



“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:13–16).

A few years ago the *SJ Mercury News* ran an article in their religion section called, “The Patterns of Belief.” It was a report on a new Harvard-designed survey of 40 communities around the nation with regard to religious affiliation. One of the communities was Silicon Valley; another was San Francisco. The survey revealed that the people of both San Francisco and the Silicon Valley are “far less likely to belong to a place of worship, to volunteer in a place of worship, to find a sense of community there, or even to trust the people they meet there. They attend religious services with less regularity than Americans pretty much anywhere else...” One university professor said, “If some mad scientist were put in a laboratory and asked to create the quintessentially secular metropolitan area in the United States, they couldn’t do better than the Silicon Valley.” The study even showed that people who are religious when they moved here from other parts of the country become less religious when they are here. Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor who designed the study, summarized it this way, “Northern California is unexcelled in its lack of religious observance.”

How does that make you feel? One response I often hear is that of frustration and even anger. We see all the secularism and we begin to feel angry. We start to dream about moving to some idyllic community where Christian values dominate the culture; where you can mention to your neighbor that you’re going to church and not have him look at you like you’re a weirdo. We’re tired of being outnumbered. We’re tired of being misunderstood. We’re tired of raising our kids in a spiritual wasteland.

But what if I told you that the problem is not them, but us? What if I told you that believing people are responsible for the corruption and decay and decline of morality on the SF Peninsula? What if I told you that if Jesus were here today he would hold us accountable for those statistics; he’d call us on the carpet?

In Matthew 5:13–16 Jesus looks at his disciples in the eyes and says **“YOU are the salt of the earth...YOU are the light of the world.”** It’s not insignificant that this comes right after telling them they’re blessed when they’re persecuted. It’s in the midst of opposition and unbelief that our light shines the brightest. Salt and light are what a dark and decaying world needs now.

What did Jesus mean by calling us salt and light? In what sense do these two word pictures make us the key to change in the midst of the most secular environment in the entire U.S.? These are the questions I want to answer. There are five important truths the metaphors of salt and light communicate.

1. Followers of Jesus are fundamentally different than others.

First, followers of Jesus are fundamentally different than others. The Greeks were wonderful communicators. When they wanted to emphasize a word, they would take it out of its normal word order and bring it right up to the front of the sentence. It’s like they took a yellow highlighter and ran it right over that word. That’s what they did here with the word “You.” This ought to be translated, **“You** are the salt of the earth...**you** are the light of the world.” Who is he talking about? He’s talking about his disciples; not just yesterday’s disciples, but today’s disciples. He’s saying, “With all your giftedness, with all your hang-ups, with your background and your job and your limitations, **you** are the salt of the earth; **you** are the light of the world.” And by doing that he’s setting you and me apart from the rest of the world. It’s like Jesus is taking a black felt pen and running a dividing line right through humanity. There is the community of the redeemed and the community of the lost. They’re as different as light from darkness and salt from decay.

John Stott tells the story of a Hindu girl in India who had come into contact with some Christians. Nobody in her circle knew what a Christian was and so they asked her, “What is a Christian?” She thought for a few moments and replied, “Well as far as I can see, a Christian is somebody who is different from everybody else.” Would that it were true!

But how are we different? What makes us different is the fact that we’ve surrendered our lives to Jesus. And part of surrendering our lives to Jesus is adopting his values. What are his values? Well, that’s what Matthew tells us in the first twelve verses of chapter 5. His values are listed in the Beatitudes. These eight Beatitudes of Jesus are upside down from the world’s values. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” It’s as we live these values

that our distinctiveness will show. Think of yourself as a poor beggar before God, operate with meekness, show mercy rather than vengeance, try to make peace with others, and you will stand out. When Jesus calls us salt and light, he's saying we are different.

2. The world needs us, whether it knows it or not.

Second, the world needs us, whether it knows it or not. By using these two metaphors, Jesus reveals something about the world around us. Today, we use salt substitutes, but salt was highly valued in Jesus' day. It was used, of course, to season food. It was also used to preserve it. In Jesus' day, there was no refrigeration or rapid transportation. Most of the fish were harvested up in Galilee but the major market was way down in Jerusalem. That was a problem. How do you get the fish from the north in Galilee to the south in Jerusalem without it going bad? The answer is you rub that fish down with salt. Salt prevents meat and fish from rotting. By using the metaphor of salt, Jesus was saying something about the world. Left to itself, the world is rotting. Left to itself, the world is not getting any better; it's not evolving into some kind of utopia; it's decaying. That's why the world needs us. Our job is to stop the rot. As salt we prevent society from going down the tubes.

