

## **The End of the Church as We Know It Out of the Saltshaker**

What would you say if I told you to eat a rock? Yet there is a rock we all eat. In fact, this rock is an integral part of our diet, and it plays a crucial role in history.

Over the last couple of weeks we have been looking at the collapse of church culture in North America— what researcher and pollster George Barna calls the end of the church as we know it. There have been several monumental shifts in our culture that have taken the church which was like a quarterback in the cultural game and has put it on the bench on the sidelines.

We used to call the plays. We were a voice that everyone listened to. We had a prominent position in the public square. When companies made business decisions they would calculate what will the church say about this? How will Joe and Jane Christian respond to this? Now they don't care. Politicians ran for office with positions they knew would appeal to Christian voters. Now, in many districts they don't need Christian voters. When movie studios and television executives made decisions about what to put on the screen, they cared about what the church thought. There was a set of Christian values that guided editorial choices. Now, they purposely put stuff on the screen to offend Christians.

The problem is that like a former superstar NFL quarterback who now warms the bench as the third string guy, the church has still been out there livin' it up like it's the big superstar, but the money, the fame and big contract are quickly running out.

Last Sunday we looked at two wrong responses we could have to these changes. For instance, we might want to withdraw from the culture. We'll just take our ball and go home. We don't need the world. The problem is that Jesus has called us to go into the world.

Or we might want to fight. Let's go to war with the culture. The world is the enemy and we're going to defeat it. The problem is that the world is not the enemy. They're the victims of the enemy. We are to reach the world; not defeat it.

We saw that God's Word points us to a better way— a way to engage the world without abandoning it, without fighting with it, and without becoming like it. It's what we're going to start looking at this morning. I know the last two weeks might have been difficult and filled with bad news we don't want to hear, but I kept saying there's good news and opportunity. That's what we're going to look at for the next few weeks.

Okay getting back to the rock we all eat. Scientifically speaking it is the combination of two elements, Sodium and Chloride—an explosive mineral and a poisonous gas. Yet together they are essential to human life. It is also what Jesus used to paint a picture of what the church should be to the world.

It comes toward the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon Jesus describes a person who follows him with all their heart. Not just what they do, what they say, what they are like, who they profess, or what they attend, but who they are. In Matthew 5:13 Jesus says something that describes the kind of relationship we are to have with the world, *“You are the salt of the earth. But what good is the salt if it has lost its flavor?”*

Why would Jesus use a rock, a mineral to describe how we should be in the world? We all know that everything tastes better with salt, but salt has other qualities that made it play such a crucial role in human history—abilities so powerful it helped shape the modern world. The world we know would not exist without salt.

Does that sound far-fetched to you? It did to me until I did a little research.<sup>1</sup> Throughout most of human history salt was one of the most valuable commodities. More battles have been fought over salt than gold. Some of the most powerful cities and nation-states were built largely on salt trade. Salt was used as money. Our word for salary comes from a Latin word for the salt payments given to Roman soldiers. When we say someone is or isn't worth their salt, that comes from salt as money. Some of the oldest roads still in use in Europe and Africa today were originally built to move salt. The Erie Canal was constructed largely to ship salt.

In France, the trade of salt was such big business that when the government taxed it, illegal salt smuggling became a giant industry. When a secret salt police was established to stop it, there was national outrage. The French Revolution was fought in part over salt.

In the American Civil War Union armies specifically targeted Confederate saltworks in Saltville VA to take out the South's salt supply. Without salt, the confederacy couldn't preserve their meat, and without meat they couldn't feed their armies, and in the words of Napoléon, *“Armies march on their bellies”*

Though we don't usually think of it this way, salt is also an essential nutrient. There have been many efforts to prove that salt is bad for you, but they have found that unless you have a

certain genetic predisposition, you can eat as much as you want without any harmful side effects. The fact is that salt is essential to life. Though the human body has only about 4 ounces of salt, you would die without it.

