

Living Up to Your Worth in Salt

Matthew 5:13-20

With all this lovely weather we have been enjoying this winter, apparently there is a shortage of salt in many parts of the country. *The New York Times* even ran an article about it after last Wednesday's storm. Not only is halite hard to find, its price is rising in the market of supply and demand! With the way government budgets are going, cities and towns may covet their stockpiles of rock salt more greedily than they do their mill rates!

In some ways, this may seem strange, since we exist in an era when salt is considered more of a cheap condiment than a coveted commodity. Not always has this been the case. Salt usage goes back thousand of years, particularly as a preservative. Somewhere in time, some Neanderthal hunter discovered that salting meat and fish prevented spoilage and ensuing sickness, which we know happens by drying out the natural moisture that contributes to the growth of bacteria. Archeologists have uncovered evidence of saltworks in ancient China and Europe, both dating back beyond 6,000 BCE; some believe halite was used to barter for obsidian, or volcanic glass, as far back as 12,000 years ago during the Neolithic Era in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey)! Unlike today where it originates largely from salt mines, in antiquity access to salt was limited, since it was residual from the sea or from mineral springs, so it became a tradable, and highly valued, commodity.

Salt was so valued it was used to ceremonially seal covenants and agreements (some examples of that are found in Leviticus and II Chronicles). The Romans would pay their soldiers with "salarium,"

which was derived from the Latin word for “salt”—*sal*—which, in fact, was money paid for the purchase of salt. From this, the English word, “salary” is derived. Another familiar term, “salad,” originates from this Latin root, as well, literally meaning “salted” and referring to the Roman practice of salting leafy vegetables.

A few more fun facts. In sub-Saharan Africa, for many centuries salt was used as currency, including in the purchase and sale of slaves! The most intriguing reference I found was that 1500 years ago the Moors traded gold for salt, *for equal weight*—in effect, they traded a brick of gold for a brick of salt (with that type of market sense, no wonder they are no Moor)!

History tells us that not only have ancient tribes fought territorial battles over salt, in recent centuries monarchs have imposed taxes on the commodity, which incited various rebellions and revolutions: the Russians rioted over a salt tax in 1648; the hated *gabelle* (salt tax in France) was a key catalyst for the French revolution; in December 1775, Virginia farmers began their own salt riots when there was a shortage, which expanded into the revolutionary cause a few months later. Even as late as the 20th century salt was taxed as a commodity by the British in their colonies—a point of bitterness for Indians and one of defiance for Gandhi and his followers in the independence movement, who made their own salt to avoid paying the British tax, i.e., the Salt March.

I find all of this rather fascinating since, for the most part, I haven’t paid much attention to salt—table salt or rock salt. I wasn’t aware of its precious value throughout history, or that it was relatively scarce until the modern era, which made it such an important

commodity in commerce. So the old idiom, “a person is worth their weight in salt,” has taken on a whole new meaning. Clearly, it was meant as a wonderful compliment! It meant you were extremely valuable, essential to daily life, and, I suppose, you preserved what was good!

All of this sheds light upon another idiom—one that Jesus himself may have coined when he declared his followers to be “salt of the earth”—the familiar reference we have here in our text today from the Sermon on the Mount. This verse, much like salt, is something I’ve not thought much about. I assume Jesus meant it metaphorically (given the alternative, as illustrated in the story of Lot’s wife!). Yet, perhaps because salt is relatively common and cheap for us today, in my mind, “salt of the earth,” has meant those who are considered down-to-earth and unpretentious. They are the ones who are straight-forward and call it as it is. That’s why we call them “salt of the earth,” because they are common, ordinary folks close to the essential elements of life—no frills, no fanfare. Old Noankers might be called “salt of the earth” people, because they possess rugged charm, genuineness, unvarnished honesty and, like salt, they’re cheap!

But now given the value of salt throughout history (and certainly in Jesus’ day), I have to revise my assumptions about this verse; Jesus must be saying that “salt of the earth” people are, instead, special, absolutely essential, greatly coveted, and beneficial to help preserve and save others. This opens up all sorts of possible meanings and interpretations I’ve otherwise missed. When Jesus called his followers “salt of the earth,” it was a stunning compliment,

especially to those who likely never felt much value in the social order of Jesus' day! He was infusing a measure of dignity, self-respect, and high value into lives that were often viewed as possessing little worth, economically, socially, and religiously! In effect, he was treating those who were perceived as expendable like they were now among the elite—highly valued and respected! They were as coveted as much as salt of the earth!

At the same time, though, I also don't want to let go of my earlier interpretation, in that for me there is something else implied by the claim, "salt of the earth." I want to hold onto the notion that "salt of the earth" people are known for their *authenticity*. Whether or not Jesus intended it, I think it fits. "Salt of the earth" people are real, not fake; they model integrity and transparency, instead of hiding behind a mask of deceit, hypocrisy, or propriety. It makes sense to me that when Jesus referred to his followers as being "salt of the earth," he not only imbued them with value, he viewed them as those he could trust to carry on his mission and teachings, in clear contrast to the Pharisees and other religious types. Unlike his characteristic railings against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and other religious leaders, here he was recognizing the authenticity of his own followers—salt of the earth people.

