

# Sermon on the Mount: Salt of the Earth

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The church must be the salt of the earth, stopping the rot of sin and evil from spreading in society, and bringing illumination and understanding to people.*

**Duration:** 43:43

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:13

**Topics:** "Sermon on the Mount", "Christian Influence", "Moral Integrity"

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## Description

J. Glyn Owen emphasizes the call for Christians to be the 'salt of the earth,' highlighting the importance of living out our faith actively in society. He explains that while believers are to maintain moral distinctiveness, they must also engage with the world to prevent moral decay. Owen warns against the complacency of the church in the face of societal rot and urges believers to cultivate their spiritual lives to effectively influence their surroundings. He stresses that true cleansing and renewal come from a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, the blood of Christ, and the Word of God. Ultimately, he calls for Christians to recognize their role in society and to embody the transformative power of Christ in their daily lives.

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## Transcript

There are various kinds of thanksgiving. There is thanksgiving, in which we bring of our gifts and we offer them to God. There is also thanks living.

And I felt, therefore, justified in continuing with the Sermon on the Mount this morning. And I want to take as the basis of our meditation, the 13th verse in chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel. Words that are very familiar to all of us.

Where our Lord Jesus Christ says, 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. We shall think particularly of that first positive statement of our Lord.

You are the salt of the earth. Christian believers are here described not simply as subjects of heaven's rule, but also as the salt of the earthly society. Subjects of the commonwealth of the heavens, salt of our earthly and human society.

The teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ can never lose its value nor its authority, because he spoke and he taught as God's only begotten Son. His word is and was God's word. He was the very expression of the mind of God, so that he could say, I am the truth.

And therefore his word will never lose its authority. Nevertheless, there are times when the word of God through his dear and co-equal Son seems to be peculiarly appropriate and relevant to our generation, to our day and age. And I have a feeling that the word before us today is a word that has that peculiar relevance to this very morning, this very day, this very period in our own history and in the history of civilization.

You are the salt of the earth. There is no salt in the earth unless you act as salt. I believe that if God were to broadcast his very last thought and injunction for his church, he would not have to change these words.

This is his will for us. There are other things, of course, included. Indeed, the following verse and the following verses, again, have something to say about our Christian duty in the world.

But this is basic, and this is where the Lord begins in the outworking of the principles already enunciated in the Beatitudes. You who have followed obediently the way of the Beatitudes, now you, says Jesus, you are the salt of the earth. There are others who have concluded that the Christian believer's proper place in society is to be tucked away somewhere, away from the real thrust of things, away from where the action is.

Keep as far away from the dirt and the grime and the sin as you possibly can. Now, in one sense that is true, of course. For we are to be holy, and we are to be spiritually and morally distinct and separate from the world.

But we are to be in the world, if not of it. And we are to be near enough for the salt to touch the sore spots in our society and to be robbed in by our presence and our example. And Jesus said that.

So, when we come to this particular aspect of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, we begin to see that the Beatitudes appear in a particular context. You see, so far we have more or less tried to deal with the Beatitudes as an entity all on their own. That's understandable because they do form a specific unit.

But that could be misleading. When you come to the end of the Beatitudes, there is no positive, no definite division saying, now we start something altogether different. Oh no, there is a bridge that moves over and brings us over it into the very rough and tumble of life as it is.

And as we come there with our Lord, acknowledging Him as the King of the Kingdom and the Lord of our lives, He says, you now are the salt of this society. So you will see, if you care to read on into the Sermon on the Mount, how in a number of ways our Lord Jesus will be repeating this over and over again. I don't need to go into the several exhortations that are found in the course of the Beatitudes now.

It would be interesting to do so as we look ahead to what is coming, but we shall pass by them and we shall come and deal exclusively today with the first of two general expressions of the divinely required response from every member of the Kingdom of Heaven. The first is the one before us today, you are the salt of the earth. And the second general exhortation is, you are the light of the world.

These are general statements applying to everybody. There is not a believer here this morning to whom these do not apply. They apply wherever we are throughout the course of time until the consummation.

You believing men and women are the salt of society. You believing men and women are the light of the world. Let's look at this.

What has this injunction, what has this word of our Lord to say to us? You are the salt of the earth. Now the first thing I notice here is that our Lord's words reflect a universal tendency that is inherent in human society. Our Lord's words reflect his own view and his own understanding of the ills and the ailments and the problems of the human race.

He sees the human race, he sees human society in need of salt. And that is only another way of saying he sees the moral condition of the race as requiring the use of an antiseptic to stop a rot that is already rampant in the body of the race. And he says to his people, you are just that.

