

Jesus has something important to tell us here, but in order to understand what he means, we need to rethink the way we look at salt. If you go to the grocery store to buy salt, you'll find it with the spices. That aisle has the most expensive things in the whole store. Some spices will set you back more than \$100 per pound. Then on the bottom shelf is the salt, pennies per pound. In Biblical times, it wasn't like that; salt was valuable and expensive.

Salt is good. It was even good for cash—so much so that soldiers in the Roman army were paid part of their wages in salt. The Latin word for salt is *sal*. That's why we call our wages today a salary. Salt isn't just good for making food taste better; it's good for preserving it. In pre-refrigeration days, it was critical for keeping food. Without salt to preserve food for the future, day-to-day survival was much more difficult.

Salt is good. It's necessary for health. If you have too little salt, you can die. As the Lewis and Clark expedition made their way down the Columbia River, they realized that they were in great danger, for they were running out of salt. It wasn't that they hated eating bland food. Without salt, their health was at risk. This was one of the reasons Clark exclaimed, "Ocean in view! Oh, the joy!" They spent much of their time on the Pacific coast that winter boiling seawater to make salt.

Salt is good. It's good for sacrifice. In the Old Testament, sacrifices were first salted before being offered. This was to purify the sacrifice and make it acceptable.

When Jesus says, "Salt is good," he's appealing to all of these benefits of salt, but perhaps most of all he was appealing to the purifying qualities of salt.

Salt is purifying, as Jesus said: "Everyone will be salted with fire". You see, salt is like a little crystal with fire in the middle. If you put it on your tongue, you can taste it burning. If you put it on a cut, you can feel it burning. Fire is purifying. It's used to burn away impurities and to remove dross from metal. Fire sanitizes and sterilizes. The Israelites used fire to dedicate pagan polluted places to the Lord. When Jesus says that everyone will be salted with fire, he's referring to trials, difficulties, and temptations. These are like sodium chloride combustions which purify and refine us. Being salted with fire is not pleasant, but Jesus uses the fire to preserve us from the corruption of this age.

We are salted with fire and we in turn salt the world around us with that same fire. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13). This is what's behind the curious statement that Jesus speaks: "If the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?" (v 50).

How does salt lose its saltiness? Sodium chloride is a very stable molecule. It's not quick to divide in a chemical reaction. It doesn't degrade over time. If you buy a can of salt and leave it in your cupboard for fifty years, when you finally take it out, it will still be salt. It may be one solid chunk, but it

will not have become anything else. That's because, today, we have pure Sodium Chloride. In biblical times, they didn't.

In those days, salt was harvested from the surface of salt marshes or pits where salt water had flowed from the Mediterranean or the Dead Sea. Mediterranean Sea salt had impurities from the algae, sand, and sea life that flowed in with the seawater. Dead Sea salt was even worse. Most of the salts in the Dead Sea are not sodium chloride, plus humidity, sun, heat, and constant contact with the earth leach away the easily dissolved sodium chloride, leaving behind the impurities. Bits of rock and sand, mineral crystals, dirt and debris remain to make it look like it might be salt, but it's tasteless. It has lost the fire of the salt within.

St. Paul warns us in 2 Timothy 3:

"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, *having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.* (2 Tim 3:1-5, emphasis added)

The Holy Spirit is the fire of the salt for the Triune God's people. What Paul describes is what happens when the fire of the Holy Spirit is driven out of us by our love of self and the rest of the nasty things Paul mentions. We become empty crystals, having the form of the godly salt of the earth, but

denying the work, presence, and power of the Holy Spirit. The salt can be leached out of us in a life not fed by the Word of God. We can become flavorless, going through the motions, without the faith. We can be hypocrites: actors who look like believers by outward action, but having no faith.

Even whole church bodies can become tasteless and unable to salt the world. We lose our saltiness if we refuse to stand against evil. A church that says "all roads lead to God" is a church that has lost its saltiness just as is a church that says let the poor take care of themselves while we enjoy our programs and diversions. Salt must purify; it must preserve. Salt substitute is not salt.

"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (v 50). That's still Jesus' word to you. You are the salt of the earth. You *have been* purified, salted with fire. By his death on the cross, Jesus accomplished what all those salted sacrifices of the Old Testament promised: forgiveness of all sins. Now by God's Word and Sacraments, that forgiveness is given to us. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. We have salt in ourselves and we salt others by forgiving one another which brings purification and peace from God.

In our Epistle, James tells Christians how they can have peace with one another. He says, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. . . . My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins"

(James 5:16, 19–20). Having learned the joy of being cleansed and free in Jesus, having his pure salt, we also have the opportunity to be the vessels to carry that forgiveness to others.

Our holiness, our forgiveness, our power come from Christ. The salt in us has power because it is from Christ. The salt of his sweat in Gethsemane, the salty blood he shed for us. We filled with salt and we have power to do battle against the powers of evil, to purify and cleanse, to flavor and preserve, and to forgive and love.