Implied in that compliment was Jesus' challenge to be true and live up to his word, where personal and social ethics were consistent; where values and priorities were completely congruous with what he proclaimed; where the selfless, service-oriented love that Jesus modeled was found fully expressed in those who pledged loyalty and love to him. To be "salt of the earth" meant you were effectively able

to represent Jesus in your life—in what you said and did and in what you valued. In doing so, a “salty” disciple helped to preserve what was good on earth by preventing that which corrupts, spoils, and makes life unpalatable from ever occurring. That was essential for any transformation to God’s coming reign. All of this would make sense to what Jesus meant by calling his own, “salt of the earth.”

However, there’s one more thing I want us to notice as we try to make sense of this passage. Let me preface it by saying we don’t know whether or not Jesus did this, since the his teachings would have come down to the writer of Matthew in oral, not written, form. But based on what I just said about “salty” disciples, it’s interesting to me where the Gospel writer ended up placing this verse in the overall narrative. One might think it would have come after a passage where Jesus criticized the hypocrisy of the Pharisees or religious priests. Or it could have been inserted toward the end of the Gospel, following the resurrection, where along with the Great Commission, Jesus commands his followers to live with integrity, like salt of the earth—highly valued for they were now carrying the mantle of the Gospel into the world. It would have made perfect sense in any of these passages.

But where did this verse end up? Juxtaposed to the preceding Beatitudes! This tells us something. The Beatitudes, of course, introduce the Sermon on the Mount with some remarkable claims Jesus made about what people were to value and consider truths of the Gospel. As much as we enjoy them as poetic verse, each of the Beatitudes were radical social and political claims and extremely counterintuitive—claims that may be true, but at first would be hard

to grasp, mainly because, at best, they seem more ideal than real and, at worst, sound ridiculous!

However, when you ponder what Jesus actually said in each of these preceding verses, then you understand why what immediately follows is this confirmation that Jesus' followers are not only blessed themselves—as valuable as salt of the earth—but they are also challenged by what Jesus claimed heaven values in each of the Beatitudes!

Believe me, living into the truths of the Beatitudes is a spiritual challenge, since they go against conventional wisdom! I don't know if this has been your experience, but I've never heard it commonly said that

- those who are poor and poor in spirit will experience the joy and fulfillment of heaven's blessings; if anything, conventional wisdom tells us that people who are poor and depressed tend to be miserable, overwhelmed with problems and hard luck;

or, that

- those who mourn over great losses in life will find comfort and peace. Conventional wisdom tells us to feel sorry for those who grieve, but then recognize, one has to adjust to living with losses—nothing will change;

or, that

- the meek and humble will ultimately rise over those who are aggressive, intimidating, and dominant. Since when has that happened? Conventional wisdom assumes that aggressive and competitive people end up on top; they're the ones who get what they want and receive the greatest spoils in life;

or, that

- peacemakers are really children of God. Sure, some are put on a pedestal and revered, but most of us are mocked by skeptics who typically view peacemakers as weak, unrealistic, naïve, and easily manipulated. That's the cynicism of conventional wisdom, particularly in a culture like ours.

Then, you have to ask, what was Jesus thinking when he told people who were persecuted, reviled, where all kinds of evil was said against them, that they are *blessed*? Have you ever met anyone humiliated and scorned by others who felt that way? More often they were emotionally scarred, if not destroyed, by such attacks.

So how can these Beatitudes hold true in the real world? In what setting do they ring with relevance? The answer is, in a world that has been transformed in values—the world we are to help create in the spirit of Christ! Jesus knew, and we know, that if we actually follow the truth in the Beatitudes to their logical end, then things would look quite differently in this world as to who is valued and honored and who is not! Jesus said, the last would be first and the first would be last! The ones who always lose out would be given priority in line for what they need to live, and those who always come out on top would be the last in line out of service and respect for those with greater need.

That's the model and those are the goals of the Gospel—to shake up the order of life on this planet in order to make things fair once again! The writer of Matthew's Gospel seemed to grasp this, which is why he wanted to make it abundantly clear that it takes “salt of the earth” people to carry it forward and to continue Jesus' mission!

I suppose, this is also why I titled this sermon, “Living Up to Your Worth in Salt.” You and I are divinely imbued with greater value than we might ever believe or see in ourselves. That’s a blessing and a grace from God. It’s for us to embrace as God’s truth for today.

But this comes coupled with the challenge to live into our faith—to live into the values revealed in the Beatitudes—to embody the beliefs we hold with authenticity and integrity and to confirm that we align our personal values and worldview with the dreams Jesus had for humanity and for earth, when he proclaimed such audacious truths and transforming hope!

It begins with dreaming the dream and reorienting ourselves toward bringing a glimpse of heaven’s joy to earth where relationships are right, people are equally valued and respected, those on the bottom have as much opportunity for the blessings of life as do those at the top, where the sorrows of life are comforted and eased, and the harmonies of life are reflected in all that lives and breathes on earth.

You are the salt of the earth. ...You are the light of the world. That’s our blessing and our mission. May we all live up to our worth in Christ and into the mission of the Gospel to the glory of God and for the hope of the world.

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