

# The Salt of the Earth

by Martyn-Lloyd Jones

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*The Christian's primary function is to prevent putrefaction and decay in the world by being a preservative or antiseptic through their individual life and character.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4:22

**Topics:** "Spiritual Renewal", "Deception And Truth"

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## Description

Pastor Steven Cole preaches about the dangers of deceit, enticement, and deception, emphasizing how they lead to false impressions, ethical enticement, and erroneous views concerning the truth. He highlights the importance of putting off the old self corrupted by deceitful lusts, being renewed in the spirit of the mind, and putting on the new man created in righteousness and holiness. The sermon underscores the need for ongoing transformation and the partnership between God's work in us and our daily choices to live according to the truth found in Jesus.

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## Transcript

We now come to a new and fresh section in the Sermon on the Mount. In verses 3-12 our Lord and Saviour has been delineating the Christian character. Here at verse 13 He moves forward and applies His description. Having seen what the Christian is, we now come to consider how the Christian should manifest this. Or, if you prefer it, having realized what we are, we must now go on to consider what we must be.

The Christian is not someone who lives in isolation. He is in the world, though he is not of it; and he bears a relationship to that world. In the Scriptures you always find these two things going together. The Christian is told that he must be otherworldly in his mind and outlook; but that never means that he retires out of the world. That was the whole error of monasticism which taught that living the Christian life meant, of necessity, separating oneself from society and living a life of contemplation. Now that is something which is denied everywhere in the Scriptures, and nowhere more completely than in this verse which we are now studying, where our Lord draws out the implications of what He has already been saying. You notice that in the second chapter of his first Epistle, Peter does exactly the same thing. He says, "We are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

It is exactly the same here. We are poor in spirit, and merciful, and meek, and hungering and thirsting after righteousness in order, in a sense, that we may be "the salt of the earth". We pass, therefore, from the

contemplation of the character of the Christian to a consideration of the function and purpose of the Christian in this world in the mind and the purpose of God. In other words, in these verses that immediately follow, we are told very clearly the relationship of the Christian to the world in general.

There are certain senses in which we can say that this question of the function of the Christian in the world as it is today is one of the most urgent matters confronting the Church and the individual Christian at this present time. It is obviously a very large subject, and in many ways an apparently difficult one. But it is dealt with very clearly in the Scriptures. In the verse we are now considering we have a very characteristic exposition of the typical biblical teaching with regard to it. I say it is important because of the world situation. As we saw in our consideration of verses 10 and 11, it may very well become the most urgent problem for many of us. We saw there that we are likely to experience persecution, that, as the sin that is in the world becomes aggravated, the persecution of the Church is likely to be increased. Indeed, as we know, there are many Christian people in the world today who are already experiencing this. Whatever our conditions may be here, therefore, it behoves us to think this matter through very carefully in order that we may be able to pray intelligently for our brethren, and to help them by means of advice and instruction. Quite apart from the fact of persecution, however, this really is a most urgent question, because it arises even here and now for us in this country. What is to be the relationship of Christian people to society and the world? We are in the world; we cannot contract out of it. But the vital question is, what are we to do about it, what are we called to do as Christians in such a situation? This surely is an essential subject for us to consider. In this verse we have the answer to the question. First of all we shall consider what our text says about the world, and then we can consider what it has to say about the Christian in the world.

"Ye are the salt of the earth." Now that is not only a description of the Christian; it is a description by implication of the world in which he finds himself. It really stands here for humanity at large, for mankind which is not Christian. What, then, is the biblical attitude towards the world? There can really be no uncertainty with regard to the biblical teaching on this matter. Here we come to what is, in many ways, the crucial problem of this twentieth century, undoubtedly one of the most interesting periods that the world has ever known. I do not hesitate to claim that there has never been a century which has so proved the truth of the biblical teaching as this one. It is a tragic century, and it is tragic very largely because its own life has completely disproved and demolished its own favourite philosophy;

As you know, there never was a period of which so much was expected. It is indeed pathetic to read the prognostications of the thinkers (so-called), the philosophers and poets and leaders, towards the end of the last century. How sad to note that easy, confident optimism of theirs, the things they expected from the twentieth century, the golden era that was to come. It was all based upon the theory of evolution, not only in a biological sense, but still more in a philosophical sense. The controlling idea was that the whole of life was advancing, developing and going upwards. That was what we were told in a purely biological sense; man had risen out of the animal and had arrived at a certain stage of development. But still more was this advance emphasized in terms of the mind and the thought and the outlook of man. Wars were going to be abolished, diseases were being cured, suffering was going to be not only ameliorated but finally eradicated. It was to be an amazing century. Most of the problems were going to be solved, for man had at last really begun to think. The masses, through education, would cease giving themselves to drink and immorality and vice. And as all the nations were thus educated to think and to hold conferences instead of rushing to war, the whole world was very soon going to be Paradise. That is not caricaturing the situation; it was believed confidently. By Acts of Parliament, and by international conferences, all problems would be solved now that man had begun at last to use his mind.

