

Being the Salt of the Earth

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, friends, we're in the Sermon on the Mount in our preaching series for February and I want to make the point that we are actually in the Sermon on the Mount, in this great message of Jesus.

He is actually speaking about us. He's talking about us, his people, his followers. We're the ones who are the subjects of the kingdom of heaven. And so as we read the Sermon on the Mount, I want you to think about it as for us, describing us.

We are the ones in it. I mean, some people think it's just sort of a bunch of sort of idealistic teachings that are out there that are unachievable or that it describes sort of some super Christian but not actually the people of God.

But it actually is describing us. It's for us. We are the ones who are poor in spirit. We are the ones who are mourning our sin. We are meek and gentle.

We are hungry for righteousness. We are the ones who are thirsty for God. We are the ones who seek to be made pure in heart. We are the ones who engage in the confrontational ministry of peacemaking.

[1 : 14] We are the ones who are blessed. Whenever we suffer for the name of our King, we are glad and rejoice when people revile us for our Saviour's name. Our goal is the Sermon on the Mount goal.

Our goal is to receive everything that Jesus' kingdom has to offer. We want it all. We want to be comforted. We want to inherit the whole earth. We want to be filled. We want to receive mercy.

We want to see God. We want to be called children of God. We want to be rewarded with God's smile when we suffer for Him. We want God's smile on us, that we want every reward that the Sermon on the Mount has to offer, not just in the life to come, but in this life.

We want it in this life. The Sermon on the Mount really grounds us in our relationship with the world as it is here and now, with the kingdom of God, not just as a future reward, though that is there.

The Sermon on the Mount also grounds us in the kingdom that's breaking into the world today through us as we follow Jesus. So I want to just make clear that we mustn't think Christianity is just about future pie in the sky when you die, future rewards only.

[2 : 25] It is that, but it's also about God's transformation in our lives today, in the world today. So being a Christian ought to make you a better tax accountant.

Being a Christian ought to make you a better postman or nurse or school teacher. Being a Christian ought to make you, for Jesus' sake, a better husband or a better wife or a better parent or a better child.

Now, in Jesus' name, that ought to be reflected in this life. And that's very clear in today's reading. You see, whenever we say we're Christian, we're making a connection with ourselves and Christ and we're making a connection with ourselves and Christ means King.

Jesus is King. So we're saying, I'm a man of the King. I'm a woman of the King. I'm a Christian. And so we live in a world where His kingdom is not recognised.

But if we are men and women of the King, then that ought to make a difference in how we relate in the world. And it ought to make a better difference, not a worse one. Well, Jesus' words are this.

[3 : 31] In our relationship with the world, He says in verse 13, You are the salt of the earth. Just a wonderful statement, a wonderful declaration from the King about who we are in the world.

We are the salt of the earth. Now, the question is, what does that mean? They did use salt as we use salt for flavouring in the ancient world.

And I'm a big fan of fish and chips. And I'm not a really good cook. I'm no master chef. But I have discovered recently there's actually different types of salt you can buy.

And you can get this fancy sea flake salt. Have you seen that? This sort of gourmet salt. I recommend it. Balsamic vinegar, freshly cut chips. Beautiful. Is that what Jesus is talking about?

Is He saying, and people teach this, that we are to be kind of a flavouring in society. We kind of do good stuff with a hint of Christian-y flavour. Well, I don't think that's strong enough.

[4 : 34] I think Jesus is being a bit more challenging to us than that. That's a bit too weak. In the ancient world, the number one use of salt, even more common than flavouring, the number one use was as a preservative.

Was as a preservative. Because, you know, you don't have electricity, you don't have fridges. And salted meat was edible meat. Unsalted meat was rotten meat.

That's what I think Jesus is talking about. You are the salt of the earth. Without us being kingdom people in the world, the world will go rotten. We are to be a preservation agent in the world.

That is our purpose in the world, not to disengage and withdraw from the world, and not to engage in a way that we compromise our convictions, but to act in the world in such a way so strongly for Christ.

In the name of Christ, we actually bless the world and are part of God's transformation of societies. And as the people of God retain their virtue, as they retain their conviction, as they retain their kingdom mindset, they can act, we can act as a blessing to society, as a preservative to society to keep it together.

[5 : 53] And there are just countless examples in church history where the church has been strong, society has been strong and brought a blessing to society. Now, Jesus gives us a warning with this.

And it's quite a serious one. He says, You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?

Because you know where the salt's working by just trying to put a bit on your tongue. It is no longer good for anything if that happens. It is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

That's a very serious warning, isn't it, from Jesus saying, The great danger, you are the salt of the earth, but your great danger is that you might lose your Christian conviction, your Christian commitment, your Christian character, your Christian courage, and you'll lose your saltiness.

