

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH (part one)

Matthew 5:13

We have completed our study in the Beatitudes and we come now to Matthew 5:13, a passage that describes the Christians as being the salt of the earth. Let us read Matthew 5:13.

Matthew 5:13. You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

Christian saltiness

Even though this passage is not part of the Beatitudes, it has a lot to do with the Beatitudes. The people who are said to be blessed because they are poor in spirit, because they mourn, because they are meek, these are precisely the people who, by their Christlikeness, are the salt of the earth. 'The blessed man of the Beatitudes,' the Lord Jesus says, 'is to function as the salt of the earth.'

Notice that the last Beatitude changes from 'Blessed are those who' to 'Blessed are you.' The first eight statements were impersonal. Anyone who is like this is blessed. But now in v. 11, the last Beatitude makes it very specific that Jesus is talking about His disciples. *Blessed are you* (My disciples) *when people revile you*. And this 'you' continues into v. 13, *You are the salt of the earth*, connecting this verse directly to the Beatitudes.

Symbol of God's purifying power

The Christians are the salt of the earth. How should we understand this matter of salt? What is the meaning of this metaphor? This metaphor is meant to picture how the disciple of Christ is to function in the world, how he is to influence the world in which he lives. Salt has several properties. We all know from experience that salt has to do with purifying. It has to do with preservation. It has to do with giving taste to food. All these characteristics are used in the Bible in connection with salt. Let us look at an example of the purifying effect of salt in the OT. We will turn to 2Kings 2:19-22, a section in which we find the prophet Elisha using salt for a specific purpose.

2Kings 2:19. Then the men of the city said to Elisha, "Behold now, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful."

20 And he said, "Bring me a new jar, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him.

*21 And he went out to the spring of water, and threw **salt** in it and said, "Thus says the Lord, '**I have purified these waters**; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer.'"*

22 So the waters have been purified to this day, according to the word of Elisha which he spoke.

Here we see Elisha putting salt into the Jericho spring water. And he declared at the same time, 'I have purified these waters.' By adding salt to water, Elisha was able to purify the Jericho water. Now, we should not imagine that salt has any miraculous healing property. In fact, adding salt to water normally makes water worse, not better. We would miss the point of this passage if we think strictly in terms of chemistry.

We are told that the water from a spring had turned bad. This physical situation reflected the spiritual barrenness of Israel caused by idolatry. Elisha's solution was designed to teach the people a spiritual lesson: the power of holiness to purify. The whole point of Elisha's action lies in the symbolism of the salt. Salt was known by the Israelites to preserve and purify. The miracle that happened did not lie in the salt itself but in the power of God. Notice the words of Elisha: 'Thus says the Lord.' It was so according to the words which Elisha spoke. The authority, the power to heal came from the Lord working through Elisha. Salt is used here as a symbol that signifies purity or holiness. It represents the power of holiness to purify.

This kind of symbolism is used in various forms in the Bible. Take for example James 5.14 where we read that you anoint the sick person with oil and pray over him. What is the significance of anointing a sick person with oil? Does oil have any curative property? No. Oil is not considered a therapeutic agent in medicine. Nor does it have any magical properties. The healing does not lie in the action of applying the oil. Olive oil, in the Bible, symbolizes the person and the power of the Holy Spirit. And in this passage of James, the oil is meant to remind us that it is God who heals. The oil doesn't heal you. The healing power comes from the Spirit of God, who is symbolized by the oil.

So in the case of Elisha's purifying action, salt was not the cause of the miracle that took place. It should be viewed as a spiritual symbol that represents God's purifying power. When Jesus says that the Christians are the salt of the earth, it doesn't mean that we have anything special in ourselves that makes us to be like salt. It is Christ in us that makes us to be what we are. And if we are the salt of the earth, it is only because God's power is at work in us to make us to be salt. Without God in us, we wouldn't be anything. It is all of God's grace that we are what we are.

Salt must accompany every sacrifice

Let us take another example that highlights the purifying virtue of salt. Salt preserves. It keeps things from going bad, from decaying. At the spiritual level, it symbolizes the power to cleanse from filth, to cleanse from corruption. And hence, it becomes an emblem of incorruption and purity. That is why no sacrifice in the OT could be presented before God without the addition of salt. Salt had to be offered with all the sacrifices. We see that in Leviticus 2.13 for example.