There are not many people living in the world today, however, who believe that. You still find an element of this teaching occasionally appearing in certain places, but surely this question no longer needs to be argued. I remember many years ago when I first began to preach, and when I began to say this kind of thing in public, I was often regarded as an oddity, as a pessimist, and as one who believed in some outmoded theology. For liberal optimism was then very prevalent, in spite of the first world war. But that is no longer so. The fallacy of it all has by now been recognized by all serious thinkers, and book after book is coming out just to explode the whole confident idea of that inevitable progress.

Now the Bible has always taught that, and it is put perfectly by our Lord when He says, "Ye are the salt of the earth." What does that imply? It clearly implies rottenness in the earth; it implies a tendency to pollution and to becoming foul and offensive. That is what the Bible has to say about this world. It is fallen, sinful and bad. Its tendency is to evil and to wars. It is like meat which has a tendency to putrefy and to become polluted. It is like something which can only be kept wholesome by means of a preservative or antiseptic. As the result of sin and the fall, life in the world in general tends to get into a putrid state. That, according to the Bible, is the only sane and right view to take of humanity. Far from there being a tendency in life and the world to go upwards, it is the exact opposite. The world, left to itself, is something that tends to fester. There are these germs of evil, these microbes, these infective agents and organisms in the very body of humanity, and unless checked, they cause disease. This is something which is obviously primary and fundamental. Our outlook with regard to the future must be determined by it. And if you bear this in mind you will see very clearly what has been happening during the present century. There is a sense, therefore, in which no Christian should be in the least surprised at what has taken place. If this scriptural position is right, then the surprising thing is that the world is as good as it is now, because within its own very life and nature there is this tendency to putrefaction.

The Bible is full of endless illustrations of this. You see it manifesting itself in the very first book. Though God had made the world perfect, because sin entered, this evil, polluting element at once began to show itself. Read the sixth chapter of Genesis and you find God saying, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man". The pollution has become so terrible that God has to send the flood. After that there is a new start; but this evil principle still manifests itself and you come to Sodom and Gomorrah with their almost unthinkable sinfulness. That is the story which the Bible is constantly putting before us. This persistent tendency to putrefaction is ever showing itself.

Now that, obviously, must control all our thinking and proposals with regard to life in this world, and with regard to the future. The question in the minds of so many people today is, What lies ahead of us? Clearly if we do not start by holding this biblical doctrine at the centre of our thinking, our prophecy must of necessity be false. The world is bad, sinful and evil; and any optimism with regard to it is not only thoroughly unscriptural but has actually been falsified by history itself.

Let us turn, however, to the second aspect of this statement which is still more important. What does this have to say about the Christian who is in the world, the kind of world at which we have been looking? It tells him he is to be as salt; "ye, and ye alone"--for that is the emphasis of the text--"are the salt of the earth". What does this tell us? The first thing is that which we have been reminded of in considering the Beatitudes. We are to be unlike the world. There is no need to stress that, it is perfectly obvious. Salt is essentially different from the medium in which it is placed and in a sense it exercises all its qualities by being different. As our Lord puts it here--"If the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men." The very characteristic of saltiness proclaims a difference, for a small amount of salt in a large medium is at once

apparent. Unless we are clear about this we have not even begun to think correctly about the Christian life. The Christian is a man who is essentially different from everybody else. He is as different as the salt is from the meat into which it is rubbed. He is as different as the salt is from the wound into which it is put. This external difference still needs to be emphasized and stressed.

The Christian is not only to be different, he is to glory in this difference. He is to be as different from other people as the Lord Jesus Christ was clearly different from the world in which He lived. The Christian is a separate, unique, outstanding kind of individual; there is to be in him something which marks him out, and which is to be obvious and clearly recognized. Let every man, then, examine himself.

But let us go on to consider more directly the function of the Christian. This is where the matter becomes slightly difficult and often controversial. It seems to me that the first thing which is emphasized by our Lord is that one of the Christian's main functions with respect to society is a purely negative one. Now what is the function of salt? There are those who would say that it is to give health, that it is health- or life-giving. But that seems to me to be a serious misunderstanding of the function of salt. Its business is not to provide health; it is to prevent putrefaction. The principal function of salt is to preserve and to act as an antiseptic. Take, for instance, a piece of meat. There are certain germs on its surface, perhaps in its very substance, which have been derived from the animal, or from the atmosphere, and there is the danger of its becoming putrid. The business of the salt which is rubbed into that meat is to preserve it against those agencies that are tending to its putrefaction. Salt's main function, therefore, is surely negative rather than positive. Now clearly this is a very fundamental postulate. It is not the only function of the Christian in the world, because, as we shall see later, we are also to be the light of the world, but in the first instance this is to be our effect as Christians. I wonder how often we conceive of ourselves in this way, as agents in the world meant to prevent this particular process of putrefaction and decay?

