

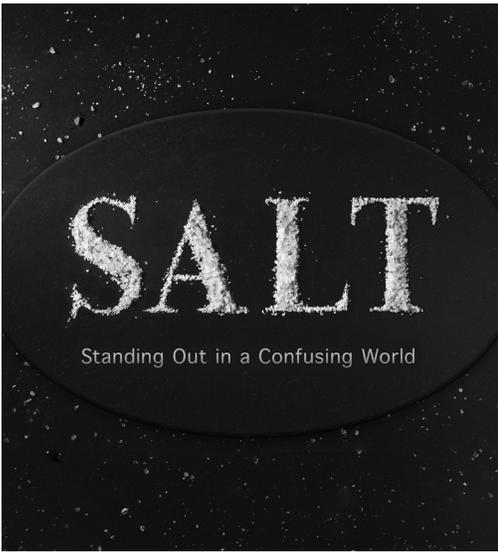
SALT

Standing Out in a Confusing World

Sermon Growth Guide

August 4, 2024

Salty



Sermon Growth Guide

August 11, 2024

Salt - Dissolving Hatred

Matthew 5:17-26

Key Verse: Matthew 5:13

“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother and sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Big Idea: When we practice forgiveness and dissolve

Foundations

Jesus saw people focused on external obedience at the expense of internal decay. These instructions occur within a broader section of six examples offered by Jesus to breathe new life into God’s instruction that guide us in living as God’s Kingdom people. The Greeks had two main words for anger. Thumos described anger like a flame with dried straw: it quickly blazed up and just as quickly died down. Orgē was long-lived anger: that of one who nurses it to keep it going. This is the kind of anger that Jesus is addressing in this passage. Dale Bruner observed, “Resentment and hard words kill people more swiftly than cigarettes and alcohol.” Jesus goes on to offer two additional examples of looking down on others. The first questions the mental competence of another; literally, “You idiot!” The second questions their moral competence; the words is closer to “liar.” Jesus’ instruction when a line has been crossed: reconcile, and settle matters quickly. As we do, we move against the grain of the world and demonstrate to those around us lives that offer something better.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Matthew 5:17-26. How many different instructions from Jesus can you find within this passage? In 5:23-24, Jesus says that we’re to reconcile not with those we have something against, but with those who have something against us. How does this differ from our usual approach, and what does it mean that Jesus tells us to do this before worshiping God?

Applying God’s Word

Tim noted in his sermon, “Jesus is more interested in the direction of your heart than the limits on your behavior.” Visible behavior tends to capture our attention; what would it look like to focus more upon the condition of our hearts? What behaviors or type of people are most likely to make you angry? How well would you say you let that anger dissipate within rather than allowing it to simmer?

Witnessing God’s Word

Tim stated in The Weekly, “Salt only has an influence if it stays in contact.” Where are you most likely to rub shoulders with those outside the church, where you have potential to be salt? How can you do so this week?

Our passage for today follows the famous Beatitudes, which commence the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth” (5:5). “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (5:6). “Blessed are those who make peace, for they shall be called sons of God, God’s beloved children” (5:9). The Beatitudes are didactic: they tell us what to do, and what rewards we may expect when we do them. The Beatitudes are also ironic. They surprise us with the unexpected. The word “Blessed,” with which each begins, is their greatest irony, for the Greek word translated “blessed,” makarios, means “a member of the upper class” (as opposed to a slave). The characteristics of being “poor in spirit” and “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” may depress us, but the Beatitudes extol them. When you practice the Beatitudes, you are a member of the “upper class in God’s kingdom!

Matthew 5:13-16 follows immediately on the heels of the Beatitudes, but it changes the way Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God. It is longer didactic, a rational appeal. Jesus now appeals to our imaginations and sense of wonder. He doesn’t tell us what to do. He tells us who we are: “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” These are metaphors. The characteristics of salt and light are also the characteristics of being a Christian. So how are Christians like salt and light?!