Now, I don't know, maybe I'm biased against my own faith here, but I just think Christians are, we've created all sorts of technologies and cliches to water down our faith, to dilute our faith.

- [7 : 07] We are expert at justifying cowardice for our faith. We are brilliant at diluting our conviction. We are very good at kind of accommodating our faith in a way that basically dilutes it to nothing, loses saltiness.
- Christians are very good schemers at justifying being ashamed of their own king. It's very sad. And I'm caught up in this. We have very good reasons.
- We say, We don't want to put people off, or we don't want to Bible bash, we don't want to be too strong. We seem to act like we know what's going to work and not work, and therefore, we justify losing our saltiness just because we think something won't work.
- Jesus says, Notice what Jesus doesn't say. Jesus doesn't say, Don't worry about being too salty.
- Don't worry about being over the top. Don't worry about being too strong. There's nothing like that. He says, Worry about losing your saltiness. Worry about diluting it.
- [8 : 12] Don't worry about being too full on. Worry about being too weak. Don't lose your distinctiveness. Jesus says, Don't lose your public conviction in me as your Lord, as your King.
- And so, we are the salt of the earth. We are God's preservation agent. And here, I think this whole model reverses what would normally be cause and effect in our evaluation of our society.
- For example, what is, I mean, think of our society today. Australian society is in a mess. You only have to open the newspaper to see the reports of street violence and drug use, sexual abuse, domestic violence, drunkenness, massive divorce.
- There's so much going wrong in society and it would be very easy for the Christian to kind of look at the world and say, Oh, what a bad society. And, you know, at least we know Jesus.
- We have something better. You know, and distance ourselves from that. But if we, but who has God sent to Australia to be its preservation agent? The church.
- [9 : 21] And if society is like that, then we have failed. If society is that bad, then we haven't done our job. And so actually, we are partly responsible for this.
- We are culpable for this. We have to think generationally about what's happened in Australia over multiple generations. The church hasn't done its job. And it's no good saying, I wish, I wish church was like it was a generation ago.
- Society is the way it is today because of the way the church was a generation ago. That we weren't the salt of the earth and now we are in a mess. And so, it's not that the church is weak because society is so bad.
- Society is so bad because the church is weak. We have not been salt. We have not been the salt of the earth. I think what Australian Christians try to do over many generations is to try and engage the world to convert the world but instead the world converted us and we diluted our conviction and now we're in the state we're in.
- So, Jesus doesn't blame society for the church. He blames church for the society. We have lost our saltiness and it's interesting that the way people disrespect Christians, the way people disrespect the church, we are trampled upon and mocked just like Jesus said we deserve when we lose our saltiness.
- [10 : 48] But friends, here is still, the declaration still stands though. You are the salt of the earth. Be the salt of the earth. Don't compromise. Don't lose your conviction and don't lose your saltiness.
- Now, if that were not enough, there's another image here that's even stronger. It's even stronger than the salt one, the image of light. So, Jesus says, you are the light of the world, verse 14.

A city built on a hill cannot be hid. And so, you know, salt and preserving food, that's sort of clear. But this is even clearer.

Light and darkness. The world is dark. We are the light. And we are to shine a light into the world. In the old covenant, they saw themselves as a light and guide to the world because they had God's revelation.

And in a similar way, and even in a stronger sense, it's because our King declared himself to be the light of the world through us. We are the light of the world.

[11 : 54] You know, we point people to Jesus and we become the light of the world. It's all, everything today is related to actually people seeing, linking us to Jesus, us to the Father.

It's not just about being good and silent. It's works and words. It's about people linking who we are, our convictions to Jesus and we are to be the light of the world as he is the light of the world.

Now, the other image, I'll just figure out briefly, it's a city on a hill and this is a common practice in the ancient world. Cities were meant to be found.

The worst thing would be to be lost and die because you couldn't find a city. And so cities were built on hills. At night you would see them because there would be towers with, you'd see lights or fires or, you know, lanterns.

And some ancient cities actually even had parts of their wall with quartz or white stones that would reflect sunlight. So even in the day, you know, kilometres away, you'd see the reflection of the sun on a small city or town on a hill.

[13 : 03] And so cities are meant to be seen. So Jesus is saying, you're a city on a hill, you're meant to be seen for who you are as kingdom citizens, as Christians. You are meant to be seen.

You're not meant to hide it. Jerusalem, the vision for Jerusalem in the Old Covenant was that it would be a place where God was truly worshipped and nations would stream in to find God and there'd be like a kind of, just nations coming in, ever coming in, ascending to Jerusalem, to the city on a hill to meet God.

And Jesus takes that kind of idea and says, that's us. Through us, people are meant to meet God. Through us, people are meant to find Jesus because we're a city on a hill.

