

## Essential Truths III: Working With God

# 14

## Salt and Light

The Bible uses many allegories to describe the Christian life, but none is as potent and unusual as the dual picture of salt and light. In **Matthew 5:13**, Jesus declares:

“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.”

Then in **Matthew 5:14-16**, Jesus goes on to say:

“You are the *light* of the world. 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. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

You have been likened to salt and to light! What a strange combination! Yet it is in discovering the unique characteristics of salt and light that we can understand the effect that our lives have on those around us.

### The Salt of the Earth

Jesus has called you “the salt of the earth.” But what exactly does that mean? What are the properties of salt that Jesus would liken to your life as a Christian?

When most people think of salt, they think of it simply as a cooking ingredient. But this is

The Birthright

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

The Body of Christ

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

The Tree of Life

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

Sent into the Harvest

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

▶ **Salt and Light** ◀

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

not all salt is. It is used in a great variety of industrial processes, including the production of ceramics, medicines and textile dyes. In ancient times, it was also used extensively in metallurgy, particularly in the refining of gold.<sup>1</sup>

For thousands of years, salt has been a precious commodity. So high was its value, Roman soldiers were often paid a *salarium*\* – an allowance of salt as their wage, from which comes the English expression, “He’s worth his salt.” The traffic of salt shaped many of the ancient trade routes and salt was often traded ounce for ounce for gold. The ancient Chinese used salt coins as currency, and salt cakes acted as money in Ethiopia, Tibet and in many areas around the Mediterranean Sea. So valuable was salt that several ancient cultures levied taxes on it.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew phrase, “To be salted with the salt of the palace,” draws on the concept of salt’s high value, since often it was only the rich who had access to it.

Salt seasoned many of the sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament (see **Leviticus 2:13; Ezekiel 43:24**) and many covenants were called “a covenant of salt” (**Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5**). This is because salt was commonly used in covenant ceremonies, hence the Arab expression, “There is salt between us,” and the modern Persian phrase, “Untrue to salt.”<sup>3</sup> As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains:

“This custom of pledging friendship or confirming a compact by eating food containing salt is still retained among Arabic-speaking people. The Arabic word for ‘salt’ and for a ‘compact’ or ‘treaty’ is the same.”<sup>4</sup>

For the purpose of our study, salt has three important qualities:

### ***Salt adds flavor***

#### **Read Job 6:6**

Salt is often added to food to provide zest and enhanced flavor. God has also intended for your life to add tang to the community in which you live. In their book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg write:

“When Christians live out their faith with authenticity and boldness they put a little zing into a sometimes bland cup of soup. They catch people off-guard and make them wince. They wake people up with their challenges and seemingly radical points of view. And they overturn a few applecarts here and there. In short, they put some spice into the lives of those around them.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Salt preserves***

Before the invention of the refrigerator, people salted meat to preserve it. In a similar way, the Christian acts as a preserving agent in a world bent toward moral decay. Just as salt stings, so the presence of the Christian pricks the conscience of the unbeliever. Though salt rubbed in a wound is painful, it prevents infection.

As the *Disciple’s Study Bible* observes:

\* From this word *salarium* we get the English word *salary*.

“The life of a true disciple flavors and preserves the society. Such saltiness is an essential part of a disciple’s character which will endure to the end. For Christian influence to permeate and preserve society, disciples must get involved in the lives and social affairs of our day. Disciples do not withdraw from society to preserve our holiness. Disciples involve themselves in all parts of society to give it a righteous flavor.”<sup>6</sup>

In **2 Thessalonians 2:7**, we read:

“For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.”

Although Paul is not forthcoming on exactly who “the one who now holds it back” is, many scholars believe it to be the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer. As a person filled with the holy presence of God, you are part of God’s strategy to stem the tide of moral decay.

### ***Salt makes people thirsty***

One of the most distinctive qualities of salt is that it makes people thirsty. There is an old saying:

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.”

Well, this saying is not altogether true. You may not be able to force a horse to drink by pushing its head down toward the water, but you can make it *thirsty* enough to *want* to drink. A small salt tablet placed in the horse’s mouth will quickly change its mind!

