

## THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Matt. 5:13

***"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men."***

When Jesus said this, he provided men with an expression which has become the greatest compliment that can be paid to any man. When we wish to stress someone's solid worth and usefulness, we say of him, "People like that are the salt of the earth."

In the ancient world salt was highly valued. The Greeks called salt divine (theion, GSN2303). In a phrase, which in Latin is a kind of jingle, the Romans said, "There is nothing more useful than sun and salt." (Nil utilius sole et sale.) In the time of Jesus salt was connected in people's minds with three special qualities.

(i) Salt was connected with purity. No doubt its glistening whiteness made the connection easy. The Romans said that salt was the purest of all things, because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. Salt was indeed the most primitive of all offerings to the gods, and to the end of the day 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.

One of the characteristics of the world in which we live is the lowering of standards. Standards of honesty, standards of diligence in work, standards of conscientiousness, moral standards, all tend to be lowered. The Christian must be the person who holds aloft the standard of absolute purity in speech, in conduct, and even in thought. A certain writer dedicated a book to J. Y. Simpson "who makes the best seem easily credible." No Christian can depart from the standards of strict honesty. No Christian can think lightly of the lowering of moral standards in a world where the streets of every great city provide their deliberate enticements to sin. No Christian can allow himself the tarnished and suggestive jests which are so often part of social conversation. The Christian cannot withdraw from the world, but he must, as James said, keep himself "unstained from the world" (Jas.1:27).

(ii) In the ancient world salt was the commonest of all preservatives. It was used to keep things from going bad, and to hold putrefaction at bay. Plutarch has a strange way of putting that. He says that meat is a dead body and part of a dead body, and will, if left to itself, go bad; but salt preserves it and keeps it fresh, and is therefore like a new soul inserted into a dead body.

So then salt preserves from corruption. If the Christian is to be the salt of the earth, he must have a certain antiseptic influence on life.

We all know that there are certain people in whose company it is easy to be good; and that also there are certain people in whose company it is easy for standards to be relaxed.

There are certain people in whose presence a soiled story would be readily told, and there are other people to whom no one would dream of telling such a tale. The Christian must be the cleansing antiseptic in any society in which he happens to be; he must be the person who by his presence defeats corruption and makes it easier for others to be good.

(iii) But the greatest and the most obvious quality of salt is that salt lends flavour to things. Food without salt is a sadly insipid and even a sickening thing. Christianity is to life what salt is to food. Christianity lends flavour 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 flavour out of life. Swinburne had it:

"Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilaean; the world has grown gray from Thy breath."

Even after Constantine had made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, there came to the throne another Emperor called Julian, who wished to put the clock back and to bring back the old gods. His complaint, as Ibsen puts it, was:

"Have you looked at these Christians closely? Hollow-eyed, pale-cheeked, flat-breasted all; they brood their lives away, unspurred by ambition: the sun shines for them, but they do not see it: the earth offers them its fulness, but they desire it not; all their desire is to renounce and to suffer that they may come to die."

As Julian saw it, Christianity took the vividness out of life.

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 Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary, as if he was recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to Church to-day, and am not depressed."

Men need to discover the lost radiance of the Christian faith. In a worried world, the Christian should be the only man who remains serene. In a depressed world, the Christian should be the only man who remains full of the joy of life. There should be a sheer sparkle about the Christian but too often he dresses like a mourner at a funeral, and talks like a specter at a feast. Wherever he is, if he is to be the salt of the earth, the Christian must be the diffuser of joy.

Jesus went on to say that, if the salt had become insipid, it was fit only to be thrown out and trodden on by men. This is difficult, because salt does not lose its flavour and its saltiness. E. F. F. Bishop in his book *Jesus of Palestine* cites a very likely explanation given by Miss F. E. Newton. In Palestine the ordinary oven is out of doors and is built of stone on a base of tiles. In such ovens "in order to retain the heat a thick bed of salt is laid under the tiled floor. After a certain length of time the salt perishes. The tiles are taken up, the salt removed and thrown on the road outside the door of the oven ... It has lost its power to heat the tiles and it is thrown out." That may well be the picture here.

But the essential point remains whatever the picture, and it is a point which the New Testament makes and remakes again and again--uselessness invites disaster. If a Christian is not fulfilling his purpose as a Christian, then he is on the way to disaster. We are meant to be the salt of the earth, and if we do not bring to life the purity, the antiseptic power, the radiance that we ought, then we invite disaster.

