



Pastor John Underhill

Introduction

Neighbor Nudge: I want you to pretend for a moment that you don't regularly attend church. That you're just a regular non-churched individual living in the Spokane Valley. I ask you to describe Jesus Christ to me; his character, his manner, his approach, how he related to people. What words, phrases would you say?

1. Loving
2. Accepting
3. Tolerant
4. Helpful
5. Gracious

Neighbor Nudge: Now I want to do another exercise with you. One of the most read sections of the newspaper is the **Letters to the Editor**. If all you had to go by was the Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper, what picture would you have of Christians in the Spokane area?

1. Judgmental
2. Negative
3. Narrow minded and intolerant
4. Self-righteous, Holier than thou
5. Militant (impose their moral view on us)

I saw a **Bumper sticker** this past week that blew me away: "I like Jesus Christ; I'm not a fan of His followers."

When **Mahatma Gandhi** was the spiritual leader of India, he was asked by some missionaries, "What is the greatest hindrance to Christianity in India?" His reply was a classis: "Christians."

What would bring someone to that conclusion? Why would someone say "Jesus? Yes! Christians? No!"

Transition: Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 5. Last week we looked at this passage briefly. Jesus says two things about your identity as His follower, as His disciple:

¹³*"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

¹⁴*You are the light of the world—like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. ¹⁵Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it*

shine for all. ¹⁶*In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.* Matt 5:13-16, NLT

Our **Theme Verse** for the next few weeks is Matthew 5:16. Memorize it, better yet, live it!

I. **By declaring our identity, Jesus describes our mission**

“You are the salt of the earth.” Let’s take a quick look at what salt meant in Jesus’ day. Salt was highly valued in the ancient world. In fact, often Roman soldiers were paid in salt. If a soldier was lax in performing his duties, they said of him that he wasn’t worth his salt.

A. Salt was connected with purity. The first mission of Jesus’ disciple is to remain pure in an impure world.

No doubt its glistening whiteness made the connection easy...The Jewish sacrifices were offered with salt. So then, if the Christian is to be the salt of the earth he must be an example of purity.” (Barclay, p. 119) Honesty in business practices. A day’s work for a day’s pay. Honesty in our speech. Moral purity in a day when sexual integrity is almost a laughing matter.

B. Salt was used as a preservative. The second mission of Jesus’ disciple is to preserve a decaying culture.

It was used to keep things from going bad, (meat was put in brine, or salt was rubbed into it) and to hold putrefaction at bay. Salt preserves from corruption. (Barclay, 120) The fishermen among Jesus’ disciples were familiar with this use of salt. After catching their fish, before they could transport them to Jerusalem or elsewhere, they had to pack them in salt.

The French culture of the early 1700s was in the process of decay. The king had a motto: “After me the deluge.” He was absolutely right. The deluge came and France was ripped apart by the French Revolution.

Just twenty miles across the channel, the English culture had the same rot. Historians have described at length the moral corruption of English culture. And yet England did not go through a revolution. What spared it? President and historian Woodrow Wilson insisted it was because in 1703 a man called John Wesley was born in England. Wesley started the Methodist movement which spread like salt throughout the land, and that delivered England from a revolution. (H. Robinson, Salt and Light)

The preservative function of salt only occurs when the salt contacts the food. If Christians are to exercise a preservative influence on this culture, we have to be in contact with it. The monastic movement started with good motives—withdraw

from an unholy world in order to devote ourselves to developing holiness. Jesus never intended that his church become a salt warehouse.

C. Salt gives flavor to food. The third mission of Jesus' disciple is to give the flavor of God to human life.

Job 6:6 reads, *“Can flavorless food be eaten without salt?”*

For dinner on Friday night we had scrambled eggs. Scrambled eggs are fairly tasteless without salt. So sitting around our dinner table, staring at our scrambled eggs, no one said, “Please pass me the bland.” “Please pass me the tasteless.” Why don’t we have a bland shaker on our table? A salt shaker, a pepper shaker, and a bland shaker? You don’t have to sprinkle bland or tasteless on your eggs—they already have that. You put salt on them because you want something that will give them some taste, some punch, some distinctiveness.

By the way, I’ve instructed the **ushers** to pass out a little treat—remember when you were in kindergarten, you’d have a snack break. I thought how nice that would be in the middle of a sermon, to have a **cracker break**. I thought about getting those delicious salted pretzels. I thought about getting some wonderful buttered, salted popcorn. But instead I decided—for those of you watching your salt intake—that it would be best to get unsalted, low-sodium crackers.

