

Being salt and light in Spain

Matthew 5:13-16

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Introduction: We begin this morning on the rolling prairies of East Texas, where the earliest settlers were Caddo and Cherokee tribes who collected brine from the salt prairie as a commodity to trade for other goods they needed. They had been doing this for centuries when they were apparently pushed out of the area by the governor of the new Republic of Texas, in the 1830's-40's, and also due to general anti-native American sentiment on the part of early settlers in the area from the U.S. It's sad to confess, but it's a dark part of our history. So starting around 1845, mining was begun on those prairies and the salt deposits were first exploited commercially. A small town grew up to the east of Dallas, which would gain a reputation far bigger than its size or appearance would suggest, known as Grand Saline. Starting in 1914, a young girl with an umbrella came to represent that salt company, and she has continued to do so for over 100 years ... though she has changed her hair style and dress over the years – but her salty little saying hasn't changed: *"When it rains, it pours!"* Maybe you have used the expression, but you probably never imagined it was actually the Morton Salt Company's marketing slogan! In earlier times, damp weather made salt clumpy and hard to get out of the saltshaker, until the Morton Co. added magnesium carbonate to their salt as a non-caking agent (1911), and it worked! It was a huge breakthrough for the table salt industry!

Just a few years later (1917) a gentleman by the name of C.O. Dixon showed up on the scene, chief electrician for the salt co. and soon manager of the electric company as well; later he would be owner of the newspaper too. So in 1936, when Texas celebrated their centennial celebration, C.O. was eager to make a contribution: he built a rock salt palace, totally out of salt, right on Main Street. Of course, salt melts with time, so it has to be regularly rebuilt. But it's still the main tourist attraction around that area. In 1946 C.O., a devout believer won to the Lord by his wife, would go to meet his Maker; in 1949 his grandson was born there. I always treasured being from Grand Saline, even though I lived there only four months, but I visited my grandmother's home regularly as a child. What wonderful memories I made at that marvelous home. And about age 6 I finally got to go down in that salt mine – what a treat! But that didn't make me "salty"; just being from Grand Saline and having all that close association with the town didn't make me "salty." That would take something much more radical in my life. In the same way that coming to church doesn't make you "salty," does it? In fact, even reading your Bible is no guarantee either ... because you can read it as if it were a rule book, legalistically, moralistically. But Jesus wasn't a legalist or a moralist – just like our primary sin problem is not fundamentally a legal matter, but a relational one! That's why the solution had to be a relational one – Jesus came to restore relationships, family, community, and He did so by living out all His relationships in perfect love, even while undergoing the maximum trial and suffering! It was such a reversal to the way Jewish teachers typically interpreted Scripture (that's why they so hated Him), but it was actually the perfect fulfillment of Old Testament truth and revelation.

What does it mean to be salty?

Remember how the Apostle Paul exhorted the Colossians: *“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to respond to everyone”* (Col. 4:6). By the way, those are synonyms: in the Greek, it’s “with grace, with salt,” back to back! We know that salt has the property of preserving, preventing decay, but the act of preserving has to do with GRACE! Responding graciously – to every person, every circumstance, to both successes and trials. Maybe you’re thinking, “I don’t think I can!” You’re right! Only one person ever did that perfectly – and that’s why we become followers of Jesus! He got it right – all the time! Jesus came to salt the world with grace, and that’s how He lights up our darkness! It’s what He was doing all the way to the cross – even as He received all that rejection and hatred in His face, what He gave back to us was GRACE! *That’s* our salvation – don’t miss it! Grace incarnate! So He called His followers the salt of the earth and light of the world, because He expects us to incarnate the same grace through His Holy Spirit, so we can also provide the light that illuminates the dark! Both are very relevant metaphors for the roles that Christ-followers are intended to play out in the world. But here’s the tricky part: does your saltiness ever get “clumpy,” like it doesn’t want to come out of the salt shaker? That’s the same idea as what Jesus asked on one occasion: “what if salt loses its flavor?” (Mt. 5:13). And another time He pondered, what if the light in us is darkened (Lk. 11:34-35)? These seem to be serious possibilities that Jesus was posing, so they should cause us no little concern, whether it should come from our failing to stand firm or stay focused, or keeping secret idols in our hearts, or getting in with bad company, or having to go through a season of affliction or suffering. Can these things make our salt lose its flavor, or darken the light in us? They shouldn’t, but there is that outside chance, because of the weakness of our flesh.