You know, Doncaster, Westfield have got it right. You know, they're so clever in the way they've built their complex. You can see Westfield, you know, almost anywhere in the eastern suburbs.

It's a city on a hill. You know, they're a beacon saying, come and shop, come and worship here. Or we're to be like that with our Christian conviction and lives in the world, a city on a hill.

[14 : 10] Come and worship Jesus. Come and meet our Saviour. Well, coming back to the image of light as Jesus does, he talks about not hiding it. Now, why would Jesus anticipate that we would want to hide our light?

Why would we want to hide our light under a basket? Well, I think the reason is because light and darkness clash. We are to be a light in the world, but darkness likes being dark.

Darkness likes dark. Darkness does not want to be lit. And so, as we shine our light, it's going to create friction. It's going to create opposition, which of course, Jesus has already anticipated by saying, blessed are you when people revile you for my name.

You know, rejoice and be glad. Great is your reward in heaven. That's how they persecuted the prophets who went before you. He's already anticipated in the clash we will suffer, but we have to be willing to do that because it is a reward.

It is a great thing to bear the name of Christ. And so, Jesus warns us, similar to the salt. He says, salt, don't lose your saltiness. Light, don't hide it. Nobody lights a lamp and puts it under the bushel basket, but you put a light on a lampstand to light everyone in the house.

[15 : 22] In the same way, let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. That's probably a very good summary of the Sermon on the Mount, verse 16.

People see our good works and will glorify our Father in heaven. The assumption there, again, must be that our words about our King, our Saviour, our God, will accompany our good deeds because otherwise people won't be able to make the link.

You're a good person. Oh, you're just a good person. Now, they need to know why we do what we do, why we hope in what we hope. It's because of Jesus. It's because of God the Father and then when they know that they'll see us and give glory to our Father in heaven.

It's only when we're following Jesus openly and naming him that verse 16 can happen. If we don't name Jesus, if we don't name God our Father and just try and be like him, we'll only bring glory to ourself.

The point of 16 is that they'll look at us and give glory to our Father in heaven. And I suspect also that when Jesus speaks of good works, he's not necessarily talking about mere morality.

[16 : 39] For example, you may show your good works when you fail in front of other people, even when you sin in front of other people. If you get caught by an unbeliever in the workplace stealing stationery, the way that you repent as a Christian and confess that to God and to your employer, that's a great witness, isn't it?

That's a great way to point people to the Father in the way that even when we fail, the way we deal with our guilt or the way we deal with repentance is a great witness to the gospel, to the Father.

So it's not necessarily about not making a mistake, but the way we deal with our guilt, and a similar example is the way we suffer. So for example, when we have cancer, the way we hope, the way we trust God, the way we keep praying, the way we refuse to be bitter, the way we refuse to kind of blame doctors and be punitive if any mistakes are made, all those things are a great witness to the Father that others won't do.

And so even in our weakness we can point people to Jesus, we can be salt and light. So just let me summarise the salt and light. Jesus is not talking about people hiding their faith, keeping it under taps and trying just to be a good example.

He's clearly talking about people who are good examples and they say why they're good examples, that they're light in darkness, they're salt-preserving society, that they're openly telling people about Jesus, they're even stirring it up for Jesus, they stir it up for Jesus because they're salt for Jesus, and they're light for Jesus.

[18 : 22] And I suspect we just need to trust God. He's named us salt, he's named us light, he will use us. You know, don't try and second guess what will happen if you stand up for your faith.

It's irrelevant. Your job is just to be salt and light. There's a lady here at this church, I'll just call her Pam, who had a friend dying of cancer that she's been caring for a long time and she's been doing all sorts of good things in terms of driving her places and hanging out with her and bringing her food, occasionally mentioning that she's praying for her, putting her on our church prayer list.

And Pam wanted to do more, she wanted to be salt and light. And she came to me recently and said, well what could I do to actually explicitly encourage this person? And I mentioned that we have in the orchard room a big box of Mark's Gospels, you know, these little copies of the Gospel of Mark.

I said, why don't you take one of those and give her a Gospel of Mark and says, well this is what I believe, this is what gives me hope, you know, it's for you to read if you'd like to read. And I said, don't give any conditions, no strings attached.

And she was very worried that it would be poorly received. But actually, I mean the lady was so grateful to be given a Gospel of Mark.

[19 : 39] She was so grateful. I can't tell you whether she's read it, I can't tell you whether she was converted, I'm praying that would happen. But we were all surprised that the dying lady was so glad that someone cared enough to give her a Gospel of Mark.

That is being salt, that is being light. And friends, no one else is as weak as we are. I mean, when people are dying, I see people dying and all these non-Christians giving them crystals and giving them all sorts of junk, giving them books they heard about on Oprah, just giving them spiritual junk food and we have the Word of Life.

We have Jesus. We have the true light and we can be true salt. Let's not hide it. Let's not hide it. Well, the second half of today's reading, I won't go into it as much because it's related to what's coming next week and the week after.

It's Jesus' attitude to the commandments of Scripture, Jesus' attitude to the Old Covenant law. and I just want to sort of make a couple of brief points. Jesus is very strong that he is not going to get a black text and cross out anything in the Bible, that the whole thing is there and will stand.

He says, do you not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets? I haven't. I have not come to abolish but to fulfil. Now, this is critical.

[20 : 59] He's not saying that new covenant believers are bound by the Old Covenant. There has been a change of covenant that he teaches elsewhere.

But what he's saying is that everything in God's word will be achieved and it will be achieved not in us being perfect but in the Son being perfect.

He is the one who has come to fulfil every commandment of God. And I don't know about you but when I've read the law, the first five books of the Bible even what Joan read today about grain offerings and different offerings I think, how could anyone ever do all of that?

And Jesus has done it. He's done it. He's perfectly fulfilled every act of righteousness for us. He's achieved it. And in an even greater sense in his death and resurrection he has fulfilled it because everything in that Old Covenant is anticipating Jesus coming to die for our sins.

And when Jesus dies on the cross as the great sacrifice well then he has fulfilled all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant. And so Jesus says I've not come to kind of water down the law I've come to fulfil it.

[22 : 15] For truly I tell you until heaven and earth pass away not one letter not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished. So Jesus has come he accomplishes the law he fulfils the law.

The whole law is anticipatory it's prophetic and it's all to get us ready for Jesus. And so it all stands fulfilled in him. Now Jesus goes on and I think he's I think also what he's trying to do is what he did last week and that is to try and break the back of the proud of the spiritual proud the Pharisee and we're tempted by this because the Pharisees what they do so well is they they kind of obey certain parts of the law and then hide other parts.

And so by Jesus saying you've got to do the whole thing that really crushes the Pharisee because they they're trying to be perfect at a few things but they're inconsistent. But in Jesus we just say well he's fulfilled the whole thing for us.

We're not even pretending to play the game of fulfilling any of it. He's fulfilled the whole thing. And he kind of continues to to to rebuke our pride in verses 19 onwards because he says whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Now on a mere Pharisee level no one can do that and so the Pharisee the proud Pharisee is broken. If you're trying to be good enough for God well you'll never do all the commandments.

[23 : 53] You'll never be called great in the kingdom of heaven so your pride is broken but the person who trusts in Jesus who trusts in the one who has achieved the law for them you have fulfilled the law in your king.

If you wear the robes of Christ you've fulfilled the law because Christ has fulfilled the law. His righteousness is your righteousness and therefore you exceed that of the Pharisee and that's verse 20 for I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is saying you know in me you will exceed the Pharisees with my righteousness you'll exceed the Pharisees but if you were trying to do this on your own you'll only fail you'll only fail.

The moralist says you know oh no Jesus says we've got to do the whole law you know they're broken by that but the Christian says I'm so glad the whole law stands not one letter will disappear because my Saviour has fulfilled it all for me and the Christian is happy in that statement of Jesus.

So let me summarize and conclude you are the salt of the earth you are the light of the world. Jesus these are Jesus words you are a city on a hill.

[25 : 18] He says it it's true. He doesn't say try and be salt he doesn't say be salt he says you are salt you are the salt of the earth you are subjects of the king who fulfills all of God's commands the king who freely forgives and freely transforms us by his spirit and the real heart of this message this teaching of Jesus today is that God was never upset at anyone for being too strong in their faith.

God was never angry or disciplined any Christian because they were too overt but Jesus does say God is angry when we hide our light God is angry when we lose our saltiness that is a bad thing don't water down your faith don't be ashamed of Jesus don't be ashamed of naming Jesus and so let me give you this sort of practical tip to finish with as you go out into the world this week it's not always clear how full on you're going to be for Jesus Jesus says be open about it but sometimes not sure what to say I would just say wherever you go say you go to the pub with people from work or you're talking to a family member whose life troubles you just pray the prayer pray to God just say to God thank you that you've called me to be light help me to be light in this situation help me to be salt help me to be willing to suffer for your name if you just pray the prayer

I'm sure that God will show you what to do but it's not always clear what to do but just be willing to give to him an openness to be salt and light you know don't go in there trying to tempt yourself to hide it just be open to God and see what he does so why don't we pray that God will do that now dear father thank you for giving us your son the true light of the world and that through him we are we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth so father thank you for naming us in this way and we pray that we would not be ashamed and not lose our saltiness and you would especially just make us willing to receive the blessing of insult for your name help us to be willing to do whatever you call us to do to be salt and light help us to be open to the opportunities that you're going to give us tomorrow morning and the rest of this week we pray this in Jesus name

Amen