

Ps 11:1,2
 Ps 7:4
 Ps 66:1,2,3,4
 Ps 145:1,2
 Ps 96:4,5
 Matthew 4:23-5:16
 Genesis 12:1-3
 Leviticus 2:1-13
 Matthew 5:13a

Yarrow, August 22, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Over the years we've heard repeated references to text: you are salt of earth. Hear it as a duty, as basis for evangelism: need to *be* salt, ie, live in such a way that you in fact are salt to those around you.

- But something vague about how to carry this out. How exactly we to be salt??
- More: if it's salt we to be, why does Jesus say "are" instead of "must be"?

Turns out that Jesus describes here *identity* of His hearers. On basis of that identity they certainly have an obligation. But the identity is rich, and an encouragement that extends to us today too.

GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE ARE SALT ON EARTH BEFORE GOD.

1. Who needs salt,
2. Why is salt needed,
3. How one is salt.

1. Who needs salt.

Jesus: "you are salt of the earth." Who He mean with 'you'?

- Cf context: text re salt found in Sermon on Mt. Sermon addressed to "crowds" (vs 1), ie, people of 4:25. Who?
 - These terms describe area belonging to Israel, though now divided in various provinces under Roman control. Pt: people to whom Jesus speaks are not Romans or Moabites or even Canadians, but are Israelites, Jews of Jesus' day.
 - Granted: inner circle are disciples, cf 5:1b.
 - But listeners more than disciples, cf 7:28f
 - Who these Israelites? God's people by covenant, cf Genesis 17:7; Exodus 20:2; etc.
 - Ie, God imposed a bond of love on slaves-of-Egypt, gave rich promises, adopted them as His children. Possible because of sacrifices in tabernacle..., ie, Another would die to atone for sin.
 - Clear: in eyes of Lord God, Israelites had unique place, ie, they alone His treasured possession.

To *these* people Jesus says, "You are salt of the earth."

- NOTE: to read statement carefully. Jesus not expressing a wish: I'd like you to be..., or: I wish you'd be.... Not imperative either: You must be.... Rather, straight-forward statement of identity: You are salt.
 - Yet not 'salt of the kitchen', but 'salt of the earth'
- We wonder: how to picture this? Does someone take God's covenant people and sprinkle them over supper? Who's supper?? Ie, who needs salt? For whom are Israelites salt??
- Inclination is: use what we know re salt in our day to explain this text.
 - Ie, kitchen salt → improve taste. So: Christians make earth more tasty.
 - Or: preservative. So: Christians prevent decay in society; without Christians society be more decadent still.
 - Get commentaries choosing one or the other....
 - But instead of using today's practices re salt to interpret Jesus' words of 2000 years ago, better to use Scripture itself.
 - Cf 5:3-12: can't understand unless appreciate Jesus' own background, ie, He raised/trained in synagogue, with open Bible. As all Jesus' words: built on God's Old Testament revelation. Ibid re salt.
- In Old Testament salt had primarily two purposes.
 - Judgment: cf Deuteronomy 29:23; Genesis 18:26; Judges 9:45
 - Friendship: cf desert travel, perspiration ∴ need more than water (decent; imperative), also salt; salt strengthened your guest. So salt became symbol of friendship, to point that when alliance or covenant made between you and guest *salt* used to affirm/seal this friendship/bond. ∴ called 'covenant of salt'. Permanent.
- Lord established covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, included this salt in the arrangements.
 - Exodus 40: building of tabernacle, God live with people – marvel!
 - How possible?? Cf Leviticus 1f re sacrifices. Includes burnt offering, ie, statement of devotion to Lord, whole animal burned. Accompanied with grain offering of Leviticus 2, a token part burnt, rest eaten by priest-as-God's-representative. Ie, given to God as man's gift-of-gratitude for wealth of redemption in covenantal gospel. This grain offering to include salt, cf 2:13, ie, symbol of friendship/covenant from people to God – of course as reply to God's claim of love as spelled out in gospel of tabernacle.
 - Clear: judgment motif not present here; here only friendship motif. Priests/Levites to explain significance of this gospel to Israel: special bond of love between God and Israel.
- Now Jesus: "you are salt of the earth."
 - Clear this is not a reference to judgment, rather to sign of friendship.
 - For whose benefit? Israel's? Sure, here gospel for Israel; see below. But Leviticus 2: salt is offered to God. It is God who 'needs' this salt.
 - This explains Jesus' formulation: you are the salt *of the earth*. This not: you salt *for* earth, but: you salt *from* earth *for* God.
- But this raises other question: why does God need salt?

