

Salty Christians (Matthew 5:13-16) ZCC 5/19/13

13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. 15 Neither do you light a lamp, and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house. 16 Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (World English Bible)

Several years ago, I woke up to the sound of Molly, our dog growling really low in her throat. I got up and went to the window to look out but it was a cloudy--starless and moonless--night that a bad writer might describe as black as pitch. I couldn't see a thing, either good or bad, so I went back and lay down and listened for a while. Hearing nothing out of the ordinary, I went back to sleep. Pretty soon, I heard it again. It was DEFINITELY a "you don't belong here" growl and I lay for a while trying to hear what she heard--but she continued to growl over and over.

I got up again--knowing that where we lived there was the possibility of a burglar in the shed or the cars or even the house. Since we had bears there as we do here, I thought it also might be a bear.

I put on glasses and my pants and slipped on some shoes in the dark. Then, being the great red necked warrior/protector/hunter that I am, I felt my way to the closet and got a shotgun I kept there and made sure it was loaded before I went out.

Let's see. Pants. Shoes. Shotgun. Glasses.

What else do you imagine I got before I went outside into the pitch-black night to see what was causing the fuss? What do you think I picked up before I went to see if it was something or nothing at all? What was missing from my list if I wanted to see what was out there that didn't belong? [Wait for answers.]

That's right, a flashlight.

MAYBE that was the most important thing of all--more important than pants or shoes or even a shotgun.

If I had gone out without the light and there WAS a bear or burglar out there, what might have happened? The shotgun wouldn't have done any good if I couldn't see would it?

OK--now I'm going to let you know how old I really am. When I was going up, we grew and processed our own hogs. We would have processed beef, but we didn't eat any. The only cattle we owned were milk-cows. We didn't eat beef at all--we ate port and chicken and supplemented that with wild game and fish. Almost every Sunday, we ate fried chicken that was grown on our farm and fresh killed on Saturday by my granny.

Anyway, back to the hogs. After the first frost, the adults started watching the weather and as soon as it was cool enough we would kill hogs for the year. Some of the meat was ground and seasoned for sausage. The tenderloins were stripped out and sliced to be frozen or cooked fresh. Since we were snout to tail consumers, the brains were cooked for breakfast over the next few days and the heads were cleaned and boiled down and made into the best (and the hottest) souse meat or head cheese you could ever hope to eat.

Most of the meat was not frozen but was cured so that it would keep all year without refrigeration. Hams. Bacon. Jowls. Shoulders. All those were held out for curing. Grandpa had a traditional recipe for the sugar cure. It had several ingredients. Red pepper. Black pepper. Potassium nitrate. Brown sugar. Let's see, though, I think I am missing a major ingredient here--what do you think it is? That's right. Salt. In fact, by volume, salt was the largest--and certainly the most important ingredient.

Why do you think that salt was the greater part of the mixture? [Wait for answers--such as preservation, prevention of decay.] Can you imagine what would have happened if we had just hung the hams in the smokehouse through the winter and into the next summer without salt in the recipe--without curing them? [Wait for an answer--they'd rot.]

When Jesus spoke of his followers as the salt OF THE EARTH and the light OF THE WORLD, there is a basic implied truth. The church and the rest of the world are two distinct communities. It is "them" and "us." Sure, the communities are related--but the followers of Christ are to be distinct and different from the rest of the world. All humankind is the subject of God's gift of love, but only those who have chosen to follow him are his people.

Jesus' metaphors also tell us something about the communities. Evidently, the world is a dark place with little or no light of its own--at least in the spiritual sense--and an external light source is needed. Also, the world is in the process of decay/deteriorating spiritually (and morally). The world cannot stop that process--only when salt is introduced from an outside source will the deterioration of the world slow or stop. God has made us different, but the church is set inside the confines of the world--as salt to stop decay and light to dispel the darkness.

Again, physically the salt and the light are metaphors--but in the spiritual sense they are literal.

In order to bring spiritual salt and light to the world, Jesus reminds his people that they have to remain salty and that their lights must be allowed to shine.