To call someone “salty” is not a compliment but an insult, for it connotes a cross and disagreeable person. We frequently hear instead that it is characteristics of salt that are meant to characterize Christian discipleship. Salt cleanses things—wounds, for example—and that’s relevant for Christians, who are called to be clean and cleansing agents in the world. Salt is a preservative, and that should also characterize Christians. We should be preservative and not corrosive, preserving creation, preserving virtues that make human relationships, communities, and society healthy. As a chemical compound—sodium chloride—

salt seasons food, making bland things tasty and zesty. Christians, too, should “season” society with joy and forgiveness and love.

We could also explore the properties of light as we have salt. But is moralizing on salt and light the point of the metaphors? Jesus does not refer to their separate properties. He uses them together, synonymously, and they appear to illustrate a single central truth of discipleship. When we ask what salt and light share in common as metaphors of being Christ followers, one unique quality emerges: they both are absolutes. Most things in life are not absolute. Most things are incremental. Like life itself, most things are best understood in terms of growth. Becoming a “grown up”—however, whenever, and if that occurs—is an incremental process. And nearly everything we seek to achieve is incremental. We’re improving at golf. Our waistlines is getting thinner (hopefully). We’re trying to become more patient and tolerant. All human relationships—marriage, parenting, family relations; all skills—job skills, computer literacy, learning to cook, how to change furnace filters, getting the baby to sleep, getting a live person on Comcast; all virtues—becoming more tolerant, forgiving, understanding, loving, faithful, most Christ-like . . . all these skills, behaviors, and virtues are incremental. We are either gaining ground or losing ground, getting better or worse, succeeding or failing. These are not innate and natural traits like breathing and eating and sleeping and begetting and dying; they are learned traits, and our learning and practice are processes that are never complete.

Salt and light are not incremental, however. They’re absolutes, either/or. A pregnancy test reveals whether you are pregnant or not pregnant; no one is “kind of pregnant.” When you rush through the air terminal to catch a plane, you either make the flight or you don’t; no one “sort of makes a flight.” The coroner’s report has only one box to check: dead. There’s no second box labeled “almost.”



An absolute characteristic of both salt and light are that they cannot be contained. Salt permeates everything in the pot. A grain of salt does not remain localized; it dissolves, spreads, permeates, and alters the taste of everything around it. And if salt no longer saltifies, if it loses its property of seasoning, what does Jesus say? Throw it out. It has only one purpose, and if it fails that purpose, it's useless. Light, likewise, is uncontainable. When you crack the door to your cellar, light doesn't enter the cellar as a vertical sliver that leaves the rest of the cellar pitch black. The whole cellar now becomes visible in a way that it wasn't before the door was cracked. If you've been in the cave when they turn the lights off, you experience the awful reality of total darkness. But when the smallest light appears, say a cellphone screen, the darkness is no longer total.

"You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world"? What is Jesus Christ saying to the church, and to you and me personally with these two metaphors? He is saying that there is no such thing as a private profession of Christian faith, a compartmentalized expression of Christian faith, a partial commitment of faith. Christian faith is not a club where you follow a set of rules that you don't follow outside the club. Your witness as a believer and follower of Christ cannot be declared and practiced at FPC, but forgotten or concealed at your place of employment, in your home, in your entertainment and vacations, in your political allegiances and choices, in what you read and watches on TV and view on you cellphone and computer screen, your economic practices, commitments, and habits. Salt and light permeate everything around them indiscriminately, absolutely, universally. Christian faith does the same in our lives. If there is one room in your house where Christ is not invited, one commitment or goal in my life of which Christ is not Lord, one problem in your life not submitted to Christ, one sin that I fail to confess to Christ, then we are not salt and light. Salt and light cannot be anything other than salt and light, which means they cannot

be anything other than absolute, all-permeating, total determiners.

