

Jesus never lived through a Grande Prairie winter. Sure, He created everything and He is present everywhere, but He missed out on sidewalk maintenance somehow. “Don’t lose your saltiness, friends,” He says, “or else you’ll be thrown on the ground for everyone to walk over.” When reading up for this sermon, I realized that growing up in Fort McMurray, in residing in Alberta for life, this has truly made me misread the text because I figured there must be a middle-eastern use of salt on the roadways. Obviously not to melt the ice, but it seems like Jesus is saying if you’ve forgotten what you’re called to be, you’ll be sent out to do a lesser job, to play a less dignified role. Like giving traction to poor pedestrians. It’s less of a reason to brag compared to the salt that brings out glorious flavours in feasts for a family, but if you’ve gone stale, or lost your saltiness, whatever Jesus means by that, at least you bring safety to the world around you.

That’s not what Jesus means. If you cease to be salt—for what else is salt that has lost its saltiness except not-salt—then you will be cast out and trampled on. This isn’t some wise and frugal man repurposing the salt that has gone bad; it is an angry chef disposing of that which is of no use to him, and letting the world obliterate it.

So the level of care that we hear with this text is not “well it would be better if we remained salty” but “we must remain salty at all cost.”

And note also that I say “remain salty.” Jesus isn’t talking down to the rocks that couldn’t become salt, the dirt that could only ever grow plants rather than season dishes. He’s not warning the disciples and the crowd on the mountain that they must work their butts off to become something that they aren’t. He is inviting them to watch out lest they cease to be what they are. “You are salt. Don’t lose it.” Or in the context of the sermon of the Mount, immediately following the Beatitudes, the blessings, don’t cease to be what He has made them into.

The same goes for light. Light that is hidden is some warped and distorted item, for it is no longer playing the role it is designed for. A light enlightening an empty room is pointless. Get a motion

sensor so that it is off when no one is around, if the aim is to keep it in the room but you don't want it burnt out. Who cares whether a tree falling when no one is around makes any sound—why would you want a light shining where no one will ever see it—it's pointless. And on the other hand, a light where it has been placed purposefully to be, it can't help but be seen. It doesn't need to work harder, to think more rightly, or even to try a bit. Simply sitting on the stand where it was placed is enough; shining down from the hill is enough to invite in weary travellers.

Salt flavours, it preserves, and in our context it melts ice on roadways, but that's not entirely relevant here. Light enlightens; it guides and reveals. All of these things are wonderful, but it's not entirely clear what it means for us to be salt and light; the only hint of how these metaphors relate to us is at the end where Jesus says to let your light shine (rather than hiding it) so your good works may be noticed and therefore others give glory to God for them.

And this shows us the lives we are to live, especially in the light of the blessings we have received. Neither salt nor light exist for their own sake. They do nothing for themselves but they serve the world around them. Which Jesus then ups the ante as He continues explaining that He has not arrived to wipe out the Law and the Prophets, to wash away the Old Testament with its demands and its promises, but instead He is to fill them fully. As He carries on in the Sermon on the Mount He explains that the ethics of God's kingdom are so much more demanding than one could have thought. To avoid murder is great, but to hate in your heart and curse is the same thing as murder. To control yourself when it comes to another person who isn't your spouse is all well and good but you have not ceased to sin, for the thought that you had to redirect about that lady or that man, it itself was adultery, even if it only ever lived in your mind. And He carries on, showing us that even if we were to manage our outward actions so that no one else could know you were a sinner, you still would be. And God would still know.

If you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, your acts of righteousness must be more complete than even those that watch every step and monitor every word.

Whereas God's people, or really all people, can only ever reach a partial righteousness. We might be able to manage these good works while neglecting caring for another aspect of God's Holy Law and perfect righteousness. Maybe we're a generous gossip, or a prayerful thief, or an ungrateful chaste individual. The people in Isaiah's time seemed to have the rituals of the faith down to a t and yet couldn't be bothered by their neighbours in need or about the conflicts they were stirring up.