It remains to be noted that sometimes the early Church made a very strange use of this text. In the synagogue, among the Jews, there was a custom that, if a Jew became an apostate and then returned to the faith, before he was received back into the synagogue, he must in penitence lie across the door of the synagogue and invite people to trample upon him as they entered. In certain places the Christian Church took over that custom, and a Christian who had been ejected by discipline from the Church, was compelled, before he was received back, to lie at the door of the Church and to invite people as they entered, "Trample upon me who am the salt which has lost its savour."

## THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Matt. 5:14-15

***You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.***

It may well be said that this is the greatest compliment that was ever paid to the individual Christian, for in it Jesus commands the Christian to be what he himself claimed to be. Jesus, said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (Jn.9:5). When Jesus commanded his followers to be the lights of the world, he demanded nothing less than that they should be like himself.

When Jesus spoke these words, he was using an expression which was quite familiar to the Jews who heard it for the first time. They themselves spoke of Jerusalem as "a light to the Gentiles," and a famous Rabbi was often called "a lamp of Israel." But the way in which the Jews used this expression will give us a key to the way in which Jesus also used it.

Of one thing the Jews were very sure--no man kindled his own light. Jerusalem was indeed a light to the Gentiles, but "God lit Israel's lamp." The light with which the nation or the man of God shone was a borrowed light. It must be so with the Christian. It is not the demand of Jesus that we should, as it were, produce our own light. We must shine with the reflection of his light. The radiance which shines from the Christian comes from the presence of Christ within the Christian's heart. We often speak about a radiant bride, but the radiance which shines from her comes from the love which has been born within her heart.

When Jesus said that the Christian must be the light of the world, what did he mean?

(i) A light is first and foremost something which is meant to be seen. The houses in Palestine were very dark with only one little circular window perhaps not more than eighteen inches across. The lamp was like a sauce-boat tiled with oil with the wick floating in it. It was not so easy to rekindle a lamp in the days before matches existed. Normally the lamp stood on the lampstand which would be no more than a roughly shaped branch of wood; but when people went out, for safety's sake, they took the lamp from its stand, and put it under an earthen bushel measure, so that it might burn without risk until they came back. The primary duty of the light of the lamp was to be seen.

So, then, Christianity is something which is meant to be seen. As someone has well said, "There can be no such thing as secret discipleship, for either the secrecy destroys the discipleship, or the discipleship destroys the secrecy." A man's Christianity should be perfectly visible to all men.

Further, this Christianity should not be visible only within the Church. A Christianity whose effects stop at the church door is not much use to anyone. It should be even more visible in the ordinary activities of the world. Our Christianity should be visible in the way we treat a shop assistant across the counter, in the way we order a meal in a restaurant, in the way we treat our employees or serve our employer, in the way we play a game or drive or park a motor car, in the daily language we use, in the daily literature we read. A Christian should be just as much a Christian in the factory, the workshop, the shipyard, the mine, the schoolroom, the surgery, the kitchen, the golf course, the playing field as he is in church. Jesus did not say, "You are the light of the Church"; he said, "You are the light of the world," and in a man's life in the world his Christianity should be evident to all.

(ii) A light is a guide. On the estuary of any river we may see the line of lights which marks the channel for the ships to sail in safety. We know how difficult even the city streets were when there were no lights. A light is something to make clear the way.

So then a Christian must make the way clear to others. That is to say, a Christian must of necessity be an example. One of the things which this world needs more than anything else is people who are prepared to be foci of goodness. Suppose there is a group of people, and suppose it is suggested that some questionable thing should be done. Unless someone makes his protest the thing will be done. But if someone rises and says, "I will not be a party to that," another and another and another will rise to say, "Neither will I." But, had they not been given the lead, they would have remained silent.

There are many people in this world who have not the moral strength and courage to take a stand by themselves, but if someone gives them a lead, they will follow; if they have someone strong enough to lean on, they will do the right thing. It is the Christian's duty to take the stand which the weaker brother will support, to give the lead which those with less courage will follow. The world needs its guiding lights; there are people waiting and longing for a lead to take the stand and to do the thing which they do not dare by themselves.

(iii) A light can often be a warning light. A light is often the warning which tells us to halt when there is danger ahead.

