exception.

(2) Jesus' statement presupposes that there is a great antithesis between believers and unbelievers. The non-Christian life is one of ethical rotteness. An unbeliever is guilty before God and his life is one of continued enslavement to sin and corruption. Because he is spiritually blind, he lives in darkness and his whole life is characterized by idolatry and sin. The believer, however, has been salted with the gospel. His life and worldview is one of healing, of stopping corruption. He is different from everybody else because God has changed him. His priorities all rotate around Jesus Christ and not his own selfish pleasures. The gospel has conquered the principle of ethical rot in his life. Therefore, the relationship of the Christian to the world is not one of compromise or accommodation, but rather loving confrontation. The salt is separate from and very different than the meat and it needs to be rubbed into the meat to be effective.

(3) Christ's maxim teaches that, although the believer is to be separate from the world ethically (that is, he is not to be *of* this world), yet he is to be very active in this world. This passage refutes the error of monasticism, that a true dedicated spiritual life can best be attained by separating oneself from society. This was the ideal in the days of the church fathers and especially the Middle Ages. The church at that time believed that holiness would result from a radical physical separation for prayer, contemplation and spiritual exercises. Our Lord, however, implies that the salt must be vigorously rubbed into the putrefying meat in order to purify it and preserve it. Christians must try to save the world, not remove themselves from it.

Jesus' statement also refutes the rather modern doctrine of rapture fever which teaches that the church's great hope is to escape this world with a secret pre-tribulation rapture. Modern dispensational premillennialism has essentially adopted the position that the world is getting worse and worse and thus there is no reason to try and change it. Rather, our task is to pluck out a few souls with evangelism and wait for the great escape, the secret rapture of the saints. This retreatist theology contradicts the Savior's salt metaphor which teaches that the church must engage the world and try to purify it and preserve it. It also contradicts the Great Commission where Christ commands the apostles to disciple whole nations. The salt of the gospel is to permeate the meat and not be placed on the shelf.

Further, the Redeemer's teaching contradicts all unbiblical forms of pietism; that is, the rather common idea that the state (i.e. civil rulers, judges, bureaucrats, police, military, etc.) and all earthly institutions are to be left in the clutches of the devil while believers go to church and

pray. In other words the penetrating, purifying power of salt is restricted to a few individuals while civil governments, schools and businesses are to remain pluralistic in their worldviews and must not explicitly commit themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord. Professing Christians who hold to this view will appeal to the U. S. Constitution or to natural law or to pragmatic considerations based on a pessimistic eschatology. But, our Lord's salt metaphor teaches that a salty church, a dynamic biblical Christianity, always has societal and cultural effects. The man who really becomes a Christian will vote, educate and do business as a Christian. The salt of the gospel and the biblical worldview penetrate and purify every aspect of that man's life.

In addition, the Savior's doctrine refutes some of the teachings that have come from the Christian Reconstruction movement. That is, the Reconstructionist idea that nations and peoples will be attracted to the justness and practicality of God's moral law in the Bible and consequently the law will salt nations apart from the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. However, the biblical concept of purification and preservation assumes a work of the Holy Spirit on the heart and a belief in the gospel. The metaphor of the disciples as the salt of the earth must be connected to the Great Commission and the church's job of preaching the gospel to every creature. Our Lord's metaphor teaches that the gospel in all its fullness is the only way to stop the putrefaction of this earth.

(4) Our Lord's instruction assumes that, apart from the salt of the gospel, all man-made schemes of utopia, or an earthly paradise, are doomed to failure. After the elites of the western powers abandoned the Christian worldview, there was a great sense of optimism among humanists. Without religious superstition (they thought) and with the amazing strides of science, technology, medicine, agriculture, industry and education it was only a matter of time until poverty, warfare, illiteracy, disease and conflict were conquered. This view was widespread among western intellectuals during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. But, this secular humanistic fantasy came crashing down with two bloody world wars, the inhumanity of communism, the holocaust and the other horrors of the twentieth century. Virtually no secular intellectuals speak about such a utopia anymore. The reason for this is simple. The earth of fallen man is a putrefying pile of filth without Christ. While the achievements of science and technology may make our lives more comfortable physically and they may increase our lifespan, they cannot change the heart of man which is evil, black and depraved. There is far more immorality and vice today in Western nations (adultery, homosexuality, unlawful divorce, lying, Sabbath desecration, idolatrous materialism, abortion, etc.) than there was one hundred years ago. There is only one solution to the ethical decay and debauchery of this world and that is Jesus Christ and the gospel. "The world is bad, sinful and evil; and any optimism with regard to it is not only thoroughly unscriptural but has been falsified by history itself."⁶

How Does the Salt Work?