We're all able to perform the bits of God's will that, by His grace, don't come so difficult to us. So we can look at the little good things we do and point to them and say "God, see! Light! Salt! Hear my prayers and take care of me because I'm doing good!" Maybe we're more subtle than that, but tell me I'm wrong in saying that this motive sits inside all of us. We do good works not purely for the sake of the hungry, the lonely, the unjustly imprisoned, the abused, the oppressed, but we do them at least partly so that a box can be checked, that we can be noticed, that we can say we did something, or at least we tried.

Even in our attempts to be good, our sin creeps in and turns it all inwards. "Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure," Isaiah accuses. When you fast, when you pray, when you give even, you're thinking about your own needs and neglecting the true needy around you. But it's not you alone, friends, it's me too. I'll take the crown for this one here today. One and all, we relax the Law so as to say that we've done enough; Jesus can't really demand that I follow each command so perfectly. Why could He be so upset for the sins that I have no control over? The sins that seem so interwoven into my being at this point, the sins I was taught growing up, the sins I developed to protect me from neglectful parents, hurtful friends, or my self-degrading mind.

So we try to sidestep God's condemnation, we try to placate Him with the little we're able to do, and we try to point out that I was light last Tuesday or I'm salt when I'm around this group.

But Jesus will have none of it, thanks be to God. Because when He returns to judge the living and the dead, He'll have none of it then either. He doesn't want anyone to sit in a false self-confidence,

with a hope that they might sneak by like a Canadian in a grocery store because they asked politely enough or they think they did enough. He comes and fulfills God's law, explaining His demands so completely, so in depth, that each person, Pharisees included if they'll listen, walk away and wonder "who then can enter the kingdom of heaven?"

But He doesn't just fulfill them like an excellent teacher, ensuring you know everything you'll need to know for the test. No, He fills them fully with His own righteousness, like none before Him. He serves others without a thought for Himself. He sits with the oppressed and the outcast, the sinners even without a concern for His own status. He heals and demonstrates God's love not seeking a thing in return. And then in the ultimate act He takes all His righteousness to the cross and dies for our unrighteousness, the blessed exchange taking place where ours becomes His and His ours. The cross was not simply a necessity of salvation because a death had to occur in place of ours—this is true, but it is also His righteousness, His Light and His Salt enacted until His last breath, Him fulfilling the Law so fully because He is doing every action, He is thinking every thought not out of selfishness but selflessness. He is living not trying to protect Himself but with faith in God and love for neighbour. The cross wasn't simply what happened after His perfect life of love—it was simply the greatest and grandest act of love in His life.

And now His righteousness has been poured onto you, into you. Now, because Christ has given you every act of service, every prayer of faith, every Commandment fulfilled from 1-10, your righteousness does surpass that of all.

You may enter the kingdom of heaven because you have been made righteous, you have been given His light to be, His identity as salt.

And once again we are at the point where we must hear and fear—how can we remain? Though I have been made light and salt, the sinner in me constantly yearns to live a life of comfort and self-service, so how may I resist that and endure?

And the first step is to repent of the fear and hear once again that your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake—not because you're salt and light; repent of the self-serving attitude that wants to remain salt and light for your own sake, that you may enter the kingdom.

And rejoice that He salts us, He enlightens you not once but a whole lifetime through. He is aware that you, little flame that you are, find yourself waving around to the point of extinguishing yourself. He knows that you're a bucket of salt with a hole in it, always at risk of finding yourself empty.

So Just as He gave Himself to you on the cross, so does He give Himself to you today. To renew you away from your self-serving tendencies, to save you from your apathy that says "I'm saved and I don't really want to care for the neighbours around me." You are here, and therefore Christ is working. You are being united through this preaching to the One who is service, salt and light to the world. And by His grace, not by your own will and efforts, you will flavour the world around you, you will do good works that point to God in heaven and glorify Him. The One who has given you everything will not cease to work on you and to work through you, thanks be to Christ our Lord. Amen.