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The Salt of the Earth

“Ye are the salt of the earth.”

—Matthew 5:13

Jesus is speaking to His disciples—to all of us, that is, who acknowledge the authority of His teaching. He compares our function on the earth to that of salt. His meaning becomes clear when we consider two familiar uses of salt in relation to food.

Salt Gives Flavor

First of all, salt gives flavor. Food that in itself is unappetizing becomes tasty and acceptable when seasoned with salt. In Job 6:6, this is put in the form of a rhetorical question: *“Can that which is unsavory be eaten without salt?”* It is the presence of salt that makes the difference, causing us to enjoy food that we would otherwise have refused to eat. As Christians, our function is to give flavor to the earth. The one who enjoys this flavor is God. Our presence makes the earth acceptable to God. Our presence commends the earth to God’s mercy. Without us, there would be nothing to make the earth acceptable to God. But because we are here, God continues to deal with the earth in grace and mercy rather than in wrath and judgment. It is our presence that makes the difference.

This principle is vividly illustrated in the account of Abraham’s intercession on behalf of Sodom, as recorded in Genesis 18:16–33. The Lord had told Abraham that He was on His way to Sodom to see if that city’s wickedness had come to the point where judgment could no longer be withheld. Abraham then walked with the Lord on the way to Sodom and reasoned with Him about the principles of His judgment.

First, Abraham established one principle that is the basis for all that follows: It is never the will of God that the judgment due to the wicked should come upon the righteous. “*Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?*” (v. 23) Abraham asked. “*That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” (v. 25).

The Lord made clear in the ensuing conversation that He accepted the principle stated by Abraham. How important it is that all believers understand this! If we have been made righteous by faith in Christ, and if we are leading lives that truly express our faith, then it is never God’s will that we be included in the judgments that He brings upon the wicked.

Unfortunately, Christians often do not understand this because they fail to distinguish between two situations that outwardly may appear similar, but that in reality are completely different in nature and cause. On the one hand, there is persecution for the sake of righteousness. On the other hand, there is God’s judgment upon the wicked. The difference between these two situations is brought out by the following contrasted statements: Persecution comes from the wicked upon the righteous; but judgment comes from God, who is righteous, upon the wicked. Thus, persecution for righteousness and judgment for wickedness are opposite to each other in their origins, their purposes and their results.

The Bible warns that Christians must expect to suffer persecution. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to His disciples: “*Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake*” (Matthew 5:10–11). Paul wrote likewise to Timothy: “*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*” (2 Timothy 3:12). Christians must therefore be prepared to endure persecution for their faith and their way of life, and even to count this as a privilege.

However, by the same token, Christians should never be included in God’s judgments upon the wicked. This principle is stated many times in Scripture. In

1 Corinthians 11:32, Paul wrote to his fellow believers, and he said, “*But when we [Christians] are judged, we are chastened of the Lord that we should not be condemned with the world.*” This demonstrates that there is a difference between God’s dealings with believers and His dealings with the world. As believers, we may expect to experience God’s chastening. If we submit to the chastening and set our lives in order, then we are not subject to the judgments that come upon unbelievers, or the world in general. The very purpose of God’s chastening us as believers is to preserve us from undergoing His judgments upon unbelievers.

In Psalm 91:7–8, the psalmist gave this promise to the believer: “*A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.*” Here again the principle is seen. Whatever judgment comes as “*the reward of the wicked*” (what the wicked justly deserve) should never fall upon the righteous. No matter if God strikes the wicked on every side, the righteous in the midst of it all will not be harmed.

In Exodus chapters 7 through 12, it is recorded that God brought ten judgments of ever increasing severity upon the Egyptians because they refused to listen to His prophets Moses and Aaron. Throughout all this, God’s people Israel dwelt in the midst of Egypt, but not one of the ten judgments touched them. In Exodus 11:7, the reason is graphically stated: “*But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.*” Judgment did not come upon Israel because the Lord “*put a difference*” between His own people and the people of Egypt. Even the dogs of Egypt had to acknowledge this difference! And the difference is valid to this day.

Continuing his conversation with the Lord concerning Sodom, Abraham attempts to ascertain the least number of righteous persons needed to preserve the whole city from judgment. He began with fifty. Then with a remarkable combination of reverence and perseverance, he worked his way down to ten. The Lord finally assured Abraham that if He found only ten righteous persons in Sodom, He would

spare the whole city for the sake of those ten.

What was the population of Sodom? It would be difficult to arrive at an exact estimate. However, there are figures available for certain other cities of ancient Palestine that provide a standard of comparison. In Abraham's day, the walls of Jericho enclosed an area of about seven or eight acres. This would provide dwelling space for a minimum of five thousand persons or a maximum of ten thousand. But Jericho was not a large city by the standards of its day. The largest city of that period was Hazor, which covered about 175 acres and had a population estimated at between forty and fifty thousand. Later, in the period of Joshua, we are told that the total population of Ai was twelve thousand persons (Joshua 8:25). The Bible record seems to indicate that Sodom was a more important city in its day than Ai.