The metaphor of light communicates a similar truth. Light was a precious commodity in Jesus' day. There was no PG&E. Talk about an energy shortage! They didn't have any energy. Darkness to us was light to them. Have you ever been somewhere that's really dark, so dark you couldn't see your own hand two inches in front of your face? Imagine living without any light at all.

Jesus says the world is a dark place. Without you it has no light at all. What does light do? It's interesting, the function of salt is simply to prevent something (decay). But the function of light is to actually change something. Not only do we prevent decay but we spread light. Not only do we stop the spread of corruption, but we promote the spread of truth and goodness. I think of the work being done by our friend Dr. Steve Arrowsmith to fight Obstetric Fistula in poor countries like Niger. He's being salt and light in Africa. He's preventing decay and spreading light; helping people in darkness see the light of the Gospel. The world needs people like that.

3. We must penetrate the world at every level.

Third, we must penetrate the world at every level. Throughout history, an unfortunate thing has occurred among Christians. Knowing that we're to be different from the world, we've tried to retreat from the world. It started with the monastic movement; monks with good motives retreated from society to keep themselves from being stained by the evil in the world. But Jesus never taught that. He sent us out, as he put it, like sheep amongst wolves. A wolf pack is a very dangerous place for sheep.

Salt doesn't do a lot of good by itself. It has to soak into the fish and the meat to preserve it. Sometimes the church becomes kind of a salt warehouse. It tries to store salt instead of spread salt. That's a tragedy! When you store salt, all it does is take up space. It does absolutely no good at all.

It's the same way with light. Light is designed to permeate the darkness. Jesus says you don't try to hide light. A city set on a hill can't be hidden. In the Middle East, cities were built on hills because it is cooler there and they could be defended easier. At nighttime those cities are always in view. They glow in the distance. You can't pull a shade down on one of those cities. And you don't light a lamp and put it under a basket. I've never been to a home and opened a closet door and saw a huge lamp inside.

"What's that?"

"Oh, that's our new lamp."

"Why is it in a closet? Why isn't it helping people see?"

Jesus says, "Stop hiding in the church! Let your light shine before men so they see your good works and glorify your Father."

Too many of us have bought into the myth of the pyramid of Christian service. At the top is the cross-cultural missionary. The most spiritual people are those who leave home and go live in the jungle to tell the natives about Jesus. At the second level just below the missionaries are those who stay home to be a pastor. Pastors can make a difference, but not quite like the missionaries. Below that it all gets kind of fuzzy. Maybe doctors and teachers are next, but if you're not in full-time Christian work, you're spiritually at a lower level. And if you're in politics or the media, you're on the brink of falling away from the faith.

It's time we blow up that pyramid. I've come to believe those working in the darkest areas, such as politics or the media, have the greatest challenges. Those who are salt and light in their secular professions are the real spiritual heroes. And that's a calling every bit as much as mine is.

Someone says to me, "Mark, I'm the only Christian in my company." They want me to feel sorry for them, or tell them to get another job. I want to say, "Congratulations. God Almighty has entrusted the entire outfit to you!"

4. We must not lose our distinctiveness.

The fourth thing this metaphor teaches us is we must not lose our distinctiveness. Salt has to retain its saltiness or it's good for nothing. We know from chemistry that salt is sodium chloride and as sodium chloride can't lose its saltiness. So what is Jesus talking about when he says "if the salt has become tasteless"? In the ancient world two kinds of salt existed. One salt was pure; the other impure. The pure salt was made through the evaporation of clean sea water. But most of the salt they had came from a big lake called the Dead Sea. It was impure, being filled with white minerals that looked like salt. Farmers piled that impure

salt behind their houses and used it for fertilizing their fields. But when the rains came and pounded on that mound of impure salt, the salt would be washed away and a useless, white sandy substance would be left. Farmers would just throw it out on the path in front of the house to be trampled on.

Salt that loses its distinctiveness is worthless. That's true of believers. Not only must we penetrate society, but we must retain our unique character as believers. Otherwise, we lose our impact. Being in the world, we have to beware of being watered down by the world's values. We're called to a different kind of lifestyle. Once again, it's outlined in the Beatitudes and all the rest of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus talks about people seeing your good works in v.16, he's not talking about trying to be weird. He's talking about just living by the values of his kingdom. Being meek and merciful. Valuing righteousness and justice. Making peace.

