

Principle #12

Salt & Light

living a distinctive lifestyle



Principles of Discipleship

OK, so we're stuck in this world for an indefinite amount of time, right? So what are we supposed to do? Do we move to Oregon and hide in a Christian commune until it's safe to come out? Do we try to take over the government and make our favorite Christian speaker president? Do we just try to blend in with everyone else and "gut it out"?

Jesus had some choice words to say about all this in his famous "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7). He taught that the kingdom of God is here, but that the kingdom of the world is still going on as well. So how do you tell who's in which kingdom? Lifestyle.

"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.

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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.*

¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

Main Passage: Matthew 5:13-16

This passage is "sandwiched" between the "Beatitudes" (vs 1-12) and a discussion of the Law (vs 17-20). Briefly, what point is Jesus making in each of those passages?

- 5:1-12
- 5:17-20

◆ What does it mean to be salt?

How can a person be "salty"?

How can a Christian lose their "saltiness"?

Can you think of any other New Testament passages which describe this idea of a Christian being "salt"?



"Salt was used in the ancient world to flavor foods and even in small doses as fertilizer. Above all, salt was used as a preservative. Rubbed into meat, a little salt would slow decay. Strictly speaking salt cannot lose its saltiness; sodium chloride is a stable compound. But most salt in the ancient world derived from salt marshes rather than by evaporation of salt water, and thus contained many impurities. The actual salt, being more soluble than the impurities, could be leached out, leaving a residue so dilute it was of little worth."

{NIV Bible Commentary}



◆ **What does it mean to be light?**

Using a concordance, do a word study of "light", in the book of John. What do you observe?

Jesus said that *He* was the light of the world (John 8:12). How can He now say that of his followers?



◆ **Compare "salt" and "light"**

As a Christian lives his or her life, how does this combination of salt & light work itself out? Does one come before the other? Do they both happen at the same time?

Do you think Christians are more light than salt, or vice versa?

If Christians are *only* light (and not salt), what happens?

If we're *only* salt (no light), what can take place?

Who was an example of a "salty" Christian in you life?

Who was an example of light?



Rebecca Pippert wrote the book "Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World" (Inter-Varsity Press). Assuming you might have heard that title for the very first time just now, and not knowing what the book was about, what would you guess she was trying to say?

What I'm calling for is a radically different way of thinking about our world. Instead of running from it, we need to rush into it. And instead of just hanging around the fringes of our culture, we need to be right smack in the middle of it.

Why not believe that one day the most critically acclaimed director in Hollywood could be an active Christian? Why not hope that the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting could go to a Christian journalist on staff at a major daily newspaper? Is it really too much of a stretch to think that a major exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art could feature the works of a Christian artist?

- Bob Briner,
Roaring Lambs

from Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount by John Stott



Salt and light have one thing in common: they give and expend themselves – and thus are the opposite of any and every kind of self – centered religiosity.

Nevertheless, the kind of service each renders is different. In fact, their effects are complementary. The function of salt is largely negative: it prevents decay. The function of light is positive: it illuminates the darkness.

So Jesus calls his disciples to exert a double influence on the secular community, a negative influence by arresting its decay and a positive influence by bringing light into its darkness. For it is one thing to stop the spread of evil; it is another to promote the spread of truth, beauty and goodness.

Putting the two metaphors together, it seems legitimate to discern in them the proper relation between evangelism and social action in the total mission of Christ in the world – a relation which perplexes many believers today. We are called to be both salt and light to the secular community.

Take first our vocation to be salt. The apostle Paul paints a grim picture at the end of the first chapter of his Roman letter of what happens when society suppresses (out of love for evil) the truth it knows by nature. It deteriorates. Its values and standards steadily decline until it becomes utterly corrupt. When men reject what they know of God, God gives them up to their own distorted notions and perverted passions, until society stinks in the nostrils of God and of all good people.

Now Christians are set in secular society by God to hinder this process. God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not rather reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: where is the salt?

