

MATTHEW 5:13–16. (EHV)

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Have you ever felt worthless?

People who get dumped by a boyfriend or girlfriend, people who get fired from a job or who don’t have a very active and fulfilling job, people confined to a hospital bed, and people with bipolar disorder are just some of those who can feel worthless.

Any number of circumstances can make us *feel* worthless. But the important question is: Are we *actually* worthless? In these verses from Matthew 5, Jesus answers that question for his believers very clearly: No. He shows us our worth by comparing us to salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. That may not sound like anything too complimentary, especially in our day and age. If any of you have strong opinions about salt, they’re probably negative ones because maybe your doctor said you need to cut back on your salt intake.

But that’s just it. We’re liable to take in too much salt because so many companies, and not just food companies, understand its usefulness. If you were to look at the ingredients of everything you own, not just in your kitchen cabinets, but also in your bathroom and medicine cabinets, you would find a lot of salt. There’s sodium in your crackers, sodium in your canned soups, sodium in your sauces, sodium in your condiments, sodium in your baking powder, baking soda is a kind of salt, sodium in your shampoo, sodium in your toothpaste, sodium in your eye drops, sodium in your contact solution, and the list could go on.

Pliny the Elder was born about twenty-five years after Jesus was. He eventually wrote his *Natural History*, a sort of encyclopedia on nature. He spent six chapters describing salt. Among its many uses, Pliny mentions that salt imparts a gloss and smoothness to the skin; preserves corpses from corruption for a long time; stimulates the appetite; alleviates snake-bites, scorpion stings, and hornet and wasp stings when mixed with other substances; helps migraines, ulcers on the head, blisters, pimples, and incipient warts when applied with veal suet; and helps cataracts when ground in a little stone mortar with milk.

Salt was rubbed on swollen gums. It was mixed with myrrh and honey and applied to bruised eyes. They packed salt in bags, dipped the bags in hot water, and applied the heated bags to aching shoulders and kidneys. They used salt to remove corns on the feet. They used it to preserve meat in the days before refrigerators. They used salt for dental care. Salt was applied to sheep and oxen to remove itch-scab. Farmers considered themselves fortunate if their sheep and cattle could graze in salty areas, because the cows gave more milk, the cheese tasted better, and the animals were healthier. The list could go on and on.

Pliny sums it all up by saying that a more humane life would be unable to continue without salt, and that nothing was more useful for entire bodies than salt and the sun.

And now what does Jesus say? “You are the salt of the earth.” Not you *should be*, but you *are*. Not just *any* salt, but *the* salt. Not just the salt of Winner or Colome or Burke or Valentine or Gordon, but the salt of the *earth*. You are indispensable to humanity’s existence. You are of inestimable worth.

This isn’t something we are naturally. Paul wrote to the Romans, “*All* have turned away, they have together become *worthless*; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:12). It may not be good for your self-esteem, but you all need to know it because it’s the truth: You and I are worthless by nature, fit for nothing but the burn pile, fit for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

But Jesus doesn’t say that you are worthless here. He says, “You are the salt of the earth. Your worth cannot be overestimated.” That’s because Jesus has given us worth. He came to fulfill God’s law, down to its minutest detail, in our place. His obedience culminated in his death on the cross, where his blood was like a salt for us, purifying us from every possible impurity, every last little sin. He has also joined that purifying power to the water of baptism. The water of baptism was like a saltwater for you, washing away all your sins, past, present, and future, and preserving you for all eternity.

As a result, you are now the salt of the earth. God works everything for the good of those who love him, for your good. That means that everything that happens, happens for you. The world spins and life goes on because of you, for your sake. You are of infinite worth because of Jesus.

That is not only a heart-gladdening truth, it is also an awesome responsibility. “But if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again?” Jesus asks. “It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by people.” Jesus isn’t making some textbook statement about whether salt can lose its saltiness. He is saying that if it did lose its saltiness, whether that’s possible for actual salt or not, it would be worthless.

Is that what we want? To take for granted the worth Jesus has given us? To risk becoming worthless once again? To be worthy once again only of being trampled underfoot? Of course not. Jesus has made us to be the salt of the earth, to be of inestimable value. So he is saying to us Christians, live that way. Be what he has made you to be.

