

# ***“You Are the Salt of the Earth”***

**Matthew 5:13**

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## **Introduction:**

This morning I would like for us to look together at a chemical compound **»PPT»** mentioned in the Bible—it is sometimes known today as Sodium Chloride (NaCl), or more commonly referred to as **“salt.”** Perhaps you can remember from your high school chemistry class that Sodium and Chloride are extremely dangerous on their own. I don’t know about you, but I very clearly remember seeing a video of someone throwing a brick of pure Sodium into the water in an old gravel pit, and it literally exploded when it hit the surface of the water. It bounced around for a while, as flames shot up out of the water. On its own, then, Sodium is unstable and is actually quite dangerous. We could say something very similar for Chlorine. We use it in a much diluted form to clean our laundry. On its own it is dangerous, but when Sodium and Chlorine come together, they form the very stable compound that we commonly refer to as **“salt.”**

At this time, I would like to ask several of our men to start passing around some salt this morning. I hope that everyone will take a piece or two and that you will feel free to either save it or eat it—that is up to you—but hopefully it will help to give us at least a little deeper appreciation for the topic of this morning’s lesson.

**»PPT»** Salt, of course, has a long and important history. We know that at one time Roman soldiers were actually paid with salt—those payments in salt are the origin of our English word **“salary.”** And so if you receive a **“salary,”** you are acknowledging the value of salt in the ancient world. I also learned this week that the word **“salad”** literally means **“salted,”** and it goes back to the ancient Roman practice of salting leafy vegetables to make them taste better! I discovered that worldwide, food uses account for only around 17% of salt production—most of it goes for industrial uses. Apparently, salt is a necessary ingredient in the manufacture of many things, including pulp and paper, setting colors in fabric, and in the making of soaps and detergents. In the ancient world, it was often used for healing. If a farmer got injured on the job, if a child scraped his knee, if a soldier was hurt in battle, the wound was washed in salt and water. Salt has antiseptic properties. Apparently, mothers would even rub their newborn babies with salt as a way of preventing infection. Even today, saline solution is often used in hospitals, and everybody knows that your grandmother was right—that a sore throat can be cured by gargling with warm salt water.

**»PPT»** Here in Madison, we are probably very familiar with the use of salt on our roads. There has been quite a controversy lately, as certain politicians have tried to

cut back on the use of salt for the sake of our local lakes, and certainly we understand the dilemma. We want our lakes to be clean, but we also want to drive around safely in the winter. Over the past week, we have taken great pleasure in washing both of our cars. When I drove to Tennessee, one of the first things we did the night we got there was to wash the car. When I left home last Friday morning, the temperature was 2 degrees. I could hardly see out the side windows. But down in Tennessee we took advantage of the warm weather and washed the car, and in washing the car, we uncovered a rust hole that we had never seen before—although we can be pretty sure it was caused by the salt! Now that I'm home, I'm thinking that perhaps the salt was the only thing holding the car together, and now it's all downhill! I have read that the city of Madison normally plans on spreading around 10,000 tons of salt in an average winter! I know at our house we use it on the driveway from time to time. You can go to Farm and Fleet and buy a 60 pound bag of rock salt for less than \$5. Perhaps the ancient Romans would be jealous at the bounty of salt all around us today.

»PPT» For most of us, though, we normally think of salt as something we eat—or in some cases, as something the doctor has told us not to eat! We put it in soup, we put it on cucumbers, we put it on tomatoes, we put it on avocados, and corn on the cob, and popcorn, and eggs, and hash browns, and on and on. Most of us keep a salt shaker on the kitchen table. Most restaurants keep salt right there where we can find it. At fast food restaurants, it comes in little packets, and probably most of us have several of those little packets floating around the car somewhere!

We know from talking to the doctors and nutritionists that salt is necessary for human life. It is vital for muscle contraction, for nerve impulses, for the exchange of water between the body's cells and the fluid surrounding them and for the digestion of protein. I have read that the average human body contains roughly 8 ounces of salt. Without it we could not live. History tells us that some of Napoleon's soldiers actually died because there was not enough salt in their bodies to coagulate their blood. Salt, therefore, is a necessity. In our modern society, though, the abundance of inexpensive salt has led to some serious problems. Although salt is necessary for human life, doctors also tell us, though, that too much salt can be very dangerous. As I understand it, too much salt is the leading cause of high blood pressure—leading to an increased risk of stroke, and all kinds of other health concerns.

