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Matthew 5:13

The Salt of the Earth

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I'd like for you to stand up and bow your heads. "Loving Father in Heaven, we've come to that point in our service when we are about to open Your Word. And Lord I'm asking that as we collectively pray to You that You will give us peace in our hearts, a stillness that we may sit quietly and listen to Your words. There are people with burdens, heavy, heavy burdens. We think of the Nash family that lost their home, and Jonathan Catchensky who is in male clinic, and there are multitudes of others. And Lord, at this time, we just silently give to You the burdens that are on our hearts. We thank You Lord, in Jesus' name, Amen." Please be seated.

Do you remember the first time you saw the ocean? I do. I was 18 years old. In fact, I had never been out of the state of Michigan until I was 18. There were two trips, I think, we took up into Canada, and that's it. Michigan that was it! My mom and dad, and all the relatives all lived in Michigan; we had no cause to leave the state. I mentioned the other two services; the state had everything, why go anywhere? Well, I was 18 and I'd never seen the ocean before. And I was curious about it, and I was interested. And the first time I saw it was on October of 1972. I was in a Boot Camp at Cape May, New Jersey. I was in the US Coast Guard.

And it's right on the ocean. And we were there at the beach. And I had read that somebody had said this one time, and I always wanted to use it. And so my opportunity came. The fellows I was with knew I've never seen the ocean before, so they said: "What do you think of it?" And so I looked as far as I could to the right, and I looked as far as I could to the left, and I looked as far as could out there and I said, "Well, I thought it'd be bigger than this." Well, you know, the ocean is impressive. I remember thinking, "I can't wait until I can go swimming in the ocean." And of course that was October and too cold, so later on down the line in the spring; I was in Virginia and decided that would be a good time to go swimming in the ocean.

Well, I don't know if you've grown up some place where it's all fresh water, like I did? Swimming is a wonderful, refreshing experience. And there is really nothing there that will hurt you. Every now and then somebody would get bit by a mesquite, but that was so rare we never even worried about it. But I grew up watching *Sea Hunt*, and all these other shows and movies, and it was always about the ocean. And there are sharks, and there are barracudas and there are things that poison you, everywhere you turned that was something in salt water to hurt you. But you know, I am 18, and I am strong, scared to death, but I'm going to do it. So I go down into the water, and I am impressed by the wave action. We were having a good, heavy wind that day. And so there was a lot of energy in the water.

I remember diving in and then body surfing. But one of the things that struck me right away is when I stood up out of the water, I thought, "Ooo, what's on me?" It's just -- there is a coating that comes on you from the salt that I wasn't accustomed to. I never felt that before, and I didn't like it. It made me itch, and it was uncomfortable. Not refreshing at all! Well I swam for a while and then was happy to take a shower and get rinsed off. Salt! The salt in the ocean was causing problems for my skin.

You know, salt seems to be everywhere. When I grew up, we salted our food. I can't ever remember not having a salt shaker on our table. Mom cooked with it. And we used salt on our roads up in Michigan to melt the ice and the snow. And we used it on our driveway and on our porch so that people wouldn't fall on the ice. Salt was everywhere, it was nothing special. In fact, in Michigan there was so much of it that back in those days before they were doing something with the paint or whatever they've done; if you had a car that was two or three years old, it was already eaten up with rust because of the salt. You know that's just the way it was, an old rust bucket from Michigan. I always thought that was a relative but it was actually a car.

And so salt, it just never – um, big deal, you know. Salt, you can go right over to Wal-Mart and you can buy salt. It's not very expensive; in fact, it's not even shipped here from China. You know, it's just seems to be everywhere. And Jesus talks about salt. And when He talks about salt, He kind of elevates salt to a dignity that is pretty amazing. And I would like to study that with you today. Look at Matthew chapter 5 verse 13. We are continuing our series in the Sermon on the Mount, and here in this passage Jesus has switched from the section known as the Beatitudes to two areas called the Similitudes. It is similar to, apparently, and that's why they call it the Similitudes.

Well verse 13 says, "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its flavor, how it shall be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men." Now what is the meaning of salt here in the Bible? It's a good question. In fact, nobody seems to know because nobody was there to record or to ask questions of Jesus. "What do You mean by salt? You are the salt of the earth?" So what has happened consequently down through 2000 years of church history, people have interjected what they think Jesus meant. And so it's kind of become a whole folklore theology associated with "...you are the salt of the earth." Salt is used or was used back then as a preservative, so people say "Well Jesus is talking about Christians being a preservative to society that they keep it from getting anymore rotten than it is.