In the same way, your presence is intended by God to make the people around you thirsty for the presence of God. As a spiritual seasoning in a tasteless world and as a supernatural preservative in a decaying society, you are the salt of this earth. In the words of Henry van Dyke:

“Christ chose an image that was familiar when he said to his disciples: ‘You are the salt of the earth.’ This was his conception of their mission – their influence. They were to cleanse and sweeten the world in which they lived, to keep it from decay, and to give a new and more wholesome flavor to human existence. Their characters were not to be passive, but active. There is no use in saving salt for heaven. It will not be needed there. Its mission is to permeate, season, and purify things on earth.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Disciple’s Study Bible* adds this comment:

“Salt is marked by its ability to flavor with only a little of its presence...Christians should give the world the gospel flavor.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Losing Your Saltiness**

**Read Luke 14:34-35**

*The Living Bible* gives a modern slant to Jesus' warning:

“What good is salt that has lost its saltiness? Flavorless salt is fit for nothing—not even for fertilizer. It is worthless and must be thrown out. Listen well if you would understand my meaning.”

It may sound unusual to read of salt losing its saltiness, yet salt has different grades of quality and purity. Even today, only the highest grade of salt reaches the dining table. Most poorer grades of salt are used in industrial processes.

In ancient times, salt was rarely pure. During Biblical times, most salt in Israel came from the Dead Sea and was often mixed with impurities, making the salt less salty. There were also conditions in which salt could be leached out or made less effective, through exposure to water, air, excessive sunlight or even other chemicals. *The Victor Bible Background Commentary* informs us:

“In Israel salt was mined from a great ledge of rock salt lying near the Dead Sea and evaporated from that Sea's waters. The rock salt deteriorated in high temperatures, and moisture could leach the salt from the rock. Thus this important product could lose its saltiness – *and become absolutely worthless.*”<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, “flakes of salt form on the rock shores of the Dead Sea at night. In the morning the sun rises. Under its heat the salt loses its saltiness. It *blends with the shore and loses its distinctiveness.*”<sup>10</sup>

To illustrate this leaching process, Marvin Vincent quotes the following story:

“A merchant of Sidon, having farmed of the government the revenue from the importation of salt, brought over a great quantity from the marshes of Cyprus—enough, in fact, to supply the whole province for many years. This he had transferred to the mountains, to cheat the government out of some small percentage of duty. Sixty-five houses were rented and filled with salt. Such houses have merely earthen floors, and the salt next the ground was in a few years entirely spoiled. [L]arge quantities of it [were] literally thrown into the road to be trodden under foot of men and beasts. It was ‘good for nothing.’”<sup>11</sup>

Salt can lose its saltiness if it is adulterated with inferior substances. In the same way, your distinctiveness as a follower of Jesus can be watered down if you mix a biblical lifestyle with the world's lifestyle.

## Salted With Fire

In **Mark 9:49-50**, Jesus makes an incredible statement:

“Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Everyone will be salted with fire! What did Jesus mean by this?

If you look at the context of this verse, Jesus has been speaking about hell and giving hyperbolic\* instructions on how to avoid it (see **verses 42-48**). But **verse 50** is not talking about avoiding hell, and neither is **verse 49**. Here Jesus is building upon the imagery of fire but using it to teach a different truth. Every follower of his, he says, will be “salted with fire.”

Fire and salt have many similarities. Fire has a purifying effect, as does salt. Both cauterize and disinfect. And both refine. It’s for this reason that Jesus speaks of being “salted *with fire*,” an expression that bears similarity to the expression to be “baptized with fire” (**Luke 3:16-17**). The fire of persecution is one of the things that “salts” and refines the Christian.

**Read James 1:2-4**

**Read 1 Peter 1:6-7**

## Have Salt in Yourselves

After making his bold statement that “[e]veryone will be salted with fire,” Jesus goes on to say in **Mark 9:50**:

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? *Have salt in yourselves*, and be at peace with each other.”