Another subsidiary function of salt is to provide savour, or to prevent food from being insipid. That is undoubtedly a further function of salt (whether a right one or not it is not for me to argue) and it is very interesting to look at it. According to this statement, therefore, life without Christianity is insipid. Does not the world today prove that? Look at the pleasure mania. Clearly people are finding life dull and boring, so they must be rushing out to this entertainment or that. But the Christian does not need these entertainments because he has a savour in life his Christian faith. Take Christianity out of life and the world, and what an insipid thing life becomes, especially when one gets old or is on one's deathbed. It is utterly tasteless and men have to drug themselves in various ways because they feel their need of a savour.

The Christian, then, first and foremost, should function in that way. But how is he to do this? Here you find the great answer. Let me put it first in what I regard as the positive teaching of the New Testament. Then we can consider certain criticisms. Here, I think, the vital distinction is between the Church as such and the individual Christian. There are those who say that the Christian should act as salt in the earth by means of the Church's making pronouncements about the general situation of the world, about political, economic and international affairs and other such subjects. Undoubtedly in many churches, if not in the vast majority, that is how this text would be interpreted. People denounce communism, and talk about war, the international situation, and other similar problems. They say that the Christian functions as salt in the earth in this general way, by making these comments upon the world situation.

Now, as I see it, that is a most serious misunderstanding of scriptural teaching. I would challenge anybody to show me such teaching in the New Testament. "Ah," they say, "but you get it in the prophets of the Old

Testament." Yes; but the answer is that in the Old Testament the Church was the nation of Israel, and there was no distinction between Church and state. The prophets had therefore to address the whole nation and to speak about its entire life. But the Church in the New Testament is not identified with any nation or nations. The result is that you never find the apostle Paul or any other apostle commenting upon the government of the Roman Empire; you never find them sending up resolutions to the Imperial Court to do this or not to do that. No; that is never found in the Church as displayed in the New Testament.

I suggest to you, therefore, that the Christian is to function as the salt of the earth in a much more individual sense. He does so by his individual life and character, by just being the man that he is in every sphere in which he finds himself. For instance, a number of people may be talking together in a rather unworthy manner. Suddenly a Christian enters into the company, and immediately his presence has an effect. He does not say a word, but people begin to modify their language. He is already acting as salt, he is already controlling the tendency to putrefaction and pollution. just by being a Christian man, because of his life and character and general deportment, he is already controlling that evil that was manifesting itself, and he does so in every sphere and in every situation. He can do this, not only in a private capacity in his home, his workshop or office, or wherever he may happen to be, but also as a citizen in the country in which he lives. This is where the distinction becomes really important, for we tend to swing from one extreme error to the other in these matters. There are those who say, "Yes, you are quite right, it is not the business of the Church as a Church to intervene in political, economic or social conditions. What I say is that the Christian should have nothing whatsoever to do with these things; the Christian must not register his vote, he must have nothing to do in the control of affairs and society." That, it seems to me, is an equal fallacy; for the Christian as an individual, as a citizen in a state, is to be concerned about these things. Think of great men, like the Earl of Shaftesbury and others, who, as private Christians and as citizens, worked so hard in connection with the Factory Acts. Think also of William Wilberforce and all that he did with regard to the abolition of slavery. As Christians we are citizens of a country, and it is our business to play our part as citizens, and thereby act as salt indirectly in innumerable respects. But that is a very different thing from the Church's doing so.

Someone may ask, "Why do you draw this distinction?" Let me answer that question. The primary task of the Church is to evangelize and to preach the gospel. Look at it like this. If the Christian Church today spends most of her time in denouncing communism, it seems to me that the main result will be that communists will not be likely to listen to the preaching of the gospel. If the Church is always denouncing one particular section of society, she is shutting the evangelistic door upon that section. If we take the New Testament view of these matters we must believe that the communist has a soul to be saved in exactly the same way as everybody else. It is my business as a preacher of the gospel, and a representative of the Church, to evangelize all kinds and conditions and classes of men and women. The moment the Church begins to intervene in these political, social and economic matters, therefore, she is hampering and hindering herself in her God-appointed task of evangelism. She can no longer say that she "knows no man after the flesh", and thereby she is sinning. Let the individual play his part as a citizen, and belong to any political party that he may choose. That is something for the individual to decide. The Church is not concerned as a Church about these things. Our business is to preach the gospel and to bring this message of salvation to all. And, thank God, communists can be converted and can be saved. The Church is to be concerned about sin in all its manifestations, and sin can be as terrible in a capitalist as in a communist; it can be as terrible in a rich man as in a poor man; it can manifest itself in all classes and in all types and in all groups.

