

Be Salty

Jason Abbott

Jesus tells us, in today's passage—*“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?”* (v. 50).

Jesus shares this proverb at the end of a lesson concerning the dangers of sin. Sin is serious; sin is deadly—Jesus has just explained. And, the consequences of sin are horrific and terrible. Jesus uses all kinds of vivid descriptions to make this point. It's better to drown than to cause a child to sin. It's better to cut off a hand or gouge out an eye than to keep them and sin your way into hell thru them. Jesus says all this then he shares this proverb about salt.

What's up with that? What's the point of this stuff about good and bad salt—about salt losing its saltiness? What does this have to do with the seriousness of sin or the dangerous consequences of sinning?

This is what we're going to be after today. So, let's read the full text together then we'll pray for God to teach us through our study of it.

Mark 9:42-50

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where

“the worms that eat them do not die,
and the fire is not quenched.’

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Jesus wants his people to be salty. And, for us to see exactly what that means, we need to establish some things. (1st) Sin is serious. This needs to be reckoned with. We have to see sin for what it really is—*deadly!* (2nd) Salt doesn't lose its saltiness. That's not possible. So, we want to get at what Jesus means when he tells us it does. (3rd) Believers are to be salty. But how can we be? How can salt be made salty again? We have to answer that question in light of our first two points.

Let's look at each of these in its turn.

1. Sin is serious (vv. 42-48).

When you read this passage, there's no denying that Jesus is making this point. He stresses it. He belabors it. He won't let it go.

- If anyone causes one of these little ones...to stumble, it would be better for them [to have] a large millstone...hung around their neck and [be] thrown into the sea (v. 42).
- If your hand causes you to [sin], cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell (v. 43).
- ...if your foot causes you to [sin], cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell (v. 45).
- ...if your eye causes you to [sin], pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes [in] hell (v. 47).

If you were listening to Jesus preach this sermon, you would probably be like: *Okay already. Point taken. We get it. Let's move on.* But, Jesus just won't let it go. He simply continues beating this drum.

Now, this is really interesting to me, because Jesus lived in a religious context where largely everybody would've agreed with him. Nobody was soft pedaling sin in ancient Israel. For the ancient Israelite, sin brought shame not only upon the sinner but also often times upon the person's family and community. Israelites were serious when it came to sin and its consequences.

So why then is Jesus belaboring the point? Why all these vivid, horrific images about sin and its consequences? That's the question.

And, friends, the answer should startle us. Our Lord won't let this lesson go because our sin is far more serious than even the ancient Israelites believed it to be. It's a bigger problem than they think. And, if it's a bigger problem than they think, what does that mean for us? What does that say about our view of sin? Are we serious about the dangers of sin?

Friends, Jesus's repetition is especially for us! It's for you and me!

When I was in early grade school, I lived in a neighborhood that backed-up onto a little creek. My best friend Shannon lived in a neighborhood on the other side of that creek. So, we would often meet in the little wilderness between our two homes and catch crawdads or skip rocks or play army. We played fairly *harmless* games—the kinds of games which most children play whenever they're in early grade school. This was our normal, *innocent* pattern with one notable exception.

On one dry summer day, the two of us met as usual. Except, on this occasion, Shannon had the idea for a new game. He'd brought a book of matches he had found at home and thought it would be cool for us to build a fire out of dry grass and wood. I thought that was a great idea, and so we began gathering large quantities of both and piling them up. Then, once we had a large pile, we set it on fire. And, it took. Boy did it take! Within minutes, the grass and wood were roaring in the little forest between our two neighborhoods. And, it wasn't too long before his mother noticed and came-out to end our fun—to end our “harmless” little game.

Shannon's mom wasn't amused. She didn't think that our game was harmless or that we were innocent at all. And, unfortunately for me, neither did my parents. We were both in big trouble.

Friends, too often we view our sins like Shannon and I viewed our little game of matches—we *don't think they are dangerous, and we don't imagine we are guilty*. Jesus, however, takes a different view of sin. He wants us to recognize its seriousness and its dangerousness. And, so he warns us here repetitively about the consequences. He warns us about the dangers. And, he does so out of care for us. Like our parents with that fire, Jesus speaks-up because he loves us.

I wonder if you believe this to be true. Too often I think we don't believe it. Too often I believe we take our cues from the world around us when it comes to sin. Friends, hear Jesus speaking to you. Sin is real, and it is deadly.

But, more importantly—longing for and pursuing the pleasure that sin offers is to forsake the joy that God offers. Don't miss that aspect of what Jesus says here. A great joy is on offer. A life and a kingdom are on offer. And, these are so valuable, in fact, that it's worth sacrificing a hand or foot or eye to gain it. *Stretch your thinking when it comes to pleasure, Jesus says, because you were created for greater pleasure than any sin could ever offer or provide.*

Friends, you were created for the presence of God—for eternal relationship with your Creator. I love how the Psalmist describes the joys of being with the Lord. He writes this poem to celebrate relationship with God.

You make known to me the path of life; / you will fill me with joy in your presence, / with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:11).

The fleeting pleasures of sin cannot carry such a glorious and eternal weight. It's only God who can carry it; only God can provide it. We must run to Jesus Christ for real life and joy and pleasure. That's the kind of glory that we were created for. Dear friends, don't go in for anything less.