Leviticus 2:13. And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt.

Salt had to accompany every sacrifice. You can see the meaning of this requirement. Holiness and purity had to come with the sacrifice.

This is of course what happens to us as Christians by the power of the gospel. As salt is used to preserve meat from spoiling, so does the gospel prevent man from being corrupted by sin. And as salt was indispensable to make sacrifices acceptable to God, so must we become salt by the Holy Spirit in offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. When salt comes into our lives, we are being purified by it. Remember that there is a stage in which we first receive the light. And then we become light. 'You will receive light from Christ,' Paul says to the Ephesians. *Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you* (Ephesians 5:14). Christ will give you light. It is after we receive the light of Christ that we become light. Likewise, it is after we receive the purifying work of the God by the Holy Spirit, pictured here as salt, that we become salt.

Season your speech with salt

So in the OT, all the sacrifices had to be seasoned with salt. In the NT, there is something else that has to be seasoned with salt. Paul says that our speech has to be seasoned with salt. Let us read this interesting passage. It will give us a more specific understanding of this picture of salt. Colossians 4:5-6.

*Colossians 4:5. Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.
6 Let your speech always be with grace, **seasoned with salt**, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.*

Our speech, as Christians, must be seasoned with salt. Now, what does that mean? How do we ‘season’ our talk with salt? Here we need to understand the spiritual meaning of salt. What does salt represent in that verse?

An important clue is given to us in our main passage, Matthew 5:13. It will not be obvious to you if you depend solely on an English Bible. What do we read? *You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste.* This is not exactly what we find in the Greek text. A literal translation would be, ‘If the salt has become foolish.’ Unfortunately this idea of foolishness is not apparent in the way it is translated in our English Bibles. So salt loses its taste in the sense that it becomes foolish, or that it acts foolishly. This gives us an important clue to the meaning of salt. It tells us that salt is meant to express spiritual wisdom since the opposite of foolishness is wisdom. And if you become foolish, it means that you have lost the spiritual wisdom. You are a fool when you are lacking spiritual wisdom.

There is a word in Hebrew that has, at the same time, the meaning of ‘being tasteless’ and ‘being foolish.’ This word is found in Job 6:6. *Can something **tasteless** be eaten without salt, or is there any taste in the white of an egg?* How can we give taste to something that is tasteless? How will I find taste in the white of an egg unless I put salt on it? The same Hebrew word for tasteless appears in Lamentations 2:14 to mean ‘foolish.’ *Your prophets have seen for you false and **foolish** visions.* So the same Hebrew word can either mean ‘lacking in taste,’ or ‘being foolish.’

Christian wisdom

This is important to understand because wisdom, in the biblical sense, has a strong moral emphasis and it often stands in contrast to folly. In Proverb 29:11, we see how one is unrestrained in his speech and the other is able to control himself. *A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.* Wisdom is shown not in the knowledge of a person but in his conduct. It has more to do with what we are and what we do than what we know.

In the NT, the contrast is between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. The earthly wisdom is carnal, unspiritual, and selfish. But the wisdom from above has Christlike qualities. We have a list of these qualities in James 3:17.

James 3:17. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

As we read this verse, I wonder if you took the trouble to count the number of qualities that are mentioned here. How many do you see? (1) pure; (2) peaceable; (3) gentle; (4) reasonable; (5) full of mercy; (6) good fruits; (7) unwavering; (8) without hypocrisy. James describes spiritual wisdom by these 8 qualities. And yet, there is one more. James 3:13.

*James 3:13. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the **meekness** of wisdom.*

The meekness of wisdom. Eight plus one makes nine. Meekness reminds us of what? The Beatitudes! Blessed are the meek. How many Beatitudes do we have? Nine Beatitudes. Interesting. Is this a coincidence? We saw the ninefold fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. We saw how the nine Beatitudes can be linked to the Lord's Prayer. And here, James speaks of wisdom as having these ninefold characteristics.

Why do we say this? Well, because there is a close connection with the topic of salt. The connection is that salt represents this kind of spiritual wisdom. Being the salt of the earth means that you reflect in your conduct these nine characteristics of the wisdom from above.