I ran into one of our nursery workers yesterday when I was buying these and she said, “I’m sure glad I’m not going to be in the service tomorrow. And if you have any of those left over, don’t send them to the nursery. We won’t eat them!” Christ intended that his disciples be to life what salt is to food. Christians are to give flavor to life. The tragedy is that so often people have connected Christianity with precisely the opposite. They have connected Christianity with that which takes the flavor out of life. (Barclay, 120)

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.”

Robert Lewis Stevenson once wrote in his diary, “I have been to Church today, and am not depressed.”

Joy, grace, laughter, purpose, peace, love. These are the things that should characterize the life of the child of God. God has placed us here to spread the flavor of heaven in a world that’s like a low-sodium cracker.

D. Salt creates thirst. The fourth mission of Jesus' disciple is to create a thirst for the Living God.

You eat a pepperoni pizza, and an hour later you’re standing at the kitchen sink, getting a cold glass of water. In the desert the nomads regularly ingest salt so that they become thirsty and drink before their body senses the need. Jesus is saying that one reason we’re here on this earth is to create a thirst for God in those around us.

Transition: By declaring our identity, Jesus describes our mission: to live pure lives, to preserve a decaying culture, to give the flavor of God to human life, and to create a thirst for God.

II. By declaring our identity, Jesus warns of a danger

The usefulness of salt comes from its distinctive flavor. It's difference. Your usefulness as a Christian to this world and Christ's kingdom depends on your distinctiveness, your difference.

A. Distinctiveness means there is a discernable difference between you and the surrounding culture (we are not 'of the world')

Distinctiveness must be a part of the Christian's life. Jesus contrasts "You" (his followers) and "the earth." He distinguishes between "You" (his followers) and "the world." If Christians become assimilated, just like the surrounding world, contaminated by the influences of the world, we lose our influence.

B. Distinctiveness doesn't necessarily mean that you withdraw from the surrounding culture (we are 'in the world')

In order for salt to do any good, it has to be distinctive, but it also has to come into contact with the food. Salt is only useful when it gets out of the saltshaker and onto the dinner. Jesus is telling us that we have to be in the world. In contact with sinful men and women. That runs a risk. There's a danger: we might be influenced by them.

C. "In the world" Christians can lose their distinctiveness and forfeit their usefulness unless they also remain "not of the world" Christians

Jesus speaks in this passage of **unsalty salt**. That's a contradiction in terms. I mentioned last week that in Israel there was a lower grade salt that was gathered from the Dead Sea. It contained some salt, but a lot of impurities as well. It was used to improve the condition of some soils. Farmers would pile it behind their barns until they needed it, and then sprinkle it on their land. But sometimes it would rain, and the water would leach out all the salt, leaving behind a pile of white impurities. It looked like salt, but it didn't taste like salt or act like salt. It wasn't good for anything. In fact, it hurt the soil, and could only be thrown out on the roads and paths, to be trampled down.

George Barna did a survey a few years back—asked Christians and non-Christians a number of questions. Then he compared the results. Here's what he found:

Question	Response of Christians	Response of Non-Christians
Sometimes it feels like life is not worth living.	16%	20%
Overall, you are very satisfied with your life these days	59%	52%
You, personally, have a responsibility to share what you have with others who are poor or struggling.	91%	86%
Freedom means being able to do anything you want.	35%	42%
Nothing can be known for certain except the things you experience in your own life	61%	64%
You have developed a clear philosophy about life that consistently influences the decisions you make and the way you live	84%	81%
God helps those who help themselves.	80%	83%
It's almost impossible to be a moral person today.	27%	33%
When it comes to morals, or what is right and wrong, there are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations	70%	81%
People are basically good.	79%	89%
The main purpose in life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment	66%	53%
No matter how you feel about money, it is still the main symbol of success in life	54%	51%
There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct.	76%	67%

- Christian faith seems to have very little impact on the values and attitudes of its followers.
- Christianity is not losing influence in America because it is overmatched by challenges of the day; it is losing its impact because believers have been unsuccessful at merging faith and lifestyle outside the walls of the church.

From the Barna Report, November/December 1997 (Word Ministry Resources), quoted in The Promise Keeper, January, 1999, p. 6

How much are you enjoying that **low sodium cracker**? Salt adds flavor, taste, zest. Unsalted salt is worthless! The tragedy is that the people of God work hard at “**fitting in**” to the surrounding world. We don’t want to “**stand out.**” We want to “**blend in,**” be “**one of the group.**” We work hard at acting like the world, living like the world, thinking like the world.