It is sometimes the Christian's duty to bring to his fellowmen the necessary warning. That is often difficult, and it is often hard to do it in a way which will not do more harm than good; but one of the most poignant tragedies in life is for someone, especially a young person, to come and say to us, "I would never have been in the situation in which I now find myself, if you had only spoken in time."

It was said of Florence Alishorn, the famous teacher and principal, that if she ever had occasion to rebuke her students, she did it "with her arm round about them." If our warnings are, given, not in anger, not in irritation, not in criticism, not in condemnation, not in the desire to hurt, but in love, they will be effective.

The light which can be seen, the light which warns, the light which guides, these are the lights which the Christian must be.

## SHINING FOR GOD

Matt. 5:16

***Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***

There are two most important things here.

(i) Men are to see our good deeds. In Greek there are two words for good. There is the word *agathos* (GSN0018) which simply defines a thing as good in quality; there is *kalos* (GSN2570) which means that a thing is not only good, but that it is also winsome and beautiful and attractive. The word which is used here is *kalos* (GSN2570).

The good deeds of the Christian must be not only good; they must be also attractive. There must be a certain winsomeness in Christian goodness. The tragedy of so much so-called goodness is that in it there is an element of hardness and coldness and austerity. There is a goodness which attracts and a goodness which repels. There is a charm in true Christian goodness which makes it a lovely thing.

(ii) It is further to be noted that our good deeds ought to draw attention, not to ourselves, but to God. This saying of Jesus is a total prohibition of what someone has called "theatrical goodness."

At a conference at which D. L. Moody was present there were also present some young people who took their Christian faith very seriously. One night they held an all night prayer meeting. As they were leaving it in the morning they met Moody, and he asked them what they had been doing. They told him; and then they went on: "Mr. Moody, see how our faces shine." Moody answered very gently: "Moses wist not that his face shone."

That goodness which is conscious, which draws attention to itself, is not the Christian goodness.

One of the old historians wrote of Henry the Fifth after the Battle of Agincourt: "Neither would he suffer any ditties to be made and sung by the minstrels of his glorious victory, for that he would wholly have the praise and thanks altogether given to God." The Christian never thinks of what he has done, but of what God has enabled him to do. He never seeks to draw the eyes of men to himself, but always to direct them to God. So long as men are thinking of the praise, the thanks, the prestige which they will get for what they have done, they have not really even begun on the Christian way.

## THE ETERNAL LAW

Matt. 5:17-20

***Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to destroy them but to fulfil them. This is the truth I tell you--until the heaven and the earth shall pass away, the smallest letter or the smallest part of any letter shall not pass away from the Law, until all things in it shall be performed. So then, whoever will break one of the least of these commandments, and will teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of the Heavens; but whoever will do them and will teach others to do them, he will be called great in the Kingdom of the Heavens. For I tell you, that you will certainly not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the Scribes and Pharisees.***

At a first reading it might well be held that this is the most astonishing statement that Jesus made in the whole Sermon on the Mount. In this statement Jesus lays down the eternal character of the Law; and yet Paul can say, "Christ is the end of the Law" (Rom.10:4).

Again and again Jesus broke what the Jews called the Law. He did not observe the handwashings that the Law laid down; he healed sick people on the Sabbath, although the Law forbade such healings; he was in fact condemned and crucified as a law-breaker; and yet here he seems to speak of the Law with a veneration and a reverence that no Rabbi or Pharisee could exceed. The smallest letter--the letter which the King James Version calls the jot--was the Hebrew letter yod. In form, it was like an apostrophe--'; not even a letter not much bigger than a dot was to pass away. The smallest part of the letter--what the King James Version calls the tittle--is what we call the serif, the little projecting part at the foot of a letter, the little line at each side of the foot of, for example, the letter "I". Jesus seems to lay it down that the law is so sacred that not the smallest detail of it will ever pass away.

Some people have been so puzzled by this saying that they have come to the conclusion that Jesus could not have said it. They have suggested that, since Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels, and since Matthew wrote it specially to convince Jews, this is a saying which Matthew put into Jesus' mouth, and that this is not a saying of Jesus at all.

But that is a weak argument, for this is a saying which is indeed so unlikely that no one would have invented it; it is so unlikely a saying that Jesus must have said it; and when we come to see what it really means, we will see that it is inevitable that Jesus should have said it.