Salt was a flavor enhancer, salt is a seasoning of life. And I even read one fascinating article that Christians are to be the flavor of life that we should be so joy filled and happy that we are the ones setting the agenda for what brings true happiness in life. And then they went on to say how sad it is that so few Christians are actually happy enough to qualify for that. We have a tendency to mope quite a bit, and to be embarrassed when we are too happy. One author wrote he would gladly have become a minister if they didn't all look and act like undertakers.

Well I thought, I could preach on that. We are the flavor enhancers. You know, that'd be cool. But I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind. Salt was also associated with a sacrificial system. Salt was sprinkled on every sacrifice that was made. And so theologians have come up with the idea of salt and purity and holiness and that type of stuff. "You are the salt of the earth." And then, others have written just the sheer commonness of it, and they have their comments about that. But the question is, "What did Jesus mean?" And there is even a harder question. Verse 13 it says, "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavor how shall it be seasoned?" In some of the versions of the Bible it says, "...if it loses its saltiness."

Now salt is salt! Do you know what happens when salt loses its saltiness? It's not salt. I mean you are either salt or you are not. It's sodium chloride. And it either is salt or its not. So chemically Jesus has setup a metaphor here that is very difficult. How can it not be salt? It's either salt or it isn't salt. And some have wrestled with that and said, 'Well, maybe it means because you know, when salt was placed underneath the stones where they cooked and they baked, and after a while it kind of became a bit useless. And they would toss it out, and maybe Jesus is referring to that? I don't know? But I've really struggled with this passage this week because it's, again, one of those verses, you read, "you are the salt of the earth..." and you say, "Aha, got it" and you go right on.

But we have to land here. We have to dig. We have to figure out what in the world does Jesus mean, "You are the salt of the earth." Well, one thing is clear. He is not teaching us how to be the salt of the earth which most sermons are about: how to be a preservative, how to be a flavor enhancer, how to be pure, and all those types of things. You know, how to be a Christians in the work place, and at home, and you know, "Out of the salt shaker," that whole series which is a fantastic series, but that whole concept, how to be a Christian? Jesus is saying, "You are the salt." And He is saying that to the 12 apostles and then those that have gathered with them to hear the sermon. "You are the salt!"

So He is referring back to the experience of being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, the pure in heart, peace makers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. "You are the salt" He says. These are Christian people. These are folks who have embraced Christ, "You are the salt," okay? We are the salt or they are the salt. But it goes on and Jesus says, "...but if the salt loses its flavor, how it shall be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men." The more I read this passage over and over and over again, it jumped out at me. Wait the minute; this is not about telling us how to be salt. This is telling us that if we are salt, but we stop becoming salt, we are worthless.

And then in Jesus' metaphor, He says when the salt stops becoming like salt – so I wrestled with this, I struggled with this, what in the world does it mean? And the Lord gave me, I believe, an answer. I couldn't find it in any book, I couldn't find it anywhere. So I found it in prayer. That's a sermon right there. Here is what I believe the Lord is saying here. Salt, when it loses its essence is worthless. Well, what is the essence of salt? Salt! Christians, think of that for a moment. You are Christians on the earth. What is the essence of a Christian? Christ! You are Christians on the earth, but if you lose Christ, you are worthless, and to be cast out and trodden under foot by men.

And isn't it true brothers and sisters, so many people start out as a Christian and then they become religious, and somewhere along the way Christ is left behind. And that person, who has the sopped up conscience and all the rules and everything that comes with being a Christian but no longer has Christ, that person is worthless. In fact, they are harmful. Well, with that idea in mind, I began searching the rest of the Bible for other references to salt. And lo and behold, Jesus says the same thing in Mark chapter 9, please turn there. Mark chapter 9 verse 50. And

this is a different conversation He was having. Mark is not quoting the Sermon on the Mount here. In Mark 9 verse 50 Jesus says, "Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it?" "If it loses its saltiness..." the New International Version says, "If it becomes unsalty..." the New American Standard Bible says, "If it loses its saltiness..." the Amplified Version says, "...how will you season it?"