2. Why salt is needed

What is God's disposition to world He created?

- Paradise: God was kindly disposed to His world. Ie, had pleasure in His handiwork, came to visit in cool of day (Genesis 3:8). Reason: covenant of love He established with creature man; human race His children. World He made was backdrop/stage for man to live, so that man could glorify God.
- Fall into sin: man broke bond of love God established with him. Result: Genesis 3:17b: “Cursed is the ground because of you.” Ie, God’s pleasure no longer in ground/soil/creation He had made, for the central creature was perverted. Ie, whole creation suffered from man’s man, felt God’s displeasure.
 - So in Genesis 6 God not just destroy sinners but all creatures from earth, cf vs 7,13,17.
 - Then Genesis 8:21: not curse earth again....
 - Instead: Genesis 11: scatter people on account of arrogance – and same chapter ends with God setting Abram aside for own purposes. See especially Genesis 12:3b: an earth deserving judgment be blessed through Abraham. Abraham and offspring God’s special people, His heritage.
 - Ie, God has plan of redemption for earth through Abraham.
 - Point: God not destroy earth because He leaves a place for Israel to live.
 - ∴ psalmist in Ps 66: encourages ‘all the earth’ to praise Lord (vs 1-4) – why? Because of what Lord has done for Israel, cf 6-12 – reference to Egypt, Exodus, Promised Land.
 - So when psalmist comes to temple he presents ‘burnt offerings’ (cf Leviticus 1f; includes salt...). Recognition: Israel is reason why God friendly to the earth, ie, not destroy but cause sun to shine and rain to fall on all so that space for Israel to be blessing....
 - Intriguing thought: God has no delight in unbelieving civilizations of Old Testament era, be they Egyptians or Assyrians or Chinese or natives of South Pacific. For they all fallen image-bearers, rebels against Creator. Their twisted religion and art and customs not please God; He too holy to stand any evil (Habakkuk 1:13).
 - Yet He lets them live, shows friendship to earth, because He has His people-by-covenant on earth, nation of Israel, through whom salvation will come.
 - This the instruction caught in the ‘salt of the covenant’ of Leviticus 2 – an instruction Levites to press upon people.
 - Recognize: what privilege for Israel → they function as salt on earth, God has friendship with fallen creation because of them!
 - Obvious: God’s intent was that Israel of Old Testament think in bigger terms than simply ‘we God’s people, we heirs of God’s promises re life eternal’. They to think in terms of world (=Moabites, Philistines, Babylonians, etc) existing on their account! What key function they had in God’s world!! Without them be no animals, no plants, no life – for wages of sin is death!
 - This delightful privilege comes with enormous responsibility!
 - Israel refused to be special, ∴ God sent into exile. Ie, salt lost its taste ∴ good only to be trodden under foot by men → Israel rejected/exiled....
 - Note: salt loses its saltiness = ‘become foolish’ = deny/ignore God.
 - This means danger for *nations*, for sign of God’s friendship with earth has gone....
- But God retained remnant, ie, salt. For Christ to come to atone for sin, build the new Israel.

- This Christ has come, announces “kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 4:17).
 - ∴ heals sick, cf 4:23f, ie, takes away effects of fall into sin, ie, remove something of curse of God of Genesis 3:17. Notice: He work among covenant people, those who have God’s favour, those who by God’s mercy are salt before Him on earth.
 - ∴ addresses crowds with words of 5:3ff: Blessed are poor in spirit, mourn, meek, etc. Ie, those who draw their manner of living, their attitudes, from heaven and not from fallen earth. These people be persecuted, cf 11f, but not to worry: fallen earth will pass away once God has completed His work of redemption, but heaven will not pass away. Earth will endure, nations and culture and civilizations will endure, only as long as Lord has His people on earth. Once that which appeals to God’s taste, once the symbol of God’s friendship with earth is taken away, earth will perish. So covenant people to take a bigger view than what eye sees.
- This the force of text: Jesus says to disciples in hearing of crowds: you are salt of earth. From out of God’s covenant people Lord is building a new people in whom God takes pleasure, ie, those who follow Jesus Christ according to Old Testament instruction. This New Testament people, who embrace Jesus Christ, who ∴ live according to pattern of 5:3ff, are ‘salt of the earth’, are the reason why God does not destroy the earth, are what is pleasing to God on the earth. What privilege for disciples!
- But now the big challenge: how measure up to this privileged responsibility?? Ie, how retain saltiness – and not go the way of Old Testament Israel in exile, be trodden underfoot?? How be a blessing for world??

