

[Jesus said:] 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.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹“Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Someone once told me how different body types are now described by their association with foods: the apple shaped body, pear, carrot, string bean, and even peanut are some examples. I asked this person what body type they think I am. “Hmm... saltshaker.” I took that as a condiment.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. Note that he doesn’t say, “You need to become salt of the earth.” Simply by listening to him, we are metaphorically salt. What Jesus means by this rests in the main purpose of salt. It is most often used to bring out the unique flavors of the foods it is combined with. Therefore Jesus is saying that we, as disciples, serve a purpose to enhance the world and the other people around us. This doesn’t mean forcing others to conform to a vision we might have for them. What it means is that we live our lives

with an awareness of God's holiness in this world, and God's image in all the people we encounter. Loving and caring for the world and all its people is a sign of our reverence for God's presence in them. The Message translation of the Bible does a great job at getting to this understanding of Jesus' metaphor: "You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth." Isn't that a lovely translation? We are the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.

Yet, Jesus follows this statement by seemingly offering the possibility that salt can lose its salt-capabilities. The truth is that salt is a chemical compound, and it will always keep its salt-qualities down to the molecular level. It can't lose its saltiness. Setting aside the science of it, there are also records of Jewish stories from around the time of Jesus that tell us it was a cultural assumption that it is impossible for salt to lose its flavor. So maybe the problem isn't that Jesus had a major misunderstanding of how salt works, rather the problem is actually how we translate what Jesus is saying. What Jesus says in the original Greek is, "if the salt is moronos..." Moronos... where we get the word 'moron.' It translates as stupid, or foolish. So don't hear this as Jesus saying salt can lose its saltiness; rather, salt can be foolish. Yet, what does that look like? It is like a container of salt left sitting next to a stew being prepared, but the salt is never used. So the stew ends up being dull, with no flavors in it at all. In that scenario, the salt is moronos. It is not fulfilling its purpose. That is the point Jesus makes: what purpose does it serve if his disciples aren't bringing out the God-flavors of the world and the people around them?

Jesus continues this metaphor by saying this foolish salt is thrown out and trampled under foot. When real salt is "trampled under foot," it is not just useless, it becomes harmful. It destroys the vegetation where it is. That leads to one possible takeaway for understanding this metaphor. We – as disciples – are salt: we will either bring out the God-flavors of this world for others to enjoy, or we are foolish by doing no good for the people and the world around us. In doing the latter, it is possible to inhibit others from witnessing God's love and

activity in this world, just like salt inhibiting vegetation. Truth be told, we can point to examples of both useful or destructive salt in church history. Many disciples of Jesus have been useful in bringing out the God-flavors in the world around them, and many disciples of Jesus have been detrimental in that endeavor. These are Christians in the past and in the present who make this world less loving and more malicious; less humane and more hateful. If you are inclined to say, “Those aren’t real Christians, though,” please realize that comment does not help the people they have hurt. Plus, that comment only serves to absolve us of the responsibility of addressing this problem within the Christian community.

There is no doubt regarding the outcome Jesus desires. He wants us to be salt that brings out the God-flavors for others to experience. Our task is to mix it up with other people and be a part of the broader society, so that through our actions and words other people may experience the savory flavors of God all around them and they may find their truest selves bear the image of God.

“You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” Note that those are both indicative verbs, meaning that they describe our existing condition. The only imperative verb, or command, in the whole text comes in verse 16; “Let your light shine before others.” The “you” in there is plural, so the best translation is “Let y’all’s light shine before others.” There is something interesting about that verb, though. It is in the third-person singular imperative, and there isn’t an equivalent for that type of verb in English. It would be like trying to command her over there to do something; in English, we would get her attention first, and then give her a command in the second-person. “Let y’all’s light shine before others.” If Jesus isn’t giving this command to the group – y’all – then who – or what – is receiving this command to shine? The answer is that Jesus is giving the light that is within us the command to shine. Doctor Melanie Howard explains the importance of this distinction;

“This is significant because [we are] not being issued explicit instructions about how [we] are to behave. Instead, that which comprises the human essence already (for example, “light”) is simply instructed to be made even more manifest

than what it already is. It is not for humans to accomplish any particular work. Humans are simply to allow their core essence to be made more evident.”

Wow. Jesus is alluding to the image of God that you already possess, and he is commanding that image to manifest itself even more so that others may see it in us and give glory to God.

This passage is near the beginning of a discourse that is commonly called “The Sermon on the Mount.” The reason why Matthew has Jesus situated on a mount is because it is a throwback to Moses on Mount Sinai. On that mount Moses delivered God’s Law for the people of Israel. To this day this event gives them a vision to worship God alone and to do the work to make this world a better place for everyone. Jesus finishes today’s passage by saying he has come to fulfill the law, not abolish it. In effect, the sermon that Jesus delivers on this mount gives the Gentile followers of Jesus – like ourselves – the vision to join in the mission to worship God alone and to make this world a better place for others. How? By allowing God’s image within us to shine even more. By enriching the God-flavors that are in the world and in the people around us. You indeed are the salt of the earth. You indeed are the light of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.