

Titles of Christians (2)
The Salt of The Earth
Sermon by Pastor Sylvia Chan

Today we continue to study the titles of Christians in the Bible. Last time we studied the title “Fishers of men”; today we are going to study another title:

^{NASB} **Matthew 5:13** “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.”

Here the Lord Jesus says that Christians are the salt of the earth. What does it mean to be the salt of the earth? Today we are going to find out the meaning of this statement.

The function of salt

Nowadays we don’t appreciate the value of salt because salt is very cheap! In the supermarket, one big box of salt costs only one or two dollars. But in ancient times, salt was very precious. Even today in places far from the ocean, in the inland areas, salt is still slightly expensive.

When the Lord Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth”, does he mean that all his disciples are literally transformed into big lumps of salt? No, definitely not! So what does he mean?

The Lord wants us to function as salt in the world; he wants us to do the work similar to salt among the people of the world.

Salt is very useful. It can kill germs, it can preserve food, it can enhance the taste of food. In Canada, salt of a different type is used to dissolve the ice on the ground. The Canadian winter is very cold, the ice makes the roads slippery, which can cause car accidents or slip up pedestrians. People spread salt in front of their houses, and the government spreads salt on the highways and the streets to dissolve the ice.

When the Lord Jesus says we are the salt of the earth, does he want us to exercise all these functions of salt? Of course not! But the Bible mentions one incident:

^{NASB} **2 Kings 2:19 – 21** Then the men of the city said to Elisha, “Behold now, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful.”²⁰ He said,

“Bring me a new jar, and put salt in it.” So they brought *it* to him. ²¹ He went out to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, “Thus says the LORD, ‘I have purified these waters; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer.’”

This is the story of the prophet Elisha purifying the water. The water in that area was bad, maybe it was polluted with some kind of poison which made the land unfruitful such that it couldn't produce anything. Elisha put salt in a new jar, and poured the salt into a spring of water and it was purified.

Some people would immediately ask, “How can a little bit of salt in the jar purify the spring of water? We have never heard that salt has such a wonderful function.”

Of course, definitely, it was not the little bit of salt that purified the water, but it was the power of Yahweh God that purified the water. Elisha was a human being just like us, but he was very faithful to God, that's why God was pleased to use him to cleanse the water to benefit the people.

This incident shows the power of Yahweh God and His loving kindness for people. It also teaches us a spiritual lesson, that if we are faithful to God as Elisha was, God would also use us to do amazing works to benefit His people.

We have a purifying effect among the people of the world

In this story, the salt purified the water. When the Lord Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was talking about this purifying function. The Lord wants us to have a purifying effect in the world.

We all know that there are a lot of dirty, ugly things in the hearts of people in the world, for example:

- Most people in the world seek enjoyment. In order to gain enjoyment, they need to have money. So people become greedy and do a lot of evil things just to get money.
- Most people in the world are ungrateful, they don't remember how other people have helped them, they don't remember the care from their parents, and they don't remember the love and protection from Yahweh God etc.
- Most people's hearts are full of anger, hatred and jealousy; they are jealous of those higher than them, but despise those lower than them.

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- Most people are selfish. They care only for their own benefit and the benefit of those they love, but don't think of the needs of others, and don't care especially about the needs of those they don't like.

I haven't mentioned the immorality in the world. Most people don't want to uphold the moral standards inherited from the Bible or from their ancestors, they even ridicule those who uphold it. Quite often it is the moral people who are ridiculed and attacked by evil people.

Christians are instruments of Yahweh God. Our Lord Jesus calls us to be the salt of the world, we are called to create a holy influence in the midst of evil in this world.

Some people would immediately ask, "How can Christians influence evil people, for only the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ can wash our sins? So how can Christians cleanse the sins of people?" Yes, I remember this very well, that only the blood of our Lord Jesus can wash us clean from all sins. But I am not talking about the cleansing of sins, I am talking about a holy influence in this world. The sins and sexual immorality in the society are causing the moral decline in the hearts of people. Christians are the salt of the earth; it is like the salt that kills germs and preserves food from decaying. Christians have to stand against this immoral power.

A person who lives in a dirty environment for a long time will get used to the filth. He doesn't see it as detestable, he may not even realize that he himself is dirty. It is only until one day he meets someone who is clean and tidy that he realizes how dirty he himself is. Similarly the one who has lived in a sinful environment for a long time would have gotten used to sins, and these sins affect his mind and his heart. People all around him commit sin. Even if they don't commit serious sins, they all commit some kinds of sin, so they don't see sin as a serious thing.

We are the salt of the earth; we have to live a life of holiness in order to create a holy influence to counter the sinful influence of the world. When the people come into contact with us, they will see our works and our lives, then they will realize how sinful they are.

Only when people see their own sins will they begin to see that they need the salvation from Yahweh God, and will seek after God. Of course when they come to God in repentance and a genuine faith, all their sins will be washed clean by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and they will be saved.

What kind of qualities do we need to have?

It is not easy to be the salt of the earth, so what kind of quality do we need to have in order to fulfill this responsibility of being the salt of the earth?

1. Willingness to offer oneself as a sacrifice

^{ESV} **Leviticus 2:13** You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.

This passage instructs the Israelites to add salt in all their offerings to Yahweh God. In the Old Testament, salt is always added in the offerings.

Please remember that salt is dissolved in water. In the incident of 2 Kings 2, Elisha added salt into the spring water. After the water had been cleansed, there was no more salt, it was all dissolved. We see that besides the cleansing of water, salt is always dissolved in water and disappears in the water, for the salt to perform its other functions such as killing germs, preserving food, adding taste to food, or dissolving ice on the ground etc.

