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BEING SALTY: Luke 14:34, Matthew 5:13

Jesus says in Matthew, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (Matthew 5:13). In Luke, Jesus goes on to say, "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Luke 14:34-35). These two passages are a direct calling from Jesus to his disciples about how to truly be his followers. Essentially these passages are about being like fertilizer to the rest of the world by stimulating growth and positively affecting the world while still remaining different than the world. Jesus is calling his followers to stay passionate and always look toward the kingdom of heaven while teaching his message.

Before taking a closer look at Jesus' intent in these specific passages and how it fits into his broader proclamation and ministry, I will mention a few uses of salt and then also how it could have been used in ancient times. Salt can and has been used in many different ways because of its different qualities. Alan Kreider, in his article, "Salty Discipleship," mentions some of these uses such salt as a preservative, a seasoning, a disinfectant, a wage, a symbol of covenants, a conveyor of judgment, and a de-icing agent[1]. Paul Minear mentions in his article, "The Salt of the Earth," that salt has been known to be a seasoning for foods in the ancient times as well as today. He also notes that in ancient times, salt was essential in temple liturgies and in

[1] Alan Kreider, "Salty Discipleship," *The Other Side* (Mr-Ap 1989) 34.

worship[2]. Eugene Deatrick notices in his article, "Salt, Soil, Savior" that in ancient times, salt used to be used in small quantities as a fertilizer for the soil[3]. Kreider points out that salt was also often used as a preservative, but

he also focuses on salt's use as a fertilizer for the soil[4]. Thus, there are quite a few different ways that one could view salt and its uses. There are also a number of ways that Jesus could have used salt to describe discipleship.

In Matthew and Luke, Jesus refers to his disciples as being salt and warns them not to lose their taste. Which uses of salt is Jesus focusing on and what does he mean by telling his disciples this? Although there are many uses to consider that Jesus could be referring to such as the preservative nature of salt, or the flavorful nature of salt, or even the Old Testament use of salt as an essential part of worship, Deatrick and Kreider put forth another view of salt, which makes a lot of sense in these passages. In ancient times, salt was used as a fertilizer to help crops grow. Therefore, when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he is telling his disciples that they are the fertilizer in the world to stimulate the growth of others towards his kingdom[5]. Kreider takes this statement further, explaining that the Greek word "ge", which is the root of geology, is mentioned in both Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, Jesus says, "You are the salt for the ge," and in Luke, Jesus says, "If it is nether fit for the ge or the manure pile…" This use of "ge" by the evangelists' points out that Jesus is not talking about the preservative or flavorful nature of salt; he is talking about the nature of salt that relates to the soil, or geology[6]. Thus,

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[2] Paul Minear, "The Salt of the Earth," *Interpretation* 51 (Jan 1997): 34.
[3] 3 Eugene P. Deatrick, "Salt, soil, savior," *Biblical Archaeologist* (May 1962): 44.
[4] Kreider, "Salty Discipleship," 34.
[5] Deatrick, "Salt, soil, savior," 48.
[6] Kreider, "Salty Discipleship," 34.

Jesus' calling for his disciples to be fertilizer makes the most sense out of the various possible interpretations of salt as a metaphor.

Now, what is Jesus' actual intent in telling his disciples that they are stimulants for growth in the world? To help answer this question, Kreider mentions three related points about salt and the disciple's calling. First of all, salt as a fertilizer is scattered. This means that Jesus' disciples will be scattered in order to fertilize the world. They will be sent out throughout the world to spread Jesus' message. Second, salt does not exist for itself; it exists to help stimulate the soil. Jesus is not calling his disciples to simply preserve the political and religious systems of the time, they are called to reach out and positively affect the world! They are called to go make things better. Third, salt is different than the soil it fertilizes. Jesus is calling his disciples to be different than the world and he warns them that if they compromise with the world, they will be like salt, losing its taste and therefore becoming useless[7].