As Jesus bade his disciples to play the role of salt in their society, he unmistakably discloses his own understanding of the moral condition of that ancient community. He saw it in danger of disintegrating and of becoming a polluted thing. Now you will notice that apparently there was no need for our Lord Jesus to say any more about what he meant when he said, you are the salt of the earth.

If you delve back into the history of the times, you will see that salt was used for many things, many purposes. If you ever boiled an egg, I don't know whether they did boil eggs in those days, but if they did, well I guess they would have a pinch of salt to bring out the taste, as you bring out the taste by means of a pinch of salt in many areas of culinary. And there were many other uses.

But there was one use for salt which was universal in that region, in that part of the world. And that was, it was used as a preservative. Whereas its uses were many, its primary task was, on all hands, to be used as a preservative of meats and of foodstuffs.

In days before, coolers and freezers and refrigerators had appeared on the scene. And in a climate which was pretty treacherous for meatstuffs, the only reliable preservative was salt. Salt itself is aseptic, free from putrefaction.

And it was thus widely used as an antiseptic, countering putrefaction from setting in. And it was the only means available. And this is how our Lord chose to speak of his disciples.

Of those, that is, who are members of his kingdom, subjects of the rule of heaven, though they live upon earth. And the point I want to stress now is that our Lord Jesus saw his society in general, then, to be in a state of moral disintegration, of moral putrefaction, of moral decay. So much so that it required some means or other, some extraordinary means, in order to stop the rot from spreading and bringing disaster upon the rest.

So then, our Lord saw evident putrefaction at work in society. And this is very significant because, whereas it might have been very evident in certain other parts of the world of our Lord's time, he is addressing, at this moment, he is addressing, in the first place, some of the godliest and the most righteous people of that day and generation. He's not speaking to pagan Greece with all its licentiousness and all its perverse wickedness and ignorance of the true God.

Neither is he addressing the Romans. He is addressing the children of Abraham. He is speaking to men and women who have been brought up and nurtured on the Old Testament scriptures, on the law and the prophets.

Heirs to the most wonderful tradition of all times, and they've been saturated in it, they've been fed upon it. But he sees, he sees, and don't forget he used the same metaphor or a similar metaphor, I should say, in other places to describe the same kind of thing going on as when he told the leaders of the Jews that they were like a grave of bones and carcasses of dead bodies. Substantial death.

He says that he sees that society, that society, in need of some saline properties to stop this awful process from proceeding so that ultimately it strangles the race. Now if that was our Lord's diagnosis of such a highly privileged community, we shudder to think of the language he might use today if he were to speak directly to us in our Western world in order to describe the condition of things among us. Here in Toronto, for example, the symptoms of evil found in that ancient Palestinian society were all like benign pimples when compared with the gross indecencies and indignities that have become part and parcel of our contemporary way of life in the 20th century.

The bloodstream of our society has become so heavily poisoned that it defies description. The disease has spread and taken firm hold of the patient, strangulating all moral expression. It's very dangerous today to live the moral life.

He will be ostracized. Someone in pastoral work told me this last ten days ago, that in process of her business profession, she had had to point out to two clients that they were suggesting something which was ethically altogether improper. And I would not like to tell you what happened.

But she was courageous enough to do it. She was the salt of society. This is what we're all called upon to be and to do.

You see, my friends, we cannot continue to share in the optimism of the late 19th century, the end of the last century and the beginning of this, how optimistic people were about human life. You and I, if we are up to date in our understanding and our knowledge of things, cannot anymore bury our heads in the sands and say, pack up your troubles in your own kit bag and smile. Everything will come out all right in the end.

We just can't do that. You remember how it was at the end of the last century? Dr. Lloyd-Jones makes a lot of this in his commentary, and rightly so. And I was reminded of this as I was reading him during the course of this last week, how he points out that the thinkers and the philosophers, not only the politicians, but thinkers generally and poets too, at the end of the last century, were all so very optimistic.

We are moving into a new era, into a new century, into a new age, and all our troubles are about to go. We shall be passing them by. They will all be behind us.

It was all because, you see, Darwin had come on the scene. And the theory of evolution, not just that man had come from the beast, but the doctrine of evolution had introduced a philosophy. And the philosophy was this, that man is essentially getting better and better.

He's always leaping forward. He's always moving forward, morally as well as physically, or biologically. And there is this inevitability of progress.

