

Out Of The Saltshaker

Matthew 5:13

Through my childhood years, I had many experiences with salt which stand out in my mind even today. I remember the collection of salt and pepper shakers which a cousin had gathered on various vacation trips. I remember the rock salt Dad put on the ice while we were turning the ice cream freezer. I recall the time my brothers and I put salt on a snail to see what would happen, and then trying unsuccessfully to put salt on the tail of a bird!

I remember that humiliating experience during those painful years as a young teenager, picking up a saltshaker in the school cafeteria to discover that some prankster had taken the top off, turned the shaker over, and then gently placed the top where it appeared as though everything were normal. And I remember my mother telling my father not to put so much salt on his food before he tasted it.

Imagine my surprise, then, to discover after I had become a Christian that Jesus compared His followers to *salt!* What is so special about salt that Jesus would say “*You are the salt of the earth*”?

Our Lord was primarily speaking of the effectiveness we Christians are to have in the world around us, and the difference we are to make. The thrust of what Jesus said was that as “salt,” as effective catalysts in our society, there exists the very real possibility that we could lose our “saltiness,” that our effectiveness as Christ’s followers could be diminished if we are not careful.

Pure salt, as we know it today, cannot lose its saltiness. But the salt available in those days was impure, being taken mainly from the Dead Sea, and being a mixture of salt and other matter. When left exposed to weather the salty taste could be lost, leaving behind what only had the appearance of salt. Salt was also used in outdoor ovens beneath a layer of tiles to help the oven retain its heat. After a certain length of time the salt had to be replaced, but one had to be careful in disposing of this useless salt. It was no longer salty to the taste, but nothing would grow wherever it was thrown. The easiest thing to do was to toss the useless salt into the road, where it would be “*trampled by men,*” as Jesus said in this verse.

The people in Jesus’ day understood immediately what He was saying. What we should understand in our day is that is possible, if we are not careful, for us as Christians to lose our effectiveness in the world around us.

We all understand that salt makes a difference in our food, sometimes a very big difference! But we've got to use it. Salt doesn't make any difference to our food at all unless we take it out of the saltshaker. If Jesus compared us to salt, perhaps we need to take a good long look at our surroundings, and decide that it is time for us to come out of the saltshaker so we can make a difference in our day.

1 We can make a difference by defining our priorities

We have to decide what is really important! "Priorities" is a word we sometimes use to explain why we are not doing something we know we should. But most often we have not even set priorities—we just float along and take whatever comes. If you stop and think about it, most of what Jesus had to say in the Sermon on the Mount had to do either directly or indirectly with the setting of priorities in our lives.

For instance, in verse six, when Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,*" He was talking about those who give the pursuit of righteousness priority in their lives. That can be said for most of the other subjects covered in His Sermon: love for our enemies, persecution, prayer, giving to the poor, fasting, storing up treasures in heaven, and so on. He is saying, in effect, "Get your life in line with what should be first in your life. Set some priorities." And He said it best in Matthew 6:33—"*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*"

That is what it takes to be successful in anything we do. Those who play professional football or baseball or basketball are in those professions because they have given priority to developing themselves in those respective sports. We Christians must force ourselves to the point where we decide—set the boundaries on—what is most important.

Few things will rob us of our effectiveness any faster than will our reluctance or hesitation or failure to define what is most important to us. Just because a person says he is a Christian does not mean that Christ and the things of the Spirit of God have priority in his life! And perhaps the reason we are not more effective in our community is because we are still in the saltshaker! We have not considered following Christ all the way to be important enough to leave behind our pet activities, attitudes, and ideas.

Maybe we're not "salty" out there in the world because we have not defined our own priorities in our homes and families, much less our personal lives. Maybe the

reason we are not making more of an impact on our area is because we have never decided what is going to be the main thing in our lives.