It's almost a rhetorical question, it can't be done. You know, how do you take sodium chloride that's no longer sodium chloride and make it sodium chloride, you see. So the metaphor is difficult. But He goes on to say, "Have salt in yourselves and have peace with one another. So, okay, He is saying the same thing, so we have to look at this contextually. I am going to tell you how to do that. If you look at Luke chapter 6 verses 12 and 13, you will discover the beginning reflections of Jesus regarding salt. Luke chapter 6 verse 12, I'll show you how I came to that conclusion. Notice this, "Now it came to pass in those days that Jesus went out to the mountain to pray and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called His disciples to Him, and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles."

Now this is about a year and a half into Jesus' ministry. He calls twelve men to be full time with Him. They will walk with Him for about two years. Notice verse 20. Luke 6 verse 20: "Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples and said, 'blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God...'" and He gives a portion of the beatitudes that Luke records. So note this that the first reference of salt that we find, "You are the salt of the earth" is in the context of the beatitudes that is given to the twelve apostles when they are called full time into ministry. So at the beginning of their call, Jesus talks to them about being salt.

Now go back to Mark chapter 9 verse 31. In Mark chapter 9 verse 31 it says, "For He," that's Jesus, "...taught His disciples and said to them, 'the Son of Man has been delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.' But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask Him." So now we are at the end of Jesus' ministry, and He is talking about His death, and He brings up salt again. So do you see that? At the beginning of the apostles' call, there is a reference to salt, at the end of their ministry together; there is a reference to salt. Jesus will be dead within six months of this chapter 9.

Chapter 9 also helps us to see what is going on. The transfiguration takes place in the first part of the chapter, and then they hear Jesus talk about Him having to die. Now, you would think that would get their attention? But, they didn't understand what He said, and they didn't ask Him. That's a problem. The next verse, chapter 9 verse 33. We are going to see in context what Jesus meant in Mark 9 when He talked about the salt. Verse 33 it says, "Then He..." Jesus, "...came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house, He asked them, 'What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?'"

Well, they were having an argument. Why didn't Jesus hear the argument? Well, it's pretty obvious. They are walking down the road, and I don't know if you've ever walked with Jesus or not? But whenever you walk with Jesus, you can never have a good argument when Jesus is around. He just kills it. He is holy, He is righteous, you just don't want to argue in His presence.

And so, you just have to kind of draw back a little bit. You let Him get on ahead; You let Him get down the road a ways. Keep Him in sight perhaps, but you get back and then you can really get at it. And that's what they were doing. They knew what they were discussing would not be pleasing to God, and so, they let God walk away from them so they can get in a good argument.

That brothers and sisters, was worth the gas money to come here because that's how marriages are destroyed. Any two people walking with Jesus will not ruin their marriage in dispute. They will talk honestly, openly, fairly and kindly to one another about the friction that they are having. But in order to have a good argument, you got to let God go on down the road. So they did. They let Him go on down the road. So when they got to Capernaum, probably to Peter's house, Jesus asked them. "What was the dispute about?" Verse 34 gives us the answer. "They kept silent." They didn't even tell Him. Why? "For on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest?" What a topic? Who would be the greatest?

Here Jesus has announced He is going to go die, and they, "Oh, wow, well boy that's too bad," and He goes on away, "Who is going to be the greatest?" And they are in a fight among themselves over who will be the greatest. Now that is a seemingly perennial problem with these men. Keep your hand here in Mark 9 and go to Luke chapter 22. I am so grateful that it was their problem and not ours. Luke 22 verses 19 and 20. Here you have the night, Thursday night of the Last Supper. Jesus will die the next day. And it says in verse 19, "He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'"

"Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant of My blood, which is shed for you...'" All right, now go to verse 24: "But, there was also rivalry among them as to which of them should be considered the greatest?" They are they are, the Last Supper. Jesus is telling them, "This broken bread is a symbol of my body, this wine is a symbol of My shed blood..." He is all into that and they are still disputing among themselves over who would be the greatest? Now notice what Jesus says, go back to Mark chapter 9. Jesus said to them in verse 35, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

Now remember our context. We begin with a reference to salt at the beginning of the apostles' call. And here at the end we have a reference to salt again. "If the salt has lost its saltiness;" if as a Christian you have lost Christ, you are worthless. And Jesus is going to demonstrate the worthlessness of it by the attitude of the disciples and the conversation He is going to have with them. Now how is it that we decide who is greater? Who is the greatest among us? In order to decide that, we have to have a standard. That standard may be, well, who's got the most money? And maybe we should have? Okay, who has more money than me? You should all be raising your hand right now. Okay, you are greater than me that way.

