

## THE USES OF SALT

At meal time, in most homes, we would find on the table a salt shaker. This is pretty standard and we sprinkle salt on our food to give extra flavour and make the food more pleasant to eat. When cooking vegetables sometimes salt is added to water. And if meat is to be cooked salt might be rubbed into the skin. Hopefully this will render the vegetables and meat tastier. For most of us our introduction to salt is through its property to enhance the flavour of our food.

Salt is also a preservative. It can be used to increase the shelf life of a product. When salt is added to fresh meat or fish the salt absorbs water from the meat or fish. Bacteria and fungi thrive in moist environments so when the water content is reduced, there is less chance of them surviving, so the produce remains edible for a longer period. We can well understand that before the invention of refrigeration, salt was much more greatly valued than it is today.

Interestingly, in the days of the Roman Empire soldiers sometimes received salt instead of money for their pay. They could trade the salt to buy what they needed. This is where the saying “he is worth his salt” comes from.

So in Matt 5:13 when Jesus is talking to his disciples and telling them they are the salt of the earth he is implying

- i) that they should be enhancing the conversation and the activity in which they are involved.
- ii) that they have a role in helping to preserve all that is valuable, all that is good and all that is of quality.
- iii) that they are valuable

## WARNING AGAINST IMPURE SALT

No matter what, salt is not an element that is useful to itself. Its value comes in its application on other things. So, likewise the disciples of Jesus are called to exist for others.

Jesus goes on to comment on what happens when “salt loses its saltiness.” Not being a chemist he is not strictly correct in making this statement. Salt is the compound sodium chloride. It never loses its distinctive flavour. It is just that when it is mixed with other substances then its distinct flavour is less evident. An impure mixture containing only a little salt is not going to be anywhere near as effective as pure salt. A mixture of salt and other substances was not going to be as valuable as pure salt.

In Jesus’ day, much salt was recovered from the Dead Sea and was adulterated with various substances. At some point, the adulteration could become so pronounced that people would discard the salt as worthless. Jesus is warning the disciples against losing their “saltiness”. Jesus warns us not to be complacent. If salt loses its taste because of impurities, it becomes worthless. We need to be wary of being an ineffective witness because “impurities” have overwhelmed our saltiness.

From being told that they are the salt of the earth Jesus then tells the disciples that they are the light of the world. Light was a crucial symbol in the Jewish worldview. Just as Greek culture prized knowledge, Roman culture valued glory, and modern Australian culture values equality. Hebrew culture's ideal standard was light. The imagery of light features regularly in biblical explanations of godliness and truth (Proverbs 4:18, *The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.*) (Also see Matthew 4:16, 2 Corinthians 4:6)

## DISCIPLES ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

In Matt 5:14 Jesus tells the disciples they are the light of the world. At other times Jesus also describes himself as being the light of the world. Remember he said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." And also, in John 9:5, he says of himself, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." There is no spiritual light in the world apart from Jesus Christ.

Jesus' light is meant to shine through his disciples. Jesus' light is meant to shine through every person who belongs to Him. The purpose of physical light is to illuminate. To reveal the physical world around us. To reveal hazards and dangers, to reveal pathways and safe havens, to reveal beauty. The light of the disciples was meant to expose untruths, to reveal moral, ethical and spiritual truths, and to lead to God's kingdom.

## LIGHT IS NOT MEANT TO BE HIDDEN AWAY.

It is important that the light of the disciples is seen. Jesus speaks of a city positioned on top of a hill. Such a city is not meant to be hidden; it is meant to be seen and found even in the darkness of night. During the time of Christ, the walls around a city on a hill were often made from white limestone, which would be relatively easy to see, even on a dim night. In the same way, the light of Christ is not meant to be hidden on the earth. It is meant to shine out brightly from all who belong to Christ. This way it is meant to be discovered by those still in the darkness.

When it was dark in Jesus' time, a lamp would be positioned in a room to best effect. There would be no point placing a lamp in a dark room and then covering it up, as that would undo its purpose. So too the disciples were told not to hide the light that they had but to let their light shine before men. A way of being a light is by performing good deeds and Jesus sees that as a result of these good deeds people will praise their Father who is in heaven.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 6, Jesus cautions on our motivation for doing good deeds. (Matthew 6:1). Good deeds done for God's sake, in ways that bring glory to God, ought to be done so that they can be seen. But we are not to be like the hypocrites who do good deeds so that they win praise for themselves. The light of Christian goodness is meant to shine out so that God will be glorified. However, in situations where the world is likely to merely praise the Christian, it's better for the act to be done "in secret" to avoid becoming arrogant and proud. (Matthew 6:2–4).

After having taught the disciples the beatitudes and the fact that they are to be people of salt and light, Jesus goes on to deepen their understanding of the Law 's teaching on various moral matters and to criticise the hypocrisy of many devoted followers of the Law.

But before he does this, he takes time out to uphold the importance and everlasting value of the Old Testament and to state how he is related to it. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount contained teachings which seemed unlike anything in the Old Testament so in the verses that follow, in Matt 5:17-20, Jesus clarifies how he and the Old Testament fit together.

### Firstly, JESUS IS THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS

In v17 Jesus teaches that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (Old Testament) but to fulfil them. So far, according to Matthew's gospel, Jesus has not encountered any opposition or debate with the teachers of the Law. But he wants to make it clear, to his disciples, he is not anti-Law or anti-prophets, he is pro-Law, pro-prophets. He tells his disciples that he is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Just what does he mean by this? Well fulfilment means "to meet the requirements" or "to accomplish what is required" or "to bring to completion."