Jesus was teaching somewhere near the sea of Galilee. Less than a hundred miles to the south the River Jordan flows into another sea, the Salt Sea, so salty that it is dead. And on its western side there lived at that time a Dead Sea Community, whose library of scrolls caused such a sensation when it was accidentally discovered a few years ago. They were a monastic community of Essenes who had withdrawn from the wicked world. They called themselves *the sons of light*, but they took no steps to let their light shine, and in their ghetto their salt was as useless as the deposits on the shores of the nearby sea. Is it possible that Jesus was thinking of them? W.D. Davies thinks he made a “side – glance” in their direction. It is an attractive conjecture.

What does it mean in practice to be the salt of the earth? To begin with, we Christian people should be more courageous, more outspoken in condemning evil. Condemnation is negative, to be sure, but the action of salt is negative. Sometimes standards slip and slide in a community for want of a clear Christian protest. Luther makes much of this, emphasizing that denunciation and proclamation go hand in hand when the gospel is truly preached: *“Salting has to bite. Although they criticize us as biters, we know that this is how it has to be and that Christ has commanded the salt to be sharp and continually caustic ... If you want to preach the Gospel and help people, you must be sharp and rub salt into their wounds, showing the reverse side and denouncing what is not right. The real salt is the true exposition of Scripture, which denounces the whole world and lets nothing stand but the simple faith in Christ.”*

Helmut Thielicke takes up this same theme of the necessarily sharp or “biting” quality of true Christian witness. *To look at some Christians, he says, one would think that their ambition is to be the honeypot of the world. They sweeten and sugar the bitterness of life with an all too easy conception of a loving God ... But Jesus, of course, did not say, “You are the honey of the world.” He said, “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt bites, and the unadulterated message of the*

judgment and grace of God has always been a biting thing.”

And alongside this condemnation of what is false and evil, we should take our stand boldly for what is true, good and decent whether in our neighborhood, in our college, profession or business, or in the wider sphere of national life, including the mass media.

Christian salt takes effect by deeds as well as words. We have already seen that God has created both the state and the family as social structures to restrain evil and encourage goodness. And Christians have a responsibility to see that these structures are not only preserved but are also operated with justice. Too often evangelical Christians have interpreted their social responsibility in terms only of helping the casualties of a sick society, and have done nothing to change the structures which cause the casualties. Just as doctors are concerned not only with the treatment of patients but also with preventive medicine and public health, so we should concern ourselves with what might be called preventive social medicine and higher standards of moral hygiene. However small our part may be, we cannot opt out of seeking to create better social structures, which guarantee justice in legislation and law enforcement, the freedom and dignity of the individual, civil right for minorities and the abolition of social and racial discrimination. We should neither despise these things nor avoid our responsibility for them. They are part of God’s purpose for his people. Whenever Christians are conscientious citizens, they are acting like salt in the community. As Sir Frederick Catherwood put it in his contribution to the symposium *Is Revolution Change?* *“To try to improve society is not worldliness but love. To wash your hands of society is not love but worldliness.”*

But fallen human beings need more than barricades to stop them becoming as bad as they could be. They need regeneration, new life through the gospel. Hence our second vocation to be *“the light of the world.”* For the truth of the gospel is the light, contained indeed in fragile earthenware lamps, yet shining through our very earthiness with the more conspicuous brightness. We are called both to spread the gospel and to frame our manner of life in a way that is worthy of the gospel.

So then, we should never put our two vocations to be salt and light, our Christian social and evangelistic responsibilities, over against each other as if we had to choose between them. We should not exaggerate either, nor disparage either, at the expense of the other. Neither can it be a substitute for the other. The world needs both. It is bad and needs salt; his dark and needs light. Our Christian vocation is to be both. Jesus Christ said so, and that should be enough.

SCRIPTURE

Which verses significantly impacted you and why?



ARTICLE

What did you personally glean from this article?



PRINCIPLE

Summarize the truth you've learned in a concise statement:



LIFE APPLICATION

How could you be “salt” or “light” this week in relation to your...

- *family*
- *friends*
- *co-workers*
- *neighbors*

