

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH (part two)

Matthew 5:13

In our previous lesson, we studied the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:13. This is what He said.

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.

The Christian's retraining influence

By this statement, Jesus is implicitly saying that the world is turning more and more rotten. The world cannot stop itself from going bad. That is why it needs salt. The Lord Jesus is telling His disciples, 'The world needs you. You are the salt of the earth and you must stop it from going bad.' God wants the Christians to be the salt that will hinder the process of social decay.

Of course, God has given man other retraining influences to keep the society in order. In His common grace, i.e., in His favor shown to all mankind (saved and unsaved), God has established certain institutions in order to prevent the society from falling into anarchy. There is for example the institution of the government. The state has the authority and the power to punish evil. There is also the institution of marriage. Home and family life help to promote good morals. So these divine institutions have a restraining influence, as far as sin is concerned, in the society as a whole.

However, God wants His own people, the regenerate and righteous people, to be the most powerful retraining influence in a sinful society. The Christians are called to become like a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low. It is in that sense that you and I are meant to be the salt of the earth, an influence for good in the world.

Losing your saltiness

So the affirmation is that we, as Christians, are the salt of the earth. But there is a condition attached to that affirmation. What is that condition? The condition is that you retain your Christian saltiness. Jesus goes on to say, *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.*

Here we want to spend some time to look carefully at this question of losing your saltiness. If you take the time to consult commentaries on this matter, you will notice that most of them emphasize the fact that salt itself, i.e., the chemical compound, cannot lose its saltiness. They explain this 'loss of saltiness' in v. 13 by the mixture of salt with impurities. We are dealing with Dead Sea salt which

contains a lot of impurity. And this salt, under certain conditions (for example, if it comes in contact with the ground or if it is exposed to rain and sun), can become tasteless. It still looks like salt, but it has lost its saltiness.

Well, there is probably some truth in all this explanation, at least from a chemical viewpoint. But I am not so sure that Jesus was concerned about chemistry. It seems to me that all this explanation is necessary because we are very hesitant to conclude that a disciple can lose his Christian qualities, that he can lose his distinctive character, described here in the metaphoric language of salt. Some have suggested that this is impossible, that what Jesus is saying is simply a supposition that can never happen.

I find this kind of reasoning quite unsatisfactory. What we have here is clearly a warning. If it is impossible for Christians to cease to be salt, then there is no point for the Lord Jesus to give us the second part of the sentence. He could have just said, 'You are the salt of the earth,' period. But He mentions also a condition and we must take it into consideration. It would be unwise to turn a blind eye to this warning.

A form of Christianity that denies its power

Let us look at the parallel passage in Luke 14 so that we can feel the full force of this warning. Luke brings out the importance of Jesus' words in Luke 14:34-35.

*Luke 14:34. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?
35 It is fit neither for the land nor for the dunghill; men throw it away. (And then, He concludes with these solemn words). He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

'Let him take careful note,' the Lord Jesus says, 'of what I am saying to you.' Be careful that you do not lose this salt quality, that you do not 'run out of gas,' if we want to use a modern expression. Because when salt loses its taste, it cannot be restored again. This wording reminds us very much of Hebrews 6 where we read that those who once tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and then fall away, it is impossible to restore them again to repentance. When salt loses its saltiness, with what shall you restore it? It cannot be restored, and therefore it is good for nothing. What do you do with it? You throw it out on the street where it is trampled under foot by men.

Here then is a serious warning. And it is important for us to consider this question. How does salt come about to lose its saltiness at the spiritual level? In what way does a Christian cease to function as a Christian?

When I reflect on this question, I think about the warning that Paul gives us in 2Timothy 3:5. Paul says that in the last days, there will be a form of godliness which denies the power of it. And I wonder if it is this picture of salt that he has in mind. You see, when the salt has lost its saltiness, it still looks like salt, whether it is mixed with impurities or not. It is still white. It is still granular. It is still powdery. But if you taste it, you notice that it doesn't have any salty taste anymore. It still has the form of salt, but it denies its power, i.e., it denies its effectiveness.

Paul says that this is what is going to happen in the last days. *For men will be ... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power (2Timothy 3:5).* There will come a kind of Christianity that has all the outward appearance of Christianity. It goes through all the motions of Christianity. It uses the language of Christianity. It still speaks the liturgy of Christianity. But although it still looks like Christianity on the outside, it has no more the internal effectiveness. It has no more the power of Christianity. The salt has deteriorated to the point that it is left with nothing but the name. The substance is gone.

So we are confronted with this question. How does the salt lose its saltiness? What are the things that might cause it? Regarding this question, I would like to give you three reasons that cause a Christian to cease to function as a Christian, and therefore to become useless to God. In order to do this, we will consider the three passages in the Lord's teaching that speak about this idea of salt losing its saltiness. We have already mentioned two of these passages: Luke 14:34 and Matthew 5:13. The third verse is found in Mark 9:50.

The loss of saltiness due to lack of commitment

First, let us return to Luke 14:34. We will read it one more time, using this time the New American Standard version.

Luke 14:34. Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned?

Notice the conjunction 'therefore.' 'Therefore, salt is good.' This word is found in the original text but unfortunately, it does not appear in many English translations. It is an important word because it connects the picture of salt to the verses that come before v. 34. In other words, what we find before v. 34 explains how salt can lose its taste. So in order to determine why salt becomes tasteless, we have to look at the context of Jesus' teaching. And the best place to start is to go back to v. 25 where Jesus begins to teach what discipleship may entail for a believer in the face of rejection. This is what Jesus says.