Another way in which this principle works is seen in the fact that, after every great awakening and reformation in the Church, the whole of society has reaped the benefit. Read the accounts of all the great revivals and you will find this. For example, in the revival which took place under Richard Baxter at Kidderminster, not only were the people of the Church revived, but many from the world outside were converted and came into the Church. Furthermore, the whole Me of that town was affected, and evil and sin and vice were controlled. This happened not by the Church denouncing these things, not by the Church persuading the Government to pass Acts of Parliament, but by the sheer influence of Christian individuals. And it has always been like that. It happened in the same way in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and at the beginning of this century in the revival which took place in 1904-5. Christians, by being Christian, influence society almost automatically.

You find proof of this in the Bible and also in the history of the Church. In the Old Testament after every reformation and revival there was this general benefit to society. Look also at the Protestant Reformation and you will find at once that the whole of life was affected by it. The same is true of the Puritan Reformation. I am not referring to the Acts of Parliament which were passed by the Puritans, but to their general manner of life. Most competent historians are agreed in saying that what undoubtedly saved this country from a revolution such as was experienced in France at the end of the eighteenth century was nothing but the Evangelical Revival. This was not because anything was done directly, but because masses of individuals had become Christian, and were living this better life and had this higher outlook. The whole political situation was affected, and the great Acts of Parliament which were passed in the last century were mostly due to the fact that there were such large numbers of individual Christians to be found in this land.

Finally, is not the present state of society and of the world a perfect proof of this principle? I think it is true to say that during the last fifty years the Christian Church has paid more direct attention to politics and to social and economic questions than in the whole of the previous hundred years. We have had all this, talk about the social application of Christianity. Pronouncements have been made and resolutions have been sent from Church Assemblies and the General Assemblies of the various denominations to the governments. We have all been so tremendously interested in the practical application. But what is the result? No-one can dispute it. The result is that we are living in a society which is much more immoral than it was fifty years ago, in which vice and law-breaking and lawlessness are rampant. Is it not clear that you cannot do these things except in the biblical way? Though we try to bring them about directly by applying principles, we find that we cannot do so. The main trouble is that there are far too few Christian people, and that those of us who are Christian are not sufficiently salt. By that I do not mean aggressive; I mean Christian in the true sense. Also, we must admit that it is not true of us that when we enter a room people are immediately controlled in their language and their general conversation because we have arrived. That is where we fail lamentably. One truly saintly man radiates his influence; it will permeate any group in which he happens to be. The trouble is that the salt has lost its saltiness in so many instances; and we are not controlling our fellows by being (saints' in the way we should. Though the Church makes her great pronouncements about war and politics, and other major issues, the average man is not affected. But if you have a man working at a bench who is a true Christian, and whose life has been saved and transformed by the Holy Spirit, it does affect others all around him.

That is the way in which we can act as salt in the earth at a time like this. It is not something to be done by the Church in general; it is something to be done by the individual Christian. It is the principle of cellular infiltration. just a little salt can affect the great mass. Because of its essential quality it somehow or another

permeates everything. That, it seems to me, is the great call to us at a time like this. Look at life; look at society in this world. Is it not obviously rotten? Look at the decay that is setting in amongst all classes of people. Look at these horrible divorces and separations, this joking about the sanctities of life, this increase in drink and pilfering. There are your problems, and it is obvious that men by passing Acts of Parliament cannot deal with them. Newspaper articles do not seem to touch them. Indeed nothing ever will, save the presence of an increasing number of individual Christians who will control the putrefaction, and the pollution, and the rottenness, and the evil, and the vice. Every one of us in our circle has thus to control this process, and so the whole lump, the whole mass, will be preserved.

May God give us grace to examine ourselves in the light of this simple proposition. The great hope for society today is an increasing number of individual Christians. Let the Church of God concentrate on that and not waste her time and energy on matters outside her province. Let the individual Christian be certain that this essential quality of saltiness is in him, that because he is what he is, he is a check, a control, an antiseptic in society, preserving it from unspeakable foulness, preserving it, perhaps, from a return to a dark age. Before the Methodist Revival, life in London, as you can see in books written at the time and since, was almost unthinkable with its drink and vice and immorality. Is there not a danger that we are going back to that? Is not our whole generation going down visibly? It is you and I and others like us, Christian people, who alone can prevent that. God give us grace to do so. God stir up the gift within us, and make us such that we shall indeed be like the Son of God Himself and influence all who come into contact with us.

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