

“Lightly Seasoned”

Matthew 5:13-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 17, 2013

Recently I was in a bookstore and I found myself on the aisle with the cookbooks. I noticed that a number of them seemed to have a common theme. Listen to the titles of a few of them: *The No-Salt Cookbook: Reduce or Eliminate Salt Without Sacrificing Flavor*; *The American Heart Association Low Salt Cookbook*; *Living Well Without Salt*; *Cooking Without a Grain of Salt*; *The No-Salt, No-Sugar, No-Fat Cookbook*. That one sounds delicious. My favorite was *No More Junk Food – Eat Your Junk Mail: An Endless Source of Low-Fat, Low-Salt Food*. OK, I made that one up. But did you notice something about the rest? That’s right. They were all focused on reducing your intake of salt.

One day a teacher asked her class, “why can’t freshwater fish survive in saltwater?” One of the kids piped up, “Because the salt would give them high blood pressure.” You may have heard from your doctor that you need less salt. The message we hear today is that salt is bad. Salt has become a four-letter word.

But then we hear Jesus say, “You are the salt of the earth.” Surely he doesn’t mean this as an insult. As it turns out, throughout most of history salt has been a very valuable and highly sought commodity. Empires have risen and fallen because of salt. Ancient Greek slave traders would trade salt for slaves, which is where we get the expression of someone being “worth their salt.” In the Roman Empire, part of a soldier’s pay was in salt and was called in Latin a *salarium*, which is where we get our word “salary.” The first known tax was in China around 2200 BC. It was a tax on salt, and at times salt has been more valuable than gold.

Besides it’s economic value, salt is absolutely critical for life. Every living thing

requires some amount of salt to survive. In the human body salt is involved in regulating your fluid balance, and is also how your body transmits electrical signals in your nervous system. You can’t survive without salt.

Salt is also very useful. There are over 14,000 uses for salt. For example, salt is an excellent cleaner. If you have a cast iron skillet you can clean it with salt and then wipe it with a paper towel and it won’t rust. Salt can be used to get rid of moths and ants around your home. It can prevent weeds from growing in the joints and cracks in your patio. You can make a paste of salt and vinegar to polish tarnished copper or brass. This begins to get at what Jesus meant when he said, “you are the salt of the earth.”

Before we look specifically at what Jesus meant by these metaphors of salt and light, we need to know that when he says, “you are the salt of the earth,” and “you are the light of the world,” the “you” is plural. He’s saying, “y’all are the salt of the earth; y’all are the light of the world.” He’s talking directly to his disciples here, but he’s also talking to the Church. You as members of the church, all of us together in and as the Church, are salt and light. Jesus is showing us what it means to be a Christian. He has given us, his followers, a mission.

In the ancient world, salt had three primary uses: as a seasoning to flavor food, as a purifier or antiseptic, and to preserve food and prevent decay. These are the things that describe the follower of Jesus. First of all, in the ancient world salt was the primary way of preserving meat and fish. Without refrigeration, food will spoil very quickly. But salt can be used to slow down the decay and make it safe to eat. In the same way, Christians are to have that effect on the culture. We look around and see our

culture decaying. That shouldn't surprise us. Our role as the Body of Christ, as salt in the world, is to influence the society for Jesus in order to prevent that decay.

The second use for salt in the ancient world is similar to the first. It was used as a purifier or antiseptic. The church and our lives should be places of purity. Jesus had just said in verse 5, "Blessed are the pure in heart." It's reasonable to think that the pure in heart will have a purifying effect on the world.

The third use for salt is the one we most often think of today, as a seasoning. If you use salt correctly when cooking it will make the food more flavorful without tasting "salty." It brings out the natural flavors of food. Jesus is clear that life in this world should be more flavorful because Christians are in it. Sadly, as the great Scottish commentator William Barclay points out, "so often people have connected Christianity with...that which takes the flavor *out* of life." Jesus intends for us to bring joy to the people around us, not take it away. It's a sin to steal joy from others.

Here Jesus gives us a warning: "if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?" Now we know that it's impossible for salt to lose its saltiness. Salt that doesn't taste salty isn't really salt. It's something else. Jesus is saying that people who claim to be Christians but don't "taste" like Christians, meaning they don't affect the world around them, aren't really Christians.

Jesus then uses a second metaphor in this passage. He says, "Y'all are the light of the world, the cosmos." Do you get how important this is? In John 8 Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." Here Jesus says, "YOU are the light of the world." Which is it? The best way to understand this saying is that we, as Jesus' followers, reflect His light. Our light that shines before others doesn't originate with us. Donald Grey Barnhouse,

who was pastor of Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia for many years, "used to say that when Christ was in the world, he was a bit like the sun, which is here by day and gone by night. The sun gives light, but when the sun goes down, the moon comes up. The moon is a bit like the church. The moon shines too, but it only shines because it reflects the sun's light." Our role as Christians and as the Church is to reflect the light of Christ into the world. How do we go about reflecting Christ? By the "good works" we do. By ministering to our community and to far away places in the world, we are reflecting Christ's love into darkness. Jesus says that if you're his follower, people will be able to tell. You won't be able to hide it and you shouldn't try. Just like a city up on a hill, it will be obvious if you are really Jesus' disciple. The light of Christ, the light of truth, will shine *through* you. And when unbelievers see it they will give glory to God, meaning that they will become followers because they want what you have. They want that kind of light.

William Barclay says, "A Christianity whose effects stop at the church door is not much use to anyone." He means that real Christianity doesn't stay inside the church. We take it out into the world. He goes on to say that our Christianity should be visible in the way we treat the cashier at the store and the waiter in the restaurant. It should be visible in the way we treat our employees or employer. He even says that our Christianity should be visible in the way we drive and park our cars.

Not long ago there was a professional football player who was interviewed for a magazine article. His team had lost almost every game that season and so the reporter asked him how he was able to find the motivation to go out there each week and play as hard as he did. He said, "my mother and father are watching. I'm going to give it

everything I've got." The point is this. You can't separate discipleship from mission. Being a Christian is not passive and it doesn't mean simply learning facts about the Bible. Being a true Christian means influencing the world around you the way salt influences the food it touches. It means giving it everything you've got because the world is watching.

Amen