

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Jesus said: “You are the salt of the earth … You are the light of the world.”

When Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth, he is telling us far more than we might at first think. The people who first heard Jesus say this, would have thought about it quite differently. So let me explain what they would have thought about when they were called the salt of the earth. And what that means for us.

The Value of Salt

First, it is hard for us to realize just how valuable salt was back in the time when Jesus walked the earth. Salt is so common these days. When you go to a grocery store, chances are that salt will be one of the cheaper things you buy. But that was not the case in Jesus’ time. Salt was much harder to obtain back then. And much more valuable.

And salt was more important back then, too, because of its value as a preservative. Before there was electricity and we had fridges, salt was one of the main ways to preserve food. In fact, salt was so valuable in Jesus’s time that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid with special salt rations. That is where our word, “salary,” actually comes from. There was even a common saying in Rome around Jesus’ time, that “*there is nothing more useful than sun and salt.*”

So, to be told that we are the salt of the earth is to be told that we are very valuable, and very useful. The world needs us. And for whatever mysterious reason, Jesus has decided that he needs us, too. As the salt of the earth, we are both valuable and useful to God, and to God’s world.

But Salt Doesn’t Exist for Itself

But there is another important quality of salt. It is valuable and useful, but not by itself. Salt is no good on its own. It doesn’t exist for itself. It’s kind of obvious when you think about it, but salt is always used for something else. The salt shaker on the table is not the meal. It is simply there to help flavour the meal. Salt doesn’t exist for itself. And that’s true for us as Christians. Yes, we are valuable. We are important. But not for ourselves.

As Christians, we are best serving our purpose when we are living for Jesus, and for others, not for ourselves. In fact, you could even say that the church is only really doing what it was created to do, when it is doing it for others. And that’s true for all of Jesus’ disciples. We are very important to the kingdom, but only when we exist for more than ourselves. Only when we exist for Jesus. And only when we are willing to be the salt, not the main course.

John the Baptist is a great example of this. He knew that he didn’t exist for himself, but to prepare the way for Jesus. And once Jesus came on the scene, John knew that his own ministry was complete. As he said about Jesus in John 3, “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*”

And it’s true for us, too. Jesus must increase. We must decrease. We are the salt, not the food. Jesus is the food. We are just trying to preserve it and make it taste better. And if we are not doing that, then we have lost our saltiness. We have lost our mission. But when we devote our lives to Jesus, and to the world, then we are truly being the salt of the earth. And then, I suppose you might say, we are truly “worth our salt” as disciples.

The Light of the World

There is nothing more useful than sun and salt, the old Roman saying goes. And in today's gospel reading, Jesus calls us both the salt of the earth *and* the light of the world. It is quite a compliment, to be called the salt of the earth. But maybe even more of one, to be called the light of the world. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that he himself is the light of the world. And yet, here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world.

Think for a minute of how much more valuable light was in Jesus's time. Salt was more valuable, but so was light. Back then, you couldn't just walk into a room and flip a switch and turn on the light. We almost take light for granted these days. But to be told that we are the light of the world is to be told that we are extremely important, and very valuable.

Jesus calls us to let our light shine, both in the church and in the community. Remember that Sunday School song,

‘Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light.
Like a little candle burning in the night.’

And he challenges us not to put our light under the bushel basket. We all have a little light to share with our world. You might not think that you have much to offer. You don't have much time. No obvious talent. To say nothing of your treasure, or lack thereof. But the Bible tells us that every one of us has exactly enough to let our light shine in this world. God has given to us exactly what God needs from us. Every light matters. Every person counts. And even the smallest light is a welcome sight in a dark place.

There is darkness in the world today, just as there has always been. We live in a broken and sinful world. It can be a fearful place. A discouraging place. A skeptical, angry, frustrated place. But the amazing thing about light, is, that the darker a place is, the less light is needed! The smallest flashlight or candle can light up a dark room. No matter how small your light is, it is exactly what this world needs.

So, Jesus says to us all, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. We use these well-known words at every baptism, to remind us that every baptized Christian can do this. We can all bring glory to God simply by letting our light shine. The smallest act of kindness, the simplest gesture of hospitality and welcome, the humblest sharing of our time or talent – these all give glory to God.

We don't have to change the world to give glory to God. We don't have to fix all the problems of our world. We just need to let our light shine. And that will bring glory to God.

Reflecting the Light

Maybe this seems a little overwhelming? We might feel, that if we are the light of the world, the world's not going to get very bright. Because our little light can seem, well, little. How can we be the light of the world? We're not Jesus. He is the true light of the world. So how can we do that?

But let's just look at the moon. When the moon is full, and the sky is clear, it is absolutely amazing to see how bright the moon can be. The moon can light up a dark night. But the truth is, that even when the moon is at its brightest, it is not providing any light of its own. All it's really doing is reflecting the light of the sun. And that's

very encouraging. Because that is exactly what I believe we are doing, when we are being the light of the world. We’re not actually providing any light of our own. We’re simply reflecting the light of the son. The Son our Lord. But when we are doing that well, when we are being fully ourselves, the disciples of Jesus, that God has called us to be, it is amazing how much light we can offer to the world. And the darker the world around us, the more important the light.

Our world certainly needs a little light these days. And Jesus tells us that being a disciple means providing this light. You are the light of the world, he says. You and I are called to reflect his light into the darkness of the world. Called to let our light shine, but not our light at all – his light reflected through us; through our words, our deeds, our good works. Called to let his light shine through our lives, so that others may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

Closing

“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world ...”

That’s what Jesus tells us today. But you know what he *doesn’t* tell us? He doesn’t tell us to be the salt of the earth or the light of the world. He tells us that we already are. Because we are his disciples.

All we must do, to be the salt and the light is to follow Jesus. We don’t have to be the meal. We just have to preserve the meal, and season it. Jesus himself is the meal. And we don’t have to be the light, either. We just have to reflect it. Jesus is the light of the world.

So, let’s not lose our saltiness. And let’s not hide our light. Because the world needs both now, as much as it ever has. And Jesus is counting on us all, to be the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. To the glory of God. AMEN

Adapted from James Lawrence commentary