

Introduction: This is Kingdom living. In Matthew Chs 5-7, Jesus is teaching in the sermon on the mount, what righteousness really is, a life to be lived by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. Our spiritual condition throughout our lives will depend on our hunger and thirst for the righteousness by which all Christians are to live by faith in the Son of God. The basic requirement for all Christian living is that we hunger and thirst for righteousness. Such hunger is seen in Moses, the prophets and the Apostle Paul. It all starts with us embracing the Christian life in Jesus, seeking to follow him, obeying his word and being guided into God's ways.

Being Christian: What made you a Christian? Who taught you how to live the Christian life? It seems that a change of heart, a conversion experience occurs when we encounter Jesus – as Paul did. Then we grow in the faith as we study the Word of God and meet with others. I want to tell you a story about a woman who became a Christian in the most unlikely circumstances. Her name was Bilquis Sheikh, a woman born into Pakistani nobility, by now a divorcee and living in a large house on the edge of a village in a fairly remote part of the country. She knew no Christians. She was lonely and bitter. She had seen American missionaries in the village working among the poor and disadvantaged: she called them “pale weeds”.

Through a series of dreams and visions she came to believe in Jesus, and made contact with the missionaries to learn more. She began to exhibit the gracious behaviour of a true Christian lady. Nobody taught her – it came from her change of heart with the indwelling Spirit of Jesus. There was a funeral in the village. The people all sat in silence around the room and nobody went near the widow. No words of comfort, no acts of kindness. Bilquis went up to her and spoke words of comfort and sat with her. Soon it became known that Bilquis was now a Christian. Someone tried to burn down her house. When she expressed the wish to be baptized, the missionaries were horrified. Christians who were baptized in Pakistan (the final repudiation of their former Muslim faith) were often killed by someone in the family – to preserve the family's honour. Bilquis went ahead anyway and was baptized. Then she became aware that people were out to kill her – she knew she had to leave Pakistan. The account of her escape, always being one step ahead of her pursuers, makes riveting reading. Her missionary friends organised for her to fly to America, to California, sponsored by Samaritan's Purse, and she became a Christian author and Speaker. She brought the presence of Jesus to people wherever she went. Her story is told in the book “I Dared to Call Him Father”. People like her are the “salt of the earth”, as is the righteous man described in great detail in Psalm 112.

Let's turn now to the passage in Matthew that we have read. Jesus said: 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. We know that salt is valuable to give flavour and to preserve from corruption. Jesus is saying here that

his followers esp. the disciples who were listening to him, must be godly examples in the world and must resist the moral decay and corruption evident in society. Christians must be an influence for good and bearers of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. In Roman times, in a pagan society, they changed the world and have been doing so ever since.

Salt was important in the Bible. The Jews were instructed way back in Leviticus that all their meat offerings should be seasoned with salt. All their offerings had to be accompanied by salt. There was a covenant of salt between God and his people. Let's understand: salt is used as a preservative, which means it is effective in making things last longer. So the term "covenant of salt" means that the covenant is perpetual and not to be broken, just as salt preserves.

I have always been a bit sad that in the new Jerusalem described so vividly in Revelation, there is no place for the ocean. There will be no oceans. Recently I learned that the oceans actually have a purifying purpose in the world, anti-pollution. When I saw the flood damage on the great Ocean Road in Victoria recently, there was a lot of mud, debris and rubbish washed into the ocean. Are our rivers constantly washing pollutants like fertiliser and pesticides into the sea? Not to mention sewage and drainage being pumped into the sea? We need the saltiness of the ocean to keep the world clean. There will be no need for this kind of purifying in heaven.

What did Jesus mean by the salt losing its flavour, and being thrown out to be trampled by men? Intriguing.

There's a word of warning here. Churches that become lukewarm, quench the power of the Holy Spirit and cease to resist the prevailing spirit of the world i.e. become worldly, will be "thrown out" by God. Lukewarm Christians will be overpowered by the ways and values of an ungodly society and go down that path.

Luke in his gospel (14:34), explains that salt plays a part in manure, too. Salt helps break down fresh excrement for better plant absorption. The minerals also prevent dunghills from rotting and becoming useless for providing nutrients for crops. Luke helps us understand that when Jesus warns of losing our saltiness, he's not describing table salt, he's describing fertilizer salt. As the salt of the earth we're called to be fertilizer! We're here to help people flourish, to be fertilizer in his Kingdom. Although salt never loses its flavour we as Christians can lose our effectiveness.

An ancient writer, commenting on this saying of Jesus, pointed out that the salt of those days was mixed with other minerals and could be of poor quality. If it lost its effectiveness, people would discard it – throw it out into the street as they did other garbage, and people would walk on it. Another suggestion was that poor quality salt was sometimes used for paths and paving. Let me digress, just for fun. In Namibia, there is sand -the whole country is sand, and there is the ocean. There is no rain. In

Swakopmund, a coastal town, we noticed that the roads looked like asphalt but in fact they are salt roads. Trucks go along pouring seawater onto the roads to maintain them, the hot sun dries the water and leaves the salt, and graders come along after. If it rained, the roads would turn to mush- but it never does and the roads are good, hard roads. Another digression – in the suburbs, you don't buy a block of land, you buy a block of sand. The streets are kept tidy by council workers raking the sand. People don't only walk on the salt here, they drive on it!

Back to our teaching on salt. Can you see yourself as a “flavour enhancer”? The Lord wants us to be the salt of the earth that preserves, sustains and brings out the “flavour” or goodness in ourselves and others. I am grateful to Annette Reeder, the “Biblical Nutritionist” for suggesting that we be “flavour enhancers” for people who may be hard to deal with. Our mission is to help them see how God works in our lives, share the good news, and direct them to the Lord.

Annette is most encouraging. Speaking to those who feel that they have little impact on the world she says: Be the salt and light in the world that spreads kindness to others through words, thoughts, and actions that embody God's goodness. In a unique, loving way, you can allow others to experience the Lord's presence in their lives by being a good friend, child, parent, spouse, colleague, church member!

Conclusion: Let me finish with some thoughts from Greg Sheridan. He has written a book called “How Christians Can Succeed Today: Reclaiming the genius of the early church”. His thesis is that we are living today not in the Christendom of a previous era, but in an age where Christianity is reviled, mocked and sidelined, a time that is called an apostolic age”, that is, Post – Christian. He says our biggest problem is fear – fear of the consequences of speaking out, from just looking old-fashioned or dorky, through to social media hostility, or even employment restrictions. The result is that fear can lead us to do what we really most want to do – nothing! The salt is losing its punch, its flavour. He shows how the early Christians revolutionised the pagan world in which they lived, a far more hostile world than ours. To be effective Christians today we need to reclaim the genius of the early church. Where will we find it? In the epistles. In the following passage from Paul's epistle to the Colossians I think we might capture some of that genius: Let me finish with Paul's words of encouragement to the church at Colosse (4:2-6):

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it early, as I should. 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. Grace and peace.

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