Jesus, as the Son of God and as our Creator certainly understood these things when he said, *"You are the salt of the earth."* His listeners, though, didn't know the science behind it, but they certainly understood how crucial salt was to their own lives. So what is it about salt that Jesus used it to describe who we are in the world? Understanding the value of salt to them, and how they used it will help us appreciate what exactly meant when Jesus said, *"You are the salt of the earth."*

### **I. Seasoning**

First of all, just like us, they used salt as a seasoning. It was a widely used spice that was common in many dishes. As Job 6:6 says, *"Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the white of an egg?"* Salt adds flavor. The taste buds on the tongue can sense only four things: sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. There are all kinds of things that are sweet, sour, and bitter. But only one thing is tastes salty, and that is salt. Why did God create us with tongues designed to sense something that could only be experienced from one thing only?

Salt is an important seasoning not only because of the flavor it adds, but as a seasoning, salt has a unique attribute. It enhances your taste buds sensitivity to the other flavors. Sometimes on cooking shows, you'll hear the chef talk about adding a little salt to bring out the flavors. Actually, it doesn't bring out the flavors; it just allows you to sense more of them. You can experience more of the sweet, more of the sour, more of the bitter. What do you think the saltiest thing is on the McDonald's menu? Not the fries, but the milkshake, because the salt makes it taste sweeter. Salt adds flavor to life.

That should be the description of every single Christian. Christians add flavor to life. We need to be the seasoning that adds flavor and zest to the world. But the point isn't just to make life taste better. Notice that Jesus doesn't say that we are the sugar of the earth. We aren't just to go around sugar coating everything, and pretending that life is sweetness and kittens.

No, Jesus says we are the salt of the earth. Salt not only adds flavor, but it makes you more sensitive to other flavors as well. When we are acting as salt in society, we help people

taste, what Eugene Peterson calls the “God-flavors of this earth.” Here's how he paraphrases this verse *the Message Bible*, “*Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?*”

What does he mean by the God-flavors of the earth?

Rom 1:19-20

*19 For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts. 20 From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. NLT*

James 1:17

*17 Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights. Unlike them, he never changes or casts shifting shadows. NLT*

1 Tim 4:3-4

*4 Since everything God created is good we should not reject any of it. We may receive it gladly, with thankful hearts. NLT*

God has sprinkled in his divine flavor throughout creation. In all of life there are God-glimpses and heavenly reminders. From life's smallest joys to its greatest blessings God is present. From spring flowers, to a summer thunderstorm, to fall leaves, to a fresh coat of winter snow; from a sleeping baby, to sharing coffee with a close friend, to making love to your wife; from great thoughts inspired by a good book, to a moment's reflection before you drift off to sleep, to a life-changing decision made while you shower in the morning; from an unexpected happy surprise, to escaping a close brush with death.

In all of these things, the hand of God is moving. In all of these things God is making himself known, reaching out to his creation, longing to have a relationship. But the world can so easily miss it because their senses have become so dulled by sin, their spiritual taste buds can't sense it. What Christians should do is bring out these flavors. We help the world savor the blessings that God has put into all of life. We help people experience God. We are the seasoning of life.

## **II. Preservative**

Salt is not only a seasoning, it is also an excellent preservative. As one anthropologist says, “It's salt's unique preservative power which, more than any other force, shaped our modern world.”<sup>ii</sup> We have known for thousands of years about salt's ability to preserve meat and keep food

from decaying. Before electricity and refrigeration this made salt one of the most sought after, treasured commodities in the world.

It was only in the last century that we learned how salt preserves. Salt destroys the microbes of the decaying process. When salt is present, these microbes can't grow and spread, so there is no decay. Though we have refrigerators and freezers and don't depend on salt to preserve our meat, many of the things we enjoy still depend on this unique ability of salt. Anchovies, ham, capers, jerky, corned beef, bacon, sausage are all meats that we enjoy because of these unique properties. Bread, cheese and sauerkraut also depend on salt's power to stop decay.

Christians, like salt, act as a preservative in culture. When we are sprinkled into the world around us, we hinder, limit, and even stop the decaying process of sin. People talk about how bad the world is getting, but how much worse would things be without the church?

D. James Kennedy has a great book called *What if Jesus had never been Born?* In this book, he chronicles the impact that Christ followers have had on the history of this world. Here are just a few of the things the church is responsible for in society. Hospitals for care of the sick were virtually non-existent before the church. For hundreds of years almost all universities were started by Christians for Christian purposes. Harvard, Yale and Princeton were all Christian universities. It was Christians that brought literacy and education to the masses so that people could read God's word for themselves. The abolition of slavery in ancient and modern times. The elevation of women from a place of subservience and personal property. Widespread charity was almost solely the work of Christians. It was the Christian faith that brought higher standards of justice and civil rights.

