

SALTY CHRISTIANS

Matthew 5:13

Salt is a plain, ordinary substance. We find it on the table when we go to eat dinner at home, in the dorm cafeteria, or at a restaurant. If the salt shaker is beyond our reach, we simply ask, "Please pass the salt." There is plenty of salt that can be bought cheaply at the stores. Just about any food product we buy has at least some salt. Nothing is more common than salt.

There was a time when salt was an extremely important commodity. We think nothing of going to a refrigerator to thaw out a roast for dinner. But before there was such a thing as refrigeration, people used salt to preserve meat and fish. Some of Jesus' disciples made a living as fishermen in the Sea of Galilee. They could do that because fish could be salted and made available to more than just local people. Also salt was needed to make food palatable. Heavy seasoning is found in food from warm climates. That happened because it was needed to compensate for how quickly food can spoil in high temperatures.

Salt is also a necessary for life. In cultures where people lived off migrating animals, salt came easily from meat. But as people depended more on crops for their diet, extra forms of salt were needed.

Salt was an important medicine. Even today most IV's contain "saline solution," that is "salt water." Salt was put on compost heaps for manure. It was needed as a necessary nutrient for livestock, especially during the summer. When the frontiersmen like Daniel Boone came to Kentucky, they found it a paradise for hunters. The Native Americans lived north in Ohio and Indiana and crossed the Ohio River to hunt in Kentucky, but didn't live there because they felt it would hurt the hunting. And why was there so much game there? Because of the salt licks. People amassed fortunes selling salt. At one time salt was to businessmen as oil is today. Trade routes were started to areas where salt could be easily procured. In North Africa this was so important that they had salt routes that traveled through the extreme environment of the Sahara. And, yes, there really are salt mines. Even today salt is important, though only 6% is used for human consumption. It is needed for the manufacture of things like plastics.

Jesus used salt to illustrate how His followers should be. We are not just to be ordinary people. There is something special and important about us. But what is it about us that is supposed to be special?

If you have to go on a low sodium diet and have to avoid salt, then you notice what happens to your food. It is not the same. The problem is something we can see, smell, or feel. The food looks, smells, and feels the same, But the taste is different. It lacks salt.

In the same way we are to be noticed. Not dramatically, not in a very visible way, but like salt in food. We are to influence the world around us. Things should be different because we are around people. But are things different? Are we like salt in this world? As some Christians

have put it, “If we were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?”

The jungle is the farthest thing from our Iowa winters. It is warm, green, lush, and humid. People like to live out their fantasies on TV. We can watch survivalists who go to extreme places to exist where it is hard to do so. Usually these places involve what is lacking—the lack of warmth in the Arctic, the lack of oxygen in the high Himalayas, the lack of food in the rugged wilderness, the lack of water in the desert, the lack of solid ground in the ocean. But the jungle is also a hard place to survive, not because of what it lacks, but what it has too much of—too much heat, too much rain and humidity, too much wildlife that makes noise all night, too many bugs to bite at you, too many poisonous creatures, too much disease.

Life today in our culture is much more like a jungle than the cold winter or bleakest desert. Our problem is not that we lack things, but we have too much—too much food, too much junk food, too much stimuli from cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, emails, etc. What is the number one complaint that millennials make to counselors? “I have too many choices and I can’t decide what to do. What if I make the wrong choice?” Too many temptations from the internet, on-line shopping, the ease of having a car, and all the things competing for our time. With all of that it can be real hard for us to be salt that is noticed, “tasted” in this world.

And we become diluted by how the world sees us. A family from Korea talked about how Christianity, unlike most countries in the Far East, is very prevalent. But they said that so much of that is because it helps with business. Connections are made through the churches that help people to do business. From an outside view it looks like being a Christian is about making profit, not loving others.

Jesus speaks of salt that has lost its saltiness. They didn’t know back then about basic chemistry. They didn’t know that our table salt is sodium chloride (NaCl), which can look and feel just like other salts like potassium chloride (KCl) or calcium chloride (CaCl₂). A major source of salt in Jesus’ time was the Dead Sea. Around the Dead Sea, the saltiest sea in the world, there is both sodium chloride and other kinds of salt. They saw the other kinds of salt as salt which has lost its saltiness.

We can become like “saltless” salt. On the outside we go to church, say we believe in Jesus, but we aren’t “tasted” by the world. We become like petrified wood, which looks just like wood, but is rock. You can’t build with it or burn it like wood. We may think on the outside we look like Christians, but is there any real substance to us, any real salt?

Little things have a way making us lose our “salt.” We fall behind in homework, not because we blow off a whole week, but because we spend that extra hour watching a soap or playing “Call of Duty.” The stories we learned in Sunday School are replaced with ideas we learn from school or our friends. The time we spend in bed before sleep is not spent in prayer, but in worrying about tomorrow. Family devotions are skipped so we can get to homework or our computers. We find it easier and easier to make excuses for missing church on Sundays.

Little by little, like sodium chloride molecule by molecule being changed to another salt or wood to petrified wood, the “saltiness” is leached out of us.

But Jesus has salt. He has substance. In the Nicene Creed we confess that He is “one substance” with the Father. He has the substance of God because He is God. When Jesus spoke, people noticed He was different from other preachers. What He said had authority, substance. He did substantial things like heal people, drive out demons, give sight to the blind and gave hearing to the deaf. But Jesus did not just have that substance, that “salt”. He poured it out for all of us on the cross. He gave up His “salt” so we can be “salty.”

Salt may be an ordinary substance. But it is a substance that does something. Without the ions it separates into—sodium and chloride—we couldn’t live. So much of our biology involves substances being selectively transported across membranes. The so-called “sodium pump” is what causes our nerves to “fire” electronic signals and make our brains work.

In the same way Jesus takes the ordinary and makes it vital, special, full of substance. Ordinary, common water--but connected to Jesus’ word it is the life-giving water of Baptism. Bread and wine—the ordinary meal of Jesus’ time. Yet with God’s Word it is Jesus’ true body and blood which forgives us of our sins. Simple, ordinary words—yet they are Jesus’ words which give us new life, which makes us ordinary people special, full of substance, “salty.”

Salt is made up of sodium and chlorine. Sodium is so unstable that if you put a little of it in water, it will explode. Chlorine is a poisonous gas. But put together they make ordinary salt.

Jesus has put us together as the “salt” of the world. We may not be noticed or seen much, but as His people we can and do make a difference. We think of our world losing ground to atheists and agnostics. Yet the *World Religion Database* shows that last year Christianity was still a growing group world-wide. With Christ Jesus in us, we have substance, “salt.” We are here not to change the world, but to let God work through us to change the lives of people.