
CONTENTS

1. Salt of the Earth	9
2. Christ's Church	13
3. Followers of Christ	18
4. The Branches	22
5. The Believers	27
6. The Disciples	32
7. Abraham's Offspring	37
8. Those Who Have Been Brought from Death to Life	41
9. Children of God	46
10. God's Elect	51
11. My People	55
12. Those Who Call upon the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ	59
13. The Saved	63
14. God's Fellow Workers	68
15. God's Field	72
16. God's Building	77
17. God's Temple	82
18. Servants of Christ	86
19. Those on Whom the Fulfillment of the Ages Has Come	90
20. God's Workmanship	94

21. Fellow Citizens with God's People	98
22. Partakers of the Promise	103
23. The Body	107
24. Imitators of God	112
25. Children of Light	116
26. A Radiant Church	122
27. The True Circumcision	126
28. Brethren	130
29. God's Household	134
30. A People That Are His Very Own	138
31. Partakers of Christ	142
32. Those Who Are Waiting for Christ	147
33. A Holy Priesthood	152
34. A Holy Nation	156
35. Aliens and Strangers	160
36. Christians	165
37. The Bride of Christ	170

SALT OF THE EARTH

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. (*Matthew 5:13*)

My father was a great fan of Dixieland jazz. Over the years he amassed a sizable collection of records and tapes featuring some of the greatest artists of the '20s and '30s. I never acquired a taste for his style of music, and one day when I complained about the “noise,” he replied with a favorite Latin phrase of his: “*Degustibus non disputandum est.*”

When I asked him what it meant, he explained: “It means, ‘There is no point in arguing about taste.’”

Jesus comments about what might be described as “tasteful Christianity” in Matthew 5:13. Here, however, He is not speaking of aesthetic differences but about the critical role the church plays in society. In referring to His disciples as “the salt of the earth,” Jesus is saying that Christians make the world a habitable place. In other words, the only reason the present world is livable is because the church is still in it.

Today, when we refer to someone as “the salt of the earth,” we usually mean that he or she is a likable person. But when Jesus used the phrase, He was not talking about personality but moral character.

This comparison would not have seemed strange to Jesus' listeners because salt was an important part of their daily existence. Like us, the people of Jesus' day used salt as a seasoning to make food taste better. But during this time, salt's most important function was to preserve food. In New Testament times there was no plastic wrap or refrigerators to keep things fresh. If meat was to be kept from spoiling before it was cooked, it had to be cured with salt. When Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, it is a reminder that we are as important to the society in which we live as salt was to the homemaker in New Testament times.

Jesus' reference to salt would also have been familiar to the disciples because it was used by the rabbis, who compared the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, to salt, and said, "the world cannot survive without salt." By calling His disciples the salt of the earth, Jesus was saying, in effect, "You are the 'living Torah' to those around you."

It is no coincidence that this analogy appears in a context that deals with persecution. It anticipates that persecuted believers might be tempted to ask: "If the world doesn't want us, why doesn't God just take us home?" Jesus' answer is that the world, while it may not want the church, desperately needs its presence.

We should also note that Jesus includes a warning when He refers to His disciples as "salt." He is saying that there is a certain quality that is essential to the church, and without that quality, we become useless. The salt that was used by Jesus' contemporaries was not pure but a mixture of salt

and other minerals. When it was exposed to air, it tended to lose its flavor and could no longer serve its original purpose. When this happened, the salt was sprinkled on walkways to prevent slipping, in much the same way we use rock salt today.

How does the church lose its saltiness? By conforming to the world around it. The church cannot function as salt when it conforms to the world it was meant to season.

There are times when it is good to conform. For example, when I am driving on the expressway, I don't want someone going south in my lane when I am traveling north. It is good to conform to the right things. Romans 8:29 promises that believers will be conformed to the image of Christ: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." God uses my circumstances as I offer myself to the Holy Spirit to make me more like Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, the conforming process can work in the other direction as well. Paul warns: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Who will shape us? Will it be God's Spirit, working through God's Word and our daily circumstances to transform us into the image of Christ? Or will it be the world, which presses us into its own mold? If we allow the world to shape us, we will become like flavorless salt, useless to God and man alike.

Being the salt of the world isn't always comfortable. Roger discovered just how hard it can be when he moved into a flat in a rundown section of Detroit. His upstairs neighbor was an unfortunate woman who suffered from a mental disorder. Her doctors had prescribed medication, but she usually forgot to take it. Roger would often hear her screaming at her husband all night long. Sometimes when she was finished with her husband, she would come downstairs and pound on Roger's door and scream at him.

During one of his neighbors' all-night family fights, Roger heard the woman complain that she didn't have enough money to buy food for the family. So the next day he went out and bought several bags of groceries and left them at their door. The woman took the groceries, but instead of thanking Roger, she cursed him!

Perhaps you work with people whose values are radically different from your own. Like Roger, you may have an unfriendly neighbor. Or it may be the members of your own family who have caused you to plead with God that He change your circumstances. But instead of the changes you asked for, things seem to remain the same. Now you begin to wonder: "If God really loves me, why has He placed me in such a situation?" Jesus' words provide the answer: If the function of salt is to preserve that which is decaying, where will it be needed most?