What could be some other related intents of Jesus in calling his disciples to be like salt? Fred Craddock, in his Luke commentary, says that Jesus, by employing this metaphor, is responding to the crowd's enthusiasm in following him. Many people are beginning to follow him and his teachings and are very excited about doing so. Jesus is responding to this excitement by cautioning them to think about the consequences of their choices because following him will not be easy, and their initial commitments can fade, like salt loosing its flavor over time[8]. Jesus does not want followers who are going to lose their passion. He wants strong passionate followers who will make it through the tough times when their commitments are severely tested. Minear goes along with these statements to say that Christ's followers are going to be persecuted and rejected, but they must not refuse this suffering or they will lose their power. The disciple's

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[7] Kreider, "Salty Discipleship," 36.
[8] Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 180.

strength will only be maintained if they fearlessly fulfill their mission that Jesus is calling them towards[9]. Jesus is telling his followers that they will suffer by following him, but they will be strong if they stay committed to him even through the pain. Essentially, part of Jesus' intent is to warn his followers of the suffering that they will go through on his account, but Jesus is also encouraging them to stick with it because of their great reward to come in heaven.

Douglas Hare, in his Matthew Commentary, mentions three more key points of intent for Jesus' use of "salt." First of all, the disciples are the salt for the earth, which is a statement in anticipation of when Jesus will send his disciples out on missionary journeys. Jesus is already preparing his disciples for the time when he will no longer be with them on earth. Second, when Jesus says "you" he is calling a community of followers, not a bunch of individuals. This mission of being salt to the earth cannot be accomplished individually; the community must do it together. Thirdly, Jesus is calling his disciples to go out and be salt, to go out on his mission. He is not commending them by calling them salt. Being salt is not a marking of status; it is a mention of the disciple's function in the world[10]. Richard Gardner, in his Matthew Commentary, goes on to say that salt, no matter how you look at it, plays a key role in everyday life. Thus, Jesus' intent is to call his disciples to be salt everyday and in all situations. He is also saying that if they refuse to fulfill this role, it is like becoming salt without taste, which is worthless and must be thrown out[11].

These teachings of Jesus to positively affect the world by being a community who stimulates growth and does not lose passion or compromise to the world also connects with Jesus' broader calling. First of all, Minear points out that in the context of The Sermon on the

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[9] Minear, "The Salt of the Earth," 36.
[10] Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 44-46.
[11] Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew* (Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottdale: Herald, 1991), 100.

Mount, this particular teaching is focused on the disciples instead of the crowds. The disciples are essentially in training to be the future leaders of these crowds. The first eight Beatitudes focus on the blessings for the crowds and then the ninth beatitude switches focus to the disciples. Jesus tells them that they are blessed when they are persecuted for his sake and then he says that they are salt and they should not back down from this calling, or from this persecution. If they do back down, they will become useless because they will be like the rest of the world. Jesus then goes on in the sermon to teach the disciples about how to interpret the law[12]. Thus, Jesus is using this passage in one of his major sermons to emphasize the disciple's purpose in the world and then to transition into teaching them about how to live righteously. Jesus is teaching his disciples how to be disciples. Craddock emphasizes this point by mentioning that the section in which these verses fit in Luke is a section all about discipleship and following Christ[13]. Again, Jesus is teaching others how to follow him and how to live righteously.

These teachings of discipleship also fit into Jesus' broader proclamation throughout his entire ministry, which is the Kingdom of Heaven and how to enter into it. The book of Matthew stresses living righteous lives to enter into this kingdom. Here, in Matthew, Jesus is telling his followers and disciples that they are called to be fertilizer and that they should not compromise with the soil by trying to become like it or else they will be thrown out because they will be useless. This is a calling to live righteous and passionate lives by being different and by proclaiming God's kingdom. One could say that being salty is the same as loving each other deeply, which is the second greatest commandment given by Jesus, because being salty is encouraging and stimulating the growth of others. Being salty is serving others and loving them so that they will become better. When a follower of Jesus truly lives out a salty life, he or she is

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[12] Minear, "The Salt of the Earth," 31-34.
[13] Craddock, *Luke*. 99.

living by these kingdom standards of righteousness put forth by Jesus, and he or she is looking to bring more people into this kingdom living.

These teachings of Jesus strongly apply to the church and our lives today. They are a calling for such a strong presence of the church in the world that everyone can look at the church and see something different than the world. The church is called to be a visible contrast-society. If it does not accept this calling, it becomes useless because it has become the same as the rest of the world[14].

Alan Kreider says that we are on a mission to make things better! The body of Christ has a positive outlook and we are working hard for God 16. Jesus is still encouraging us today to not grow complacent or to compromise. We are to stay as salt and to encourage and fertilize. Therefore, I, as part of the body of Christ am called to be like salt. I am to accept this mission even though it will include pain and suffering. I am to go be a stimulant for growth. I am called to be different because heavenly glory is much better than earthly glory. I am called to be salt.

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[14] Gardner, *Matthew*. 101.