2. Salt doesn't lose its saltiness (vv. 49-50).

Now, I am truly no chemist. In fact, the absolute worst grade I ever tallied was in high school chemistry. Mrs. Perry gave me that mark. I remember more about her than I do about chemistry. She loved to square dance and even taught square dancing on the side. That I remember—chemistry, not so much.

Yet, I've read enough from others, who do know their chemistry, to tell you that sodium chloride is a very stable compound.¹ It is not likely to lose its saltiness. For it to lose its saltiness, there would need to be a chemical reaction to make it less than salt—less than sodium chloride. And so, for this reason, it's not likely that Jesus was talking about salt losing it's saltiness by subtraction but, rather, by addition.

¹ I found [this](#) article to be especially helpful, both for its chemistry and its thoughts about this saying from Jesus.

In short, salt loses its saltiness by being polluted or diluted in something else—not by being less than it was originally. F. F. Bruce puts it this way.

*...in the ordinary experience of Galilean life, salt was rarely found in a pure state...it was mixed with other substances, various forms of earth.*²

In this way, salt was good as long as it wasn't overly contaminated or polluted, as "long as the proportion of salt in the mixture was sufficiently high."³ If it wasn't, then the salt was useless. It was too polluted with foreign substances to be any good. So, it would be tossed out. It would be thrown into the trash heap. And, in the context of Jesus's teaching here, this idea makes a lot of sense. He's teaching his followers to cut off pollutants—to cut off what will make them impure, to cut off the things which will dilute their saltiness. *Do away with everything which causes you to sin*, Jesus says to us. *Get rid of what pollutes you*.

Yet, what's interesting is everything our Lord mentions is part of us; isn't it? Our hand (v. 43). Our foot (v. 45). Our eye (v. 47). Jesus locates the problem in us. The cause of sin isn't something out there. It's something in here.

There's this really fascinating section in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography where he decides he's going to attempt to cut off all vices (he called them "errata") in his life. In short, he's going to do-away with his sins and replace them with virtues. So, he makes a list of thirteen virtues, and he systematically pursues the acquisition of each of these virtues. But, the last virtue, humility, is one he cannot seem to master in the end. Finally, he writes this.

*In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; ...even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.*⁴

Notice that Franklin locates the vice in himself. Pride is ready to "peep out" at any moment—especially whenever he imagines he has finally acquired humility. The problem isn't out there. It's in him—in his heart.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Saying of Jesus*, 37.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*: you can read the fuller excerpt [here](#).

And, brothers and sisters, the Bible is clear. This is the problem we all have. None are found pure. None are born pure. None are pure or even pure enough “salt.” We are all polluted with sin at our very core—at our very heart. It is not something out there (what goes into us) that makes us unclean. On the contrary, it’s something in here (what comes out of us) that makes us unclean (Matthew 15:11).

We are not sufficiently salty—to extend Jesus’s metaphor here—on our own. We need help. We need purifying. We need to be made salty again. Because...

3. We are to be salty (v. 50).

Here’s that hard saying again—that mysterious question which Jesus asks us. He ends with it here.

Salt is good, [Jesus teaches us] but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? (v. 50).

Notice the very personal nature of this question. Jesus doesn’t ask his disciples how can salt be made salty again. Instead, he asks them how they can make it salty. *How can you do this?* he asks. Jesus is asking if we’re capable of cutting off the hand or cutting off the foot or gouging out the eye of our own sin.

You know, in one sense, I think he’s saying go try. Go try to do it yourselves. Go try to do what Benjamin Franklin tried to do. See if you can. See how that goes for you. (I say this because Jesus often challenged those who were proud in this way. He challenged the rich young ruler in this way (Mark 10:18-21), as well as the expert in the law (Luke 10:25-28). He sends them off to learn how much they need saving—how much they need a Savior.) This is a lesson in humility.

The sacrificial system was a lesson in humility too; wasn’t it? You’ve sinned. So, an animal must die in your place. Take it to the temple. Place your hands on it. Identify with it. Slaughter it. Kill it, so that you won’t have to die. Super humbling! Your sin on that animal always before you repetitively throughout your whole life. Death. Death. Death. Humility. Humility. Humility.

Interestingly salt was used in sacrifices. It was regularly a part of the offerings. Salt may’ve symbolized purification and preservation, since it was an essential way to keep food pure and edible in ancient times. This symbol wouldn’t have been lost

on Jesus's disciples or his original Hebrew audience. Salt's spiritual significance would have come alive to them. One scholar explains it this way.

...just as every sacrifice needed salt to be acceptable, so too the disciples must be purified if they are to enter the kingdom.⁵

But, again, we must ask ourselves—*How can we make ourselves salty again? How can we purify ourselves?* The answer to Jesus's question is clearly that we can't. We can't purify ourselves. He has to do that for us. He has to make us salty again, and he must keep us that way. He must always be our saltiness—our righteousness. Only Jesus can do it.

And, he has. This is the good news. When we place our faith in Christ Jesus, he purifies us from our sins. He makes us salty again. Let me end with these words of encouragement found in Hebrews.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Jesus Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:11-14).

Amen. Praise God for Jesus!

⁵ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 195.