

Michael Brown: Are Modern-Day Believers Still 'The Salt of the Earth'?

In one of the most famous passages in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to His disciples (and, by extension, to His followers today), "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot" (Matt. 5:13; He followed this by saying that we are the light of the world.)

But what, exactly, does it mean to be the salt of the earth? And what does it mean to lose our saltiness?

Many New Testament scholars explain that one of the main functions of salt in the ancient world, where refrigeration did not exist, was preservation against corruption.

Applying this to the Lord's words, one commentary explains that, "Jesus' followers are the saving element of the human race. ... They have a power of preservation which counteracts corruption and decay. ... As salt prevents food from spoiling, so the disciples are to prevent the corruption of morals. The presence of the disciples delays the corruption of the world and its consequent judgment."

Others emphasize that "salt improves the taste of food," and so "the disciples are to improve the quality of the society in which they live."

Still others point to "both preservation and flavoring. ... The disciples make a purer earth and make it a better place to live." (*SIL: An Exegetical Summary of The Sermon on the Mount*; I have removed the commentary references from this quote.)

Suffice it to say that our calling to be the salt of the earth is anything but trivial. We are called “to prevent the corruption of morals ... to improve the quality of the society in which [we] live ... [to] make a purer earth and make it a better place to live.” The stakes are high!

Take us out of the world, and the corruption and rot and decadence and madness will only increase. Take us out of the world, and everything falls apart.

But that only applies if we ourselves really are salt, really are living differently than the world (in moral and spiritual terms), really are functioning as the moral conscience of the society.

As D. A. Carson noted in his *Expositor's Bible Commentary* on Matthew, “The point is that, if Jesus’ disciples are to act as a preservative in the world by conforming to kingdom norms, if they are ‘called to be a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent ... they can discharge this function only if they themselves retain their virtue’.” (Citing R. V. Tasker).

And that is really the crux of the matter. We can’t fix something else if we ourselves are broken. We can’t prevent the spread of corruption if we ourselves are corrupt. We can’t function as salt if we ourselves have lost our saltiness.

Ironically, salt still looks the same, whether it is salty or not, which means we can deceive ourselves by outward appearance. Outwardly, we may look fine. But what is the state of our souls? What is the quality of our lives? What is the health of our marriages and families? Whom do we resemble more, the world or the Lord?

The truth is that, for more than a generation now, rather than us changing the world by shining the light into dark places, by overcoming evil with good, by winning the lost and making disciples, by separating ourselves from the sin and pollution

of the society, the world has largely changed us.

Thank God for those who are burning bright and retaining their saltiness. But all too many are not, which helps explain the current state of our nation. And so, just as “politics is downstream from culture,” in a country where the Christian faith is supposed to be dominant, culture is downstream from the church.

That means that if you trace back the moral and spiritual decline of the society, you will find that much of it began among us, the professing followers of Jesus.

That’s also why we are so often ridiculed, mocked, denigrated and even ignored. It is *not* so much because we are being persecuted for our faith as much as we are being “trampled underfoot” (the words of Jesus) because we have lost our saltiness.

Of course, Jesus is simply making a spiritual point here rather than discussing the qualities of salt. (The *SIL Exegetical Commentary* notes that, “The impure and highly adulterated salt of ancient times could lose its saltiness because the sodium chloride could leach out or dissolve in humid weather and leave only tasteless crystals which no longer tasted like salt.” Otherwise, generally speaking, salt does not lose its taste.)

But if salt *can* lose its saltiness (certainly this is true spiritually speaking), what do we make of the Lord’s question, “How can it be made salty again?”

In natural terms, there is nothing that can be done. Salt that has lost its saltiness has no useful purpose at all.

Thankfully, the whole Bible calls straying believers to turn back to God in repentance, and as we do, the Lord Himself forgives, restores and renews.

"God, make us salty again!" The fate of America depends on it.
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