

Basic Training: Salt Lamp
By Jason Huff
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Leviticus 2:11-13; 1 Kings 11:29-32,36; Matthew 5:13-16

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 5:13-16. Let's listen to the Word of God together. "[Jesus taught,] "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. 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.'"

Have you ever heard of a salt lamp? I hadn't until I started preparing for today's sermon. I've got a picture of them to show you. In different parts of Europe and Asia, they're very popular. When you put a candle into a large salt crystal, they glow. It's become a huge scam, actually – there's an entire industry that mines these rocks from the Himalayas and claims that lighting them in your home creates negative ions that help your brain and your immune system. Apparently being pretty wasn't a big enough selling point!

Salt lamps came up because they slam together the two metaphors in tonight's passage as Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount. The metaphors illustrate two interconnected ideas, just like these salt lamps. Tonight, we'll examine what Jesus is saying, how it relates to the Beatitudes, and how they point out the future of CrossWay.

The Beatitudes last week set up a new mindset for Jesus-followers. It's a paradigm the world hates; we saw just how opposed the world is to God's ways. Jesus taught in the last beatitude that His followers would be persecuted for their faith – He said we could rejoice when we are wronged on His behalf. Living in such a strikingly different way like the Beatitudes describe might lead us to believe that Jesus wants us to live apart, uncontaminated by the world. Christian splinter groups have done that – from orders of monks in the ancient church to the Amish and Anabaptists closer to the present.

Jesus immediately counters that thought. The Beatitudes teach us that we will be genuinely happy in God as we turn to Him and mature in faith, relying on Him and growing more and more like Him. Those changes don't come from abandoning the world; they come from embracing Christ. God *wants* those changes to be seen by the everyday world. Both metaphors ask Christians to be an active part of the communities we live in.

Let's dig deeper. Jesus says to His disciples, "You are the salt of the earth." What's the idea? First, Jesus's metaphor tells us we are important to the Kingdom of God and what God is doing. Salt was vital in ancient economies. Roman soldiers were paid partially in salt – that's where we get that a worker is or isn't "worth his salt." If you were shown hospitality, you were "sharing salt" with your host. Salt could mean the difference between life and death, between having plenty and starving. If we are the "salt of the earth," it means we play a lead role in God's plans to save His people.

What is our role as salt? Why are we so important? When I think of salt, I'm reaching for the shaker on the dinner table. We think of something that brings out flavor in something that's bland. In America, we've got too much salt in our diets. When I started losing weight a couple years ago, I learned how loaded everything we eat is with salt. You can't get away from it. You can gain weight through just eating too much salt.

But many processed foods have a lot of sodium for the same reason it was so valuable to the ancients. It's wasn't primarily to make things taste good. It's a preservative. Salt keeps things from going bad. If you've had beef jerky, you know what I'm talking about. Beef jerky has a two year shelf life. Jerky that's just beef and salt can last a lot longer! In Jesus' era, there was no refrigeration. Without salt, meat went bad in a few days at best. With salt, you could prepare meat to have through the lean months.

When Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, He gives us immense value as preservatives. In a world that's gone rancid, we protect and preserve God's ways. We stand against the corruption that surrounds us. Because God has remade us and has removed the corruption from us through faith in Christ, we act as a counteragent to the world and its culture. We bring flavor to the world because we stand out against it, and we keep it from further decay.

But what if salt loses its saltiness? It's good for nothing. Now the chemical compound of salt can't become un-salty. But 2000 years ago, salt was processed differently. It was taken from marshes and had a lot of impurities. There was rarely a proper place to store it. And when it got wet, the salt leached from the rest, leaving you with a pile of dirt that would kill soil but wouldn't preserve anything. You put that on your beef, you'd be in big trouble.

If we're the salt of the earth, how can we become unsalty? It can happen if instead of keeping our corner of the world from corruption, we ourselves get corrupted by wrong philosophies and agendas and by popular but ungodly views. If we decide we're going to fall in step with the world, we lose our saltiness. We lose our effectiveness for Christ. Jesus isn't saying that if we ever sin we lose our salvation; we all still feel the effects of sin on our lives. But if we trust Oprah over Scripture and the Supreme Court over God's justice, we don't function as God intended, as preservatives. If nothing we do makes us stand out as Christians so that someone takes notice, we need to reconsider if we are actually following Christ or not.

Now let's get away from the metaphor. How does this play out in real life? Let's take an example from this weekend. Two movies are vying for the date night crowd. One we've all heard about on the news: *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Another has little press and almost no recognition: *Old Fashioned*. One is playing on well over 2,000 screens; the other is playing on less than 200. One is about a naïve woman getting into a really dark, abusive sexual relationship with a powerful and brutal man. The other is about purity in romantic relationships and how there's a choice besides the hook-up culture that has overtaken our society.

I can't tell you that *Old Fashioned* is going to be a great movie. It might not be. It could be cheesy or overacted; a lot of well-intentioned Christian films are. But I know this much – it's a preservative. It's David standing against Goliath. If you're in the market for a movie this weekend, I'd suggest that one. Post on Facebook what you're up to instead of this sad phenomenon. I don't think it will help anyone to get into a fight about it, but simply standing against the tide makes a difference. Being a preservative isn't really about complaining about what's already gone bad but promoting what's good and keeping it that way.

