

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Sermon on the Mount Series: Matthew 5:13

by Maurice Barratt

“Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is henceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.”

The disciples have listened to the first words of Jesus. The beatitudes are complete. What now? What do you become if you live out the qualities of the beatitudes, the character of Christ, in this life? You become two things: The salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Jesus does not say, “You should be the salt of the earth”. He says “You are the salt”. What does this mean? Firstly, it means that this is about how God sees us. It’s not about how we see ourselves, or how others see us; this is God’s view of us. Secondly, it means that, whether your life is full of the character of Christ or not, if you are a Christian, you are the only salt there is. Thirdly, this means that you can be good or bad salt. Every Christian is salt of some kind. The question is whether we are salt that has its proper qualities (“savour”), or whether we are salt that has lost its savour - “good for nothing”. A Christian who has been born again but who does not grow and develop the character of Christ is of no use to God. He is saved, but “good for nothing”. Neither is he of use to the world. God cannot use him, and the world “tread him underfoot”. A sad position to be in - but a common one.

The Earth

In order to understand what Jesus is saying we need to look at the two key words “salt” and “earth”. Let us first consider the word “earth”. There is an important distinction in the Bible between the earth and the world. If we read the Bible thinking that the earth means the same as the world, we will miss a major truth. The earth, in the Bible, always refers to the physical creation. The earth is God’s. (In the next issue we shall see that by contrast, the world is the devil’s; and “the world” refers to a spiritual domain, not to physical things at all.) A few scriptural examples will suffice. In Isaiah 54:5, God is called “the God of the whole earth”.

Psalms 24:1 says “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof”. When the beatitudes say “The meek shall inherit the earth”, it means the physical creation. When God created the earth it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). (Throughout the account of creation in Genesis 1, the word “earth” is always used, never “world”).

But in Genesis 6 we read that “The earth also was corrupt before God ... for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth” (verses 11-12). This is physical corruption, not spiritual corruption. “The earth was filled with [physical] violence” (verse 11). The earth is still corrupt; and in the book of Revelation we see the culmination of that corruption, in the vision of the whole Babylon, who is

called “the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth” (Rev 17:5). But God’s aim is to redeem the earth from corruption - not just to redeem man, but to redeem the earth, the physical creation. Paul tells us that “the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The earth is “groaning”, Paul says, because it is waiting to be redeemed from corruption, and this can only happen when our salvation is completed and we are physically changed - when we are given resurrection bodies. We have what Paul calls “the firstfruits of the Spirit” - the spiritual new birth - but we are waiting for the physical new birth, “the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23).

Only one man has risen from the dead with a new, incorruptible resurrection body - Jesus, who is “the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20); but we are the harvest which will follow that “firstfruits” when we are given new bodies; and when that happens, not only our bodies but the whole physical creation will be redeemed.

The Function Of Salt

So the earth has become corrupted. There are only two things you can do with something that is corrupt. One is to destroy it; the other is to try and preserve it. Salt is what you use to stop corruption. This is why Jesus talks about “salt of the earth”. Much has been written about the properties of salt. It purifies, it preserves, it seasons. Let’s remind ourselves that Jesus says we are the salt of the earth - the only salt there is for the earth. What does this mean? Knowing that the earth refers to God’s creation, not to the world (society, culture, the spiritual systems of the world), we can say that we are the flavouring, the seasoning, of God’s creation. “Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt?” asks Job (Job 6.6). Earth is corrupt and therefore “unsavoury” to God. It is no longer “very good”. But Christians are the seasoning of the earth. As long as we are there, the earth is more “savoury” to God. We give taste, we give meaning to the existence of a corrupt earth.

We can also say that we are the preserving power in God’s creation. Salt is the only thing that stops meat from going rotten, or at least delays the process. We are the only thing that is preserving the earth from complete physical corruption. We are the physical manifestation of the spiritual qualities of the beatitudes. “Salt” is simply the character of the beatitudes physically manifested in our lives.

Have you noticed that the beatitudes become more physical as they progress? They begin with inward attitudes (poverty of spirit, mourning), but they end with physical persecution, and a final injunction to do something physical - “leap and dance for joy”. Persecution arises when the character of Christ in us becomes physically manifested - when “the life of Jesus” becomes “manifest in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:10-11).