The first part of verse 13 says, "You are the salt of the earth..." The very presence of his people--of the church slows down the decay of the world.

Of course, there are other restraining influences such as the state and its laws and authority. The home can also exert a wholesome influence on the world around it. That said, I believe that God intends for the most powerful restraint on the world to be his own righteous redeemed people--his followers--his church.

The last part of verse 13 points out that this is conditional. As the salt of the world, we will make a difference only as long as we remain salty. To me, Jesus is referring to the Beattitudes from this same sermon. He had just spoken of his followers as being peacemakers and gentle and merciful and righteous and pure in heart.

In order to make a difference in the world around us, Christians must remain salty--or Christ-like as we live and work and play in this world. If we become the same--assimilated and contaminated--then we lose our ability to influence and to preserve.

Jesus goes on to say that if we lose our saltiness--we are worthy of being tossed out and waked on as you might do with salt that was no good--that has lost its saltiness and ability to preserve.

The second metaphor is that the followers of Christ are the light of the world. In verse 14 he talks about a city on a hill--how it can be seen at night--how it stands out.

Jesus described himself as the Light of the world in John 8:12 and John 12:46--so I suppose you might say that our light comes from him--from our relationship with him.

In the 16th verse you'll notice that Jesus associated good works with this light--"Let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works and glorify the Father." To me this light is basically everything that a Christian does and says. Spoken testimony and dealings in the world. Works of love--things done out of care and concern for others.

But in verse 15 we also see that, just like being salt--being light has some conditions. Jesus says, LET IT SHINE! We HAVE the light, in a sense, we ARE the light--the light has been given to you and to me. Yet some choose to hide that light--but Jesus says to let it shine and make a difference. The light of Christ takes away spiritual darkness.

It also preserves and purifies, much as salt does. Years ago, during spring cleaning, people would take their bedding out--and hang or spread their mattresses in the sun. We called it airing them out, but the greatest cleansing effect came from the sun. The sun makes things clean!

So, very quickly I want to point out some lessons I find in this passage:

(1) There is a fundamental difference between the world and the church--between Christians and non-Christians. We are to be as different in nature as light is from dark and as salt is to decay. If we become just like the rest of the world we wind up serving no real purpose for God nor really for the world either.

One of the greatest tragedies is the tendency of the church to be absorbed by the prevailing culture rather than changing it by their influence. When we become the same as those around us, we are going against the basic theme of the sermon on the mount. The sermon was built on the premise that Christians ARE different from the rest of the world--and the sermon issues a call for us to BE different from the rest of the world.

(2) We must accept the responsibility these distinctions put on us. The very first word in this passage is "you". The Greek word is best translated as "you and you alone." The logic is, then, that we must not fail in the tasks before us because there is no other to do those tasks. We Christians must remain true to our nature--no one else will. Our distinct qualities as the salt of the earth and the light of the world MUST NOT be lost to sinfulness, compromise, laziness, or fear.

(3) We must see our responsibility as twofold--to purify and to bring light. We are to help stop the spread of evil but also we are to promote the good--promote truth, beauty, and goodness.

What are we to do? The character described in the Beatitudes and our nature as salt and light are very closely related. Our influence--our ability to light the world and change the world depends on our character, on our being different from the world.

Let me read some of the ways Jesus describes us--from Luke's account of this same sermon. Jesus says that if we listen to him, if we let our light shine and if we are the salt of the earth--we will be blessed and the world will be blessed through us and God will be glorified.

From Luke 6:

27 “But I tell you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. 29 To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer also the other; and from him who takes away your cloak, don’t withhold your coat also. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and don’t ask him who takes away your goods to give them back again. 31 “As you would like people to do to you, do exactly so to them. 32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive back as much. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing back; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil. 36 “Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful. 37 Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Don’t condemn, and you won’t be condemned. Set free, and you will be set free. 38 “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be given to you. ‡ For with the same measure you measure it will be measured back to you.”