Some of you sitting here today are “low-sodium” Christians. You get up on Monday morning and go to school thinking, “Don’t let people find out that I’m a

Christian.” OK, maybe you don’t think that to yourself, but you live that way. You don’t speak up in class discussions when you could go public with your faith. You have allowed opportunity after opportunity to pass you by. Just like those crackers, your life is tasteless and people don’t come away with any thirst for God.

Some of you are “low sodium” Christians at work. You just do your job, but you don’t do anything as a representative of heaven on earth. You hear about a co-worker that’s having trouble with his marriage. You think about saying, “I’m praying for you.” But you don’t. You’ve worked in the shop for 10 years with a man whose become a good friend, but you’ve never once mentioned to him that you are a Christian.

Jesus’ intent is that there be such a dramatic difference between the way His disciples do life and the way the rest of the world does life that people would say, **“Tell me more, I’m thirsty to find out more, there’s a flavor to your life that I want to have in mine.”**

Our distinctiveness as Christians is so utterly important that Jesus says...

D. An indistinguishable Christian is a worthless contradiction

¹³ *“You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

1. Does “thrown out and trampled underfoot” imply loss of salvation?

Throughout the Bible, “trampled” is used as a picture of judgment—of God’s judgment on the enemies of His people:

Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes. Psalm 44:5 (NIV)

With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies. Psalm 60:12 (NIV)

With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies. Psalm 108:13 (NIV)

(cf. Deut 33:29, 2 Samuel 22:43, 2 Kings 9:33, Psalm 91:13, Isaiah 5:5, Hosea 5:11)

2. “Thrown out and trampled underfoot” implies we forfeit God’s protection and incur His discipline

It is usually the people of God who, by His help, are trampling on the heads of their enemies. But Jesus in Matthew 5:13 turns this upside down. Because

His people have inverted what God intended (lost their distinctiveness) and become just like the world, as a result God inverts what He intended. Rather than His people trampling on their enemies, now it is the enemies who trample down His people.

When His people fail to live out their identity, God doesn't act on their behalf based on that identity. When we live out our identity, God subdues our enemies and actively works on our behalf, gaining the victor. When we fail to live out our identity as salt and light, God in essence says, "If you choose not to live as you're supposed to live, I'll choose not to protect you like I normally do." By intentionally forfeiting our distinctiveness, we unintentionally forfeit God's protection.

3. "Thrown out and trampled underfoot" indicates that we are useless/worthless as far as our impact on this world

Here's what we have to understand—we think that by being distinctive, different, as the disciples of Jesus Christ, we'll be singled out for ridicule; we'll be ostracized, left out, shunned. So we try to fit in with the world around us, its values and lifestyle. And we fail to realize that by trying to blend in, we've become flavorless salt, we've lost God's protection, we've incurred His discipline, and the world will ultimately turn on us, trample us, and throw us out. The very thing we wanted to avoid, we bring on ourselves by failing to be and live as God intended.

Look at the terminology used in this verse: "What good..." It isn't "useful." It is "thrown out" and "trampled underfoot." **An indistinguishable Christian is a worthless contradiction.**

A Christian can become so compromised by the world (think Lot) that he loses his/her distinctiveness entirely and comes under the judgment of God.

A Christian can become so compromised that he/she doesn't appear any different in behavior, attitude, action that the non-Christian folks living around.

Illustration I recently spoke with a woman who used to attend this church. Today she is living with boyfriend without the benefit of marriage. When I challenged her about this she retorted that a marriage license is , "just a piece of paper, God understands." At that point she became useless to God, useless for Him to use to make a difference in this world. She can't help preserve this decaying world of lost men and women because she is decaying just as fast! We all face pressures to "tone down" our testimony, not take our faith too seriously, to relax in our battle against the sin on the inside as well as the outside.

Conclusion

- We must be salt: distinctive purity
- We must be light: practical kindness
- We must create a thirst for Jesus Christ
- We must illumine the path to Him

Jesus coupled salt (**distinctive purity**) and light (**practical kindness**). Both are necessary if men are to praise our Father in heaven. James couples both of these elements in James 1:27 (NIV)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

- 1. We need to repent of our desire to “fit in.” We need to repent of the fact that we’ve denied our identity**
- 2. We’ll never exert the influence of heaven on earth if we don’t get out of the saltshaker and into the world**