

“You are the Salt of the Earth”

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Matthew 5:13).

How often have you heard the expression, said of someone who has great personal integrity, “he (or she) is the salt of the earth?” Well, as you see, this expression comes from the Lord’s Word and is derived from the way we use salt, especially in food, to give it flavour, or, more properly speaking, to draw out the flavour of the food itself so that it tastes better.

The teaching is mentioned in three of the four Gospels, and it’s significant that every time it is mentioned it’s in the context of temptations, or challenges that the disciples were being warned to expect as they followed the Lord. In Matthew the statement comes right after the verses in the Sermon on the Mount about being blessed in spite of persecution. In Mark it follows strong warnings about personal temptations to commit sins that could result in condemnation! And in Luke it follows the Lord’s command to forsake all as we follow Him, lest we start something we can’t finish and end up both looking and feeling foolish.

The verses in Mark are particularly instructive in that they speak of the danger of offending, or sinning against others, and there the teaching is put this way: “...Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavour, how will you season it? ***Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another***” (Mark 9:50). These are beautiful, powerful words that refer obviously to the tendency to be sharp or aggressive with others when in fact we should be sharp and disciplined *within ourselves*, and gentle with others. And it comes from the chemistry itself of salt, which forms itself into sharp crystals which, until they are dissolved, can have the effect of aggravating the skin or tissues of the body. So much is this the case, in fact, along with other qualities of this unique substance, that salt in heavy concentrations will effectively sterilize anything on which it is spread. This is why - even though it may cause great pain - it can be used to disinfect wounds in the body, and also why it has been used throughout history to destroy the crops and crop growing potential of an enemy’s fields. Remember the Dead Sea? The reason it is dead is that the concentration of various mineral salts is so high that neither fish nor vegetation can survive in its waters.

And yet salt is a precious commodity, useful in a wide variety of ways. In fact it has been so highly valued through the ages that in some cultures it has been used as a form of currency.

So the Lord referred to His disciples as “*the salt of the earth*,” suggesting that they should perform at least some of the uses represented by salt among others. The question is, what are those uses, and how – if salt ruins a field – is it a good thing to be “the salt of the earth?”

Well, in simple terms, and speaking primarily now of salt as a seasoning, one of the critical characteristics of it is that it attracts water and then, as it dissolves, it holds the water at the surface, not only drying up the flesh or food on which it is spread, but more importantly in cooking, bringing the flavour of the food also *to the surface* where we can more quickly and easily taste it.

Rust, also, by the way, is caused not so much by the salt itself, although the salt may be corrosive; it is caused by this *effect* of the salt drawing water to itself and then holding it there at the surface of metal which, because it is therefore exposed far longer to the water than it would be otherwise, allows the water to penetrate the paint or other coatings more pervasively than it would otherwise. So the metal naturally rusts faster than it would apart from the presence of salt.

Then again, salt is used as a preservative in food for much the same reason: it brings the water to the surface, where it evaporates, and the food dries, making it resistant to the growth of bacteria.

In addition to all this, everyone knows that eating salty food makes you thirsty (which is why bars and restaurants that make their money on drinks typically serve salty snacks and heavily seasoned food). The salt creates a longing for water – or some other drink! – and so it has the effect of promoting a conjunction or combination of these two things, food and drink.

This, then, is precisely where the correspondence, or the spiritual meaning of salt lies. It is a conjoining medium, and as such it represents the affection **for** truth, or the affection that is **in** truth for good (AC 9207, 9325:9, 10300, etc.).

But where does this meaning come from? And why is it a property that relates to salt, and not to the water itself or other drinks that normally correspond to truth?

This is not explained specifically in the Writings, but when we go back to the Gospels we are reminded of the teachings about persecution, temptation and commitment in the face of opposition, all of which provide the context for the message about salt. So we are reminded that truth does not come to any of us apart from a context of some desire, need or use, often involving some problem or challenge. When we learn something, it is usually because we have a need to know. Then, when the truth appears to us, we say, “Aha!” and immediately put it to work.

This context, this need we often feel within ourselves, typically arising from some evil or falsity that is affecting us, is what highlights the use of salt. For in attracting water, and drawing water out of the environment, salt beautifully represents the desire for knowledge, insight or truth, and also the power within that truth itself to heal and do good.

Indeed, as it has been explained to me, all forms of salt are combinations of metallic and non-metallic ions, in which combinations electrons from one ion transfer to the other creating a positive charge in one and a negative charge in the other, the result being an electrical bond between them. In other words, the two (or more) parts of the compound are held together by an electrical force. Thus the chemical, salt, itself illustrates the conjunctive power that it has with respect to good and truth. In one ion there is something missing, in the other something “extra.” One is attracted to the other, and they are bonded together by the power of use. Thinking, then, about spiritual things, this certainly seems to illustrate the power of love or desire.

