

“Let’s be great!” Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Do you know who you are? This is what Jesus says about you – you are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. How does that sound? Perhaps, as something from culinary science and something from physics?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we can’t even comprehend what divine grandeur and power is hidden behind these simple metaphors. You are the salt; you are the light! May the Holy Spirit help us to understand what this means and what magnificent tasks are entrusted to us. Let us reflect on, first, who we are and what does it mean, and then on where to get the power for such a grand mission?

First, who are you? You are the salt of the earth. What does the salt do? What is it used for? We could say that it serves two main purposes. First, it serves as a preservative, it prevents food from spoiling and decay.

Now, think about this, Jesus says that there is something about His disciples, something about you that keeps the earth, this world, from corruption and decay. Jesus says that there is something so powerful in you that prevents this world from degradation, this society from disintegration.

Do you feel like you have the power to keep this world from falling apart? I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel that way. But let’s look at one of the Biblical testimonies that helps us to see what power dwells in God’s people, even if we don’t realise it.

You all probably have read the account of what happened with those ancient and prosperous cities Sodom and Gomorrah. They were blessed in every way, but they turned away from the source of all their blessings.

They indulged their sinful passions and that led to incredible promiscuity and unheard lawlessness. Collectively raping those men who happened to wonder in and stay during the night in their cities... And what was God’s reaction?

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Even facing such degradation and evil He said that if there still were 10 righteous people, we could say, 10 Christians, He would not destroy those cities. 10 grains of salt. This is who you are. The salt of the earth. This is the power that Christian presence means for this world. It is for your sake that God keeps this world going.

But then salt serves another function as well, it not only preserves, but also brings out the taste that is there. It makes everything – not exactly everything – but it makes things taste better. Again, this is who you are, the salt of the earth.

But what would that mean, that you make everything taste better? How would that happen? It is actually very simple. We are simply to live our ordinary lives, in all our ordinary callings. We are to live as children to our parents, we are to live as siblings to our siblings, as parents to our children and as spouses to our spouses.

We are to live as colleagues to our work colleagues, as subjects to our superiors, and as superiors to our subjects, and so on. It's very simple. But... There is a catch. Yes, we are to live in these ordinary callings, but! ... We are to live extraordinary lives!

We are to strive to be extraordinary children, siblings, parents, spouses, employers and employees, citizens, neighbours, etc. You are to be extraordinary people. But how? Think about this - what hinders anyone from serving better? Often it is our desire to be recognized, or our worries about our future, etc.

But now, remember who you are? Jesus' disciples, the salt of the earth? Being made God's children, you don't need to make a name for yourself, you are already valued beyond comprehension, you don't need to be anxious about your future, you and your life are in your Father's hands.

He looks at you and says: "You are my beloved child; you are very good!" What does this mean? Now we can fully focus on serving others in all our callings. More, to you is given God's wisdom for how to live in all those calling, to you is given God's Spirit to power your service.

You have everything to live those extraordinary lives, to strive to make every calling, every relationship as beautiful, as pure, as lovely and praiseworthy as possible. This is why God has placed you here, to be the excellent salt of the earth.

It's interesting what language Jesus uses to describe the tragedy that we can often see. When the salt loses its saltiness. When Christians do not live as Christians. We don't see this in our English translation, but Jesus uses the word that comes from the root "foolishness". It's like He is saying that the salt becomes "foolish".

And when He says that then salt is not good for anything, He uses a word that comes from the root of "strength", "being strong". What Jesus laments is those situations where Christians become foolish, for they ignore God's wisdom, and where they become weak, for they do not stand anymore in the truth of God.

And then they are only good for being trampled on by the world... As I was preparing this sermon, this tragic description reminded me of the terrifying imagery from Revelation 17, where the visible church had lost its saltiness.

Then she is described as “**Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations...** [she was] **drunk with the blood of the saints** (of faithful Christians).” But even when she had lost its saltiness, the world still hated her...

... So “**they made her desolate and naked, and devoured her flesh and burned her up with fire.**” That is the fate of any church that loses its saltiness. The world and the ruler of this world first deceive and then destroy those that are deceived.

May our church be spared from such terrible fate!