But, you know, if I don't have a lot of money, I may use a different standard. A position! You know, maybe at work I have a little higher position than you. In fact, I know people that accept lower pay in order to have a higher title. Position! Talent! Looks! Who is greater? And you want to know something fascinating? In the realm of religion, when we are Christian but we've left

Christ behind, standards themselves become the standard. We have the suspender crowd. You know. And their standard is, 'do you have any restriction around your waste?' If you do, they are greater than you.

We have all kinds of different crowds and different judgments that we use. "I don't eat like them, I am better than them. I don't go to that movie, I may bring one worse into my house, but I am still better than them." And we can use standards as a standard. And a Christian who has left Christ behind has all the rules, has all the things, all the dialog, but they don't have Christ. And I am telling you, they are worthless and harmful. And Jesus states that, "If you really want to be great, you'll become the servants of all." I wish He had given some other way to be great, don't you? I mean, that is so contrary to any of us in our natural hearts. But that's what happens when Christ comes in. And it's all in the context of Him dying on Calvary for us.

You see if you don't want to talk about Him dying for you; if you don't want to think about Him dying for you; if you don't want to ask Him questions about Him dying for you, then you can draw back and get into a dispute. And your whole religious experience can be who you are greater than? Jesus says, "It's worthless." Well, it doesn't end there. Let's continue reading here. Let's go to verses 36 and 37. "Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them; 'Who ever receives one of these little children in My name, receives Me. And whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.'"

Now, why a child? Well a child has no authority, has no money, position. They may have some talent, but they have nothing to offer. These men, who are in their concepts of greatness -- in fact, children were to be tolerated back then, especially by the males of the species. The child gathered worth when they were old enough to do something. We love children today just because they are children. You know, we like to hold them as babies and tickle them with our nose and chin, and that type of stuff. But, back in the day when this was written, it wasn't like that so much. Our culture is much more sensitive to children and dogs even. And back in that day, you called your enemy 'a dog'. Today, be careful. Your dog, your neighbor's dog has rights. And you do something to that dog you may end up in court. It happens!

Well, Jesus is saying, this helpless child who has no power or authority at all, you receive that child; you receive Him, and not Him, but Him who sent Him. In essence Jesus is saying, "They are going to come into your life, people who really have nothing to offer you. But you love them, and you are loving God." It goes on, verse 38, this is, this I think is so fascinating; "John answered Him saying, 'Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us, casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.'" It's so fascinating how he says it. "We saw someone who does not follow us, casting out demons in Your name." Why is he not concerned or why isn't the question whether he was following Jesus or not? Following us!

And what you have here is the picture of religious people who know and understand that their way is the right way, their way is the only way, and anybody else functioning in the name of

Jesus can't be right because they are not one of us. And if they are not one of us, we have no control over them. We are the ones who know how to do it, we are the ones who know how to do it right, and if they are not doing it the way we do it, they can't be from the Lord. And it goes on to say, so "John says, 'we forbade them, we stopped them from doing it.'" And Jesus was not happy about that.

I am telling you brothers and sisters that in the realm of Christianity, when we become a Christian, if we journey on down the road but we leave Jesus behind, we are going to think we are greater than other people. We are going to disregard the children or the helpless among us, and we are going to be the type of people who think anybody who doesn't do it the way we do it is wrong. Whether we are thinking in terms of our denomination and our beliefs, and other denominations and their beliefs, or people within our denomination and their practices which may be different than ours, and on and on and on, it's a heart problem.

Let me ask you a question. When you drive down the road and you go pass church after church after church, do you say, "God, please bless my brothers and sisters that attend here," or do you say, "There are the apostates, there they are!" What's your heart? Only you can answer that. Christianity without Christ becomes very organized religion and very harmful and painful and difficult. It goes on, Jesus goes on to describe in verse 42, He says, "And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would have been better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

Now they know what that means because the Romans, in order to stop rebellion, would grab the leaders of that rebellion. If they didn't crucify him, one of their things was if they were near water, and apparently this would happen there even in the lake or the Sea of Galilee. They would take the leaders, tatter them to a millstone, and throw them into the water. And the people were forced to watch on shore as the person's body was dragged down. And they saw the person kicking, until life left them. And then the Romans left them in the water. It was a horrifying thing according to what I read, because the currents under there would sway the bodies, the dead bodies back and forth, and nobody was allowed to drag them out.