The richness of the Word of God is so remarkable. We have now a deeper understanding of what should be the qualities of a disciple of Christ. We can think of a disciple in terms of the Beatitudes. We can think of a disciple in terms of the fruit of the Spirit. Now, we can think of a disciple in terms of the wisdom which is from above. And we can make this our prayer in terms of the Lord's Prayer.

Dying, burning and dissolving

We said that salt was used in the ancient world as an agent in the preservation of food, especially meat. It prevents food from decay. Now, how does salt do that? How does salt keep things from going bad? Think of the last time you used salt. You put some salt in your food. If you look at it, what do you see happening? The salt disappears. It dissolves into the food. Here is the clue to an important aspect of the nature of the disciple and what he is called to do in this world.

Salt functions by dissolving, by losing itself, by dying. John 12:24 uses the picture of a seed that falls into the ground and dies. And by dying, it brings forth much fruit. Salt functions in the same way. It falls into the food and it dies. It dissolves. And there, it brings forth its effectiveness. That is how it can preserve. That is how it can give flavor. If salt doesn't dissolve, it cannot do any of these things. Salt works by dissolving, by losing itself.

Think of light. How does light function? Well, light functions in exactly the same way, by giving itself away. Look at a candle. It gets shorter and shorter. If the candle is to give light to the room, it cannot remain at the same length. It has to burn itself out in order to give light. It literally burns itself to death, until it disappears completely.

This is the kind of picture that the Lord Jesus chooses to describe the life of a disciple. The oil is burning away in order to give light. The salt dissolves and loses itself in order to fulfill its function to preserve. The seed falls into the ground and dies. And only so, it becomes fruitful. 'Otherwise,' Jesus says, 'the grain of wheat will abide by itself alone.' Salt will remain by itself just as a lump of salt if it doesn't dissolve. And it would be good for nothing.

The self-giving attitude of spiritual wisdom

Now, this is exactly how divine wisdom functions. Take 1Corinthians 1:23-24. Here Paul tells us what is the nature of divine wisdom.

1Corinthians 1:23. But we preach Christ crucified (Christ who died on the cross. The Son of God who perished. The Son of God who gave Himself on the cross for the remission of our sins),

to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness (this message about somebody who dies on the cross to save the world is plain stupidity. It was a stumbling block to the Jews because they could not accept that the Messiah could die as a criminal. It was foolishness to the Greeks because they could not make sense of a story in which a god gets himself crucified by his enemies),

*24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and **the wisdom of God*** (Christ crucified, that is the wisdom of God).

You think that it is just a stupid fable? As offensive as it may be to your mind, that is precisely the wisdom of God, a wisdom that gives itself. 'That when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, when we were still His enemies,' Paul says in Colossians, 'Christ died for us.' You see, that is the divine wisdom. That is how divine wisdom looks like. It is Christ crucified, Christ who gave Himself on the cross.

Back to Colossians 4:6. *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt.* Now we know what it means. Seasoned with spiritual wisdom. Let all that you say be seasoned with spiritual wisdom. Let all your words be expressed with a self-giving attitude. Our talk must be applied to the profit and the edification of the hearers. You can see that salt has in itself this divine wisdom. It has as its quality a self-giving nature.

No wonder that salt was offered with all the sacrifices in the OT. Do you see the meaning? There is no use offering a sacrifice externally to God without the spiritual meaning of salt being present, namely that you give yourself as you offer the sacrifice. Otherwise the rich man would have an advantage over the poor man. A rich person can easily give a hundred sheep whereas the poor man can hardly give a pigeon. Then the rich would have all the advantage. That is not how it works with God. It is not so much what you give. It is how you give and that in giving, you give of yourself. And this gift must come from a pure heart. Otherwise you have given nothing at all. Jesus said, 'If you have offended a brother, don't even bother give any sacrifice to God. It will not be accepted.' *First be reconciled to your brother, **and then** come and present your offering* (Matthew 5:24).

You are the salt of the earth. You are not like the world. By your Christian character, you are to act like salt in your community. But in order to be effective, you must retain your Christian character. Salt must retain its saltiness. In our next lesson, we will see how Christians can lose their influence in the society.