With regard to the prophets, the prophets had foretold the coming of a Messiah and their prophecies are seen to be partially fulfilled by the life and work of Jesus. He would be recognised as the Promised Messiah. Further fulfilment of their prophecies will occur when Jesus comes again.

With regard to Jesus fulfilling the Law, that is a more detailed matter. When Jesus speaks of the Law he is referring to the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah. Within the Law there is what is known as the ceremonial and civil laws and the moral law.

The ceremonial laws govern Israel's worship including instructions for the tabernacle / temple, the system of sacrifices, the dietary laws and the cleanliness codes. Jesus fulfilled these laws by his sacrificial death on the Cross. There is now no longer any need for further sacrifices when we approach God. Christ was the one pure sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. Mankind can pray to God through Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and God will forgive their sins and they will be purified from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9.) We are now made clean by the blood of Christ, no longer by keeping ceremonial laws

Civil or judicial laws directed the daily life, the legal and social regulations of the nation of Israel. This included punishments for crimes, property rules and social relations. Civil laws were more or less an application of the moral laws to everyday life.

And then there are the moral laws which deals with God's timeless commandments. These show us the way that we ought to behave. The moral laws are summarized in the Ten Commandments.

Because of the context of verses 17 to 20, it is felt that in this passage of scripture Jesus is particularly thinking of the moral laws. I say this because in the verses that follow, he specifically deepens the disciples understanding of moral issues and implies that civil laws are only there because mankind failed to meet God's moral laws.

Jesus extended the moral laws inwardly. He extended the Law into the human heart. He did this by stressing people should not just obey the Law with outward acts but also with inherent qualities of mind and character. Jesus explains this so clearly in a few verses further

on, in v21-26 in his teaching on violence. Whereas the Law says “do not murder.” Jesus says to not verbally insult a person, do not even be angry. We may feel we have kept the law when we don’t murder someone but the outward law “do not murder” is only truly fulfilled when we are also not physically violent towards someone, when we don’t speak insultingly about someone and when we don’t harbour ill will toward someone. It is in this way that Jesus looks at the moral laws and unfolds their profound implications to the disciples. His explanations that follow in v21-48 show us the deep intentions of the Law. His teaching revealed the depth of meaning in the moral Law. His teaching fulfilled the Law and his life was lived in keeping with Law’s intent. His life fulfilled the expectations of the Law

How does our human heart change so that it doesn’t even feel anger toward people who wrong us? Well that only comes about through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Secondly Jesus recognises THE EVERLASTING NATURE OF THE LAW

In v18, Jesus adds forcefully that the law will not pass away, not even a little bit, until everything in it is accomplished and until heaven and earth pass away. So the Law is steadfast while ever Creation exists.

In the Hebrew alphabet, similar tiny marks differentiated one letter from another. So, by stressing in v18 that not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished, Jesus' is making the point that every letter of every word in the law would remain in effect until He accomplished everything in it (Hebrews 9:20–21;10:1–4). He would do this, and will do this by perfectly obeying every requirement of the law, dying as the final blood sacrifice for the sins of humanity, defeating death in the resurrection, and then by fulfilling every prophecy made about the promised Messiah in both His time on earth and in the future.

Thirdly, Jesus stresses THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LAW

In v19 he links obedience and teaching of the Law to status in the kingdom of heaven. Practising and teaching others to obey the Law entitles someone to be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Whereas, breaking the Law and teaching others to do likewise, results in someone being called least in the kingdom. However, what he is not saying is that someone isn’t part of the kingdom of heaven if he breaks the Law.

Fourthly he discusses THE PHARISEES AND THE LAW

Verses 18,19 are difficult verses because what Jesus’ teaches here about the Law seems to be in conflict with his observance elsewhere. Here he defends every detail of the Law. Elsewhere, he defended his disciples’ non-observance of Sabbath laws when they plucked grain on the Sabbath (12:1-6) and again when they failed to observe the ceremonial law that required ritual handwashing (15:1-9). He, himself, healed people on the Sabbath (12:10-13). And yet, in v18,19, Jesus appears to be calling for a super-meticulous observance of the law.

It is worthwhile recalling that in this passage he is addressing the disciples and explaining to them how he and the Law and the prophets fit together. In this Sermon on the Mount he is teaching the disciples a more insightful way of looking at the Law and a new understanding of what it means to be blessed.

When Jesus breaks the Law and defends the disciples for breaking it the situations are different. He is confronting the Pharisees and using those occasions to highlight the complexity of the Law and the need for the Pharisees to recognise its hierarchical nature. In Jesus' day, Jews were subject not just to the Law of the Torah but also to commentaries on the Law. These commentaries comprised thousands of rules defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour stemming from the Torah. Jesus respected the Law, but he had little tolerance for the thousands of rules generated by the scribes. That was the source of much of the conflict between him and the scribes and Pharisees.

Over-riding all the laws are the commands to love God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and to love your neighbour as yourself. Foremost in Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is the attitude of the heart in every situation. Sadly, the Pharisees were very good at keeping the letter of the Law and being seen to keeping the Law. Where they failed was in showing Godly love, being sincerely repentant and wanting a change of heart. The moral Law made them superficially aware of their sin but they did not let it speak to their heart. It was as if there were so many little by-laws that by the time they had obeyed all of them, they had lost focus on the core moral laws. We might say they couldn't see the forest for the trees.

And so, in v20 Jesus tells the disciples that unless their righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law then they will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus understanding of righteousness transcends legalistic law keeping and focused instead on a transformation of the heart. A transformation that should manifest itself in loving actions. He calls for a greater righteousness than the Pharisees with the emphasis on genuine inward integrity and love not merely duty and outward show.