Having noted how the disciples would have understood the metaphor of salt, we need to ask how believers work as salt upon this earth or wicked mass of humanity. The key to answering this question lies in the meaning of the metaphor itself.

First, the Christian is to purify. This means that believers speak the gospel to others and live in a manner consistent with that message. The Bible teaches that true purity of sanctification

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:152.

before God occurs only when a sinner believes in Jesus, is justified and then is renewed and delivered from the pollution of sin by the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, "For he who has died [with Christ] has been freed from sin" (Rom. 6:7). Believers must confess the Savior before men and be willing to speak to others about the gospel, for that is the only way people are saved. And, once saved, people are further purified subjectively by the Holy Spirit's application of God's Word to the heart. "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). "You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit..." (1 Pet. 1:22). Thus, the church's primary task is to preach the gospel and disciple the nations by teaching them the whole counsel of God.

This is certainly how the apostles and evangelists salted the Roman Empire. They went about preaching the gospel, establishing churches and indoctrinating new believers in the truth. They did not start a political movement to attempt to force change on a pagan culture. Neither did they form protests and marches against vices such as prostitution or slavery. They sought to purify from the inside out instead of the outside in. They were not satisfied until hearts were changed by the gospel, for such change brings sincere, true purity and spirituality. They changed the wicked, rotting heathen Roman Empire one soul at a time.

Does this mean that the church must not be involved in politics or get involved in social issues such as abortion or homosexual rights? No. The church can and should petition the government, present biblical position papers on crucial issues and raise important questions from the standpoint of the biblical worldview in the public square. But, we must not get side tracked in these areas and neglect the spread of the gospel, because cultural and societal putrefaction can ultimately only be stopped by the gospel. Unbelievers are not going to accept the ethics of Scripture until they first embrace the lawgiver. The heart of unbelieving man is wedded to human autonomy. The unregenerate person does not want to be told what to do or how to lead his life by God. But if his heart is regenerated by the Holy Spirit and he bows the knee in humble submission to the Lord, he will gladly obey the moral law. Therefore, the church's energy must be focused on the gospel, on educating people with the truth.

Indeed, Old Testament prophecies that speak of the effectiveness of the Messiah's reign make it clear that people come to Christ before they embrace His teaching. "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow into it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3). In light of the New Testament, we can safely say that this prophecy regards the New Testament church which has the responsibility to preach the truth to every creature (cf. Jn. 4:22; Lk. 2:32; Mk. 16). Those who want to be taught by God come into the church for instruction. Those who embrace God want to walk in His ways. Faith in Jehovah and His doctrine is coterminous with a sincere desire to walk in accordance with God's moral law. Truth leads to godliness and, when believers have been instructed, they will want to do God's will. There can be no right obedience, nor any right worship, until one first has learned of and believed in Christ. Therefore, whenever and wherever in the church preaching the truth about Jesus and His law-Word has been relegated to a secondary position, that church has been unfaithful to the will of God.

To see how to be ineffective as salt on society, we only need to examine the anti-abortion efforts of Christians in America. While the determined efforts to elect Christians or anti-abortion candidates to office are biblical, the practice of picketing abortion clinics and yelling at heathen

women on their way to murder their babies has been a dismal failure. Why? Because external pressure or coercion cannot change hearts and minds! Such practices have caused very few women to forsake abortion. If all the time, energy, money and organization put into protests had been put into training new pastors and planting churches, many more lives would have saved. People who trust in Christ do not murder their children and they do not vote for men who believe that killing babies is acceptable.

