

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Matthew 5:13

Rev. Philip Parker

Bill was sitting at his desk one day when the business manager walked by, stopped for just a moment and then said, "Bill, it pains me to say this, but you're just not worth your salt." Bill didn't understand what the comment meant, but he knew it wasn't good. Later that night he googled the words on his computer and this is what he discovered, "In the ancient world salt was a precious commodity. It was used as a standard of measurement for currency and was sometimes actually used as payment for services rendered. The Latin word for salt is 'sal,' and it has been incorporated into the English word 'salary.' A person 'who is not worth his salt' is therefore a person who is not worthy of what he is being paid."

Bill was devastated. He realized that he was in danger of being issued one of those infamous pink sheets, and he made a decision right then and there to do everything he could to improve his performance at work. He needed that job and he didn't want to lose it. He also remembered that his pastor had spoken on the subject of salt several weeks earlier during a Sunday morning service. He didn't remember what his pastor had said, but decided it might be a good time to seek out his advice and counsel, especially if salt had anything to do with the way he was supposed to live out his life.

Bill made an appointment and met with the pastor several days later. After a few words of introduction, Bill told him about the business manager's remarks and how he had resolved to be a better employee. Then he said, "Several weeks ago you preached a sermon on salt as best I can remember. I don't know how that message might apply to me, but the manager's comment really shook me up. I want to be a better person, a better Christian, but I don't have a clue as to how salt might be a part of it. Can you help me?" "Yes, I think I can," the minister replied, "and if you have a few moments, Bill, I'll take you on a journey back through time to a hillside in Galilee where Jesus uttered these words during His Sermon on the Mount. He said, 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt has lost its savor, its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trodden under the foot of men.'"

Now for just a few moments, let's take a look at what the pastor said to Bill and see if any of his comments might apply to you and me. Let's listen in as the conversation continues.

"You see, Bill," the pastor said, "In Jesus' day and time salt was precious. It was quite expensive and difficult to obtain. In fact, in that part of the world, most of the salt came from the area around the Dead Sea. Remember the story of Lot's wife and how she turned into a pillar of salt as she, her husband and their children, fled from Sodom and Gomorrah. People would gather the salt along the shoreline, put it in bags and sell it in the market places. However, those buying the salt had to be careful. Sometimes unscrupulous merchants would mix it with other substances that looked like salt, but didn't taste like salt. That kind of salt was worthless because it was filled with all kinds of impurities. There was no way to separate these impurities from the pure salt. The best thing you could do was to throw the contaminated salt out on the roadway. If nothing else, it might at least retard the growth of a few weeds."

"But what does that have to do with me?" Bill asked. "Well," the pastor replied, "Jesus knew some things about salt, in fact, most of the people listening to Jesus, knew some things about salt that we tend to forget." "Like what?" Bill asked. "Well, for starters," the pastor said, "salt has a unique two fold purpose. It seasons and it preserves. What would food taste like without salt?" "It would be pretty bland," Bill answered, "like the time I was in the hospital. They wouldn't let me put any salt on my food and it was just plain awful." "Yes," said the pastor, "food without salt loses its flavor. It doesn't taste very good and the same is true for us as Christians. We need to be the kind of people that add a little zest to life. Remember Jerry Clower. He was a Christian comedian, maybe a little before your time, but perhaps you've heard of him. He could really make people laugh, and he did it in away that was never demeaning or vulgar. I remember one of his stories in particular. He and several of his neighbors were out one night hunting raccoons. They treed one and John, one of those neighbors, climbed up that tree to knock the racoon down. What they did not know was that they had treed a lynx, not a raccoon. As you can imagine, the lynx didn't enjoy the sudden arrival of some unwelcomed company. A great deal of noise and commotion began to arise from up in the branches of the tree. In fact, the whole tree was shaking. After a few moments John hollered down, 'Shoot up here, quick!' 'I can't do that,' Jerry said, 'I might hit you.' 'Never mind,' said John, 'Go ahead and shoot, one of us has got to have some relief.'"

