

“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.

¹⁴ *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

¹⁷ *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:13-20)*

This is What Your Faith Does

On Friday, I got a Facebook message from someone that I went to grade school with. She asked me about my sister. Now, we haven't seen this woman in over thirty years, so I told her a little about my sister's life. She lives in Switzerland. In college, she met a guy from a little town outside of Zurich. She married him and she's lived there now for almost twenty years. Our childhood friend commented, “Wow. Sounds like her life's been an adventure.” That made me think about how different her life would've been if she had stayed in the little town in West Michigan where we grew up. I'm sure I'd still love her, but her experiences would've made her a different person today, don't you think? This morning, Jesus talks to us about an even greater impact on our life and our character than spending twenty years in Switzerland. He's talking about the change that faith makes in us. What would your life be like if you weren't a believer? **This is what your faith does:**

I. It gives life to the world.

II. It dedicates your life to God.

I.

Our faith doesn't just save us. God gave us faith also for the benefit of others. Of course, you can't believe for someone else. But your faith does work for your family, your friends, your co-workers, even for your enemies by the way it works in you. **This is what your faith does: it gives life to the world.**

Jesus said, **“You are the salt of the earth.”** Jesus did say “you.” He was talking to every believer that ever will live, starting with those people gathered there in front of him that day. To his followers of every time and place – to us, Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.” And Jesus did not say, “You should be the salt of the earth,” or “You could be” or “Try to be.” He said, “You are.” It's a reality. If you are a believer you are the salt of the earth.

What does that mean? Today, we think of salt mostly in terms of taste. But that's not the point Jesus was making. He lived in a time before refrigerators. People had to preserve their meat after they butchered it. So they salted it to keep it from spoiling. When Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he meant that your purpose on this planet is to preserve it. You hold back God's judgment. Do you remember Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah? “God, what if there are only thirty righteous people there? What if there are only twenty? What if there are only ten?” God was willing to spare those sinful cities for the sake of ten believers. God still follows that pattern. He withholds judgment on this earth for the sake of his children here. In a country like ours where thousands of unborn babies are murdered every day, would it be unjust if God punished our country? No. Why doesn't he? In part, to protect the millions of believers who live here. God preserves the entire world from judgment while his children live and work here. The devil will not overcome it, judgment will not destroy it, until he has gathered his people in.

Jesus also said, **“But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?”** Salt doesn't spoil. It could sit on a shelf for years and still be usable. At least, that's true for salt we know, which is quite pure. In Jesus' day, the sea salt they used was much less pure and under certain circumstances, it could lose its flavor and its properties as a preservative. Then it was worthless. God made us to be the salt, the preservative

of the world. We fulfill that function by living our faith. But if we ever stop living our faith, we lose our saltiness. We are no further benefit to the world.

Just to make clearer what it is we do for the world, Jesus said, **“You are the light of the world.”** Now, doesn’t the Bible say that Jesus is the light of the world? So how can we be the light of the world? Because we reflect his light. Jesus said, **“A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”** When God gave us faith, he lit us up like a city on a hill or like a candle in a dark room. Once that light comes, it can’t be hidden. And why would anyone want to? What would be the point of lighting a candle or turning on a lamp and then covering it so that no light got out? When you turn on a light, you let everyone enjoy it.

So when God lit us up with faith, he did that for the benefit of the whole world. Jesus said, **“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** God uses us to give life to unbelievers – to save them from hell. When we live as Christians, God uses our life to get the attention of the unbelievers around us. He uses kindness and compassion to wake people up from their own selfish pursuits, to give us a chance to share his light, the gospel, so that those people come to faith in Christ and live in heaven.

You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. What is it that makes you the one thing that preserves this world from judgment? What is it that makes you the one thing that brings light to people who are lost in darkness? It’s your faith! When God comes into our hearts through the gospel, he make us light and salt. What a terrible thing it would be for us to lose our saltiness. What a terrible thing it would be for us to hide our light. Do you think we could ever do that? Sadly, we could. It’s all too easy. It happens when we’re embarrassed about our faith in a society that looks down on people like us as “Bible bangers” or “fundamentalists” or whatever they’re calling us this week. It happens when we’re afraid to stand up for what we believe in or even to talk about it. It happens when we care more about our comfort, or our popularity, or our standing in life than we care about being the light and salt of the world.