But for this morning, I would like for us to look at one of the most famous passages on salt in the Bible—a passage that comes near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount—a passage found in Matthew 5—Matthew 5:13. »PPT» In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on page 1506—Matthew 5:13.

I am sure that all of us have heard these words before, but I would ask this morning that we hear them again. Back up in verse 1, Jesus sees the large crowds starting to gather, and so He goes up on the side of a mountain and sits down. He starts out with the Beatitudes, *"Blessed are poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the gentle,"* and so on. But immediately after the Beatitudes, the Lord makes a profound statement as He refers to the disciples as being the *"salt of the earth."* If you will, please look with me at the words of Jesus in Matthew

**5:13.** Jesus said, ***“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”*** Lord willing, I would like for us to go on and look at the next few verses next week, but for now, let us keep our attention focused on **verse 13**.

We notice right away that Jesus says to His disciples, ***“You are the salt of the earth.”*** He does not compare them to salt, He does not tell them to be salt, He does not command them to act like salt, being salt is not some kind of spiritual gift that some people have and others don't, but Jesus says, ***“You are salt.”*** As Christians, then, salt is who we are. The context seems to indicate that Jesus was telling them how to behave—how to be different from the world—how to be in the world but not of the world. And so the question is: How do we live in this world without becoming so involved in it that we are changed by it, and not the other way around? How do we live as the salt of the earth? After all, Jesus was speaking to a group of people who were not the kind who would have normally had a big influence on the world. He was speaking to fishermen, and tax collectors, and other very average people. How then were these very normal people to have an influence on the world? I would like for us to study this question this morning by looking at the importance of salt as it was used in the ancient world.

**I. As we think about the importance of salt in the ancient world, one of the first things we find in our research is that SALT WAS USED TO PRESERVE VARIOUS FORMS OF FOOD. **▶▶PPT▶▶****

Of course, it still is, even today. Although it is more common in the South, we know that ham and other forms of meat are still preserved and **“cured”** with salt. We realize that putting meat in the freezer is a relatively new concept. 2,000 years ago, then, if you wanted to save any meat, if you wanted to transport your fish to market, those things would be rubbed with salt and would actually be packed in salt. Salt is a preservative that keeps something from going bad—it prevents decay.

In a spiritual sense, we might think about Sodom and Gomorrah. We remember that God was willing to spare those cities if only ten righteous people could be found. Of course, God could not find ten righteous people, but if He had, those cities would have been **“preserved”** through the righteous living of just a few people. Apparently, Lot, then, had failed to spread his influence. Lot had failed to live as salt. You might remember that when Lot warned his neighbors of the judgment to come, his own sons-in-law laughed at what Lot was saying—his family thought he was joking! Something was wrong there.

We think about a wicked society, and we only need to look at the world around us right now. We look around us, and we see a process that started when Eve took that first bite of the forbidden fruit. Sin continues to spread, the world continues to rot, as people keep on choosing to turn away from God. Just this last week, you might have noticed the lesbian couple who led the legal battle leading to the legalization of same-sex **“marriage”** in Massachusetts (back in May 2004)—apparently, they have

now decided to **"divorce."** Divorce is a terrible thing, and I hate to be happy about any divorce, but perhaps with this one I can make an exception!

But even closer to home, the world around us continues to rot in sin. We think of the recent decisions right here in Madison to start providing late-term abortions—right across the street from Meriter Hospital—a joint venture between Meriter and the University of Wisconsin. Right across the street from where one of my children was born, other children will be murdered! The latest news stories tell us that the abortions will take place through the 22<sup>nd</sup> week of life. We have friends and members of this congregation who were born not too long after the 22<sup>nd</sup> week of life. Over the past couple of days, I have appreciated the comments made by Peggy Hammill, state director of Pro-Life Wisconsin, **"When we kill babies, it is a failure of our health care system and a failure of our intellects. When we kill babies it is a sign that consciences are dead. When consciences are dead, there is no limit to what we will not do."** I agree with that statement 100%.

But the atrocity is not something that will happen in the far-off distant future, it is happening right now. Perhaps you have heard recently about the murder of Shanice Williams. Her 18-year old mother went in for an abortion, the doctor gave her a medicine to open the cervix, she went home to let the medicine take effect, several days later she went back to the clinic, but the doctor was late for the appointment, and Shanice was born at 23 weeks. But before anything could happen, the owner of the abortion clinic apparently came in, cut the umbilical cord, and threw Shanice in a garbage bag which was then thrown out into a dumpster. The mother had a change of heart (that is apparently when she named her baby), the little body was discovered by police, and they then performed an autopsy, confirming that the baby was breathing on her own when she died.