In fact, as our world situation deteriorates, with more and more social chaos and political instability, Christians’ spiritual capacity to preserve and to illuminate will be put to its fiercest test. Will we bear the fruit of Jesus’ Spirit when it’s our turn to undergo severe adversity or persecution? Will we remain faithful when the tides and currents of this world turn totally against us? **Friedrich Nietzsche** was a 19th-century German philosopher, critic, and musician, son of a Lutheran minister, raised in a very pious home. Yet he became fascinated with atheistic philosophies during his university years, and it caused him to drop out of church and Christianity. This was 150 years ago when this sort of thing was already happening! And today it’s become not only a trend, but a veritable plague on our churches! **Young people**, don’t drop out! Get to know the good **reasons** for the Christian faith – it has stood the test of time and outlived all its detractors because it’s the Word of God – humans could never have invented such an incredible story as what the Bible reveals! So let its salt permeate your thoughts and it will preserve your life! Let its light illuminate your heart and you will experience the truth that sets you free from being a slave to physical appetites and material things. We don’t want to lose you to some cultural fad or philosophical current! One of our seminary students wrote her end-of-course thesis on the influence of Nietzsche and the nihilism he predicted would result from the repudiation of Christianity that was taking place in his day. [Nihilism: the philosophical current that says everything can be reduced to nothing: we come from nothing, we are headed nowhere, life has no meaning.]

Her thesis reminded me of what a cultural icon Nietzsche was back in my own university years, especially his Parable of the Madman, who lit a lantern in broad daylight and ran to the marketplace crying, “I am looking for God!” The unbelieving crowd there made quick fun of the madman until he explained to them that God was actually dead, killed by all of them, and the consequences of their action meant that they must now assume the enormous responsibility of “being gods,” for which they were not in the least prepared. Nietzsche saw the moral deterioration that would occur due to the rejection of the Christian belief in God; the vacuum it left would eventually empty life of all its value and meaning, requiring the invention of a new humanity, which he referred to as the *Übermensch* (a kind of “superman”). Nietzsche became an ardent advocate of the relativism and post-truth that characterize our postmodern world; his concept of “knowledge” was that it was purely a matter of self-

deception, conventions invented by humans for selfish reasons. The unfortunate results of Nietzsche's philosophy soon played out in his own life; human personhood becomes totally vitiated by selfishness, by the lies we believe, and by the enemy of our souls who hates God and every expression of His image. Far from achieving the status of *Übermensch*, Nietzsche's personal decline, in his career, in his health, and in his relationships, was so precipitous that by age 45 his productive years were over; by 56 he was dead.

Is there evidence today that Nietzsche's diagnosis was on target? Too many to enumerate, but we'll glance at a few examples: the rampant debunking of Christian values by an increasingly aggressive atheism, general rejection of all absolutes (except this one!), the growing dominance of pagan materialism/hedonism, acceptance of the cult of the body and narcissism as "politically correct," anti-Christian sentiment on an international level (see the Global Terrorism Index with Christians as the primary target); the success of the international drug cartels, the steady rise of human trafficking as a lucrative business, increasing suicides (even promoted online); more peoples on the move seeking to escape the growing number of areas in crisis, in search of a better life, but provoking social unrest in the places they end up (only a sociological phenomenon, or is there a larger spiritual movement behind it?).

How should Christians respond to these challenges? We live in a dark rotting world, in constant process of decay, due to our common sin nature. Why have Christians not made a larger impact on the world and its problems? One analyst says it's because we have with great efficiency managed to dilute the most challenging teachings of Christ, so that we have stripped the gospel of its radicalism! This is why our influence is so shamefully minimal on the society at large. Much more important than the number of professing believers is the depth of discipleship those believers have assimilated into their lives. As Christians we often lament the decadence of the world, criticizing the violence, the corruption and immorality, the materialism and lack of respect for life. But who's at fault here? John Stott uses this analogy: If a house becomes dark in the evening, it makes no sense to blame the house, does it? This is just what happens when the sun goes down. The question is rather, "what's going on with the light?" Similarly if fish spoils and becomes inedible, it makes no sense to blame the fish, since this is what happens when bacteria multiply. The question should rather be, "where's the salt?" In the same way, if there's a deterioration in society and a decadence of values, to the point that it's like a very dark night or a smelly fish, there's no point in blaming society, because it's simply what happens when fallen men and women are abandoned to their own criteria, and no higher standard of relationship is being held up, no moral restrictions are placed on the human ego. So the question to ask is, where is the church? Why are the salt and light of Jesus not penetrating this society and making an impact? It must begin by impacting our own homes, our families, personal lives! John Stott wrote: *"The truth of the Gospel is most powerful when it is put on public display!"* In other words, the radical social alternative our world needs to see demonstrated is in the way we as the church practice community according to the teachings and patterns of Jesus' life, starting in our homes.

Spain needs us to live like the salt and light of Jesus. Other churches in Spain need our example as salt and light too, just like our neighbors, friends, co-workers. But may we not think for a moment that it's just a matter of trying harder! Just a question of more technology or better strategies! Not the answer! It's not about something we do, but Someone we know! John Stott again: *"Our Christianity is poor because our Christ is poor,"* meaning we have a deficient, mediocre vision of Him that cannot compare with the real thing!!! May we join the apostle Paul in his prayer after nearly 30 years of walking with Jesus: *"that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made like him in his death"* (Php. 3:10).