3. How one is salt

I mentioned already: where our translation has ‘loses its saltiness’ Greek has ‘become foolish’.

- Ie, deny God, cf Ps 14
 - If deny God – God’s wrath on self, and you no longer reason for God’s friendship, compassion to earth. Point: you need to ‘be salted’, ie, another to attract God’s favour for you. But how??
- That question so important, for Israelites/disciples remain sinful, inclined to evil...
 - See effect of Jesus’ ministry: cf Mt 23: woe to leaders/Pharisees.... Ends with plea to Jerusalem, cf Mt 23:37ff, then description of fall of Jerusalem, 24:2. Why?? Jews reject Jesus Christ, cf Mt 27:22f, 25. Even disciples fail, cf 26:56b, 69ff.
 - Pt: where is salt? Is there anything in people here that attracts God’s favour?? None!
 - But then full judgment of God ought to pour down on earth, destroy all!
- Yet here the gospel: Jesus is also salt, ie, covenant child. Yet never lost His saltiness, even under extreme pressure of God’s judgment on cross. Rather, persevered in being acceptable to God, never sinned.
 - On account of His sacrifice – fulfillment of Leviticus 2 – Lord God did not destroy the earth but let the lights come on again after three hours of darkness, ie, sun to shine on Israel/world.
 - So it’s remarkable that the *earth* rejoiced at Christ’s triumph, cf Mt 27:51 – cf Ps 98:7f. For God’s judgment on earth averted, ie, His friendship remains on account of Jesus Christ and so earth continues.
- But Jesus – salt on earth before God – would not remain on earth, for ascend into heaven.

- Yet leaves His people behind – as salt on the earth, the evidence of God’s friendship.
 - This the force of text: God’s New Testament Israel is the salt of the earth before God, the sacrifice of earth to God that makes earth palatable to God.
 - This the privileged place of people of God in New Testament dispensation. We tend to see ourselves on the outer of things, and we tend to esteem the achievements of the world, look at them with respect.
 - But fact is that unbelieving world is offensive to God, and would not exist were it not for the church, God’s covenant people.
 - Remember this when watch Hollywood or take in today’s culture! God not impressed, and would destroy whole earth were it not for His people on earth.
 - You are salt: God has mercy on earth because there is something on earth pleasing to Him, ie, people bought by Jesus’ blood, covenant children. For their sake God keeps earth turning. So: don’t look down on church/selves! Critical function, by God’s grace!!
 - ∴ enormous responsibility. If you as God’s people insist on being same as world, ie, if refuse to be poor in spirit, mourn on account of sin, be meek, etc (and that’s the spirit of today’s culture), why should Lord God consider you tasty? Spit out..., and reject community, earth at same time!!
 - Cf what happening in western world now!! Witness empty churches....
 - So: retain saltiness, ie, be the people of God Lord wants you to be – for sake of your community, country, world!!
 - What Canada, USA needs most of all is not better government in itself, but repentance – and that begins with the people of God living as persons renewed by Holy Spirit, ie, attitudes of 5:3ff, so that God’s blessing is attracted to nation and not God’s curse.
 - Text gets used to draw out need for evangelism. Fine – but understand where true influence in your community begins, ie, living in a fashion that pleases God, attracts His favour.
- And here the great encouragement: the Christ who triumphed over sin so as to restore earth to God has given His Holy Spirit.
 - In strength of this Spirit able to obey Colossians 4:6. “Seasoned with salt” ≠ not bland in eyes of people. Rather: God-pleasing. Tasty to Him. Don’t forget sun rises each morning and creatures have life, God friendly to fallen world, because has a people to save – and each generation of believers is the salt that symbolizes this friendliness. Let that come out in how speak/live.