How can we live like the salt of the earth? It doesn’t mean living arrogantly and expecting everyone to wait on you hand and foot. It means, for one thing, praying for the earth. Accounts like Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah remind us that God sometimes only lets a nation or city survive or thrive for the sake of the Christians who live there or whose lives are affected by it. Maybe God is preserving our nation only for the sake of the Christians who are living there. So pray for our nation and every nation where Christians live. Pray that we and they would always be able to worship the true God in the way that is right. Pray that the preaching of the gospel would not be hindered there. Pray that more people would believe it.

The apostle Paul reminds us that people cannot be saved without the witness of the gospel from Christians. So don’t be afraid to tell people that they are worthless by nature, but also that they have inestimable worth because of what Christ has done for them. Eagerly support the proclamation of the gospel with your prayers and offerings and encouragement. God will use your witness in word and deed to purify people from their sin, just like salt purifies.

Salt also seasons. Do you realize how meaningless existence on this earth is without Christ? Ask the woman who spends eight hours every day Monday through Friday monotonously putting plastic sleeves on one roll of tape after another what she does for work. She probably won't sound very proud about it. Ask her why she does it, and her answer will probably sound unconvincing. But a Christian doing the same task? She sees in her monotonous work a way that God is providing for her and her family's needs. She sees faithful service to her employer. By working diligently, she's helping to feed him and his family, and the families of those over her. She sees love shown to her fellow human beings in providing them with something they need—tape—and doing so in such a way that they may obtain it in the best possible condition and with less risk of disease. The examples of ways you can season the earth around you are countless.

Salt also preserves. All the salt and embalming fluids in the world can only preserve people's bodies, and that only after they die. By telling people about Jesus and praying for their eternal welfare, we have the ability to preserve people's bodies and souls for all eternity. Jesus said, "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:26).

But Jesus doesn't just call us "the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world," he says. This doesn't need a whole lot of explanation, because we still hopefully appreciate light and its importance for life. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus call *himself* the light of the world, so we might rightly wonder how he can put us on par with himself. As we already learned, we are worthless by nature; Jesus is not. So what gives?

Even in English, our word *light* can be used to describe a light producer, such as a lamp, like when we say, "Turn off the light." Or we can also use the word to describe the light that is produced, such as a flame or other reflected light, like when we say, "That star gives off such beautiful light."

Jesus is the light as in the light-producer. The light of life originates with Jesus. Without him we could do nothing but walk around in utter darkness and death. But when Jesus shone the light of life on us through the gospel, communicating to us that he has fulfilled every last detail of God's law and has paid the price for all our violations of God's law, we became like metal heated with fire. Such glowing metal gives off light and is a light, but its light is not its own; it comes from the fire. We became like stars. Stars give off light and are lights, but their light is not their own; it is reflected from the sun.

So Jesus can say both: *He* is the light of the world, and *we* and all who believe in him are the light of the world. Not, "You *should be* the light of the world." "You *are*."

But again, this is not only a heart-gladdening truth; it is also an awesome responsibility. "A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way let your light shine in people's presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Jesus has made us to be light, not so that we can hide his light under a bushel basket. Not so that we make our Christian faith the world's best-kept secret. Not so that we can keep silence while maintaining that our religion is "a deeply personal matter." That would be as foolish as lighting a candle and immediately covering it with a flower-pot. No, we are the light *of the world*. Our job is to communicate to people by word and deed that our salvation is accomplished,

that our joy has now begun, that Jesus is coming again, and that God has befriended us by his Son's first coming so that he need not come again as our enemy.

Simply go about your daily tasks faithfully and honestly, and pray and look for opportunities to tell people why you do so. Those opportunities will come. If you hide your faith, if you tell dirty jokes with the rest of your coworkers, laugh at the same filth your neighbors do, take advantage of your employer or customers like they do, hang up the same obscene calendars they do, those opportunities will not arise. But if you let your light shine, people will see your good deeds, they will ask about them, you can tell them your motivation and strength for them, and they may then praise your Father in heaven.

So you see that none of you who have been given faith in Jesus are actually worthless, no matter how you feel. Far from it. Every one of you has worth that cannot be measured or calculated. It is worth that Jesus has simply given you by his fulfillment of God's law and by his sacrifice for sin. You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world. No joke. Jesus loves you. You are precious to him. And you are one of the most valuable, indispensable possessions the world has, whether it acknowledges it or not. Amen.