It's interesting to me that Jesus didn't say, "You are the sugar of the earth." It's not sweetness that makes a difference; it's salt. Salt has a bite to it, doesn't it? Sometimes salt can irritate and sting, but if we don't retain our distinctiveness, our impact is lost and the world decays. Tim Keller says, "Properly understood, Christianity is by no means the opiate of the people. It's more like the smelling salts."

So when we look at the Bay Area and see the decay, whose fault is it? Look at it this way: If the fish goes bad, do you blame the fish? No! You say, "What happened to the salt?" If the house is dark, do you get angry with the house? No! You say, "What happened to the light? If society goes bad, do you blame society? No! You say, "What happened to the believers? It's our fault. We've lost our distinctiveness. It's time for God's people to stop complaining and start being salt and light. And when we do that, there's nothing that can stop us.

5. As salt and light, we're the most powerful influence on earth.

Here's the fifth thing: As salt and light, we're the most powerful influence on earth. There is no reason for us to be pessimistic. Jesus assures us we can change the world. Here he looks at a small band of Jewish peasants. They weren't the rich and the powerful and the influential of their day. They were just ordinary people. But he called them world-changers: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." These Jews were going beyond Palestine; beyond Judaism and into the whole world!

That's true of us as well. But how do we change things? As salt and light, what are the weapons we use to combat decay and darkness? Let me suggest a few things. First, the weapon of prayer. Don't dismiss this as a pious platitude. It isn't. Prayer is an indispensable part of a believer's life and of the church's life. Our first duty toward society and its leaders is to pray for them. In 1 Tim 2:1-2 Paul says, "*First of all, I urge that supplications*

and prayers and petitions be made for all men and for those who are in authority that we may lead a quite and peaceable life in all godliness." If our society is violent, immoral and unjust, could the reason be that we're not praying for these things?

Second, the weapon of truth. There is the truth of the gospel. Paul wrote, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes*" (Rom 1:16). We believe in the power of the gospel to bring salvation to those who trust in Jesus. But it isn't only the gospel that's powerful. All God's truth is powerful. What believers need to learn is how to use God's truth in the public square. We need to learn the art of rational argument. Just as we need people who can defend the gospel in evangelism, so we need believers to argue the truth and goodness of God's standards. To do that with unbelievers, you can't just quote the Bible. You have to defend the truth in ways they can understand and appreciate. For example, you're an engaged couple who isn't living together and people can't figure that out. They ask you about it. How do you explain that? Do you just quote the Bible or can you defend that in ways that make sense to them?

Third, the weapon of love. Right here in the sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you... For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same?*" (Matt. 5:43-46). You see, people need to see that we care, even about those who mistreat us. We should ask ourselves the question, if CPC were to disappear tomorrow, would anyone in our community miss us? If we're loving and serving our community the way we should, they would notice. If your family were to disappear tomorrow, would anyone in your neighborhood notice? It's hard to exaggerate the power for good that can be exerted by a Christian family where neighbors see a couple loving one another, devoted to one another, enjoying each another. They see children growing up in the security of a loving and a disciplined home. They see a family not turned in on themselves but turned outwards—welcoming others, seeking to get involved in the concerns of the community. John Stott writes, "One Christian nurse in a hospital, one Christian teacher in a school, one Christian in a shop or in a factory or office. Christians are marked people. The world is watching. And God's major way of changing the old society is to implant within it his new society with its different values and different standards and different joys and different goals; so that, people see and are attracted."

CONCLUSION

Let's stop pointing the finger at the darkness and decay in the world. Let's start being salt and light. When we do that, even the SF Peninsula will change.

Matthew Parris is a newspaper columnist for *The Times* of London and a self-described atheist. He grew up in Africa and he recently wrote an article that said he can't ignore the difference that he sees in African Christians. Parris returned to Malawi after 45 years. He wrote, "...traveling in Malawi refreshed a belief...I've been trying to banish all my life, but an observation I've been unable to avoid since my African childhood. It confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my world view, and has embarrassed my growing belief that there is no God. Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of...government projects, and international

aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.... When I lived in Africa we had working for us Africans who had converted and were strong believers. The Christians were always different. Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world—a directness in their dealings with others—that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if someday someone would write an article like that about believers on the SF Peninsula!

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