Kennedy's book documents dozens of other examples as well. This isn't to ignore the church's failures. But the fact remains, that by and large the church has acted as a preserving force in culture.

As our country rejects its Christian roots, and as the church seems to be experiencing a loss of influence, the truth is much of it is because we have strayed from our original calling and purpose. But even as decay seems to set in the culture, the best way for the church to fight against the decay is not to keep pointing our fingers at the decay, complaining about it, or running away from it, but it is to act as a force of good in the culture.

We should not be surprised by the decay. It's what dead things do. That's what happens when people are dead in their sins. Decay is to be expected unless there is salt there to counteract it. We need to be a preservative. When Christians are not engaged in society, we should not be surprised when the world goes bad. Unsalted meat should go bad. When it goes bad, the question is not, "Why did it go bad?" but the question should be, "Where is the salt?"

The 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren wrote, "The presence of a good man hinders the devil from having elbow room to do his work."

### **III. Medicinal**

Salt not only preserves by preventing decay, but in Jesus' day it also served as medicine. Salt has the power to help heal. It is the same preserving power of salt that gives it such a medicinal value. Salt acts as an antiseptic, fighting infection. It can be applied to all kinds of wounds and infections. A swim in the Dead Sea which is almost 34% salt, is known to cure all sorts of skin ailments and maladies.

Without salt, infection can spread unchecked leading to gangrene, amputation and death. Thousands of Napoleon's troops died during his retreat from Moscow because their wounds would not heal after they ran out of salt.

Christians not only provide seasoning for our society. We not only act as a preservative in our culture, we are also medicine that heals. In a sick and wounded world, the church is the healing ointment that God has given to heal the wounds. That doesn't always mean that our medicine will be easy for the world to take. Anyone who's ever got salt in an open sore, knows that it can hurt. When the salt of our influence comes in contact with the decaying power of sin, there will be cries of protest. But a good doctor never stops healing. That's why we need to earnestly seek to be a healing influence in the world.

It's easy for us to sit inside the four walls of our buildings and point to what's wrong in the world. We can point and blame, and wag our tongues, but what can we do to heal? What can we do to bring grace and hope to where the world is broken? Too often when the world is hurting what they see from the church is not a hand held out to heal, but a finger pointed in blame.

I'm not saying we shouldn't speak the truth about the world's situation, for Scripture

says the church is the pillar and support of truth. But God's word also calls us to speak the truth in love. When we speak the truth in love, I believe we can bring God's healing to the world.

We are to be seasoning in our society, a preservative in our culture, and medicine for a wounded world. The church needs to have ministries that engage the world in each of these areas— as a flavoring, as a preservative, and as a medicine. If the church strives to do these three things, I believe we can influence the world in a positive way.

Let me just say a couple more things about being salt in the world. Notice that Jesus doesn't just say that you have the salt. He says you are the salt. Your words, your actions, your presence, your lives are the salt. You season, you preserve, and you heal.

But how can you do that? How does salt do its work? (Pull out salt in a shaker) Is this salt doing its work right now? Are we doing our work of seasoning, preserving, and healing now? No, not really, unless a couple of non-Christian people come wondering in for whatever reason. We can't just put all of our salt in piles and say, "Well, here's the salt, if you want some come and get it."

Salt can only do its work when it is rubbed in. It must penetrate to be effective. Salt becomes a part of the dish. It becomes a part of the meat. It becomes part of the wound. It does its work best when it blends in, but is not overpowering. A bunch of Christians stuck together isn't going to season the world. People get a taste of that and it is disgusting. Nobody eats a plain teaspoon of salt. No, we've got to become part of the culture, penetrate the society, and blend in.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the seasoning of life. So following the command of our Lord, and the advice of Emeril get out there and kick it up a notch.

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<sup>i</sup> For good information on the history of Salt see Kurlansky, Mark (2003) *Salt: A World History*, Penguin Books.

<sup>ii</sup> 2010/08/27 From a transcript of a Food Network special Eat this Rock.

<http://www.goodeatsfanpage.com/season7/salt/salt.htm>