And Jesus says, "If you offend one of these little ones, cause them to stumble, it'd be better for you to have a millstone hung around your neck and thrown into the sea." Then what? Then to face Him! Well who is a little one and what does it mean to offend them? I'll tell you what I think it means according to what I've studied. A little one is somebody young in the faith. They could be any age. But they are young in the faith. And they come into your fellowship, and somehow they just haven't realized and learned. They are not at level "A" of the club members. They make mistakes in some of their theological comments, or maybe they don't eat just right or dress just right, or whatever.

And so always, in every gathering where there are Christians who have walked away from Christ, there will be a group of people who are the conscience for other folks. And they will come with a bonny finger, and a stern, scorn look on their face, telling that person how they need to come up to a higher level. Jesus says, "You offend that person, you run him off, it'd be

better for you to be drowned with a millstone around your neck than to face Me.” That’s how He feels about it. This is serious stuff.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt has lost its saltiness, it is good for nothing but to be trodden under foot by men.” It’s a judgment passage and a serious one. How serious? Look at the next thing Jesus says in verse 43: “If your hand makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than having two hands, than to go to hell into the fire that shall never be quenched.” And He’ll talk about the hand and the foot, and there is one other one too, the eye. Pluck it out. Now, please, don’t anybody go out of here and do that. Jesus isn’t saying to do that literally. He is just talking about how serious this issue is. And again, that’s another passage that we often times; we take out of context, and we apply it to whatever. Jesus is applying it to people who are supposed Christians, but they’ve left Christ behind.

He says in verse 49: “For everyone will be seasoned with fire and salted with fire...” the way it is written in some versions of the Bible. “...salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.” The commentators say, “We don’t completely understand it, we think it might mean this, it might mean that.” You get to verse 50, and it kind of pulls it together. “Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in your selves.” And when I read that I thought, “What in the world, how does that work?” And here is what I think it means. I think it means this. If salt represents Christianity, and losing saltiness means losing Christ, its very essence, then to have salt in yourselves means check and see is Christ indeed in your life? Is Christ indeed in your heart?

And it goes on to say, “...and have peace with one another.” Isn’t it fascinating that Jesus’ description of His people in John 13 verse 35 is this. That, “This is the way that all men will know that you are My disciples.” And He doesn’t list one doctrinal thing, He doesn’t list one behavioral activity, He doesn’t list any standard what so ever. He says, “You will have love one to another.” That brothers and sisters is a Christ filled religion. It takes a miracle to love and love comes from God. That miracle is provided to us from God when we walk with God. So you see, when Jesus in Matthew 5 says: “You are the salt of the earth,” it’s a warning. Remain salt, remain in Christ.

And two years later, well eighteen months later when He is talking to these men in Mark 9, it’s obvious they’ve left Christ behind. They let Him go on ahead. They separated themselves. And in that attitude, and in that demonstration, you have a sad picture of what happens to religious people who forget, salvation comes from Jesus Christ, and Christ alone. Our hope, our need, our joy, our peace, our eternal life, all comes to us in Jesus Christ. And it’s so easy to start with Him, but then you start adding all the incurred-aments, (?) and before long, we are good for nothing. We got all the rules, but we got bad attitudes. And we judge one another; we hurt one another; we run people off, and all the time think: “We are right. Anybody that doesn’t do it the way we do it is wrong.”

I don’t know what you are thinking right now, but I know that in my life, my heart is crying out for a Savior. My heart is longing for Jesus because it’s so easy to go down the road without Him,



and to become religious. And so today, my question for you is, "Do you want Christ, do you want Salt, I mean holly, purifying, loving presence of God in your life? Do you want to come back to the essentials? Do you want to be connected with eternity, and do you want Him to live through you?" If you want Christ in your heart, I am going to ask you to stand.

"Father in heaven, forgive us Lord for being on the road without You. Forgive us! We ask for Jesus to come strongly into our hearts, to reestablish Himself or to establish Himself. And we pray that indeed we will be salt and that we will remain salt. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen."