

“An Invitation to Who We Are”

Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Many of you know that Pastor Carey and I both enjoy cooking, and so over the years I've collected many of my favorite recipes into a cookbook on my computer that I can edit and add to as I come across new recipes. I did a little research on my cookbook and discovered that out of over 200 recipes, nearly 75% of them include salt in one form or another as one of their ingredients, and I'm sure almost all of them have salt in there somewhere as a part of an ingredient. It probably won't surprise you to hear that more than a quarter of my recipes are for desserts, and of the dessert recipes, nearly half include salt. That's something that surprised me when I first started cooking, that even sweet desserts like chocolate cake include salt; we tend to think of salty being the opposite of sweet. But of course you don't have to do much cooking to learn quickly that salt doesn't just make things taste salty, salt makes things taste more like themselves, only better. Salt is a flavor enhancer; it adds flavor beyond just saltiness, so even in a chocolate cake you need salt to keep the cake from tasting bland.

So I think it's fair to say that salt is the single most important ingredient in the kitchen. More important than sugar, more important than tomatoes or rice or flour or anything else I can think of, salt is crucial to almost everything you cook. Maybe not much of it; maybe only a pinch or a few turns of a salt grinder, but it's probably in there unless you're trying to keep it out.

We tend to write our history books around wars and the names of kings; we could just as easily write our history as a story of salt. Empires have risen and fallen because of salt. How much of this was known by Jesus' audience on that day He preached the Sermon on the Mount I can't say, but they surely knew that salt was important. It was much more valuable in those days because it was much less available, but everyone still would have known how important it was. They may not have added a pinch of salt to their chocolate cakes, but they surely used it to add flavor to at least some of their food. And in the many centuries before refrigeration, salt was one of the best ways to keep their food from rotting so quickly. Salt was one of those things that was so important for daily life that it took on an almost holy connotation, maybe not unlike bread and wine: some of the sacrifices in the Old Testament include salt, and salt was sometimes part of a covenant ceremony.

Jesus tells His disciples that they are the “salt of the earth.” Many, many preachers and scholars have tried to make their name by trying to come up with a new way of understanding what Jesus is saying to us by teasing out some obscure use of salt, but there's plenty of meaning just in salt's ability to preserve and season. Salt prevents corruption and it adds flavor. “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus tells us: our function as disciples of Jesus in the world is to prevent the gagging smell of rot and add the pleasing flavor of God's kingdom instead. And that's nice on its own. It's kind of like the Beatitudes that we read last Sunday, in the verses just before our reading today: it's nice and comforting and encouraging by itself, and if you've been a Christian for very long you've probably heard a sermon or two about it before now, but have you stopped and thought deeply about what Jesus is saying?

Because this is not just a nice metaphor to describe us, like the Beatitudes this is an invitation to a deeper sort of life in Christ. We are called to be salt in a bland and rotting world, and we are

called to be light in a dark world, right after Jesus has announced the Beatitudes. Remember what we said last week: this series of blessings Jesus just proclaimed is kind of like His version of the Ten Commandments: He's explaining the law of how His kingdom works, and saying that the poor in spirit and the mourners and the peacemakers and the pure in heart are the ones who are blessed in His kingdom is His way of outlining the basic ethic for how His kingdom works. He's not just being nice and encouraging for people who are having a hard time or who are looked down on by the world, He's saying that His kingdom functions on the presence of God, and God is present with these sorts of people rather than the proud or strong or bullies. He's revealing the truth of God's kingdom in the face of the lies our world tells us about how you have to be good enough and strong enough and can only get ahead at other people's expense.

And immediately after He lays all of that out for us, Jesus calls us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In other words, the first priority after laying out the ethic of God's kingdom is making sure we understand that that ethic is not meant to be kept to ourselves. It is not enough for you to be good with God, for you to sit in the lifeboat while your neighbor drowns, for you to get into God's kingdom by the skin of your teeth and breathe a sigh of relief or, worse, look down your nose at the person on the outside looking in. Most of the Beatitudes are not solitary: being a peacemaker or being meek or being persecuted or insulted all involve someone else, and Jesus is underlining that fact by then saying that our purpose in the world is to affect those around us. We don't keep that blessing to ourselves, we preserve the world from the corruption of power and flavor the blandness of selfishness and a consumer mentality.

Folks, Jesus is giving us the opportunity to do something in this desperate world. He's not laying on us the obligation to go out there and get busy, He's giving us the chance to do something other than wring our hands and shake our heads as the world goes to hell around us. Christians in every age have struggled with how to have a positive impact for God's kingdom in our world in the midst of war and want and racism and hatred and selfishness and fear, and Jesus has already told us: you're blessed if you do the sorts of things and live the sort of life in the Beatitudes. And He's saying that we don't have to be holy people cloistered away from the world, caring only about how many prayers we've said today and how many Bible verses we've read and how many sermons we've heard. He's saying that holy people are salt and light, living the ethic of the kingdom in response to the corruption and darkness of the world and having an impact on the world through the power of God.