How close have we come to losing our saltiness or to hiding our light? Don’t we come dangerously close to it all the time? Can’t we all think of times when we just didn’t want to be salt or light – we didn’t want to face up to the scrutiny and perhaps ridicule that brings with it in this world? Haven’t there been times when our fear or our selfishness got the better of us and we didn’t serve the purpose God gives us in this world? If that’s been true for you – as it has been for me – then we are guilty of sin.

But that’s exactly why Jesus came – because we are guilty of sin. He came to rescue us even from our failure to let our light shine. He came to rescue us from losing our saltiness. He came to take all our sin away – even our fear and our shame in front of the world around us. He died and he paid for all that sin. He rose and God forgave it. To him, it’s like we never committed those sins. The Holy Spirit reached into our hearts through that promise of forgiveness and gave us the faith that changes us. We are the light of the world because he made us the light. We are the salt of the earth because he made us the salt. Day after day, as we hear his word of love and forgiveness, day after day as he points us to Jesus’ cross to take away our failure, he brightens our light again. He makes us again the salt that preserves his world from judgment. He will do that for us every day until we reach eternal life.

II.

When God sends faith into our hearts, he changes us. I’ve often wondered what kind of person I would be and how I would’ve spent my life if I were not a Christian. Only God can know the answer to those questions. But we do know what difference God tells us that faith should make in our lives. **This is what your faith does: It dedicates your life to God.**

Jesus didn’t come to abolish the law or the prophets. In his time “the law and the prophets” was shorthand for saying “The Old Testament Scriptures.” Jesus came to fulfill all that God had foretold in the Old Testament. Everything that God commanded in the Old Testament ceremonial laws taught the people something about Jesus. In his life, he fulfilled all those lessons. The Bible clearly says those things are over now. Jesus is not commanding us to keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, like not eating pork or worshipping on Saturday.

But he did say that whoever breaks the least of God’s commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever practices and teaches what God commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Now, he was not talking about the ceremonial laws. He was talking

about what we call the moral law: what God says is right and wrong for all people of all times. You see that in the very last sentence where he says, **“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** The Pharisees and the teachers of the law did keep those ceremonial laws. But they were not righteous in God’s eyes and they would not enter heaven. Why not? Because they were hypocrites. In another place, Jesus pointed out that they kept the little things – in fact, they added all kinds of little laws that they could keep. But they neglected the heart of God’s law: justice and mercy because they had no real faith. Their only faith was in themselves.

Jesus tells us to be more righteous than they were. You know what? Every believer is automatically more righteous than they were because faith gives us the righteousness of Christ. God sees us as holy when we trust in him. But Jesus does still call us to examine what we say and do. If we’re not faithful in living and teaching what he commands, we will still be in heaven because we trust in Jesus for forgiveness. But we will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. If we dedicate our lives to living the way he calls us to, then we will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

True faith doesn’t say, “I’m forgiven, so I can do anything I want to.” True faith says, “God has loved and forgiven me. I want to love him by doing all the things that God wants a Christian to do.” True faith understands that Jesus is calling us to teach and practice what he commands especially when it’s hard. Luther put it this way: if I’m faithful in everything that God commands except the one thing that the devil is attacking, I have not been faithful at all. It’s easy to live as God calls us to when the whole world agrees with it. But when the whole world thinks what God says is stupid or unreasonable or outdated, that’s when it’s hard to live as God calls us to live. That’s when it’s tempting to downplay or to sidestep what God commands.

What kinds of commands are hard today? The obvious ones are fellowship – who can worship with and pray with and who we can’t; the roles of men and women in the church; marriage and divorce – and especially not living together or having sexual relations before we get married. I’m sure we could think of others. But Jesus commands us to teach and practice all that he teaches, including these things. Do we stand on what he says even when it’s unpopular?

It’s hard to do because we’re sinners. But because it’s hard, we rely on Christ and his power. His power comes in the message of his love and forgiveness. Jesus who said these things to us today, died because this is so hard for us sinners to do. He died for our weakness and our failures and he rose to give us a new life and a new power to do all this for him. He delivers that power when he delivers the gospel. That is his promise. Faith seizes that power to dedicate our lives to him.

Faith never leaves us the same. Once God enters your heart, your life will be different. It’s hard for us even to imagine what our lives would be like without the gospel. But with the gospel, we belong to Jesus. He loves us and forgives us and strengthens us. He calls us to be salt that preserves this world, to be the light that points to heaven and to live for him, even when it’s hard to do that in this world. The strength to do all those things comes from him, from the power of the gospel. Tap into the power and live for Jesus. Amen.