The only reason that God has not destroyed the earth is that there is something stopping the rot - a remnant, the Christians who are the salt of the earth. If that salt goes, the earth will be only fit for destruction. When antichrist is manifested, he will make the whole world worship him, and destroy those who refuse. But by doing that, he will destroy the salt which alone is preserving the earth from being destroyed. What follows from the antichrist’s destruction of Christians (Revelation 13)? The destruction of the totally corrupt Babylon (Revelation 18), and finally the destruction of the old earth

(Revelation 21). But as the old creation passes away, the new creation comes: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away ..." (Revelation 21:1). The corrupt earth is redeemed.

Salt Without Savour

Now we must take in Jesus' warning that there is such a thing as savourless salt - and a more useless commodity would be hard to come by. Nothing can bring back the savour to savourless salt. Unsavoury food can be seasoned with salt, but what can season unsavoury salt? if we cannot be the preserving factor in the earth, nothing can. We are the only hope there is. If we lose the character of Christ, nothing else can bring it back. If the church loses its savour, what can God restore the character of Christ to it?

The sad fact is that much of the Church has lost its savour, and is "trodden underfoot of men" to prove it. The Church has become a laughing stock, outmoded and irrelevant, the vicar a caricature of ineptness, fit only for jumble sales and garden parties. The world despises the church in increasingly outspoken and blasphemous terms. Mockery of Christ and the Church in the media, unthinkable twenty years ago, is now commonplace. Why? Because our salt has lost its savour. The corruption is becoming rampant. The recent endeavours of Christians to be so-called "salt in society" are nothing but a red herring. The idea that we should get involved in politics or culture in order to "influence it for God" is a smokescreen covering the real problem: the Church has lost its savour; it no longer has the character of Christ. No amount of political clout, financial power or cultural influence can substitute for that loss, or rescue our salt.

Salted With Fire

What happens to savourless salt? It is "cast out". What happens to savourless Christians? Are they saved? Yes indeed. They have been born again. They have "the firstfruits of the spirit". But Jesus says that "everyone shall be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49). What does that mean? It means that each of us shall be tried before the judgement seat of Christ, and it is a trial by fire. "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is" (1 Corinthians 3:13). Jesus teaches that there are serious consequences to the responsibilities and privileges of being a child of God. The foolish virgins are locked out of the wedding feast; the unprofitable steward who buried his talents is "cast into outer darkness"; the steward who mistreated his fellow servants is "appointed his portion with the hypocrites" (Matthew 25:10, 25:30, 24:51). There is no indication that these servants, stewards and virgins are not saved, or that their punishment is hellfire; on the contrary, their punishment is consistently called "outer darkness"; but it is nevertheless a punishment, or at the least a terrible loss.

Remember Lot's Wife

When Jesus was teaching his disciples about the end times, he told them to “remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32) - who, as everyone knows, was turned into a pillar of salt. What is the significance of that? Lot’s wife represents savourless salt. Lot and his family were “righteous”, and they were delivered from the destruction of Sodom - that is, they were saved, not destroyed with the wicked. But although they were saved, Lot’s wife suffered a terrible judgement on the road out of Sodom - not the “hellfire” of Sodom, but the “salting” trial of the Christian. What was Lot’s wife’s error? She “looked back” to Sodom, to her home. In Luke 17, where Jesus speaks of Lot’s wife, he is warning of a particular danger for Christians days - the danger of becoming involved, not with sin, or even with dubious worldly activities, but with natural, wholesome and apparently harmless things - eating, drinking, marrying, planting, building, buying, selling (Luke 17:27-28) - not sinful activities relating to the antichristian spiritual system, but earthly activities relating to physical survival and sufficiency (food, housing And procreation). The lesson is clear - to be salt with savour, our hearts have to be separate from earthly things. “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:3). “Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth” (Matthew 5:19). Lot’s wife looked back, and proved that her salt had no savour, that she loved earthly things, that her treasures were in Sodom. So she was left where she was, “good for nothing” except to be a warning to us to “set our hearts on things above, not on the earth”.