We are here for the world, not for ourselves. If faith in Jesus was only about me and my relationship to Jesus, God would scoop up new believers into heaven as soon as they claimed Jesus as their Lord. But He doesn't; He leaves us here for now so that we can be salt and light, so that we can live according to the ethic of God's kingdom for the benefit of those who are not yet in the kingdom. When the people around us give in to hate, we show them the blessing of meekness. When they give in to greed, we show them the blessing of poverty of spirit. When they give in to the temptation to do violence, we show them the blessing of being a peacemaker. We show them that even unjust, unearned suffering does not mean you are cursed; we can be blessed by God's presence even when we are insulted and persecuted. We are here in the world, living as salt and light, because we love the people around us, even though they might be trapped in corruption and darkness.

And more than that, Jesus is also saying that it would be absurd for us to do otherwise. "If the salt loses its saltiness," Jesus asks, "how can it be made salty again?" I have a degree in chemistry, and

the only ways I can think of to make salt lose its saltiness is to do some chemistry to it that would require some intentionality. If you leave it alone, salt is incredibly stable under normal conditions. It's not just going to spoil or get less potent. Jesus and His audience knew this, even though they didn't have the science of chemistry yet. It's kind of absurd to say that salt would lose its potency. And likewise with a lamp: what on earth would be the point of lighting a lamp and then covering it with a bowl? That's what Jesus is challenging us with: if we have the potent, preserving, enlightening challenge of salt and light in our lives, why on earth would we keep it to ourselves? You can't be salt and not be salty. Salt kills corruption, and light throws back the darkness. Salt and light automatically bring change wherever they are introduced to rot or darkness. There is an inherent potency to God's presence in the world revealed by our lives; why would we try to hide it or diminish it? We live as God's people for the sake of the world.

But at the same time, there's a danger of losing ourselves if we focus too much on the world. God's people have always run the risk of living somewhere on a swinging pendulum, going back and forth between living so much for the world that we let the world define our terms and identity and success, and living so far from the world that we withdraw into ourselves and let the world go to hell. Jesus doesn't give us that option, because He keeps preaching in this Sermon on the Mount. It's a mistake to read the Sermon as a laundry list of unrelated ideas, with Jesus switching from topic to topic as different thoughts come to mind. Jesus and the writer of Matthew's gospel were surely intentional in how they structured the different parts of the Sermon. So Jesus begins with the ethic of God's kingdom, then moves to an invitation to use that ethic for the world to save from corruption and bring light to dark places, and then He insists that being for the world does not mean that God's law goes out the window. "Don't think I've come to abolish what God has said in the past," Jesus tells us. The smallest letter in God's law will last longer than the ground you're standing on.

We may be *for* the world, but we're rooted in God's word to us. God sets the terms, we live it out, and the world is changed as a result. Other people don't get to determine what righteousness looks like: God sets the standard, God writes the law, God decides the ethic, and then we live it out for the benefit of those around us. The problem has always been letting others define us, whether we love the world so much that we give in to the world's terms, or we reject the world so thoroughly that we get stuck on our own righteousness and let legalistic religious folks define what we should do. And that's when we get lost and don't know what to do. That's when we throw our hands in the air because our mission isn't working. That's when we wander out of the presence of God and into either worldly relativism, blown hither and thither by what the world thinks is good, or into self-righteousness and legalism, blown hither and thither by trying to please self-righteous folks and their ever-changing standards of how you cut your hair and what you eat. That's when we either compromise God's standards of the Beatitudes so that we can be more successful according to the standards of business or politics, or we compromise God's invitation to be salt and light in the world by navel-gazing and checking off boxes on our holy to-do lists.

If you're bland salt or blocked light, if you're Jesus' disciple who isn't for the world, you're good for nothing. Likewise, if you're a disciple of Jesus who thinks that being for the world means God's law isn't important, and if you let the world so define you that God's definitions aren't seen as being relevant, then you're banned from entering God's kingdom. Instead, we can be salty salt and bright light, realizing that we are rooted in God's past actions and God's words to His people. We can let God define us for others. It's a tricky, delicate balance to maintain, as any student of the history of

the church can attest. But it's much easier if you're motivated by love of God and love of others, which you might remember Jesus telling us elsewhere are the two most important commandments. If we stay present in the world and rooted in God, close to our neighbors living in rot and darkness but also embedded in the Scriptures and in prayer and in the community of the church, we stand a much better chance of being salt and light according to God's word.

This is a calling, rather than a command; a blessing, rather than a burden. Jesus is inviting us to see that the ethics of the Beatitudes are not passive and impotent. The people of God don't just sit there and let things happen to them. Instead, we go on the offensive, we respond, we stop wringing our hands and we get up and we have an impact on our world. We live in an age, as in all ages, when there is so much debate about what is good and how we should respond to the evils around us. He has shown us what is good, and which way we should go. We bear with us the ethics of God's kingdom, and we go on the offense in love. There is much of the Sermon on the Mount yet to come, and Jesus is going to tell us what that love looks like, so stay tuned. But in the meantime, invite the Spirit of God to show you if you need to commit to being more for the world or more rooted in God's word.



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