The Jews used the expression The Law in four different ways. (i) They used it to mean the Ten Commandments. (ii) They used it to mean the first five books of the Bible. That part of the Bible which is known as the Pentateuch--which literally means The Five Rolls--was to the Jew The Law par excellence and was to them by far the most important part of the Bible. (iii) They used the phrase The Law and the prophets to mean the whole of Scripture; they used it as a comprehensive description of what we would call the whole Old Testament. (iv) They used it to mean the Oral or the Scribal Law.

In the time of Jesus it was the last meaning which was commonest; and it was in fact this Scribal Law which both Jesus and Paul so utterly condemned. What, then, was this Scribal Law?

In the Old Testament itself we find very few rules and regulations; what we do find are great, broad principles which a man must himself take and interpret under God's guidance, and apply to the individual situations in life. In the Ten Commandments we find no rules and regulations at all; they are each one of them great principles out of which a man must find his own rules for life. To the later Jews these great principles did not seem enough. They held that the Law was divine, and that in it God had said his last word, and that therefore everything must be in it. If a thing was not in the Law explicitly it must be there implicitly. They therefore argued that out of the Law it must be possible to deduce a rule and a regulation for every possible situation in life. So there arose a race of men called the Scribes who made it the business of their lives to reduce the great principles of the Law to literally thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations.

We may best see this in action. The Law lays it down that the Sabbath Day is to be kept holy, and that on it no work is to be done. That is a great principle. But the Jewish legalists had a passion for definition. So they asked: What is work?

All kinds of things were classified as work. For instance, to carry a burden on the Sabbath Day is to work. But next a burden has to be defined. So the Scribal Law lays it down that a burden is "food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a customs house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen"--and so on endlessly. So they spent endless hours arguing whether a man could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether a woman might wear a broach or false hair, even if a man might go out on the Sabbath with artificial teeth or an artificial limb, if a man might lift his child on the Sabbath Day. These things to them were the essence of religion. Their religion was a legalism of petty rules and regulations.

To write was to work on the Sabbath. But writing has to be defined. So the definition runs: "He who writes two letters of the alphabet with his right or with his left hand, whether of one kind or of two kinds, if they are written with different inks or in different languages, is guilty. Even if he should write two letters from forgetfulness, he is guilty, whether he has written them with ink or with paint, red chalk, vitriol, or anything which makes a permanent mark. Also he that writes on two walls that form an angle, or on two tablets of his account book so that they can be read together is guilty ... But, if anyone writes with dark fluid, with fruit juice, or in the dust of the road, or in sand, or in anything which does not make a permanent mark, he is not guilty.... If he writes one letter on the ground, and one on the wall of the house, or on two pages of a book, so that they cannot be read together, he is not guilty." That is a typical passage from the Scribal Law; and that is what the orthodox Jew regarded as true religion and the true service of God.

To heal was to work on the Sabbath. Obviously this has to be defined. Healing was allowed when there was danger to life, and especially in troubles of the ear, nose and throat; but even then, steps could be taken only to keep the patient from becoming worse; no steps might be taken to make him get any better. So a plain bandage might be put on a wound, but no ointment; plain wadding might be put into a sore ear, but not medicated wadding.

The Scribes were the men who worked out these rules and regulations. The Pharisees, whose name means The Separated Ones, were the men who had separated themselves from all the ordinary activities of life to keep all these rules and regulations.

We can see the length to which this went from the following facts. For many generations this Scribal Law was never written down; it was the oral law, and it was handed down in the memory of generations of Scribes. In the middle of the third century A.D. a summary of it was made and codified. That summary is known as the Mishnah; it contains sixty-three tractates on various subjects of the Law, and in English makes a book of almost eight hundred pages. Later Jewish scholarship busied itself with making commentaries to explain the Mishnah. These commentaries are known as the Talmuds. Of the Jerusalem Talmud there are twelve printed volumes; and of the Babylonian Talmud there are sixty printed volumes.

To the strict orthodox Jew, in the time of Jesus, religion, serving God, was a matter of keeping thousands of legalistic rules and regulations; they regarded these petty rules and regulations as literally matters of life and death and eternal destiny. Clearly Jesus did not mean that not one of these rules and regulations was to pass away; repeatedly he broke them himself; and repeatedly he condemned them; that is certainly not what Jesus meant by the Law, for that is the kind of law that both Jesus and Paul condemned.