Decision Time

When the judgement comes, it is too late to make a last minute decision to forsake earthly treasures. They are too deeply attached to our hearts. That decision must be made now! Lot’s family made their decisive mistake many years before God destroyed Sodom. When Abraham and Lot left Egypt Abraham offered Lot the choice of where he should live. Lot chose the attractive option, the well-watered plain of Jordan, beautiful “even as the garden of the Lord” (Genesis 13:10). Lot made a choice based on his earthly desires. Abraham had no such interest. He had already been called out of his homeland, and he was a “stranger and pilgrim on the earth”. Thus Abraham inherited the promised land of Canaan - and Lot inherited a heap of trouble. By choosing earthly delights, Lot lost his salt, the savour that made him stand out from the rest of men. Although he was righteous, and “vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked” (2 Peter 2:7), he nevertheless had no preserving effect on the corruption in Sodom; his sons-in-law had no respect for him; his wife suffered God’s judgement; and his daughters slept with him while he was drunk and bore him his sons Moab and Ammon, whose descendants would become nations at enmity with Israel, the promised seed. Lot and his family were saved, but they were no use to God, and no use to the world. They were righteous, but also “trodden underfoot of men”, “good for nothing”, because they had lost their savour. Abraham, by contrast, had so much savour that God shared with him His plans, and Abraham was able to intercede with God for Sodom. Abraham was of great use to God.

The choice is before us today. If we set our affection on earthly things, and lay up treasure on earth, we will not lose our salvation, but we will lose our savour and be “good for nothing”, of no use to God or to the world. Or we can be like Abraham, and count earthly things as nothing, and we will become salt with savour that is both pleasing and useful to God. And we will spare ourselves much pain in the future.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Relaxed - But Ready

It was my first trip to Lanzarote, and I didn't really know what to expect, other than it would be hot. After collecting our suitcases from the airport we took a taxi to our apartment and I had a chance to look at the scenery. The black volcanic ash which covered the surface of this island made it look very barren indeed and there seemed to be no vegetation other than the occasional cactus which sprung up here and there. I reflected upon England which is so lush and green and thanked God again for where he had planted me. Our apartment was pleasant and adequate and was one of eight on a complex which also housed a small swimming pool beneath our balcony. Maurice and I were very grateful for the opportunity to come to such an exotic place, as personal money, when you're in the ministry, is very hard to come by. For the first few days we sunbathed, swam and walked, and had a really enjoyable and relaxing time. But then one day someone stopped us in the street and, after asking a few questions, invited us to look around another resort and offered us a free radio cassette player and meal voucher for our trouble. Never one to pass up a bargain, I jumped at the opportunity, especially as the resort was situated at the other end of the island thus giving us more of an opportunity to sight-see.

A Good Opening

The next morning as arranged, a car came to our apartment to pick us up and take us to this holiday resort and we were given a conducted tour. The complex was indeed lovely and we were very impressed with both the mature gardens and the extensive swimming pool. Our guide ushered us to a table, ordered drinks and began to talk with us about the timeshare scheme. He asked us lots of questions one of which was, "What is your occupation?" On hearing Maurice's answer we embarked on an incredibly excellent conversation about God, church, values, and so many other things, and our guide ended up sharing his life and all the problems that he had kept bottled up inside him for such a long time. He confessed that this job provided him with an escape from his situation as here, on this holiday island, he could live in a fantasy world instead of reality. We had a wonderful time of fellowship together with him which started of a good friendship. When he found out that I was a singer he invited us both to a barbecue they were holding that evening on the complex. There would be food, drink and entertainment provided. He then wanted us to meet his manager whom he said had once been a "man of the cloth" himself.

A Surprising Invitation

As soon as we walked through the manager's door Maurice felt sure that this man had been a Roman Catholic priest. He just looked the part - black trousers, black shirt, the only thing that was missing was the white collar. But he couldn't have been more wrong. During the course of our

animated conversation we found out that his man had once been an Elim minister who, after leaving his pastorate, had now found his vocation working for timeshare. He said he had far more opportunities to speak to people about God here than he ever had in church before. As soon as he found out that I was a singer he earnestly begged me to sing at the barbecue that evening. He even had a special request, "Amazing Grace" .To be honest, I wasn't enamoured with his plea. I hadn't come away on holiday to minister and therefore had no backing tapes with me. And after questioning them I found out that there wasn't even a piano on site, so it meant singing the song without any musical backing whatsoever. The men kept pressing and urging me and in the end I gave in, thinking to myself that nobody knew me so it didn't make any difference. Maurice and I were, however, very grateful for the invitation to the barbecue because we'd never have been able to afford this ourselves. It meant we could have an extra treat to the one we had already planned for the end of the holiday.

