

## **Title:** Embodying the Qualities of Salt: Preserving Goodness and Promoting Wholeness

In last week's sermon, we started a section in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus privately taught His disciples some essential lessons on discipleship. Today's readings have a similar theme but with a prophetic edge. The context occurs after Jesus predicts his coming death for the second time. He knows that his time on earth is short, so he doesn't waste time (or words) telling his disciples the most critical things for their mission and purpose. At times, his message seems disjointed because several topics are covered in a short amount of time. Yet, His message is direct and uncompromising. Like many prophets of old, Jesus saw moral issues from a black-or-white perspective that called for change.

When Jesus shows us this prophetic side of his ministry, modern people often have trouble receiving it. Therefore, as I comment on his words today, please know that I do so with a spirit of compassion. We have some stern and challenging words to consider today, which are hard to understand. So, please bear with me as I wade into some deep theological water and pick out a few principles that I hope will be beneficial.

To get started, let's begin with our Old Testament reading. The journey to the Promised Land was not as easy as many Hebrews expected. As they began looking backward instead of forward, they started complaining to Moses about their situation. [This human tendency is all too common, and its solution is addressed in the other readings, as we will later see.] The murmuring soon spread throughout the camp until Moses began to show signs of frustration and burnout. The solution God offers him instructs him to share the burden of leadership with 70 elders, who are consequently anointed with the Holy Spirit.

When two Israelites in the camp are also given the gift of the Spirit, Joshua expects Moses to be jealous. But Moses responds with humility and prophetic wisdom when he states, ***“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”***<sup>1</sup>

This experience parallels the one in our Gospel today, when someone other than the 12 disciples is casting out demons in the name of Christ, and the disciples **“tried to stop him because he was not one of them.”**<sup>2</sup> But Jesus said, ***“Do not stop him.”***<sup>3</sup> His instruction opened the circle of discipleship to admit others outside their immediate circle and demonstrated that ministry is meant to be shared.

The “we verses them” syndrome is a common human tendency, even among Christians. Labels are attached to denominations, theological differences, and ministerial styles, often dividing people with harsh and unfounded judgments.

On more than one occasion, I have felt the sting of discrimination within the circle of faith when brothers or sisters of different theological traditions only accept me up to a point and then draw a line. I actually had one person tell me, to my face, that she couldn’t believe I was a Christian due to my denominational association. Such prejudices are a stumbling block to fellowship and contradict our call to be “partakers of God’s grace,”<sup>4</sup> as our opening prayer for today informs us.

Jesus has some sharp words for those who put ***“a stumbling block before one of these little ones.”***<sup>5</sup> The original word that Jesus used for stumbling block is “skandalizó.”<sup>6</sup> Our English word scandal comes from this word, and in this context,

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 11:29

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:38

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:39

<sup>4</sup> BCP, p. 234, Collect for Proper 21

<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:41

<sup>6</sup> Strong’s Concordance, #4624 skandalizó (skan-dal-id'-zo) properly, set a snare (“stumbling-block”); (figuratively) “to hinder right conduct or thought;

it means “to give offense and cause to sin.” Jesus gives us these warnings because the health of our witness to the world depends on our unity and love for one another. Jesus will later say, “***By this, the world will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.***”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the metaphor Jesus uses about “cutting off” things that offend, whether they be by the use of our “hand,” “foot,” or “eye,” needs to be dealt with severely. If Jesus prunes every branch that is connected with him, then we, too, have some responsibility to put away those things that block us from following him and uniting ourselves with others in love.

When Jesus addresses “***things that offend,***” it seems as if the list of possibilities is endless. The remedy Jesus uses to stop the downhill slide into corruption is discovered in the symbol of salt.

When Jesus used the metaphor of salt, he used a substance essential for preserving food. Similarly, believers are called to maintain goodness and prevent moral decay. This quality is central to who we are as God’s sons and daughters and is why Jesus looked upon his disciples in Matthew and said, “***You are the salt of the earth.***”<sup>8</sup>

In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls us “***to have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.***”<sup>9</sup> By this, he is reminding us of our purpose. Used in this context, salt as a symbol presses home a critical point: for just as salt enhances flavor and makes food more enjoyable, so we, too, are to make the world a better place.

Therefore, Christians are encouraged to bring out the best in others and add value to the relationships they enjoy. The Apostle Paul would later write, “***Let your conversation be***

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<sup>7</sup> John 13:35

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>9</sup> Mark 9:50

*always full of grace, seasoned with salt.*<sup>10</sup> Collectively, the metaphor of salt not only encourages believers to be a positive influence and maintain moral integrity but also upholds their commitment to be holy, for purity honors God and always blesses others.

The “hell” that Jesus warns against will happen if we don’t do our job. The word for “hell” that Mark uses is “geenna - (gheh'-en-nah),”<sup>11</sup> which was a worm-infested garbage dump west and south of Jerusalem, where fires were always smoldering. It was a smelly, disgusting place that was dreadfully avoided. Hell is a terrifying truth – a solemn, heartbreaking reality. Its reality tells us something about God, who is holy, hates evil, and will bring all evil into judgment. Thankfully, God sent his Son to spare us from that judgment. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.”<sup>12</sup>

The Gospel always leads us back to the love of Christ, but it also warns us about the consequences of compromising with evil, which could cause us to lose our saltiness. So, how do you stay salty? By amputating those parts of you that lead you in the wrong direction.

So come Holy Spirit, and “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire”<sup>13</sup> so that we might be Holy and become “partakers of your heavenly treasure.”<sup>14</sup> *Amen*

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<sup>10</sup> Colossians 4:6

<sup>11</sup> Strongs Concordance, #1067, geenna

<sup>12</sup> John 3:16-17

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 3:12

<sup>14</sup> BCP, p. 234, Collect for Proper 21