The point is, all truth, if it has real integrity, looks to the practice or accomplishment of some good. It contains within itself the power to express itself in words or deeds. So, when the circumstances of our lives provide the context of need: when we are threatened, challenged, tempted to do something wrong or foolish; when we are confronted by the sharp, corrosive comments of our critics (see SD min. 4548 & 4627), if we know the truth or at least are prepared to go to

the Word and learn it we will find that this truth immediately seeks application to the problem at hand. The truth looks toward what is good and is drawn to the situation as water is drawn to the surface of something that is salted.

Note, too, that there are many different kinds of salt. Detergent salts, for example, like sodium-phosphate, actually can enrich the earth, even though sodium-chloride ruins it. And everyone knows that Epsom salts can be used either internally as laxatives or externally to draw poisons with the moisture out of the skin.

Again, the point is that just as salt draws water, along with various properties that are in the water, *out*, so it represents an energy or force we call *affection* that is inherent in truth longing for application to the good of life, thus bringing good and truth together.

This is why we use salt when we make the bread for the holy supper. The salt represents our need, and hopefully our desire, to bring the truths of the Word and doctrine into life where they can be conjoined with good, indeed where they can be expressions of good.

But there is more. Did you know that certain kinds of salts can have the effect of making oil and water mix? This has something to do with the water molecules combining with the salts so that they are able to blend with the oil. Marvellous! Oil and water correspond to good and truth.

And do you know why salt melts ice and also causes water to have a higher than normal boiling temperature? Again, it's because the water molecules combine with the salts and thus create a greater mass and thus the need for more heat to be pulled out of the substance before it can freeze, and more heat to be added to it before it will boil. Again: marvellous! Think how genuine truth, truth that really has a longing for the good of life within it, keeps us from freezing up or boiling over in our relationships with others.

But what about the negative or harmful applications of salt? Why did Lot's wife turn into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26)? Why does road salt or table salt prevent things from growing in the earth?

Well, just about anything can be used or abused, and so every substance on earth can have a good or a bad correspondence. Salt is no different. In plain words, if it doesn't do what it's supposed to do, then it is either worthless or – sometimes – actually destructive.

In the case of Lot's wife, she turned into a pillar of salt when she disregarded the angel's warning and “looked back” at the destruction of Sodom. “Looking back,” here as elsewhere in the Word represents our spiritual state when we know the truth, that is, when we know what we should be doing, but when that truth just sucks the life of good, leaving the ground barren. It is in fact a state of “faith alone,” faith without works or even any inclination to do good works. It is what the Writings sometimes call “historical faith,” a faith that merely looks back, or perhaps down at others with a sense of God's judgment on their evils, but does not look forward itself to doing what the Lord commands. It is a harsh, bitter, corrosive faith that can spoil the potential for charitable work that might otherwise grow up in the good ground of community life.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Mat-

thew 5:13). Indeed, as we read in Luke, “It is fit neither for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Luke 14:35).

The purpose of knowledge, insight or truth is that it should serve and be conjoined with good. To this end we are taught that truth actually contains within itself an inclination towards good, in fact the very essence of good which is drawn out by the representation of salt in the Word. This is why we sometime say in the church that truth is really only a form of good, specifically, “good made visible to the understanding.”

If we are indeed therefore “the salt of the earth” it is because we have the truth in the form of the Word, and now a genuine doctrine from the Word that has the power to do tremendous good in our own lives and in the lives of others *if we will use it with charity, with thoughtfulness, with sensitivity and consideration* (WE 6350).

If we can respond to this challenge, which after all is the daily challenge we face to remain cheerful in spite of the attacks of the hells, to resist the temptation to offend others by charging ahead too aggressively with our own ambitions or ideas, to count the cost of our discipleship in measured steps, building solidly on the foundation that the Lord has provided, not giving up, but going forward with His help and encouragement... If we can do these things, then truly the Lord’s words will be fulfilled in our lives and we will be among those who are likened to that amazing, vital substance, “the salt of the earth.” We will be able to respond to the needs and challenges of our world with real help, healing insight and a spiritual perspective that allows us – with our neighbours – fully to savour the deeper meaning and purpose of our lives from day to day.

Indeed, we will enjoy and appreciate the precious commodity of holy fear, the innocent, healthy fear of offending in any way against the Lord in His love and wisdom, the simple fear that is likened also in the Writings to salt (AC 3718), seasoning our every experience with a genuine effort to conjoin what is true with what is good from Him.

Amen.

Lessons: Leviticus 2:7-13: salt for grain offerings!
Children’s talk on doing what is good with zeal for the truth

Matthew 5:10-16, or perhaps Mark 9:38-50 (see also Luke 14:25-34)
Arcana Caelestia 9207:1-3 (or more)