True to their word they sent a vehicle around to collect us later in the evening to take us to the barbecue. The place was milling with people. There was a bar and restaurant which was packed full, and the overspill of people went onto the balcony. The place was absolutely buzzing with chatter and laughter. We were handed drinks and it wasn't long before we were told to help ourselves from the barbecue table. We sat down with our food in the restaurant and Dave, our guide, who had also become our friend, made sure that he was seated next to us. For our entertainment they had provided a cabaret and whilst we were still eating a man wearing a dinner suit, and a woman who was scantily dressed and wearing fishnet tights, came onto the stage and began to do a song and dance routine to backing tapes. I felt more and more out of place and dreaded being called up to sing. But it wasn't long before the feared announcement came that "a special guest had come from Manchester to sing", and I was invited up to the stage.

Bewildering Success

I mustered all the boldness I could and walked forward hoping and praying that none of my embarrassment and inadequacy showed. I expressed my thanks to the manager for inviting me to sing and told the audience that he had requested "Amazing Grace", a song which was particularly dear to me as, being a Christian, I understood what grace was all about. Maurice and I had prayed a lot about this evening and we'd asked God to turn this foolishness into something that would glorify Him. Before now there had been a constant hubbub of noise as people chatted over their meal, but once I began to sing I noticed a hush fall upon them and was amazed to see all the knives and forks and glasses put down and all their heads turn towards me. Even the people who were on the balcony became quiet and looked in through the windows as they listened intently to the song. Seeing their response made me pray more fervently inside that He would use this occasion for His glory, and I put my whole heart and soul into the song.

At the end of the song there was a total silence for about five seconds and then, to my amazement, the audience began to clap and rush towards me, and people began to hug and kiss me. I was totally bewildered by this response as obviously it had never happened before. Then there were shouts from all over the restaurant that I should sing another song. So, given this cue I spoke to them for about ten minutes concerning the things that God had done in my life and then sang a song with the message, "If I'd known yesterday the things I know today, a lot of things I'd not have done" .I

finished my song and left the stage to a roar of applause and people patting me on the back as I returned to my seat next to Maurice. I was absolutely overwhelmed by their reaction and knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that God had touched these ungodly people.

Confessions

What followed was even more amazing. Maurice and I continued our meal and one by one people began to tap Maurice on the shoulder and ask if they could have a word with him. They came out with all manner of confessions and begged Maurice to "put a few words in" to God on their behalf. As I sat back watching these things happening, it appeared as if a revival had broken out and I couldn't believe that God had been so gracious in such an ungodly atmosphere. The manager was absolutely over the moon at the success of the evening and was loathe to let the night finish. He took his staff, Maurice and myself, and a few others to an all-night café where we could get tea, coffee, alcoholic drinks and food so that we could continue our get-together. In his exuberance he began to get over-friendly and familiar with me, and I had to extricate myself from his grip on a number of occasions. I didn't want to judge him too harshly as I could see that he was quite drunk and probably didn't realise what he was doing. However, Maurice and I knew that our job had been done and now just wanted to get home. We persuaded our friend Dave to let us go and he called a taxi for us. As we were leaving the manager came rushing over and begged us to allow him to take us for a meal the following evening to show his appreciation for what we had done that night. He arranged to meet us at a little café from where he would collect us and take us to what, in his opinion, was the best restaurant on the island. After saying our farewells we finally left in a bemused state at what God had done that night.

A Shocking Announcement

As arranged, Maurice and I sat in the café drinking coffee whilst we waited for the manager to show up. The time appointed came and went and yet there was still no sign of him. Just as we were about to leave the café, Dave, our friend from the timeshare resort, entered and came over to our table. He sat down with us and poured out an amazing story. Apparently for some time now, the manager had been a source of embarrassment to the staff because he was in the habit of drinking heavily and seducing the female customers. Up until now they had tried to ignore his behaviour but, after witnessing his total lack of respect towards myself the previous evening, they were incensed, for in their opinion I was a good girl and totally different to the others.

That very morning the staff had all got together and unanimously made the decision to request head office to dismiss their manager saying they would no longer work for him because they had totally lost their respect. They faxed their head office with this request and within a matter of minutes the answer came back that their request had been granted and the manager was sacked. Dave was full of apologies for the treatment I received last night and begged that I would try to forget it. As we walked back to our apartment that evening, Maurice and I couldn't help but reflect on how the mighty had fallen. The man who had once been an Elim minister had backslidden so much that he

had become a drunken womaniser, despised not only by Christians, but also by the world. "If the salt has lost its savour it is fit for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the foot of men."