

# Matthew 5:13-16

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*Following the chiasm often called the “Beatitudes” Jesus uses the metaphors of ‘salt’ and ‘light’ to describe His disciples and the impact they are to have upon this world.*

The parallel Gospel accounts of this teaching are Mark 9:50, Luke 8:16, 11:33, and 14:34.

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus continues to use the second person *you* in His address to His disciples. He tells them that as His followers, *You are salt* and *light* in a dark and tasteless world.

He first uses the metaphor of *salt* to describe their function in the world, saying, *You are the salt of the earth*. In Jesus’s Jewish culture *salt* had three uses—all of which apply here.

First, *salt* was used as a seasoning for food (Job 6:6). As a seasoning, the right amount of *salt* has the ability to draw out the full flavor and true taste of the food it seasons. Too much *salt* masks the flavor. If there is no *salt* then the food is tasteless. But just a little *salt* enhances the flavor greatly. When Jesus told His disciples that they *are the salt* (seasoning) *of the earth* He is telling them that though there are few of them, their godly lives will draw out the good in the world around them. It is important for believers to remember that they are not called to be a majority. They are called to fulfill their function as *salt*.

When God first created the world, He declared it to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Through the corruption of sin resulting from our disobedience, the original goodness of creation is obscured and hard to taste. But as Christ redeems the world through the lives of His followers, creation’s hidden goodness becomes more revealed and appetizing. Godly living then salts *the earth*. It is an invitation for others to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Second, *salt* was used as a preservative. In the days before refrigeration, *salt* kept food from spoiling before it could be consumed. As a preservative, the Old Testament uses salt as a metaphor for endurance, signifying the covenant between God and His people, or His lasting covenant with King David (Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5). When Jesus told His disciples that *You are the salt* (the preservative) *of the earth*, He is telling them that their godly lives are the seasoning that preserves the goodness in society.

Recall how God promised to Abraham that He would preserve Sodom despite its wickedness if only Abraham could present to Him ten righteous men (Genesis 18:32). Only ten righteous men would have been enough *salt* to preserve a famously wicked city. A world that was good when it was created now rots with evil, but it only takes a little *salt* to be sufficient goodness to preserve the world. Jesus told His followers that they are that preserving *salt* when they live according to the principles in the “Beatitudes” chiasm.

Third, Moses taught that *salt* was the key ingredient for the incense that burned before the altar. The incense was perfume, whose aroma was to be “salted, pure, and holy.” (Exodus 30:34-35).

Likewise, the faithful lives of Jesus's followers are *salt* that is used to become the "fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and those who are perishing" (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). Moreover, the righteousness of Jesus's followers that does not conform to the world's standards salts their living sacrifice and signifies their covenant with God (Mark 9:49-50; Romans 12:1-2).

As *salt*, Jesus's disciples are to be all three of these things. They are to be the seasoning that draws out what is good. They are to be the preservative that keeps what is good. And they are to be an ingredient in the altar's incense that signifies what is holy and pleases God. *But if the salt* becomes *tasteless* and loses its saltiness it does none of these things. Pure sodium chloride does not spoil. In the time of Jesus it is likely their salt contained compounds other than sodium chloride. If their salt came from the Dead Sea, and it was similar to today's salt, it might have been less than half sodium chloride. If left in humidity, the sodium chloride could dissolve, leaving behind salts other than sodium chloride. What would remain would not serve the function that sodium chloride serves, as it would not have the proper flavor.

When Jesus rhetorically asks *how can it be made salty again?* He is saying "There is no way to fix spoiled salt." *You* (His followers) are it. If *You* (His followers) lose your saltiness you become useless to serve as salt. *You* (His followers) are *no longer good for anything except* for one thing, *to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men*. Perhaps after the sodium chloride spoils, the remaining salt is useful as an herbicide. Jesus might be referencing methods of salting roads in order to keep them free of weeds and thorns, by scattering the spoiled salt and allowing it to be *trampled under foot by men*. In any event, the metaphor makes a stark contrast between the two uses. One is to bring out goodness, the other is to be discarded and forgotten.

The second metaphor Jesus uses to describe the function of His disciples is *light*. *Light* illuminates. *Light* reveals what is there and shows the way. *Light*, opposite to darkness, is a common metaphor throughout the Bible and the ancient world for goodness. When Jesus told his disciples, *You are the light of the world*, He was telling them that they are the beacon fires of truth that reveal the reality of God's goodness and contrast with man's wickedness.

Jesus expands the *light* metaphor to *a city set on a hill which cannot be hidden*. At nighttime *a city* that is elevated *on a hill* is like *a lamp* that *gives light to all who are in the house*. It *cannot be hidden*. It is too large to cover with a shade. It is in full view, for everyone to see. The *city* is a metaphor that adds a community element to *the light*. Those who live in God's Kingdom and seek His standard of righteousness (social harmony) are *a city* whose citizens enjoy the life-giving blessings of unity and harmony. Its *light* is attractive and draws people to its warmth.

*You* (Jesus's followers, His *disciples*) are an example of God's goodness to *the world*. Just as no one lights *a lamp* and hides its light by putting *it under a basket*, but rather puts it *on the lamp stand* so that *it gives light to all in the house*, so *you* (His followers) are to *let your light shine before men in such a way* that other people take notice. They are to live *in such a way* that others *may see their good works*, not for the purpose of mistaking the servant for the King, but *in such a way* that when others notice, they *glorify* the King (*your Father*) *who is in heaven*. Jesus's followers are to live *in such a way* where other people can *see* God's goodness.

By describing God *as your Father who is in heaven*, Jesus draws His disciples in even closer. Not only are they disciples, and ambassadors of the heavenly kingdom, they are children of the King. God Himself is their Father.

### **Biblical Text**

**5:13-16 You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.**