Taking these other cities into account, we could say that the population of Sodom in Abraham's day was probably not less than ten thousand. God assured Abraham that ten righteous persons could by their very presence preserve a city of at least ten thousand. This gives a ratio of one to a thousand. The same ratio of "*one among a thousand*" is given in Job 33:23 and in Ecclesiastes 7:28, and both these passages suggest that the "*one*" is a person of outstanding righteousness, while all the remainder fall below God's standards.

It is easy to extend this ratio indefinitely. The presence of ten righteous persons can preserve a community of ten thousand. The presence of a hundred righteous persons can preserve a community of one hundred thousand. The presence of one thousand righteous persons can preserve a community of one million. How many righteous persons are needed to preserve a nation as large as the United States, with an estimated population of nearly 250,000,000? About 250,000 persons.

These figures are evocative. Does Scripture give us grounds to believe that, for example, a quarter of a million truly righteous persons, scattered as grains of salt across the United States, would suffice to preserve the entire nation from God's judgment and to ensure the continuance of His grace and mercy? It would be foolish to claim that such estimates are exact. Nevertheless, the Bible definitely establishes the general principle that the presence of righteous believers is the decisive factor in

God's dealings with a community.

To illustrate this principle, Jesus uses the metaphor of “*salt*.” In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul uses a different metaphor to convey the same truth: “*We are ambassadors for Christ*.” What are ambassadors? They are persons sent forth in an official capacity by a nation’s government to represent that government in the territory of another nation. Their authority is not measured by their own personal abilities, but is in direct proportion to the authority of the government which they represent.

In Philippians 3:20, Paul specifies the government which, as Christians, we represent. He says, “*Our conversation [literally, our citizenship] is in heaven.*” Two translations render this, “*We are citizens of heaven*” (PHILLIPS and NEB). Thus our position on earth is that of ambassadors representing heaven’s government. We have no authority to act on our own, but as long as we carefully obey the directions of our government, the entire might and authority of heaven are behind every word that we speak and every move that we make.

Before one government declares war on another, its usual action of final warning is to withdraw its ambassadors. While we are left on earth as heaven’s ambassadors, our presence guarantees a continuance of God’s forbearance and mercy toward the earth. But when heaven’s ambassadors are finally withdrawn, there will then be nothing left to hold back the full outpouring of divine wrath and judgment upon the earth.

This leads us to a second effect of the presence of Christians as “*the salt of the earth.*”

Salt Restraints Corruption

A second function of salt in relation to food is to restrain the process of corruption. In the days before artificial refrigeration, sailors who took meat on long voyages used salt as a preservative. The process of corruption was already at work before the meat was salted. Salting did not abolish the corruption, but it held it in check for the duration of the voyage, so that the sailors could continue to eat the

meat long after it would otherwise have become inedible.

Our presence on the earth as Christ's disciples operates like the salt in the meat. The process of sin's corruption is already at work. This is manifested in every area of human activity—moral religious, social, political. We cannot abolish the corruption which is already there, but we can hold it in check long enough for God's purposes of grace and mercy to be fully worked out. Then, when our influence is no longer felt, corruption will come to its climax, and the result will be total degradation.

This illustration from the power of salt to restrain corruption explains Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12. Paul warns that human wickedness will come to its climax in the person of a world ruler supernaturally empowered and directed by Satan himself. Paul calls this ruler "*the man of sin*" (more literally, "*the man of lawlessness*"), and "*the son of perdition*" (v. 3). In 1 John 2:18 he is called "*antichrist*," and in Revelation 13:4 he is called "*the beast*." This ruler will actually claim to be God and will demand universal worship.

Emergence of this satanic ruler is inevitable. Paul says with certainty, "*Then shall that Wicked [lawless one] be revealed . . .*" (2 Thessalonians 2:8), Paul also declares in the same verse that the true Christ Himself will be the one to administer final judgment upon this false Christ—"whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit [or breath] of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."

Unfortunately some preachers have used this teaching about antichrist to instill into Christians an attitude of passivity and fatalism. "Antichrist is coming," they have said, "Things are getting worse and worse. There is nothing we can do about it." As a result, Christians have all too often sat back with folded hands, in pious dismay, and watched the ravages of Satan proceed unchecked all around them.

This attitude of passivity and fatalism is as tragic as it is unscriptural. It is true that antichrist must eventually emerge. But it is far from true that there is nothing to be done about him in the meanwhile. To this present moment there is a force at work in the world that challenges, resists and restrains the spirit of antichrist. The work of this force is described by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. Freely rendered in modern

English, these verses might read as follows: “*And now you know what holds him in check until he is revealed in his time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work: only he who now holds him in check will continue to do so until he is withdrawn or taken out of the midst*” (author’s paraphrase).

This restraining power, which at present holds back the full and final emergence of antichrist, is the personal presence of the Holy Spirit within the church. This becomes clear as we follow the unfolding revelation of Scripture concerning the Person and the work of the Holy Spirit. At the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1:2, we are told that “*the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*” From then on throughout the Old Testament, we find frequent references to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the earth. However, at the close of His earthly ministry, Jesus promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would shortly come to them in a new way, different from anything that had ever taken place on earth up to that time.