## THE ESSENCE OF THE LAW

Matt. 5:17-20 (continued)

What then did Jesus mean by the Law? He said that he had not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil the Law. That is to say, he came really to bring out the real meaning of the Law. What was the real meaning of the Law? Even behind the Scribal and Oral Law there was one great principle which the scribes and the Pharisees had imperfectly grasped. The one great principle was that in all things a man must seek God's will, and that, when he knows it, he must dedicate his whole life to the obeying of it. The Scribes and Pharisees were right in seeking God's will, and profoundly right in dedicating their lives to obeying it; they were wrong in finding that will in their man-made hordes of rules and regulations.

What then is the real principle behind the whole Law, that principle which Jesus came to fulfil, the true meaning of which he came to show'?

When we look at the Ten Commandments, which are the essence and the foundation of all law, we can see that their whole meaning can be summed up in one word--respect, or even better, reverence. Reverence for God and for the name of God, reverence for God's day, respect for parents, respect for life, respect for property, respect for personality, respect for the truth and for another person's good name, respect for oneself so that wrong desires may never master us--these are the fundamental principles behind the Ten Commandments, principles of reverence for God, and respect for our fellow men and for ourselves. Without them there can be no such thing as law. On them all law is based.

That reverence and that respect Jesus came to fulfil. He came to show men in actual life what reverence for God and respect for men are like. Justice, said the Greeks, consists in giving to God and to men that which is their due. Jesus came to show men in actual life what it means to give to God the reverence and to men the respect which are their due.

That reverence and that respect did not consist in obeying a multitude of petty rules and regulations. They consisted not in sacrifice, but in mercy; not in legalism but in love; not in prohibitions which demanded that men should not do things, but in the instruction to mould their lives on the positive commandment to love.

The reverence and the respect which are the basis of the Ten Commandments can never pass away; they are the permanent stuff of man's relationship to God and to his fellow-men.

## THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

Matt. 5:17-20 (continued)

When Jesus spoke as he did about the Law and the Gospel, he was implicitly laying down certain broad principles.

(i) He was saying that there is a definite continuation between the past and the present. We must never look on life as a kind of battle between the past and the present. The present grows out of the past.

After Dunkirk, in the Second World War, there was a tendency on all hands to look for someone to blame for the disaster which had befallen the British forces, and there were many who wished to enter into bitter recriminations with those who had guided things in the past. At that time Mr. Winston Churchill, as he then was, said a very wise thing: "If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future."

There had to be the Law before the Gospel could come. Men had to learn the difference between right and wrong; men had to learn their own human inability to cope with the demands of the law, and to respond to the commands of God; men had to learn a sense of sin and unworthiness and inadequacy. Men blame the past for many things--and often rightly--but it is equally, and even more, necessary to acknowledge our debt to the past. As Jesus saw it, it is man's duty neither to forget nor to attempt to destroy the past, but to build upon the foundation of the past. We have entered into other men's labours, and we must so labour that other men will enter into ours.

(ii) In this passage Jesus definitely warns men not to think that Christianity is easy. Men might say, "Christ is the end of the law; now I can do what I like." Men might think that all the duties, all the responsibilities, all the demands are gone. But it is Jesus' warning that the righteousness of the Christian must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. What did he mean by that?

The motive under which the Scribes and Pharisees lived was the motive of law; their one aim and desire was to satisfy the demands of the Law. Now, at least theoretically, it is perfectly possible to satisfy the demands of the law; in one sense there can come a time when a man can say, "I have done all that the law demands; my duty is discharged; the law has no more claim on me." But the motive under which the Christian lives is the motive of love; the Christian's one desire is to show his wondering gratitude for the love wherewith God had loved him in Jesus Christ. Now, it is not even theoretically possible to satisfy the claims of love. If we love someone with all our hearts, we are bound to feel that if we gave them a lifetime's service and adoration, if we offered them the sun and the moon and the stars, we would still not have offered enough. For love the whole realm of nature is an offering far too small.

The Jew aimed to satisfy the law of God; and to the demands of law there is always a limit. The Christian aims to show his gratitude for the love of God; and to the claims of love there is no limit in time or in eternity. Jesus set before men, not the law of God, but the love of God. Long ago Augustine said that the Christian life could be summed up in the one phrase: "Love God, and do what you like." But when we realize how God has loved us, the one desire of life is to answer to that love, and that is the greatest task in all the world, for it presents a man with a task the like of which the man who thinks in terms

of law never dreams of, and with an obligation more binding than the obligation to any law.