As a nation, we are legally murdering children. We are murdering children at a rate of around 1.2 million every year. Our society is rotting. What do we do about it? Jesus tells us, **"You are the salt of the earth."** As Christians, we are the preservative. As Christians, we are the conscience of this community, because this community does not have one! As Christians, we are the ones who need to speak up for what is true and right, and we are to protest what is wrong. As Christians, we are the ones who are responsible for speaking out against hatred, and racism. We are different, and through our Christian influence, we are the ones who do the best we can to slow down the decay.

Have you ever noticed that it's easy to be good when you are with some people, and it is easy to be bad when you are with other people? Have you ever noticed that? There are some people we would never even think of doing something bad around. But then there are other people who seem to encourage us to do what is wrong. As Christians, we are to be that first kind of person! We are the ones that (through our example) make others think twice about doing what is wrong.

Our society is drifting farther and farther away from God. Our role as Christians is to slow the process down a little bit. Our role is to preserve Godly living for as long as we can. Our role is to live the Christian life, and when the world starts looking

around for answers, they notice the way we are living, and they slow down and take a look. We know from experience that a piece of dead meat will not go looking for salt—the salt needs to go to the meat! We can hardly imagine this world without any Christian influence.

As Christians, then, we have the ability to help encourage the person who drinks too much to see that drinking is not necessary to get along. As Christians, we have the ability to help those who are out to get rich to see that there are things more important in life than making money. As Christians, we have the ability to gently encourage those who are not attending worship as they should to get to worship and classes where the word of God is being taught. As Christians, our role is to slow down the rate of decay in the world around us. First of all, then, salt is a preservative, and when the Lord tells us that we are the salt of the earth, He is saying that Christians play a role in preserving the world.

## II. As we think back to the importance of salt, we discover that salt not only preserves, but it also **FLAVORS THE FOOD THAT WE EAT.** **▶PPT▶**

Perhaps we would agree with the little boy who defined salt as **“the stuff that makes things taste bad when it is left out.”** We know that without salt many foods are not very flavorful. In fact, as the little boy seemed to notice, when we taste food that has the proper amount of salt, we don’t even think about it. But we notice when the salt is missing. In fact, there are some foods that we can hardly imagine eating without salt—popcorn, pretzels, or maybe a good steak. But even if we put salt on a steak, we do not say, **“Wow, that is great salt!”** But instead we say, **“Wow, that is a great steak!”** Salt brings out the flavor of the steak. The steak does not bring out the flavor of the salt. Even recipes for cookies and cakes call for salt. We don’t add salt because it makes the food look better, or smell better, or feel better—we add salt to make it taste better!

As we apply this to our Christian faith, we think of what Paul wrote in **Colossians 4:5-6**, ***“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”***

As Christians, then, we do not necessarily need to go out and scream at people on the street corners, but our daily conversations are to be **“seasoned with salt.”** We are to conduct ourselves with wisdom toward those on the outside. As Christians, we are to naturally enhance the flavor of the world around us—the way we talk, the way we act, the way we react to stress, the way we handle our finances—the way we behave at school, or work, and especially at home—the way we behave when we think that no one is watching. If we serve as salt, we draw attention not to ourselves, but to the Lord. We are the salt of the earth. Our schools, our workplaces, our homes, should all be better because we as Christians are there. We know from experience that often times just the presence of a Christian in a room will change a conversation from what is obscene to what is pure. A lot of times, people



just don't know any better. Sometimes people lie without really thinking about it, they hurt the ones they love the most, but a lot of times it just takes a Christian to demonstrate the way things need to be. Actions speak louder than words.

We may only have a tiny bit of influence, but as salt, that is often all it takes. I think we have all had the experience of having too much salt on something. Shortly after we were married, I got up early and made some waffles for my wife. I didn't want to wake her up to ask any questions. Did you know there is a difference between a teaspoon and a tablespoon? I soon learned that there is a huge difference between two teaspoons and two tablespoons of salt! After the first bite, we tried to double and then triple the recipe to dilute it a little bit, but we should have started over. By the way, she lovingly ate those waffles anyway. A little salt goes a long way.