This is no longer merely a *description* of the Christian as “the salt of the earth.” It is now also a *command*: “Have salt in yourselves.” The original Greek recorded in the New Testament can have one of two meanings:

- Have salt *in* yourselves
- Have salt *among* yourselves

Both are probably correct. There is no question, however, that the following statement – “and be at peace with each other” – is an explanation of what it means to “[h]ave salt in yourselves.” Through Christ, you have been given peace with God (**Romans 5:1**) and you are now to express that peace toward other Christians (**Colossians 3:15**). This relationship of peace with other Christians is part of what it means to be “the salt of the earth.”

In **Colossians 4:6**, Paul takes this to the next logical step. He says:

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, *seasoned with salt*, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

When your life has been salted with fire and with the peace of God in the midst of

\* Jesus often used “hyperbole” in his parables and teachings. A hyperbole is the use of obvious exaggeration (or “over-statement”) to make a point. Examples of hyperbole are **Matthew 19:24; 23:24; Luke 6:41-42**. In **Mark 9:43-47**, Jesus was not instructing his hearers to sever limbs or pluck out eyes. He was teaching them to take drastic measures – *whatever was necessary* – to avoid the judgment of God and the destiny of hell. It was drastic measures of the order of **Mark 9:43-47** that took Jesus to the Cross, to bear our punishment, so that we could escape the fate of hell.

that fire, your conversation will reflect this to those outside of Christ. This is what Paul means when he speaks of “your conversation [being] always full of grace, seasoned with salt.”

As explained in *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament*:

“The salt of holiness must always flavor our speech...The Greeks called salt *charitas* – grace – because it gave flavor to things. Our speech must not be corrupt...[S]alt (God’s grace) holds back corruption.”<sup>12</sup>

In summary, we see that salt is what makes you distinctive. You are salted through:

- The refining fire of persecution
- The experience of peace with God and with other Christians
- The understanding and action of grace in your life

As the “salt of the earth,” you flavor a flavorless world, you preserve a corrupting society and you make people thirsty for the righteousness that is found in Christ.

## The Light of the World

But that is not the only metaphor that Jesus uses when describing your impact upon the world around you. He not only calls you “the salt of the earth”; he also describes you as “the light of the world.” Just as Jesus referred to himself as “the light of the world” (**John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46**), so he has called you to take on exactly this same characteristic.

### Read again Matthew 5:14-16

Jesus uses two illustrations to picture how we are to be “the light of the world”:

- A lamp on a stand
- A city on a hill

The first pictures your life as an individual Christian; the second, the combined effect of many individual lights shining together.

In Scripture, light is often used to depict the revelation of God shining into a person’s heart. Light, simply put, *illuminates*. One example of this is found in **2 Corinthians 4:6**. J. B. Phillips renders this verse in this way:

“God, who first ordered light to shine in darkness, has flooded our hearts with his light. We now can enlighten men only because we can give them knowledge of the glory of God, as we see it in the fact of Jesus Christ.”

The shining of light has to do with a revelation of God, which must be expressed practically (in your life) *and* shared verbally (with your mouth). By its very nature, the Gospel must be lived *and* spoken, and it is in the combination of these two things that we truly become “the light of the world.”

### Read Luke 11:33-36

In order to be an effective light, Jesus says, you must allow the light of God to penetrate every corner of your life. This happens when:

- You live by the truth of the Gospel (**John 3:21; 1 John 1:6-7**)
- You put your full trust in Christ (**John 12:36**)
- You put aside the deeds of darkness (**Romans 13:12**)
- You stay sober and alert (**1 Thessalonians 5:5-8**)
- You stand your ground in the face of suffering (**Hebrews 10:32**)
- You declare the praises of God (**1 Peter 2:9**)
- You love your brother and sister (**1 John 2:8-10**)
- You live a life that pleases God (**Ephesians 5:8-10**)
- You exercise the justice of God (**Isaiah 51:4; 58:6-8**)
- You expose yourself to the light of God's Word (**Psalms 119:105,130**)
- You walk in the light of God's presence (**Psalms 89:15; Isaiah 2:5**)

The light of God is described as “a light for revelation” and “a light...for glory” (**Luke 2:32**). That light brings exposure (**Ephesians 5:13-14**), which incidently is also a characteristic of God's Word (**Hebrews 4:12-13**). As you live the Gospel and speak the Gospel, the light of revelation will expose the darkness in people's hearts and direct their attention to the source of the light – Christ himself.