Salt is the symbol of self-sacrifice because it is dissolved. If we want to be the salt of the earth, we have to be willing to sacrifice ourselves.

Indeed when we want to help or encourage other people, we have to give our time, energy and wisdom, and people may not be grateful, they may hate us or scold us. When we pray for people, we have to be persistent, you don't just pray once. When we live a life of holiness in this world, we definitely would be attacked and ridiculed by people. But we don't hold grudges against them; we continue to love them even more. When we explain the word of God to people, very often they would hate us and insult us. I have been insulted and attacked many times in all these 30 something years serving Yahweh God, but I don't fight back, I have never taken revenge. I just quietly accept all these attacks, I continue to pray for them and I love them even more.

2. Our speech are always gracious, seasoned with salt

^{ESV} **Colossians 4:6** Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

What does it mean that our speech will always be gracious, seasoned with salt?

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From these Bible passages we see that one very important function of salt is cleansing. When it says here to let our speech be seasoned with salt, it means our words will cleanse the listeners' hearts. Letting our speech be gracious means that in our speech we are very grateful to Yahweh God as well as to people.

People in the world like to complain about almost anything. In all these years of serving God, I have noticed to my surprise that it is often the rich people who complain more than the poor people. Quite often when the poor people receive something good, they would give thanks to God (or to whatever idol they believe in, not Yahweh). But the rich people have all the good things in the world, yet they complain most of the time! It is very strange. Maybe when they have too many things, nothing is new to them, nothing can make them happy! So if we want to function as the salt of the earth, we should give thanks to God who gives us life and everything we need in life, and also give thanks to people who have helped us.

Quite often people in the world like to boast about themselves, but they insult and talk down other people. We as the salt of the earth are to be humble before God, and exalt our Father in heaven.

People in the world often lie to one another, but we speak the truth in love.

Let me share a testimony. Before Pastor Bentley and I went to preach the gospel, I was working in an insurance company as a system programmer analyst. My colleagues often have lunch together; during lunch time they like to gossip about this person or that person. I was very uncomfortable with this kind of talk, but I didn't have the courage to point out their wrongdoings. One day several of us were having lunch together, and they started to gossip about someone who was not at our table. I was sitting there feeling very uncomfortable, but I didn't know what to do. I tried to finish my lunch quickly and leave the table. Suddenly someone noticed that I was too quiet, she turned around to ask me, "What do you think about this person so and so?" I didn't know how to answer her, and one of the people at the table was my boss. I didn't have the authority to point out their wrong doing. Moreover, they were not Christians, so they wouldn't accept the authority of God's teaching. But I definitely didn't want to participate in this kind of gossiping. Immediately I turned to Yahweh God, then the Holy Spirit told me to just speak from my heart with humility. So I said in a very gentle voice, "I am sorry, I don't want to talk about people behind their backs." They didn't expect that I would say something like this, so suddenly everyone became quiet, no one opened the mouth to gossip anymore. I was scared, but also very happy, even though I may have offended some of them, but I obeyed the teaching of my Father. I stood the ground, and didn't follow the behavior of the world. That is one typical example of how to live as the salt of the earth.

All these points I mentioned are just some examples from daily life. The more we want to help other people, the more we have to give of ourselves. Salt can exercise the purifying effect only when it is dissolved.

What does it mean that salt has become tasteless?

In the passage Matthew 5:13 the Lord Jesus says, "... if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again ...". It sounds very strange, how can salt become tasteless? What does it mean that salt has become tasteless?

We have to look at the original Greek word for "become tasteless," and it is "μωραίνω" (*mōrainō*). This word *mōrainō* is used 4 times in the New Testament: Matthew 5:13, Luke 14:34, Romans 1:22, and 1 Corinthians 1:20.

The original meaning of *mōrainō* is "to make foolish". In Romans 1:22 and 1 Corinthians 1:20 this word is translated as "to make foolish". But in Matthew 5:13 and Luke 14:34 this word is translated as "to become tasteless."

You would wonder why? Why was it translated as "to become tasteless"? Why wasn't it translated as "to make foolish"? Because Matthew 5:13 and Luke 14:34 are talking about salt; if it is translated as to make foolish, it would make no sense, for how can salt become foolish? Salt cannot become foolish, only human beings or animals can become foolish! But salt can become tasteless, which is why here in Matthew 5:13 it is translated as "become tasteless"! But in the original Greek language, it says "salt has become foolish"!

And the word *mōrainō* (to make foolish) carries a meaning very different from the ordinary meaning of foolish! Now let's find out what it means to be foolish:

^{ESV} **Romans 1:21-22** For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools.

Here it says that though the people knew that God exists, that there is a God, they did not honor Him as God nor give thanks to Him. That they don't honor God means that they don't obey Him. The consequence of disobeying God is that their thinking has become futile, and their hearts are darkened. They claim to be wise, but actually they have become fools.

This passage tells us that the foolish people are those who disobey God and do not give Him thanks.

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We now apply this meaning back to Matthew 5:13, where the Lord Jesus says we are the salt of the earth. When the Lord says that the salt has become tasteless, he means that if we become disobedient to God, or don't even give thanks to God, or don't acknowledge the grace of God in our lives, then we are no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

Conclusion

Now let's sum up everything. Today we studied another title of Christians, "the salt of the earth". We have to fulfill our function as salt in this world. We have to live a life of righteousness to create a righteous influence against the evil of this world. In order to fulfill this function, we need to offer ourselves as a sacrifice to God. Our speech must be gracious, seasoned with salt. On the other hand if we don't obey Yahweh God, and don't acknowledge God's grace in our lives, we would become foolish just like the people in the world. In this case God wouldn't want to use us any more, and we would be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.