That was the problem of a young man who came to Jesus in Matthew 19. The young man was rich, and wanted to know how he could receive eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments, to which the young man replied that he had kept all the commandments. But something inside his heart told him that wasn't enough. So Jesus told him, "*Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me*" (v. 21). He was telling the young man to realign his priorities. You see, that young man and any person to day can have salvation if it is important enough to them. The Scripture says that the young man went away sad, because he had great wealth.

It was easy to see what had priority in his life by the decision he made. The same thing is true in our lives today: the choices we make about how we spend our time, where we are during worship and Bible study times, whether or not we set a good example for those who follow us, how we spend our time and our resources—all of them are the result of choices we've made, and every one of them shout to those around us about what is most important to us.

Jesus told about another rich man in one of His parables. This man decided that he would tear down his barns and build bigger ones. When he was completely comfortable, he would take life easy; he would Jesus told about another rich man in one of His parables. This man decided that he would tear down his barns and build bigger ones. When he was completely comfortable, he would take life easy; he would "*eat, drink and be merry.*" But his priorities were all wrong, so in the parable, God spoke to him: "*You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?*"

When we read that parable many times we stop right there, but the next verse is the one which talks about priorities: "*This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God*" (Luke 12:16-21).

If you do not take pains to properly order your priorities, one day it will come home to you like a slap in the face, like a stab in the heart. Can you say with Paul, "*This one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:13b-14).

2 We can make a difference by realizing our potential in Christ

Have you ever heard someone say, “He’s the salt of the earth”? They were paying that person a very sincere compliment, and according to the way we use that phrase today, they were correct. But when Jesus said, “*You are the salt of the earth,*” He wasn’t handing out compliments. He wasn’t giving an opinion about our characters. He was making a statement about our very natures as His followers. Jesus was comparing us who follow Him with something which was vital to the health and welfare of every living creature. The Greeks called it divine. Our English word “salary” is derived from the practice of paying Roman soldiers with bags of salt, which is probably the origin of the expression that someone is “worth his salt.”

We nowadays take our refrigerators and freezers for granted, until there is a power failure. But in the hot climate of Palestine, two thousand years ago with no refrigeration, salt was used to preserve meat. With no ice available, fishermen had to cover their catch with layers of salt so the catch could be sold as fresh. But as precious as salt was to the people of that ancient culture, they were not even aware of the vast potential salt had. Even today, salt is used in meat-packing, sausage-making, fish-curing and food-processing to either preserve or season, or both.

From preventing mold to preserving food to keeping your drains clean, salt has so many practical uses. It is used in household cleaning, and is an effective antiseptic. Got a mosquito bite? A paste made with water and salt will relieve the itching. A sore throat? Warm salt water may be just what you need. Got an overflowing washing machine with a mountain of suds? Sprinkle salt on the suds, and they’ll go right down. And we haven’t even mentioned manufacturing and industrial uses. There are more than 14,000 potential uses for salt.

Judas Iscariot was a man who had a lot of potential. He had a head for business sense, and probably brought to the disciples a balanced approach to their ministry. It is tragic that Judas betrayed Jesus, but it is equally as tragic that Judas never realized what he himself could have been!

Peter was hot-headed and short-sighted, and often acted impulsively. But Jesus saw potential in that fisherman. So even after he had denied three times that he even knew Jesus, the Lord gave him an awesome task. It was Peter’s message on the day of Pentecost which drew the net for three thousand souls to be saved. It was Peter who was able to make a difference in the Gentile world with the Gospel because he was in the process of discovering his potential in Christ.

And look at John Mark. He had grown homesick and had left Paul and Barnabas on one of their missionary journeys. When he matured a little bit, he was ready to rejoin them. Barnabas was eager to accept him again, but Paul wouldn't have him. You see, Barnabas looked past the failures to see the potential John Mark had in his life in Christ. So Barnabas took John Mark and went in one direction to share the Gospel, and Paul took Silas and went in another. All these had potential—and so do we—and they could only make a difference in that pagan culture when they discovered their potential in Christ!