Lord Jesus, make me more like You so that my influence in the world will leave behind the lingering savor of Your presence. Amen.

CHRIST'S CHURCH

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (*Matthew 16:18–19*)

One bright June afternoon, a small crowd of friends sat in lawn chairs in our yard and watched as a team of workers built our new church. A prefabricated building, its walls had actually been made in a factory and then delivered to the building site on a large flatbed truck. Everyone cheered as the first wall swung into place, and in a few hours the entire frame was up.

The finishing process took much longer. Doors were hung and the inside walls were finished off with plaster, paint, and wallpaper. And after the builders completed their job, we turned our attention to the inside furnishings. We took as much care in deciding on the color of the carpet as we did in picking the building's floor plan.

However, before any of the walls went up, before one pane of stained glass was put in place, before an inch of carpet was laid down, or a single drop of paint was splashed on, the building's foundation had to be planted. Steel rods and concrete were used to fix the building's footings in place. Al-

though this wasn't nearly as exciting as the raising of the walls, in many ways it was more important, because a building is only as strong as the foundation upon which it stands.

In Matthew 16:13–19, Jesus lays bare the foundation of His church in an exchange with the apostle Peter that took place near the end of His Galilean ministry. As the crucifixion drew nearer, Jesus began to focus less on the crowds and more on His disciples, in order to prepare them for His departure.

While traveling through the region of Caerea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples to describe the rumors being spread about Him. “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” He asked. The disciples all spoke up at once. “Some say that you are John the Baptist come back to life!” exclaimed one. “Others think you are Elijah,” said another. Someone pointed in Jesus’ direction, chuckling, “Oh, really? I heard someone say that He was Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Everyone laughed.

In the silence that followed, Jesus probed His disciples further. “And what about you,” He asked gently. “Who do you say I am?” The disciples looked nervously from one to another, as if they were afraid of giving the wrong answer. At last, Peter replied, blurting out the words like one who had been bursting to tell a secret that was burning inside him: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” His eyes shown fiercely, daring Jesus to deny it.

But Jesus did not. Instead, He beamed back a smile of approval and said, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by

man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Jesus' promise here seems to have been a kind of pun based on Peter's name. Peter's given name at birth was actually Simon, which meant "hearing." When Simon's brother Andrew first brought him to meet Jesus, the Savior renamed him Cephas, an Aramaic term that meant "stone" or "rock." The Greek form was *Petros*, or Peter. Anyone who knew Peter well could not help but see the irony in Jesus' words. Old impetuous Simon, the well-meaning but unstable fisherman. If his behavior as a disciple is indicative of his previous life, Peter was a man quick to speak and act, but easily swayed by the opinions of others. It was this trait that eventually caused him to deny his Lord and earn a sharp rebuke from the apostle Paul for shunning Gentile Christians when in the presence of Jewish believers.

However, Peter the man was not the rock upon which the church was founded. Rather, it was Peter's confession that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It is here that we see the true foundation of the church and discover its most glorious name. The church that was about to come into being would not be Peter's church. It would be Christ's church, founded not upon human principles or earthly philosophy, but upon a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe. This church is made up of all those who recognize Jesus' true nature and genuinely confess Him as Lord and Savior.

This is an important reminder in an age when

so much of the church's thinking and practice seems to be drawn from the secular realm. In the world's view, an organization's first concern is efficiency: What is the bottom line? Are we making a profit? How can we get more for less? While efficiency is certainly important, the church's first concern is fidelity. For us, the bottom line is not the profit margin but the will of our Lord and Savior. Before we consider the methodology of others, before we even consider our own tastes, the church must look first to Christ.

It is in this name that we see the secret to the church's power. Jesus' words to Peter promised victory over the grave, giving a picture of the church storming the gates of Hades. This metaphor is used several times in the Old Testament for death (Job 17:16, 38:17; Psalm 9:13, 107:18; Isaiah 38:10). In the ancient world, a city's gate was its first line of defense. When an army seized the gate, it captured the city. Jesus pictured the church as an invincible army able to meet and overcome death in its own stronghold.

In Matthew 16:19 Jesus also granted the church authority to "bind and loose." The rabbis used these terms to speak of forbidding and permitting. Jesus characterized this authority as the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." In the ancient world, keys were a symbol of responsibility. For example, when Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, was made governor of the palace under Hezekiah, the Lord prophesied: "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (Isaiah 22:22). In Jesus' day, the scribes were given a key at their

ordination to symbolize their possession of the key of knowledge (Luke 11:52).

The church, then, has real authority in the spiritual realm. While the prospects of individual congregations or denominations may rise or fall, the future of the church is assured. It will do more than merely survive; it will be victorious because it is built upon the indestructible foundation of Christ Himself.

Father, thank you for this reminder that the church belongs to Christ. Help us to recognize His authority and rely upon His power in all that we do. Amen.