And with the advance of knowledge and of schools in every segment of society in those days, in every part of society in Europe and elsewhere, you had schools for children. Now with education coming, we've got the answer to everything. People are not going to fight anymore.

People are not going to indulge in sex and evil in an illegitimate way anymore, outside of marriage. People are not going to do the stupid, craziest things they have been doing anymore. People are going to be taught.

They're going to be educated. And with education, we're going to leap ahead. There will be no more war.

Their swords will be beaten into plowshares. We shall have conferences where wise people will come together and talk things through. This was the late last century and the first decade of this.

Do you know, my friends, there are some people who are still living back there. They're still in the dreamland of those days. And they're forgetting the explosion of 1914 and of 1939.

But thinking men and women have realized that those two massive explosions have blown the bubble to that figment of the human imagination. You cannot depend upon the inevitability of progress, either morally or otherwise. Why? Because there is poison at the heart of the race.

There is evil in the mainstream of society. Listen, my friend, it's more poignantly personal than that. In your heart and mind, there is sin.

Out of the heart of men, says Jesus, there proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, lasciviousness, an evil eye, and a whole host of other things. I don't want to go after them now. Where do they come from, including wars and battlings between men and men? They all come from the human heart.

There's something wrong with the human heart. Now listen, to me this is the remarkable thing. And I still believe that the church has yet to wake up to this.

The church of Jesus Christ, the true church of Jesus Christ, was meant to be the salt of that kind of society. Men and women, if you were born of the Spirit of God and washed in His blood, you were meant to be, I was meant to be, the salt of society to stop the rot from spreading. Now I have to bring a caveat in here.

This is not all the truth of the New Testament. And you mustn't deal with this as if it were the only thing that Jesus ever said. If he said we only need salt to stop the rot, well, of course, it would be an emasculating of his own gospel.

But in the next word he will say you are the light of the world. And he has much more to say after that. We do not only need salt to stop the rot from spreading, we need to bring light into the situation, to explain to men and women what's happening, and to show the way out.

But in the meantime, the world, the earth, society, needs salt. Your office, your home, the place where you work, the place where you live, the people you company with, they need salt. And you, brother and sister, you are the salt of the earth.

Because, you see, this is threatening to progress and to move ahead and to strangle the whole of creation. And unfortunately, as I indicated previously, we are living in a day and age when the church has either forgotten or deliberately chosen not to take this seriously. In order to be salt, you see, we have to be different from the society.

You cannot act as a preservative unless you are yourself an aseptic and can act as an antiseptic. You must have in you a quality of life that can stand against the rot. And having stood against it, can move into

it and change things by the grace of God.

And the consequences of the church's negligence, of course, is very tragic. I have no time to deal with that at all this morning. The only thing I want to say is that whereas in former ages, when immorality has been rampant, in former ages, God's faithful people have had one royal standard to raise against the incoming tide of the contemporary barbarians.

The law of God. And our fathers did that. You go back into the 16th and the 17th century and the 18th century, this was fundamentally what they did.

They appealed to the nations, they went back to the law, they went back to the Ten Commandments, they went back to the preaching of the prophets, they went back to the same kind of teaching in the New Testament, and they declared God's law. But you see, we don't have God's law anymore, we don't believe there is a law. We have been poisoned intellectually, we do not believe there is such a thing as really right and wrong, heaven and hell.

We don't believe that anymore. And we don't believe that there is a law of God that is infallible, by which we shall be judged. We don't believe that anymore.

We have abandoned the revelation of God, and so we have no law to stand on and to declare. We've sold the past. You know what has been happening in Europe, don't you? What has been happening in the countries of Europe over the last 25 years is this.

That leaders, political leaders, and it doesn't matter what flavor they have been, generally speaking, I could quote to you country after country, where they have legalized what God has condemned. Not only homosexuality and soliciting and these kind of things, but other things too. They've legalized, they've made it legal, and they've given certain things the aura of respectability, and they've baptized it with this aura of respectability, that from there on it becomes accepted as part of society.

The government has to look after it. That's what's happening. Thus our world has been turned upside down and inconsistent with itself.

There is no more inconsistent society than ours. In an age when cleanliness and hygiene is generally the order of the day, in every other realm of life, morally, we are moving into an era of legalized bilge. Physically, our children are examined the moment they're born, and intermittently thereafter until they die.

And they have their regular check-ups, as most of you do, not as children, but as grown-ups. Physically, that is. Intellectually, our children are tested to see if there is any drawback.