In 1983 I took a group of students from Jamestown College, where I was teaching at the time, for a three-week Jan Term in Germany for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. Nine out of ten Luther sites were in then-communist East Germany, so to East Germany we went. We applied for visas, entered East Berlin through the Friedrichstrasse subway station, and were met by a 22-year old woman named Sabina. Sabina was the agent assigned to our group by the government. She had two duties, one of which she declared, one of which she did not. She declared that she would be our guide; she did not declare that she would inform the Stasi (Secret Police) of our activities in the "German Democratic Republic." Sabina was only a couple of years older than our students, she had never been in a church in her life, she had been taught that Christianity was decadent and dying, and her knowledge of Martin Luther was marginal. Sabina and I made a good team: I was pleased with her deficiencies, and she was pleased with my ability to teach her things that she did not know about her country. Apart from entering educational institutions, military complexes, government buildings, or deviating from our itinerary, we were largely uncensored. For three weeks, we lived morning, noon, and night in an Orwellian communist world.

On our last day, we were "invited" to visit the Neue Wache—the New Sentry or Guard Post—that symbolized the safeguarding of communism as a religious ritual. In robotic precision, East German soldiers in smart uniforms, spit-shined jackboots, and military weapons goose-stepped to a militant trumpet liturgy. It so happened that a group of ten or twelve American soldiers who were being shown around East Berlin were also "invited" to the ceremony. I had not thought too much about America during our three weeks in the East, but the sight of these soldiers fanned to life an irrepressible patriotism within me. I, of course, knew none of



the soldiers. They were of different races, from unknown places, each with a personal story unknown to me. None of that mattered. They were Americans, my people, in a strange and hostile world. I wanted to stand near them, touch them, if possible, and tell them how much they meant to me. They were “salt” and “light” to me!

There was a cruel irony in our situation, however. We had become good friends with Sabina and she had disclosed far more information to us than she should have. We also had three other East German Christians who were present at the monument with us. Overhead cameras photographed every person and movement at the monument. Any collaboration between our group and the American soldiers would imperil our Sabina and our East Germans friends with the Stasi. We kept ourselves separate and made no response to the soldiers.

The American soldiers, however, had no idea who we were. To them, we appeared like everyone else at the monument, as East Germans, the communist proletariat, perhaps even enemies. They had no idea of our longing, no idea that we looked on them as “salt” and “light.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the world looks on us as Christians with similar longing! I know what many of you are thinking when I say this: The world does not look on Christians with longing. It scorns Christians, it mocks Christian faith, people are leaving the faith and the church because Christians are identifying their faith with political causes and social ideologies rather than with “the faith once delivered.”

It is important to note that such hostility is directed to “Christians” or “the church,” but very seldom against Jesus Christ. No one blames Jesus for calling his followers “salt” and “light”; they blame his followers for not being “salt” and “light”! The world longs for “salt” and “light.” Its anger erupts from its disappointment with those from whom it expects to see “salt” and “light,” from whom it hopes to

see “salt” and “light” turn out to be fake salt and dead batteries in a flashlight.

When people know that you are a Christian, they look on you as I looked on those soldiers with deep and unspoken longing. You have something, that if true, if embodied by you, is something they yearn for. They may know nothing more about you than I knew about those soldiers. But they know that what you claim, what the Christian Faith proclaims, is “salt” and “light.” You will not be aware of their urge and longing any more than the soldiers in East Berlin knew of my urge and longing. But it’s there. It’s an insuppressible urge and longing of life for “salt” and “light.”

This brings us to Jesus’s closing word on “light.” “Now then, let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven” (v. 16). What a sublime statement! If only Jesus had changed the ending. If only he had said, “Now then, let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify you for being so virtuous!” We all want our good works to glorify ourselves. We don’t do very many, after all. Shouldn’t we get credit for the few we do? No, we shouldn’t. Jesus uses “good works” here as a synonym for “light.” The purpose of light is not to draw attention to itself. You don’t see light, after all, any more than you see air. Light is the means by which we see things, it is not what we see. Your good works are the beam of light along which people see God! If your good works point to yourself, then people see you rather than the Kingdom of God. If your good works point to yourself, they have no saving significance. But if I do whatever I do in life so that God will be glorified, then my deeds become redemptive. They are “salt” and “light.” People see God.

Amen.