Maybe you'll be a preservative in some other way. Maybe you'll stand up for someone who's been wronged. Maybe you'll show grace to the person who's unpopular at work or at school. Maybe you'll speak up for a godly response to a problem rather than the easiest response or the socially acceptable one. Resolve today that you will be salty, a preservative that will keep God's Word. It's too hard to make that choice when the situation is right at hand. Make the choice tonight so when the time comes, you make the right decision to stand up for godliness.

Jesus goes on to say, "You are the light of the world." Jesus calls Himself "the light of the world" twice in the gospel of John, and He says that He is the light of the world "while I am in the world." That means that we have been given the role to be as Christ to the world at large. It's a huge privilege. In as much as we follow Jesus faithfully, we reflect His light and shine it out. You, as a Christian, are given this incredible honor. Without Jesus' light, there is spiritual darkness. We take His light into dark corners and illuminate them.

He goes on to say, "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." God's people are that city on a hill. To Jesus' listeners, the city on a hill is Jerusalem, which was known for its elevation. But now that Jesus has arrived, the city on a hill is us, His people, the church, together. We aren't just in one location, a holy site at one point on the map. We're everywhere. We take God's message wherever we go. God didn't make us to be hidden away, tucked into some corner somewhere. He makes us to shine His light.

Jesus uses these metaphors because they show the ridiculousness of trying to hide who we are. We are Christians. That's our identity. To try to hide it is to deny our very selves. It's dishonest. A lamp exists to give light. A lamp that's never lit is a waste of money, but it's just crazy to turn on a light just to cover it up. Being a Christian and not wanting to shine for Him don't make sense together. Both Mark and Luke tell us Jesus' opinion on the subject: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." Christians want to reflect Christ. They aren't embarrassed of Him or what He teaches.

Jesus explains a bit more how we shine. He says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." The light we have from Jesus culminates in good deeds. We've studied together that good deeds don't save us from our sins. Instead, good deeds come about once we have been saved by Jesus' work on the cross and been forgiven and transformed by God the Father. Once that's happened, we'll want to do good things so that others are blessed and they come to know for themselves the grace and love that God has shown to us.

Sometimes we get confused about what it means to shine our light. Saying that something is wrong or bad isn't quite the same thing. I can sit in our living room at 11 at night and think, "Boy, is it dark in here." I can complain; "Boy, I can't read with this little light!" I can get upset and yell about the darkness. But none of that is going to flip on the switch for me.

In the same way, sometimes we have to point out that something is not God's best. Someone who's blind can't know if it's dark or light outside. In the same way, someone who's spiritual blind, not a Christian and doesn't know the Scripture or God, isn't going to know much about what pleases God and what doesn't. Sometimes we have to speak into that spiritual darkness and say, "Hey, it's dark in here," when we come across sin. But that doesn't fix the problem; it's not lighting a candle. It's not our primary calling. Our primary calling is to shine light on a better way of life.

Our role as Jesus' light-bearers is to do good works so that God is praised by others. When we do that, the darkness is exposed for what it is, the darkness flees, and others see the goodness of what we're doing. For example, when we feed people out of our pantry and at Meal and a Movie Night, we're doing a good deed that others appreciate. At the same time, it sheds light on the problem of poverty. Recycling newspapers and magazines for BRANCH helps build a home for young women coming out of human trafficking. It's genuinely good; it exposes the shame of modern slavery, and it does something about it. We don't just curse the darkness; we shine brightly so that, in our sphere of influence, the darkness has no choice but to flee.

We might it's not quite right to shine for Christ. Are good deeds good if we put them on display for the world to see? Jesus addresses this later in the Sermon on the Mount. We have to be careful because we can make our good deeds all about us, trying to show how good we are – showing off. Jesus says that our prayers and our giving should be done in private, not part of a big display.

But the key is that our good deeds are to bring honor and praise to our Father in heaven. We just need to be mindful – are we doing what we do so that we get the credit and the glory? Then best to rethink it. Are we doing it so that people might know who Jesus is, that they might find hope and redemption in God the Father, that where once there was suffering, now there is joy in God? If that's the case, then let's do it openly and proudly!

As we move forward in faith at CrossWay, as God leads us to a new home where we can better serve the community and reach out, we're going to have opportunities to shine. How are we going to shine, and where? Those are questions we can answer together. The elders and deacons have been brainstorming, and we want you to be part of the conversation as well. How can we, as CrossWay, do good deeds that will make Jesus known to the local community?

There are tons of opportunities. We just have to figure out which ones God is calling us to do! We've had suggestions for weight loss and exercise classes that incorporate our faith. We've thought a little about what it would be to have game nights for the community, or maybe a movie night for adults with films that challenge us to think about our relationship with Christ. We've talked about fixing computers and offering classes on protecting kids on the Internet.

There are many ways that we can get out into the community and do good in the name of Jesus Christ so that God is glorified. A lot of them don't cost much money – just time and investment in relationships with people. Folks are always amazed that our little church can do so much good. We can get out there and let more people know that we are there for them, that they can experience for themselves not just a fixed computer or a fun night out but the love of God!

We are salt and light...salt that preserves good and godly ways of life, and light that lets others know that God is real, that He's worthy of honor, and that He desires a relationship with us in which we find His love and forgiveness. We are a shining city on a hill; God through the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in every believer's heart. Will we be a salt lamp? Will we shine in dark places and season the world around us? Will you commit to that this week?