

# **“The Salt and the Light of the World”**

Matthew 5:13-20, Epiphany 5-A, Feb. 5, 2017

Have you ever noticed, dear friends, that there is a lot of name calling that goes on in the Bible? And yet the kind of name calling that goes on in the Bible is very **different** from the kind of “hurtful” name calling we may have experienced as children. When God calls us by new names it is **never to malign us**, or to **defame us** or to **insult** us, but instead to **strengthen us**, to **encourage us** and to **compliment** us!

The **Apostle Peter** was certainly paying some **magnificent, little compliments** to some of the first Christians, who comprised together the early Church along the Mediterranean seaboard! He did so when said to them: *“You are a **chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; God’s own people that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Peter 2:9)!**”*

And **Jesus is certainly paying** each of us, who are his disciples **two gigantic compliments** in our Gospel lesson today also, when he says to us: *“**You are the salt of the earth**” (v. 13)!* And again, *“**You are the light of the world**” (v. 16).*

## **I. FIRST, WHY WOULD JESUS CALL HIS DISCIPLES “THE SALT OF THE EARTH”?**

**(A). One reason could be because of the great value that was placed upon salt in the ancient world.** Salt and history have been **inextricably intertwined for thousands of years**, with **great importance** placed on **salt by many different cultures**. Even today the history of salt touches our daily lives.

Salt was a very important **medium of exchange in commercial ventures in the ancient world**; so much so that **many forms of currency (money)** in the ancient world were produced in the form of **“salt cakes.”**

Friends, even, the English word **“salary”** is derived from the Latin word *salarium* for **“salt.”** Oftentimes, throughout history, when **employers wanted to compliment employees** for the great work they were doing—they would say to their employees: **“YOU ARE WORTH YOUR WEIGHT IN SALT!”**

Have you ever stopped to think that there is **no other religion**; there is **no other philosophical system** and there is **no other ideologue** found anywhere throughout the history of the world that places **more value on every single, solitary human life** than does the Gospel we preach? --- So much immense value that our God would send his only-begotten Son into this rebellious and sinful world to die for every one of us—to make a complete atonement—for every one of us—for all our sins?

It was **this belief** that empowered Paul one day to say to the church at **Rome**, *“**For he who spared not his Son but gave him up for us all, how shall he not together with Christ give us all good things**” (Romans 8:32)!*

And didn’t Jesus also one day speak to us about the **immense value that God the Father places on every one of us one day**, when he asked his disciples: *“**Are not sparrow sold down at the temple, two for a penny—and yet not a one of them falls from the sky to its death below without your Heavenly Father taking notice! Why the very hairs of your head are all numbered! Fear not, therefore, because you are of much more value than many sparrows** (Matthew 10:29-31)*

Jesus calls us the **“Salt of the Earth”** because of the immense value that our God places upon us!

**(B) A second reason would be because salt is universally present all throughout the world.** Why salt is virtually found everywhere—certainly, in **all the oceans of the earth**, that collectively cover **about 75% of the earth's surface!**

Salt is also found in rivers and lakes throughout the world—though in varying degrees—**ranging** all the way from **.002%** that is found in the **Mississippi River** to **12% in the Great Salt Lake of Utah.**

Therefore, Jesus was also looking forward to that day **when Christians would be present in every corner of the globe too!** It's what he prophesied would happen when following his death and resurrection, he said to his disciples on that first Ascension Day: ***"You will receive power from on high, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you—and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Samaria and to the uttermost ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)!***

Still today we are all called upon to help fulfill his Great Commission: ***"Go, therefore, and make disciples out of every nation, by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and behold, I will be with you always unto the ends of the earth" (Matthew 28:18)!***

**(C) A third reason that Jesus might compliment us, saying: "You are the salt of the earth"—is because for centuries salt was one of the greatest preservative in extending the shelf-life of food throughout the history of the world.** Simply stated, **salt absorbs water, and when fresh meat and even some fresh vegetables, like beans and cabbage were salted,** the salt completely removed the water from them, so that **in the absence of water—the bacteria present within the meat could not multiply—therefore acting as a preservative.**

In Jesus' calling his disciples the **"Salt of the Earth"** he is reminding us that one of our chief responsibilities is to **combat its deterioration—by our constantly combating moral and spiritual decay.** And yet we are not just to combat moral and spiritual decay **primarily by each of us standing upon our own "soapboxes," CONDEMNING THE WORLD,** but by our preaching and teaching the Gospel **as the life-changing message that it still is;** the kind of life-changing message that empowered St. Paul also one day to say, who was speaking out of his own personal experience: ***"If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come! And all of this is from God who through Christ reconciled the world to himself, committing to us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17)!***

Let's remember what St. John tells us: ***"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17)!***

**The danger,** however, was that the **salt** that was **harvested from the marshes, lagoons** and from the **rocks** all around the **DEAD SEA could easily acquire a stale or alkaline taste** because of its mixture with **gypsum.** It was therefore, then, as Jesus teaches us here, **"good for nothing"** except to be thrown away and trampled under the feet of people (Ezekiel 47:11)!