### Read Isaiah 60:1-3

The issue at stake if we are to be effective “salt” is purity. The issue at stake if we are to be effective “light” is exposure. For the purposes of this study, we will label salt and light this way:

- The salt of the Gospel – holiness
- The light of the Gospel – revelation

Now let's take a look at how these salt and light work together to create a very powerful witness to the world.

## Three Essential Elements

There are three essential elements to an effective witness – potency, proximity and proclamation.\*

### **Potency**

Just as salt that has lost its saltiness is next to worthless, so the potency of your life as a Christian is of prime importance in your witness for Christ. How “potent” is your life? How “real” is your daily walk with God?

Do you remember Jesus' words in **John 15:4**? “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” The measure of your potency is directly

\* Adapted from the book *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, where authors Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg use the mathematical formula  $HP + CP + CC = MI$ , where HP is High Potency, CP is Close Proximity, CC is Clear Communication and MI is Maximum Impact.

related to your proximity to God. By remaining in him, through the practice of a close, daily walk with God, you *will* bear much fruit. This potency can only come from the flow of life received through the Lord himself.

In the words of Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg:

“...salt that is without savor and of inferior quality is worthless. It has lost its power. It won’t create much thirst, won’t add much spice, won’t retard much decay. It can have all kinds of proximity [to people in the world] – it can be poured all over something we want to affect – but if it lacks potency it is, Jesus said, useless. About all it does is give people something to stomp on.”<sup>13</sup>

So the first order of Christian witness is to maintain *the potency of a Gospel-energized life*.

### ***Proximity***

But just having a “potent” Christian life is not enough to be an effective witness for the Lord. There are a lot of Christians who have “got a lot of potency in their own relationship with Christ. They walk a God-honoring path in their personal patterns of living. But they never get out where they can rub up next to people who need their influence. They’re good-looking table ornaments [as salt in salt-shakers], but they have low impact.”<sup>14</sup>

Just as proximity without potency is worthless, so potency without proximity is wasted. For salt to have its full impact it must, in the words of Becky Pippert, be poured out of the salt shaker. Thus the second order of Christian witness is to maintain *a Gospel-motivated contact with others*.

### ***Proclamation***

But even potency and proximity is not quite enough. For effective witness to take place there must be a proclamation of the truth. Unless Christ is shared, no one will understand the reason for the hope that you have (**1 Peter 3:15**).

### **Read Romans 10:13-15**

Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg express it this way:

“Without [a clear communication of the Gospel], people are left guessing what it is that sets us apart in our quality of living. They may doubt that they could ever experience the kind of transformed life they see in us...Far too many Christians have been anesthetized into thinking that if they simply live out their faith in an open and consistent fashion, the people around them will see it, want it, and somehow figure out how to get it for themselves.”

We are not just to be potent Christians. We are not just to have a proximity ethic, where we choose to rub shoulders with people in the world. We are also, like John, to proclaim that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (**1 John 1:1**). Like Paul, we are to be “compelled to preach” (**1 Corinthians 9:16; 2 Corinthians 5:14**).



Thus the third order of Christian witness is to maintain *a bold and sincere communication of the Gospel to others*.

Being a witness for Christ involves being *salt* (potency and proximity) and being *light* (proclamation). We will be exploring these facets later in the Biblical Studies Course, when we examine the practical aspects of how to be a witness to God's grace in our lives. But in the meantime, we encourage you to read **Matthew 5:13-16** once again, and as you do, speak to the Lord about what this passage means for you personally – this week.

<sup>1</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Metallurgy," excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *World Book Multimedia Encyclopedia, International Deluxe English Edition 1999*, CD-ROM.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1999 CD-ROM Edition.

<sup>4</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Salt," excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p.42.

<sup>6</sup> *The Disciple's Study Bible*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933), quoted by Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>8</sup> *The Disciple's Study Bible*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>9</sup> *The Victor Bible Background Commentary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>10</sup> *The Teacher's Commentary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>12</sup> *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p.43.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p.43.

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