Second, Christians are to work as a preservative in society. When believers are faithful in church planting and evangelism and they teach the full counsel of God, there comes a time (if God blesses these efforts) when there are enough believers in society to change it. There was a time when all of Europe was in total darkness—when everyone worshiped idols and people even engaged in satanic rites and human sacrifice. But, gradually Europe was salted and heathenism was replaced with Christendom. In our day when the West is post-Christian and people have adopted relativistic ethics, hedonism, and materialism, the preserving power of Christianity is needed as much as ever.⁷ If ministers are faithful in preaching and churches apply God’s Word to every area of life, enough people will be enlightened to the truth to change institutions, schools, civil magistrates and unjust laws. “Every Christian, however limited his sphere of influence, must still, within that sphere, exert the influence which he possesses. He must exhibit truth in its meaning, and evidence, and influence: he must be a living epistle of Jesus Christ, seen and read of all men.”⁸ We are all called to be a cleansing agent and preservative in our society. This can only be done by defeating corruption with the truth and leading by example.

The Savior’s Warning

This passage makes it very clear that the church is not to ignore society, but is to actively work to change it. This, however, cannot occur if the church loses its saltiness. Thus, our Lord’s maxim comes with a sober warning: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Mt. 5:13). There are a number of things to note about this statement.

First, it is an implicit warning regarding the condition of the salt of professing Christians. The statement, “if the salt loses its flavor,” means if the salt loses its character or purpose as salt.⁹ In our day salt is very pure. But in ancient times finding a good, pure source of salt was not always easy. If salt was adulterated or too contaminated, it did not taste like salt, but was foul. This was often true of salt from the marshes and lagoons near the Dead Sea, which were mixed with undesirable substances such as gypsum. Salt which is not salty is worthless, for it cannot be used to preserve meat or add a pleasing flavor to food.

Likewise, the professing Christian, pastor or church which does not teach the truth or live the truth is worthless for the preservation of society. Think for a moment about the Roman

⁷ The expression post-Christian simply means that Christianity is no longer the predominant worldview in the Western nations. It does *not* mean that the church of Christ is not present and active in these nations. It also does not mean that Christianity will never be predominant in these nations again. Someday it will.

⁸ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:155.

⁹ Interestingly, the verb *moranthe* translated “becomes tasteless” also means “to become foolish” (e.g., Rom. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:20). “The unusual use of it here to describe what has lost its saltiness goes back to the underlying Hebrew root, ...*tpl*, a word that had both meanings (see Black, *Aramaic Approach*, 166-167). A...translator [i.e. Matthew writing under divine inspiration] then chose the Greek word *morainein* because it applied more readily to the disciples. For the disciples, the salt of the earth, to lose their saltiness was equivalent to becoming foolish. It would in effect be to lose their identity” (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 99).

Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. The papal church corrupted worship by human inventions. They banished the biblical doctrine of salvation by their system of works righteousness, indulgences and sacramentalism. The priests were usually illiterate and completely ignorant of doctrine. The church leaders were notorious at that time for their lust for money, drunkenness, fornication and adultery. The masses of people who attended church were given mumbled Latin and childish man-made rituals. The result was that ignorance and immorality spread throughout the countryside. The very people who were supposed to be salt were not salty. Instead, they were corrupt and worthless.

Also, consider Modernism or Christian liberalism. When many of the mainline Protestant churches rejected the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture in the early part of the twentieth century and cast aside a number of the fundamental doctrines of the faith, they ceased being a salt and light to modern society. Instead of being salt that preserves meat, they themselves became rotten, worldly, unbelieving and disgusting. Instead of challenging the world to believe in Christ and submit to His law-Word, they became the world. Their position was accommodation not confrontation. In the process they retained religious terms, but imbued them with a new modernist meaning. Now, if the church becomes just like the rotten world of heathen humanity, who is going to salt it? If the salt itself is not salty, hope of purity and preservation is destroyed.

This principle also applies to individual professing Christians. The believer who backslides and is leading the life of a hypocrite cannot be effective as salt to others. If a person's life completely contradicts his message, people are given a confused, contradictory picture of the gospel. Thus, it is crucial that we live the truth and are willing to be bold and speak up for Jesus in front of unbelievers. Most Christians have to work with and mingle with unbelievers at one time or another. This gives them a wonderful opportunity to be salt in such situations. If a believer doesn't confess Christ; but, rather, tries to fit in and commune on the unbelievers' terms, then he will not have a positive effect on them. Instead, their wicked speech and unbelief will have a negative effect upon him. There is no neutrality on this matter at all. Christians must either, stand up for Jesus and be salt, or they will backslide and put themselves in great danger of total apostasy. If a believer makes it crystal clear at work that Christ is his Lord and Savior; that he will *not* listen to dirty jokes; or allow others to take the Lord's name in vain or curse in his presence, people will take his words seriously. A strict confessing Christian can have a profound, positive effect on those around him as long as he is faithful. Beloved, are you fighting the spiritual and ethical deterioration of society by your life and words, or are you yourself deteriorating? Are you a useful citizen in God's kingdom, or have you lost your saltiness as a Christian? Are you going to be the salt that purifies and preserves, or the meat that rots, putrefies and is cast into hell—the garbage dump of all human history?