In John 14:16–17 Jesus gives this promise: “*And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth [a title of the Holy Spirit] . . . for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.*” We may paraphrase this promise of Jesus as follows: “I have been with you in personal presence three-and-a-half years, and I am now about to leave you. After I have gone, another Person will come to take My place. This Person is the Holy Spirit. When He comes, He will remain with you for ever.”

In John 16:6–7 Jesus repeats His promise: “*But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.*” The picture is clear. There is to be an exchange of Persons. Jesus will depart, but in His place another Person will come. This other Person is the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

In John 16:12–13, Jesus returns to this theme for the third time: “*I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.*” In the original Greek text, the pronoun “he” is in the masculine gender, but the noun “Spirit” is neuter. This

grammatical conflict of genders brings out the dual nature of the Holy Spirit—both personal and impersonal. This agrees with the language used by Paul in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 concerning the power which holds back the emergence of antichrist. In verse 6 Paul says, “*What is restraining him*” (RSV), and in verse 7 he says, “*He who now restrains him*” (RSV). This similarity of expression confirms the identification of this restraining power with the Holy Spirit.

The exchange of persons promised by Jesus was effected in two stages: first, the ascension of Jesus into heaven; then, ten days later, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. At this point in history the Holy Spirit descended as a Person from heaven and took up His residence on earth. He is now the personal Representative of the Godhead resident on earth. His actual dwelling place is the body of true believers, called collectively “*the church*.” To this body of believers Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16: “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?*”

The great ministry of the Holy Spirit within the church is to prepare a completed body for Christ. After completion, this body will in turn be presented to Christ as a bride is presented to a bridegroom. As soon as this ministry of the Holy Spirit within the church is finished, He will again be withdrawn from the earth, taking with Him the completed body of Christ. Thus we may fill out Paul’s statement in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 as follows: “*He [the Holy Spirit] who now holds him [the antichrist] in check will continue to do so until he be withdrawn.*”

The opposition between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of antichrist is described also in 1 John 4:3–4: “*And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come, and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*”

In the world is the spirit of antichrist, working toward the emergence of antichrist himself. In the disciples of Christ is the Holy Spirit, holding back the emergence of antichrist. Therefore the disciples who are indwelled by the Holy Spirit act as a

barrier, holding back the climax of lawlessness and the final emergence of antichrist. Only when the Holy Spirit, together with the completed body of Christ's disciples, is withdrawn from the earth, will the forces of lawlessness be able to proceed without restraint to the culmination of their purposes in antichrist. Meanwhile, it is both the privilege and the responsibility of Christ's disciples, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to "overcome" the forces of antichrist and to hold them in check.

The Consequences of Failure

As the salt of earth, then, we who are Christ's disciples have two primary responsibilities. First, by our presence we commend the earth to God's continuing grace and mercy. Second, by the power of the Holy spirit within us, we hold in check the forces of corruption and lawlessness until God's appointed time.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, the church stands as the barrier to the accomplishment of Satan's supreme ambition, which is to gain dominion over the whole earth. This explains why Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 that there must be "*a falling away first, before the man of sin [antichrist] can be revealed.*" The world translated "*falling away*" is literally *apostasy*—that is, a departure from the faith. So long as the church stands firm and uncompromising in its faith, it has the power to hold back the final manifestation of antichrist. Satan himself fully understands this, and therefore his primary objective is to undermine the faith and righteousness of the church. Once he achieves this, the barrier to his purposes is removed, and the way is open for him to gain both spiritual and political control over the whole earth.

Suppose that Satan succeeds, because we, as Christians, fail to fulfill our responsibilities. What then? Jesus Himself gives us the answer. We become "*salt that has lost its savor.*" He warns us of the fate that awaits such savorless salt: "*It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men*" (Matthew 5:13).

"*Good for nothing*"! That is severe condemnation indeed. What follows? We are "*cast out,*" or rejected by God. Then we are "*trodden under foot of men.*" Men become the instruments of God's judgment upon a saltless, apostate church. If we in

the church fail to hold back the forces of wickedness, our judgment is to be handed over to those very forces.

The alternatives that confront us are clearly presented by Paul in Romans 12:21: “*Be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.*” There are only two choices: either to overcome, or to be overcome. There is no middle way, no third course open to us. We may use the good that God has put at our disposal to overcome the evil that confronts us. But if we fail to do this, then that very evil will in turn overcome us.

This message applies with special urgency to those of us who live in lands where we still enjoy liberty to proclaim and to practice our Christian faith. In many lands today Christians have lost this liberty. At the same time multiplying millions in those lands have been systematically indoctrinated to hate and to despise Christianity and all that it stands for. To people thus indoctrinated there could be no greater satisfaction than to trample under their feet those Christians who are not already under their yoke.

If we heed the warning of Jesus, and fulfill our functions as salt in the earth, we have the power to prevent this. But if we default from our responsibilities and suffer the judgment that follows, the bitterest reflection of all will be this: It need never have happened!