***"If the salt loses its saltiness, what will make it salty again?"*** Salt, therefore, provides to some degree **a negative function in this world** to **combat moral and spiritual decay,** but **light, by contrast, provides a tremendously positive function in this world!**

**II. THEREFORE JESUS PAYS HIS DISCIPLES A SECOND GREAT COMPLIMENT WHEN HE SAYS TO THEM: "You are the light of the world" (v. 16)!**

The **concept of "LIGHT" in the Holy Scriptures** indicates the **true knowledge of God** (Psalm 36:9; Matthew 6:22-23); **the goodness, the righteousness** and the **truthfulness of God** (Ephesians 5:8-9); **including also the joy** and the **gladness** and the great gift of true **happiness** (Psalm

97:11; Isaiah 9:1-7) that can only come to us through a vital and meaningful relationship with our God. -- The statement, **“You are the light of the world”** not only indicates that Jesus’ disciples are to be **the possessors of these wonderful gifts**, but that they are also to **transmit them to others!**

So often the houses built in Palestine back in our Lord’s Day were often very dark in that first century world! They were often constructed with **ONLY ONE CIRCULAR WINDOW IN THE WHOLE STRUCTURE THAT WAS ABOUT 18 INCHES ACROSS.**

Many of those primitive homes only had **one small oil lamp** in the **whole house**, that was only the **size of a gravy boat; a bowl that was filled with oil—that also included a floating wick.**

The lamp most always stood on a lampstand, on a skinny wooden table that might have positioned the lamp some 5 feet into the air.

The mere thought of someone therefore coming along and covering up that **ONE AND ONLY LIGHT IN THE HOUSE WITH A BUSHEL BASKET**—THE KIND USED BACK THEN AND OFTEN STILL USED TODAY FOR THE CARRYING OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES WOULD HAVE BEEN LUDICROUS AND **PREPOSTEROUS!**

While Jesus encourages us to welcome the Holy Spirit’s and his sanctifying work into our lives—teaching us that yes, we are saved solely by the grace of God alone through our faith in him, nevertheless, a true and living faith will also result in a life of good works being lived out by us towards others that will prompt others to glorify the Father in heaven.

In his book entitled **BEHOLD I DO A NEW THING**, C. Kirk Hadaway speaks to us about the primary threat that poses itself to any organization—when an organization becomes sidetracked, and shifts away from its original purpose for existing—a **malady** that Hadaway identifies as **“Goal Displacement.”**

He then illustrates his contention by sharing with his readers a story about a group of people living along the eastern seaboard of the United States, in that section that is still popularly known as the New England states. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century this group of people decided to construct a **LIGHTHOUSE** to help direct ships trapped in **dense fog upon the ocean safely to the land**; especially when they found themselves in a great peril at sea. Originally, there was not only a lighthouse keeper, but also a group of volunteers, like a group of volunteer firemen, who were trained to go out to sea and rescue people involved in any shipwrecks on the rocks of the nearby New England Coast.

To make a longer story short, however, over time the lighthouse forgot its primary reason for existence. People would even come by and distract the lighthouse keeper from his primary goal by **chatting with him**. On Friday night and Saturday night, some of his friends would come to the lighthouse to play cards with him. Over time, the people in the community built another building at the base of the lighthouse and opened a restaurant there—providing a great social function for all who were living nearby. **Unfortunately, as time went by, everyone forgot what the lighthouse’s original purpose for existing even was—to be a lifesaving station to those at sea.** Then when a ship crashed upon the rocks for lack of a warning light, the villagers were not prepared for the rescue.

The lighthouse, had over time, became primarily a place for people to come and to have fun, but we all know that having fun was not the original reason for that lighthouse having been built. **AND STRICTLY SPEAKING NEITHER ARE CHURCHES. ALTHOUGH WE OFTEN HAVE FUN AT CHURCH, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE ARE FELLOWSHIPING AND STUDYING GOD’S WORD TOGETHER, EVEN THOUGH WE HOPEFULLY REMEMBER THAT HAVING FUN IS NOT THE CHIEF REASON FOR OUR EXISTENCE!**

Like that 19<sup>th</sup> Century Lighthouse, the Church of Jesus Christ has a much higher calling and a much greater reason for its existence—and every now and then we make a valid use of our **when, as Jesus is doing for us here, we revisit what the primary purpose for the church’s existence really is!**

Friends for any people in Jesus’ day who felt that he had no real respect for the law of God and the Ten Commandments—Jesus counteracts that charge also in our Gospel lesson today. ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, for 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 the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-20)!***

Aren’t we glad therefore, that again today, just as we concluded the sermon last Sunday, that when Jesus stepped forward to be baptized by John in the Jordan River, and John protested, Jesus said to John: ***“Let it be so for now to fulfill all righteousness”*** and that our Lord Jesus took our place under the law of God for us, living for each one of us the perfect life that we could never live, so that by his crucifixion and resurrection—we might know—that everything God the Father requires of us—we can now celebrate—has been fulfilled for us by him! Amen