True, consistent Christians who are totally dedicated to serving Jesus are the greatest lovers of the lost and benefactors of mankind. But, worldly, wicked, hypocritical, false professors of Christ are more deplorable, less hopeful and under more severe damnation than the world because they had the truth and rejected it. They knew the truth about the Savior, but counted Him as less important than their own selfish lusts and desires. Those who are complete apostates are reprobates. "The implication is clear. Just as salt having lost its flavor cannot be restored, so also those who were trained in the knowledge of the truth but who then resolutely set themselves against the exhortations of the Holy Spirit and become hardened in their opposition

are not renewed unto repentance (Matt. 12:32; Heb. 6:4-6). Therefore, let that which is named salt be salt indeed!”¹⁰

Second, this warning about the condition of the salt comes with a solemn figure of judgment. The salt that is good for nothing is “to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Mt. 5:13).

In ancient oriental culture garbage was cast out into the street. The professing Christian who is not a true believer or the wicked minister who does not preach the gospel are worthless to God’s kingdom and must be cast out of the church. They will be cast out into the outer darkness on the day of judgment. They will receive a much greater damnation because they rebelled against a greater knowledge. It is a horrible thing to never enter the kingdom of God. But to be a part of the visible church and profess Christ and then be cast out of it is far worse. There is nothing more useless to God’s kingdom than the unchristian Christian—the saltless reprobate who abandons the truth for the world. Peter says, “It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet. 2:21). Beloved, we must have salt in ourselves (Mk. 9:20). We must fight against lukewarmness, worldliness and carelessness in our lives with every fiber of our being, for what is at stake is not mere shame, calamity and judgment in this world; but, the everlasting contempt and suffering in the world to come. How terrifying to have Jesus speak to you directly on that day, “I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness” (Mt. 7:23). “How fearful will be the doom of the unprofitable servant—‘cast into utter darkness,’ where there is ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth [Mt. 25:30]!’”¹¹

The saltless salt or the non-Christian Christian will not only be thrown out as useless trash in God’s sight, but will also be trampled underfoot by men.¹² The apostate Jews who denied the Redeemer and followed their own self-righteousness were trodden underfoot by the Gentiles. The areas of the Roman Empire that embraced Arianism and rejected the divinity of Christ to this day have been trodden underfoot by the followers of Mohammed. Think of the terrible judgments that befell apostate Roman Catholic nations during the Middle Ages: the wars, the plague and slavery to anti-Christ. Think also of the horrors that came upon Europe after the acceptance of modernism: two world wars, fascism and communism. If professing Christians do not retain their saltiness in our day, we may be oppressed by humanists, sodomites and feminists. Unsalty professing Christians bring down God’s judgment and are condemned by their fellow men. “Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, because you have not kept My ways but have shown partiality in the law” (Mal. 2:9). “There is bitter truth also in the fact that a saltless and powerless Christianity makes more unbelievers than all the books of infidels that were ever written.”¹³ “Let God be glorified in the shame and rejection of those by whom he has been reproached, and who have made themselves fit for nothing but to be trampled upon.”¹⁴

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 283-284.

¹¹ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:161.

¹² One cannot help noting the similarity of teaching between our text and the parable of the useless vine in Ezekiel 15:2-5, “Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any other wood, the vine branch which is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on? Instead, it is thrown into the fire for fuel; the fire devours both ends of it, and its middle is burned. Is it useful for any work? Indeed, when it was whole, no object could be made from it. How much less will it be useful for any work when the fire has devoured it, and it is burned?”

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 201.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:54.

This passage ought to spur us to our Christian duty of holiness, of leading an exemplary life and keeping our doctrine pure and unadulterated. Go out into the world as God's salt!

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