As Christians, we show people in little ways that the Christian life is pleasant, and enjoyable, and a better way to live. As Christians, we are not miserable people. As Christians, we demonstrate what it means not to worry all the time. As Christians, we demonstrate what it means not to go through life with an overwhelming fear of death. As Christians, we should be known as the people who make life better in every way possible. We do not lie, we are authentic and genuine, we show kindness toward those who are poor, we have hope for the future. As Christians, we are the salt of the earth. It is interesting that this statement comes right after the beatitudes. As Christians, we are blessed—we are happy people!

And once again, we discover here also that salt requires contact with the world. Just as meat cannot be preserved without being covered in salt, the salt needs to be placed on the food to change its flavor. We do not hole ourselves up here in this building, but we get out there and live with people in the world. And so we find that we as Christians flavor the world.

### **III. As we come to the end of our study, we discover that SALT ALSO HAS THE ABILITY TO GENERATE THIRST.** **»PPT»**

If you ate your rock salt a while ago, perhaps you already know this! A big cup of ice-cold water sure would be good about now! Well, salt makes us thirsty! And hopefully, our Christian example will also cause people to ***"hunger and thirst after righteousness"*** (going back up to **Matthew 5:6**). We know that many members of this congregation are Christians today not because of a huge advertising campaign, but because of the godly influence of another Christian. Generally speaking, we did not reach each other with an ad in the newspaper, but we discovered Jesus because someone made us thirsty. A parent lived the Christian life, a spouse won us over, as Peter says in **1 Peter 3:1**, ***"without a word,"*** (not from constant nagging, but from being a Christian). A neighbor sees our example and gets thirsty—he starts wondering why we are so different, why we are so happy, why we are able to forgive, why we do not hold a grudge, why we can stop smoking, why we are so patient, why we always keep our word. They wonder why we are full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**).

We understand why Jesus described Himself in **John 4** as *“living water.”* The woman at the well was thirsty for something, and Jesus satisfied that thirst.

As Christians, though, we do not make people thirsty for God unless we are truly salty—unless we actually get out there in the world! If the salt stays in the salt shaker, it does no good. So finally, then, being the salt of the earth means that we make people thirsty for the Christian faith.

### **Conclusion:**

As we come to the end of this morning’s lesson, I would like for us to focus in on something Jesus says at the end of this verse, ***“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”*** What in the world does that mean? After all, scientists tell us that salt is a rather stable compound. Why is it, then, that 80% of this verse is a warning? Generally speaking, salt does not lose its saltiness. We need to understand, then, that the salt they had 2,000 years ago was different than the salt we are familiar with today. Today, our salt is very refined. The salt we passed around earlier was purchased at Woodman’s yesterday for \$1.09, and it is basically pure. But in ancient times, they would scrape up their salt from a dried up seabed, and in the process they would scrape up a lot of other stuff with it. Jesus, then, is referring to the danger of salt getting mixed in with other stuff and getting contaminated. And then, over time, as it gets wet, as it absorbs moisture, for example, the salt dissolves, leaving behind the sand and gravel and whatever else was in there. And so we have the picture of someone eventually sprinkling sand on their steak or spreading dirt on their potatoes.

Jesus was warning His disciples, then, to keep their example pure. He was warning them to always be authentic—to avoid the sin of hypocrisy. Because if they allowed themselves to be contaminated by the world, Jesus said that they would be good for nothing, except to be thrown out on the path in front of the house to be trampled underfoot by men.

- When we see a person in need and turn the other way, we lose our saltiness.
- When we hear a dirty joke and let it slide, we lose our saltiness.
- When we fail to stand up for someone who is being slandered, we lose our saltiness.

This morning we have learned that salt serves a purpose:

- Salt preserves.
- Salt enhances flavor.
- Salt generates thirst.

If we no longer do these things in a spiritual sense, the Bible teaches that we abandoned our purpose and are good for nothing. This morning, then, I would like

for us to visualize people we know who could use some salt—our families, the people at school or work, people in the neighborhood—and let us make a commitment to be salt to someone this week.

If you have failed to be salt and need to repent of that, or if you need the prayers of this congregation to be even saltier than you are now, we would encourage you to let us know about that so we can pray about it right now—write it on a card and bring it to the front in just a moment. On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian and would like to obey the gospel right now, you need to know that Jesus died for our sins. We react to that sacrifice by turning away from sin and allowing ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will talk to us. But if you are ready to be baptized right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)