"Well, not all of us can be comedians, but we can all be pleasant and cheerful, even when life becomes a bit difficult at home or on the job. Sometimes God's people need to lighten up. We can become so serious about everything that we're just unpleasant to be around, always fussing and complaining. Instead of being the salt that makes life more exciting and winsome, we become like a bitter ingredient that makes it sour and

distasteful." "Yeh, you're right," Bill said. "I'm afraid that my attitude on the job has not been good. In fact, I've begun to notice that people tend to avoid me. They don't want to hear me talking about how bad things are, even though at times they can be. So there's some room for improvement, and I'll try to work on being a happier more cheerful kind of person. But didn't you say that salt serves a two-fold purpose?" "That's right and here it is" the pastor continued. "Salt not only seasons, it also preserves." "Oh," I didn't know that?" Bill said. "Tell me more."

"Have you ever eaten a slice of Smithfield ham? Have you ever seen one in a grocery store? It's not refrigerated or frozen. It's just sitting out at room temperature because it's been preserved by salt. In fact, when you ate that piece of Smithfield ham didn't it taste salty? Before there were canned or frozen foods, the only way to preserve food, especially meats, was to soak them in salty brine. That and drying, usually over a smokey fire, were the only two ways to keep things from spoiling. The people in Jesus' day knew that and that's why they knew what He meant when He said they were to be the salt of the earth. Their task was to make life better by preserving it from ruin."

"And that's what they did. When the Roman Empire collapsed, it was the church that saved the remnants of Western Civilization. Throughout the centuries that followed it was Christians who time and again preserved the societies in which they lived. They opened hospitals, started orphanages, and here in America championed a public school system that became the envy of the world, a school system based upon the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible. In fact, many of the charitable organizations we still cherish were started by Christians. One of them is the Red Cross. In 1859 a Swiss businessman, Jean-Henri Dunant, while traveling through Italy came upon a horrific scene. Thousands of soldiers lay wounded and dying on a war weary battlefield. Shocked by what he saw and by the lack of any medical care being provided, this young man, a devout Reformed Calvinistic Christian, took matters into his own hands. He organized local villagers to provide first aid and later wrote a book about what he had experienced, sending it at his own expense to interested individuals all across Europe. An organization gradually came into existence and out of it grew what we now recognize as the International Red Cross, universally known by its red cross emblazoned on a field of white.

"Like Jean-Henri and so many thousands of others," the pastor declared, "we need to be the salt of preservation in our own day and time. Just look around at what's happening. Our nation is coming apart. We're beginning to rot. Decay has set in and it's impacting almost every area of our lives. People don't want to work anymore. Our moral standards have

declined precipitously. Our schools are no longer academically proficient. When you look at America today, it's a far cry from what it used to be. So we've got to speak up and get involved. We've got to do the work of being salt, a preservative that keeps our society from becoming utterly spoiled. I remember what Paul said to the Christians living in Colossi, 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you will know how to answer everyone' (Colossians 4:6). So, Bill, add a bit of zest to your conversations and become involved in the kinds of things that make our world a better place in which to live, especially those kinds of things that truly embrace the Christian way of life. Fulfill the unique purpose of salt, zestiness and preservation.

"But," Bill replied, "there is so much going on that needs to be corrected. How can just one person, like myself, expect to have any kind of impact on the world around me?" "That's a good question, and thankfully one that can be answered," the pastor said. "For you see, Bill, salt has a unique strategy. It's called penetration. We are to do the same kind of thing that salt does. Only a little bit of salt can dramatically change that which it penetrates. For example, you don't have to cover a steak with salt to make it taste better. Only a few shakes are needed to make a real difference, and the same is true for the world of humanity. I remember a story about a Christian monk who single handily changed the pagan culture in which he lived. His name was Telemachus. Visiting Rome, he went to the Coliseum and witnessed what was taking place. Seeing the gladiators killing one another, he jumped down into the arena, stood between two of the combatants and pleaded with them to stop fighting with one another. Angered by this disruption, the crowds started stoning Telemachus and one of the gladiators may have stabbed him to death. Nevertheless, he did not die in vain. The Roman emperor, Honorius, was so impressed by his martyrdom that he banned the gladiatorial contests and they came to an end."