But then, you are also the light of the world. You are the light that shines in the deep darkness of this world. Today many Christians and many churches seem confused. The world is playing those deceptive tricks on us.

It is the world that tries to portray the Church as being the darkness and themselves as the pinnacle of wisdom and the beacon of light. Whoever disagrees with what the world values and cherishes, that person or church is accused of sitting in darkness.

Many Christians are being deceived, we may buy into these lies, we may try to quench the light that is entrusted to us only to fit in, not to appear different and thus we become more like the world.

You can see churches trying to be even more virtuous according to the worldly virtues than the world itself. To be more inclusive, more tolerant, more for equality, not according to God’s will, but trying to please the world, and so our true light goes dim.

As with our saltiness, so also with the light in us, we have been given more than we can comprehend. You as disciples of Jesus possess incredible power. The metaphor of light helps us to see this reality even clearer.

When we lived in the US, we made a trip to the Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky. It is one of the largest cave systems in the world. As part of the tour, we descended deep underground and stopped in a big cave, probably 50m long and 20m wide. Then our tour guide turned off lights... I had never experienced such deep darkness. You could see nothing. Nothing...

But then he lit just one little match... and suddenly! we could see till the farthest corners of that cave. One match, one little light dispelled all the darkness in that cave. You are the light of the world, and this is what the Triune God does through you.

Listen how Paul describes what God does through you: “**He delivers people from the domain of darkness and transfers them to the kingdom of his beloved Son.**” (Col 1:13) He “**opens their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Christ].**” (Acts 26:18)

This is what God does through us. **And now we get to our last question**, – where do we get the power to be the salt and to be the light? Where can we renew it? It’s not something we possess; it’s not something that we can find within ourselves.

We receive this power from the outside. We received it from our Triune God. How do we receive it? As we listen to the Word of God, when the Holy Spirit Himself brings us the pure teaching of the Law and the Gospel through our ears into our very hearts.

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See, heaven and earth will pass away, but not the tiniest bit of God's message to us. The Word of God endures forever. That Word is God's power for our salvations. That Word is what makes and keeps us the salt and the light. That Word is what comes with the power of the Holy Spirit and makes you wise for your extraordinary service.

That Word is the greatest treasure entrusted to us. The very life eternal. Therefore, this is our shared responsibility to listen and learn, to proclaim and preserve the Gospel that we have received as faithfully as we can.

For, remember, **"whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."**

The Word of God, the whole counsel of God is what makes us the salt and what makes us the light of the world. All our activities together, whatever intense, whatever impressive they may seem, they can't save anyone nor bring anyone into God's family.

The Word of God winsomely proclaimed and beautifully lived out in our lives is what brings glory to God the Father and grows His family. This is why it is constantly under attack. This is why the world can't stand it; it screams against it and calls it darkness.

But we do know better. You know. The Spirit of God not only changes our hearts so that we gladly obey God's Word, but He also enlightens us so that we begin to see and appreciate the beauty and wisdom in everything that God has revealed to us.

We do not obey God's instructions simply because our capricious God has commanded us and we have no other options. No, whatever our gracious God has revealed, commanded, instructed, it is true and good and beautiful and perfect.

It is excellent for our flourishing in our marriages, in our families, in our workplaces, in our churches. If there are some things we still don't understand clearly enough, then we need to blame ourselves for not listening to our God diligently enough.

Then we need to pray for His Spirit to draw us closer to Jesus so that His presence and His Spirit enlighten us and we can rejoice in all God's wisdom and goodness. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. By God's grace...

And how much He cares about your saltiness and your brightness! Every week He invites you to be with Him, to come in His presence, so that He can cleanse you, wash away all your stains and purify you with His forgiveness.

Every week He is waiting for you to speak to you, to teach you, to confess His affection to you, to pour His Spirit over you and to feed you with His Divine Meal, to help you to be great in the kingdom of heaven. And then He makes His face shine on you, fills you with His light and sends you to live as His people.

To be the salt and the light. This is who you are, and this is where we receive the power for our new life and our great and joyful mission. May the Lord Jesus Himself make you the best salt and the brightest light possible, so that the world is blessed through your extraordinary service, and all whom you serve begin to glorify our Father who is in heaven.

May you all be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven! Amen.