Are they able to imbibe what is being taught them in the schools? Is there any evidence of being somewhat slow in pace, taking things in? If there is, you must make special provision for them. You see, the intellectual is so important, and we've got to make special provision if there's anything lacking or anything wrong. And yet, simultaneously, those same children are being immersed, even bombarded by moral sewage.

Hygiene on the one hand, care for the body, care for the mind, sewage on the other. How do you explain that? There's a madness about the rest. We've become altogether inconsistent.

We see nothing wrong in it, you see. We've been conditioned, and we've been duped, and we just don't know where we're going, nor what's happening to us. On the physical plane, we are rightly concerned that our world should enjoy the benefits of sanitation, hygiene and cleanliness, of course.

Whilst at the same time, we go on to desanitize the moral climate, and to take the moral oxygen out of the atmosphere. And men and women are perishing morally, and have no moral concept. And we have to say about our age, what Jeremiah said about some people in his day, they don't know how to blush.

Now, in that society, you are the salt of the earth. Jesus saw this real difference between his people, members of his kingdom, and those of all the other counter kingdoms of the earth. The church is altogether different, a new creation.

And a new creation with an entirely different life, with a quality of antiseptic that can stop the whole thing from spreading, and by the grace of God, enable to turn the tide a little, and bring in the light with it, in order to bring a new, more new creations into existence, in this awesome world. You see, we need to see this, we need to realize this, we need to take it in afresh. If you are a Christian, my friend, God has been at work in you, and is at work in you.

I sometimes go on the road, and people say, you know the signs on the road, beware, men working. As if to say, take your hats off. Well, I do take my hat off, metaphorically, when I see men working anyway.

But I tell you, what I see in so many places where I go, is God at work. And I'm learning, and looking into the faces of God's people to remember this. There is not a man, there is not a woman of God, but the God has been and is at work there.

That's how you're a saint, that's how you're a believer, if you're a believer. God has been at work in you, it is God who's done it. The Christian is a new creation, he is morally different from the world around him.

He is morally saline in his nature, he is salt. That's the verdict of the Son of God. This new creation takes its birth from the gift of our new nature, of our rebirth, of our new spirit, the Spirit of God.

Peter goes so far as to say that we are made partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. There it is. The teaching of our Lord, reiterated to the people of the next generation.

The remaking of a man as to be thus different from the world around him is an intricate divine action consisting of many parts. There must be a cleansing, a way of sin. This is a major operation.

You cannot make a man or a woman to have this kind of character without a cleansing, a cathartic process. This divine catharsis, this is salvation. Have you been cleansed from your sin, my friend? Have the chambers of your imaginations and your thoughts and your desires, have they been innerly cleansed? This is salvation, you see.

I have no time this morning to go into the details of this. Let me quote to you three scriptures only and offer no comment. But I quote these scriptures because they refer to three factors that are involved in this cleansing.

The blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God. Jesus Christ gave himself for us, says Paul in Titus, to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people. How? Christ died.

He gave himself up for us to do that, to purify us, to cleanse us. In Titus 3, 5, he says this, God saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. There is no renewal, there is no change of our hearts apart from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said to his disciples, Now you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. And in many of our churches the blood of Christ is not mentioned and the Holy Spirit is nothing but an impersonal entity and the Word of God is diluted. Brothers and sisters, there is no cleansing, there is no purging of the hearts of men and women apart from the Word of God and the blood of his Son and the Spirit of the Holy One at work.

Has he been visiting you? Are you clean? Men are not fully remade even by such cleansing. There must be a renewal. I know I can't go after that this morning either but just let us remind ourselves of that statement.

Renewal, renewal in the Holy Spirit, Titus 3, 5. The Spirit does not only take part in our cleansing but also in the renewal of our natures, giving us the divine seed, the divine same end so that we are new creatures if we are born of God. Such a divine work brings to focus, you see, the real difference between the Christian and the society around him. Now to such people Jesus says, You are the light, you are the salt of the earth.

This is the Christian's ministry, this is part of our major part of our ministry here. See, many of us and many believe, sometimes elderly Christians in their homes will say to the pastor when he visits them, I feel so helpless. I can't come to the services as I used to and I can't go out and I can't offer tracts to people and I can't go and evangelize and I can't join the visitation evangelism team.

Oh, brothers and sisters, listen to this. You don't need to move from where you are to perform a basic Christian ministry by just being what you are in Christ. You are the salt of the earth and someone comes into your house, someone comes into your hospital ward if you were there.

None of you this morning are there of course. Someone comes to you and if you are what you are, if you be what you are, if you just be yourself in Christ, you are exercising by His grace a ministry. Now, I'm not saying it's not necessary to go to the further most parts of the earth.

