

Discovering Jesus Course

127

The Salt of the Earth

After proclaiming the eight-fold blessing of the New Covenant, Jesus describes the life of his disciple in an unusual way. In **Matthew 5:13**, he declares:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”

Jesus describes his disciples as salt. What did he mean by this unusual metaphor?

In ancient times, salt was an extremely valuable commodity – often considered worth more than its weight in gold. The Chinese minted salt into coins and people around the Mediterranean used cakes of salt as currency. The Greeks traded salt for slaves, leaving us with the saying, “He’s not worth his salt.” And in the times of Jesus, Roman soldiers were often paid in salt, and so from salt (*sal*) comes the Latin word *salarium*, from which the English word “salary” is derived.

Why was salt considered so valuable? Salt not only adds flavoring to food (**Job 6:6**), it also preserves food. We need to remember that in the time of Jesus there were no refrigerators. The people used salt to preserve meat and, particularly, fish. Salt also had an important medicinal value, for it was used to wash newborn infants (**Ezekiel 16:4**) and to disinfect open wounds.

So what was Jesus meaning when he described his disciples as “the salt of the earth”? Very simply, Jesus was describing the *preserving* quality of a true disciple’s life. He wasn’t meaning that his disciple merely adds flavor to society; he meant that his disciple is the preserving agent of society.

But let’s take a closer look at the term that Jesus used. He didn’t actually say that his disciples would be the “salt of society” or the “salt of the nation,” he said they would be the “salt of the earth”! Why would Jesus use that particular expression?

Today, when we speak of “the earth,” we generally think of the planet upon which we live. When Jesus spoke of “the earth,” however, he wasn’t meaning our the Planet Earth. In Hebrew (or its Aramaic equivalent), he would have used the word *ha’Eretz* – “the Land.” *Ha’Eretz* refers to the geographical tract of land that the Romans called Palestine, but the Jews called, quite simply, “the Land.”

Just a few verses before, in **Matthew 5:5**, Jesus had pronounced, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit *ha’Eretz* (the Land)!” As we saw in **Lesson 125**, Jesus was declaring that it would not be the militant who would inherit *ha’Eretz*, but rather the meek!

Jesus was, at the time of the Sermon on the Mount, speaking to Jewish disciples who knew the promises of God. They knew that God had promised *ha’Eretz* – the Land – to Abraham and his descendants (**Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17**). They knew that by the hand of Moses, God had led their ancestors to *ha’Eretz* – “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (**Exodus 3:8**). And yet *ha’Eretz* – “the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (**Genesis 50:24**) – was now occupied by pagan armies and defiled by pagan practices. All who “hungered and thirsted for righteousness” were longing for the messianic age, when *ha’Eretz* would again be the inheritance of the true Israel! And addressing this messianic expectation, Jesus declared that it would be the meek of Israel who would receive the inheritance of *ha’Eretz*.

Then, in almost the next breath, he declares to those same “meek,” who will inherit *ha’Eretz*, are right now “the salt of *ha’Eretz*.” They are to be the salt of the land that they will later inherit! Just as salt preserves, so the lives of his disciples would preserve the Land. Just as salt disinfects a wound, so their lives would disinfect the Land.

How would their lives be like salt? It is the very eight qualities that Jesus pronounced in his eight-fold blessing – the four inworked beatitudes and the four outworked beatitudes – that would be the preserving agent (read **Matthew 5:3-12**). These are the qualities of spiritual salt. But with this description also came a warning. As *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible* explains:

“There was plenty of rock salt on the south-west shores of Dead Sea...The outer lay of rock salt was often impure and harsh. It had no flavor and was used to spread on the temple courtyards in wet weather to make them less slippery.”¹

Jesus thus warned his disciples: If you lose the qualities I’ve listed, you will become like flavorless salt, with only one purpose – to toss out onto the temple courtyards to be “trampled by men.”

The words of Jesus apply just as much to his twenty-first century disciples as they did to his first century disciples. All true disciples of Jesus are called to the “salt of the earth” – the preserving agent of society in the land in which we live. This is why Paul later wrote in **Colossians 4:6**:

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, *seasoned with salt*, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

Salt not only preserves and disinfects. It also makes people thirsty! As the salt of the earth, we cause others in our land to “hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

¹ *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Herts, UK: Lion Publishing, 1986), p.186.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.