"Hopefully, most if not all of us will never have to face martyrdom, but we may have to face a bit of hostility. We've all heard the saying, 'It hurts like rubbing salt in an open wound.' People may not like it when we penetrate their lives with the salt of Christianity. But as we all know, salt does have a curative quality, and it really does penetrate that to which it is introduced. Take for example, these words from the Apostle Paul. Writing to the Christians in Philippi he said, 'All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household' (Philippians 4:22). In other words, the message of Christ had been able to penetrate all the way into the very palace of the emperor. Never forget, even though you are a single individual, that you can have a significant impact for the cause of

Christ. So get involved. Find a place of service and penetrate the world around you with the saltiness of the Gospel.”

“Ok,” Bill said. “I can do that. But didn’t Jesus say something about salt being thrown out as useless, trodden under the feet of men?” “Yes he did,” the pastor replied, “and that’s the last thing I want to share with you. In James’ letter to Jewish Christians, he said, ‘Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world’ (James 1:27). In other words we need to be the real deal, not a mixture of godliness and worldliness. Mahatma Gandhi, the famous leader who was very instrumental in helping India to gain independence, once said, ‘I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike Christ.’ Unfortunately, he was correct. Survey after survey has indicated that there is little difference in the life styles between Christians and non-Christians.”

“So Bill, let me ask you a few questions. Do you ever visit a pornographic site on the internet? Have you ever been tempted to cheat someone, or take something that doesn’t belong to you? How’s your speech? Do any of those four letter words slip into your vocabulary now and then? Simply put, does your life reflect the life of Christ or is it more like those who claim no allegiance to the Lord?” Bill hung his head and admitted, “I’m afraid you’ve got me there. Compared with the people around me, especially those in the office who are living a very secular way of life, there’s very little if any difference.”

“Well the pastor continued,” that’s the problem and not your’s alone. People reject Christianity because of the poor example set by other Christians. Too often we become like salt that has been adulterated with foreign, unsavory ingredients. When we lose our purity, we are good for nothing. In fact, we are worse than good for nothing. Over and over again, I’ve seen even Christian leaders fall from grace because of sinful behavior. They lose their calling, their reputation, sometimes even their families. No one respects them anymore. Just like Jesus said, it is as if they had been thrown out onto the roadway of life, ground under by the relentless march of an ongoing humanity.”

“I sure don’t want to go there,” Bill exclaimed! “That’s why,” the pastor concluded, “both you and I need to take seriously what Peter said, ‘As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;

for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy' (1 Peter 1:14-16). Or to put it another way, our lives need to be separate and distinct from the ways of the world. We need to be pure, unadulterated salt."

"Thanks, pastor. You've given me a lot to think about and a lot to do. But I'm not sure I'm up to the challenge," Bill admitted. "None of us are," the pastor explained. "However, with God's help and a little love in our hearts, we can make a difference. We can become the salt of the earth. Remember the well-known Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*? Near the end George Bailey, the leading character in the movie, makes a terrible discovery. A substantial sum of money is missing and to make matters worse a banking examiner has just arrived to check the books. Over the years George has poured out his life in loving devotion to the community of Bedford Falls. Now everything seems to be lost, including his reputation and his livelihood. In total despair George cries out, 'I wish I had never been born.' That's when Clarence, the angel who wants to earn his wings, comes to the rescue. He takes George on a journey, showing him what Bedford Falls would have become without his influence. It's not a pretty picture. George is confronted with the realization that like pure, savory salt, little by little, day by day, he had penetrated and preserved an entire community."

After a few closing comments, a time of prayer and a handshake, Bill departed. Sitting at his desk, the pastor reflected on what they had talked about. Then thinking about all of the folks that attended his church each Sunday, he said to himself almost as a prayer, "Wouldn't it truly be a wonderful life if each and every Christian could become like the salt of the earth, a pure, flavoring, preserving presence, penetrating a world that so desperately needs to experience its impact. Yes, indeed, that would be a wonderful life."