



Matthew 5:13

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But 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 underfoot.”

Reflection

All great preachers use illustrations and

Jesus was the greatest of preachers so it's no surprise to find his preaching filled with illustrations. He uses illustrations taken from daily life so that everyone could relate to them and remember them, illustrations like salt and light. They're easy to remember and very easy to relate to because they're a big part of your life and mine even 2,000 years later. Salt tastes good and we need it to live, and light is a necessity of life. It was the same back then. Pliny the Elder, a Roman naturalist and philosopher who lived in New Testament times, once wrote 'there is nothing more useful than salt and sunshine.'

And so today and tomorrow we're going to see Jesus start the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount with these very famous pictures of what Christians are to

this world. We're salt and light. The Beatitudes have taught us what a member of the kingdom of God looks like, and now the remainder of the Jesus' sermon will go on to tell us what we are to do in the world, starting with being salt and light. And today we're having a close look at the first of these, what it means for Christians to be the salt of the earth.

As we've just said salt is a metaphor. It's an illustration taken from daily life to make a powerful and memorable point. Powerful because we can all relate to it, so the point really hits home. And memorable because salt is such a part of everyone's daily life that whenever Christians reach for salt we can't help but recall Jesus' teaching that we are the salt of the earth.

But what does Jesus mean when he says that we are the salt of the earth? Well I think the first thing to note here is that Jesus is drawing a distinction between Christians and the world. We are the salt of the earth. We are separate and distinct from the world, we're members of the kingdom of God, not the members of the kingdom of this world, so we're separate and distinct but we have a very important role to play in this world – and that role is to be salt of the earth. But what does this mean?

In Jesus' day, much as in our day, salt did many things. And so we perhaps don't want to be too prescriptive as to what Jesus specifically meant. This is a general statement; Jesus is going to get very specific in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount but this is a general statement. So I think

it's appropriate to aim at a general application of this picture. Salt in the ancient world was extremely important. It was a precious commodity. It was sometimes even used in place of money, as currency, because of how versatile and important it was. Life in the ancient world would have been a lot poorer without salt. It added flavour to food making bland food taste much better. And in a time without refrigeration it preserved some foods from decaying which meant it was essential, and in much higher use than it is today. Further, salt was and still remains a very important and necessary part of the human diet. It was also used as part of religious sacrifices in the temple, and was even used in agriculture as a fertilizer for some types of soil. Salt was indispensable in the ancient world, just as Pliny said, 'there's nothing

more useful than salt and sunlight.'

So in comparing Christians to salt Jesus is saying that Christians serve society in many and various ways but in summary we are indispensable to this world. We're a precious commodity without which this world would be a much poorer place. Just as salt was used in temple sacrifices in honour of God, we makes sacrifices to serve our community in honour of God. Just as salt added much flavour and enjoyment to food and life, in the same way we're to season our conversations with salt, be interesting, be thought provoking, be attractive, and stand out in the world for Jesus. And of course, the world around us is perishing, decaying because of sin. It's only hope is Jesus. We're the salt of the earth, the means God has given us to

stop the decay, the means God has given to preserve lives on into eternity through the good news of the gospel. But he's also given us to preserve our society, to uphold his will in his world. Our world is groaning under the weight of sin and injustice and oppression and social and environmental degradation and God has given us to the world to slow down the decline until Jesus returns and sets everything right again. And so we get a sense in all these things of what it is to be the salt of the earth, of what it is to be God's indispensable agents to this world.

But then what's this about losing our saltiness? And this is perhaps especially confusing if you know a little bit about chemistry in that salt, sodium chloride, is a very stable compound which basically means

that it can't lose its saltiness. Well, it's likely here that Jesus is referring to what was called salt in his day. Now they didn't have refineries back then, and so the salt Jesus is talking about probably came from the Dead Sea through a process of evaporation. You were left with a white powder that looked like salt but was actually a mixture of sodium chloride and a whole lot of other things. And salt, being the most soluble, could quite easily wash out, meaning that while the residue of white powder still looked like salt, and was still called salt, it stopped tasting and acting like salt. And so salt without saltiness became about as useful as dust on the side of the road. Just like a Christian who's no longer like Christ.

To be effective in this world Christians must retain their Christ-likeness, just as salt must

retain its saltiness. A Christian who doesn't live like Christ, who doesn't offer their life as a living sacrifice, who doesn't season their conversation with salt, who doesn't fight for and uphold Christ's values in our culture ... has become useless. A Christian who lives without Christ is useless, good for nothing except being tossed aside, in fact they're probably not even a Christian at all.

Think

So Jesus's striking statements continue to confront his disciples, the great crowds that had had gathered to hear him, and us. Take some time to think now about this powerful image. Christians are indispensable to this world. Do you realise the responsibility this entails? We're precious,

and distinctive, and we offer the hope of preservation to a dying world. But if we're going about our days with little reference to Jesus, we're useless, good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled underfoot. Take a moment to frame up today in the context of these realities. What are you going to do to be the salt of the earth today?

Pray

Then spend some time praying. Pray that God would use you to uphold his values in his world today. Pray that God would give you opportunities in conversations you have to endear yourself to people and to steer them to him. Pray that God would use you as their means of preservation, their means of salvation, and pray

that they would be saved today.

So take the time now to think and pray
and tomorrow salt becomes light.