*Luke 14:25. Now great multitudes were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them,
26 "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.
27 "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*

Identifying with Jesus automatically involves some suffering and some rejection in the world. And Jesus is saying, 'If you love your family or even yourself more than Me, then you will never decide to come to Me because you will find that the cost of following Me is too high for you.' Remember that all this is connected with our passage on salt. The salt refuses to dissolve, to carry his cross, to die. Let us look at the next section.

*Luke 14:28. "For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it?
29 "Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him,
30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'*

People mocked this man. He begins building and he can't finish the work. In other words, he is a fool. The salt has become foolish. Remember what we said in our previous lesson. When Jesus talks about the salt losing its taste, it is in the sense that it acts foolishly. And here, the salt has lost its saltiness precisely because it acted foolishly. He did not count the cost of his project. Now he has to face the shame of not finishing what he has started. Then v. 31.

*Luke 14:31. "Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?
32 "Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace.
33 "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.*

Equally foolish is a king who wants to go to war without assessing whether he can win with the resources that he has. So he goes to war, but he soon realizes that he is not strong enough to win

the battle. And therefore, he has to surrender. He is a fool because now he becomes a captive. He has lost his freedom. You want to fight for righteousness? Don't be a fool. Count the cost of a commitment to Jesus before you decide that you are going to fight for righteousness.

Now we begin to see the connection. We see why salt loses its taste. It happens when someone goes back on his original commitment. You begin to follow Jesus but you stop because you are pulled away by other commitments. You start building, but then you decide that it is too costly to finish. You go back on your original commitment. As Peter says, it is like the dog that returns to its vomit (2Peter 2:22). You begin well and you end badly. Your last state is worse than your first. It would have been much better for you not to have started at all than to start, and then to turn away from your initial commitment. Either you start and you stick to the end, or you don't start at all. You count your cost first. So the disciple who retains his saltiness is the disciple who understands his commitment to God and he sticks it through to the end.

The loss of saltiness due to sin

That is the first point. The second reason that explains how salt can lose its savor is given to us by the context of the other passage. This is what Jesus says in Mark 9:50.

Mark 9:50. "Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Here again, we need to get the whole context. What is the context of this verse? Let us go back to v. 42.

*Mark 9:42 "And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.
43 "And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire,
44 {where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.}
45 "And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than having your two feet, to be cast into hell,
46 {where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.}
47 "And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell,
48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*

And then, Jesus goes on to talk about salt losing its saltiness.

*Mark 9:49 "For everyone will be salted with fire.
50 "Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."*

What causes salt to lose its saltiness in this case? Notice the emphasis of this passage. Causing a little one to stumble. This is the sin of leading others to commit sin. Your hand causing you to stumble. This is the sin of the hand. Your foot causing you to stumble. This is the sin of the foot. Your eye causing you to stumble. This is the sin of the eye. By these examples, the Lord Jesus tells us how terrible sin is, and He gives a warning to the sinner. Every man is personally responsible for his sin. If a person weakens under temptation to the point that he enters into sin, that is when he is going to lose his saltiness.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew. The salt that has lost its saltiness will be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. 'To be thrown out' is an expression often used to indicate one's

exclusion from the kingdom of God (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; John 6:37; 15:6). Here in Mark, Jesus says the same thing, but using slightly different words. Three times in this passage, He talks about the fire of hell, about being cast into the unquenchable fire of hell. Never fool around with sin. You cannot afford the luxury of falling into sin. And that is why in the Lord's Prayer, we say, 'Lead us not into temptation.' We are asking for God's help to prevent us from falling into temptation. And God will provide a way to escape temptation.

The loss of saltiness due to persecution

Let us come to the third reason that explains why salt becomes tasteless. We will return to our passage in Matthew 5. What is the immediate context of Matthew 5:13? We saw in our previous lesson that v. 13 is directly connected to the Beatitudes, and more specifically to the last Beatitude, by the word 'you' in v. 11. 'Blessed are you when men revile and persecute you.' It is clear that Jesus is talking about His disciples. And immediately after that, He goes on to say, ***You are the salt of the earth.*** The people who are being persecuted are to be the salt of the earth.

This 'you' gives us the clue to understand why salt loses its saltiness. When hard times come and you break under the pressure, that is when you can lose your saltiness. It is like the seed that was sown in the Parable of the Sower. It fell on a rocky place. And when the sun rose, what happened? It withered away and died because it had no root. The salt has lost its saltiness. And Jesus tells us that the sun symbolizes the persecution that arises because of the word and that causes a man to fall away (Matthew 13:20-21).

The disciple's responsibility

When Jesus calls us 'salt of the earth', He is also giving us a responsibility. 'You are the salt of the earth; therefore retain your saltiness. Otherwise you become a useless disciple.' Jesus expects that we will retain our saltiness, that we will not lose our Christlike character.

And we saw in this lesson that there are three things that can cause a Christian to lose this salt quality, and therefore to cease to function as a disciple. You can lose your saltiness if you go back on your initial commitment to God. You give up because you discover that the cost of following Jesus exceeds your commitment. You can lose your saltiness if you allow sin to tempt you. How can you be the salt of the earth when you live in sin? And finally, you can lose your saltiness when you break under persecution. You fail to remain faithful to the end.

In all this, we must ask God to sustain us and to give us what it takes to remain distinct from the world so that we can have this restraining influence that prevents the society from lapsing into its own decadence.