It is necessary. But I do want to encourage some of us who are not as mobile as others and who cannot move in and out as other people do. Listen my friend, just be what you are by the grace of God.

Learn to be the salt. Learn to be a believer. Learn to be a saint.

This is one reason why it grieves me so very, very much that in our modern day and age there is so little emphasis, generally speaking, upon the doctrine of holiness. And I have met supposedly good Christian people who almost talk as if really your daily prayer and Bible reading and devotion and being apart and alone with God as if it's unnecessary. You know, it's a lie of Satan.

It is absolutely indispensable. You say, why? Because this is how we maintain our saline properties. It's by fellowship with God.

It's by communion with our Holy Heavenly Father. It is in being alone with Him and by His Word and His Spirit and the blood of Christ continuing their ministry upon us. By these means we continue to have our saline pungency if we are to have it at all.

And there are many of us that will never be what we ought to be because we spend so little time with God. No one else will make you holy. There is a word here in the text that I can't go after this morning, but I must mention it.

If the salt has lost its savor, then what can salt it again? What can give it its saline properties back? And Jesus doesn't answer the question. There is an answer to the question by the grace of God. There is an answer to the question.

The King of our kingdom who invites us at the beginning of the Beatitudes shows us the way. And if you have lost your saline properties this morning, the thing for you to do is to go back at the beginning of the Beatitudes and start all over again. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Blessed are they that mourn. Blessed are the meek. And so forth.

Go through it. Press on. Get lower and lower at the feet of the Savior and let Him have more and more of you.

And let Him rule and reign and transform and direct. And He will give you back the properties you've lost. But you see, the Christian is meant to be overcoming the world.

Everyone born of God, says John, has overcome the world. We have this potency which God has given us, which we should guard and cultivate by His grace. I must conclude with this.

Which process is going on in your life this morning? Possibly the two. Is the world influencing you? Or are you influencing the world? You know, it really is a question worth considering. You see, if you take a red hot bar, a red hot poker, we would say in England, out of the fire, and there it is imbued with fire, red hot, and you take it out of the fire and you put it on a cold hearth, two processes will begin to take place.

One, the poker will get cooler and cooler and colder and colder. Two, the hearth will get warmer and warmer until there comes a point where the poker and the hearth are about the same temperature. Now we come to a strategic moment.

Unless the poker can get more heat into it and get its heat restored and renewed, then the poker is going to be more influenced by its environment than the environment is going to be influenced by the poker. I don't know whether that's a good illustration. I hadn't thought about it.

But something like that, my friends, may be going on in all our lives this morning. We've come out from the presence of God and we find that the world is taking the steam out of us, is taking the energy out of us, taking the zeal out of us, taking the love for God and His people out of us. The world is creeping into us and we are losing our coldness.

And the world may be a little bit influenced by us, but there comes a point when, unless we can get back to the original source of heat and purging and be impregnated with a divine fire and the divine life that makes us saline, we cannot perform our ministry. Oh, please, do not think that the preacher in the pulpit this morning is insensitive to the problems of this day. I salute some of you young people who are facing temptations the kind of which I never faced in my day and I thought that the temptations I faced were overwhelming.

I know, I know. But my friends, as long as I open the word of God, I discover that the children of God have the kind and quality of life that should overcome this world. And I have to deny my faith and my Lord before I can go back from there.

And therefore I dare to believe that the life of Christ perfected in you and in me can still make us salt of this awful society in which we live. Brothers and sisters, let's take it more seriously. I confess to you my sins, my weaknesses, my frailties in this respect.

All that one had fought more, all that one had oftentimes been more outspoken against evil. We say that's negative. But you have to do it in certain circumstances.

And I believe that God is calling upon us in this day and age to try to recapture the old apostolic tongue and the fear of God in our heart. You are the salt of the earth. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we have to acknowledge before you that whereas we were always unworthy of this epithet and description of us, we have fallen so far short as to feel that we have little right to be called by your name at all. And we are somewhat disheartened as we come to a passage like this and see how far short we fall of the standard you have set and of the call that you have addressed to us. Oh God, enable us to see your view of your people even as we see here your view of society.

You think we can. You think that it is possible for us to overcome the moral temptations and trials and climate of our day and age. And just because you believe that we can, help us to believe it also.

And in obedience to your word to discover what you have to do within us and for us and to give to us in order to make us increasingly fit into this part of our job description. Spirit of God, come afresh upon us to this end. In the blessed name of your glorious Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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