Oh, and there is so much potential that you and I have, too! There is a certain amount of potential we all have which comes to us as a natural part of our genetics. The late Casey Stengel was asked about two twenty-year-old rookies who had recently joined his New York Yankees baseball team. Would they ever amount to anything? Stengel said, "In ten years, that guy over there has a chance to be a star. In ten years, this other fellow has a chance to be thirty." That's one kind of potential.

But there is another kind of potential that is available only in Christ. It largely goes unrealized, untapped and unused. Jesus said to us, Oh, and there is so much potential that you and I have, too! There is a certain amount of potential we all have which comes to us as a natural part of our genetics. The late Casey Stengel was asked about two twenty-year-old rookies who had recently joined his New York Yankees baseball team. Would they ever amount to anything? Stengel said, "In ten years, that guy over there has a chance to be a star. In ten years, this other fellow has a chance to be thirty." That's one kind of potential.

But there is another kind of potential that is available only in Christ. It largely goes unrealized, untapped and unused. Jesus said to us, "*You **are** the salt of the earth.*" He did not say, "You should consider the various properties of salt and seek to emulate those in your life." You ***are*** the salt of the earth—this is your potential in Christ! We Christians need to wake up and realize that we have a stabilizing, preserving, penetrating influence on society today, and that we can indeed make a difference. Our only choice is whether or not this influence is going to be good or bad.

But the warning in Matthew 5:13 is that if we lose our saltiness, we lose our ability to penetrate the world and make a difference. We cannot live up to our potential in Christ if we are not "salty" where it really counts. We are not being all we were created, or re-created, in Christ to be, if we will not make every effort to be true to

our new natures in Christ—that of making a difference in our world with the influence of Christ.

3 We can make a difference by getting involved

If the salt in that shiny saltshaker on your table at home could choose not to participate in your meal, the food would be pretty bland and unexciting for the most part. Only when we shake the salt out of the saltshaker does it make any difference in the food we eat. Only when you and I make a conscious decision to get involved in what's going on around us can we actually make any measurable difference for Christ.

But getting involved is one of the last things we ever do. Sure we are involved in some things, but how many of those things will even be remembered ten years from now? You see, it is cheaper to *talk* about a situation than it is to actually *do* something about a situation.

I believe there is a definite progression here. Perhaps one reason we so often fail to get involved is because we have not first decided what is important. We have not defined our priorities. Consequently, we have not even begun to discover the potential we have in Christ. So we hold back, depending on the natural abilities and potentialities of the people of the world to get things done in our community. We cannot penetrate if we do not participate.

Martin Luther, a great Christian leader of another century, once wrote: “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God *except* precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, then I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.”

In other words, we may proclaim the Gospel non-stop twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, but if we refuse to get involved in those matters which are currently relevant, then we are *not* following Christ.

It is imperative that every born-again, truly committed Christian search his or her heart to determine where the battle is raging, and go to the front to represent Christ at that point in time. If Jesus had had the attitude that many of us do, I doubt very seriously that He never would have cleansed the Temple. He might not have told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, with a man of another race as the hero. He

might not have eaten with known sinners and social outcasts. If Jesus had chosen to get involved the way most Christians do today, He would never have gone to the Cross!

For too long we have been content to remain in the saltshaker. I pray that God would upend our worlds, literally shaking us out, so that we leave the comfort and security of the saltshaker and go into the world to make a difference.

Have you lost your saltiness? It may be because of some sin or lifestyle you've harbored in your heart. It may be because of an attitude that has alienated you from other people and separated you from God. It could be because of bitterness or a heart grown hard or a love for Christ which has grown cold. Or it may be because of a spirit of apathy that has taken over your life.

Luke's version of what Jesus said in Matthew 5 reads this way: *"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out."*

Then He said this, and this is very important: *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"* (14:34-35)