

Weekly Scripture and Sermon Study: History & Context Guide
Matthew 5:13 "Salt"

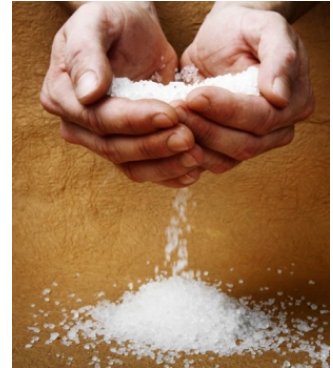
History, Culture, & Context

This section of chapter 5 in Matthew comes at the conclusion of the Beatitudes, which is a part of the greater Sermon on the Mount text.

In verse 13, we read: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."

The purpose of salt is to add flavor, to cleanse and purify, and slow down the decaying process. Jesus' metaphor suggests that we, as disciples, can make an impact on the world, and in a sense, help to slow down the decaying process and evils of sin.

In other words, if salt loses these qualities, it is without use and purpose. If disciples of Christ do not impact the world around them, then they lose the special qualities granted to them by God. We are called to be distinctly different as followers of Christ and are set apart to make a difference in this world.



From: <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/02/09/let-them->

From a historical perspective, there is an interesting passage from Pliny the Elder's "The Natural History," that discusses salt as used in antiquity. Written during the Roman empire, the multi-volume work is understood to be the first encyclopedia. One excerpt from this passage states, "...higher enjoyments of life could not exist without the use of salt: indeed, so highly necessary is this substance to mankind, that the pleasures of the mind, even, can be expressed by no better term than the word "salt," such being the name given to all effusions of wit" (Pliny the Elder, §41).

It is interesting to note that salt was sometimes used in covenants in the Old Testament. See Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5. According to the NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, "Salt was the finest preservative in antiquity, and it symbolized permanence and preservation." It further explains, "Because salt was employed as a preservative, its use in a covenantal context also emphasized the expectation that the covenant would last for a long time, a meaning attached to salt in Babylonian, Persian, Arabic, and Greek covenant contexts." Further, "Because salt inhibits the leavening action of yeast, which represented rebellion, salt could additionally stand for that which prevented rebellion." With this in mind, and reflecting on Jesus' metaphor of salt in Matthew 5:13, sin is seen as rebellion against God (see Isaiah 66:24) with salt being used to slow sin's decaying process.

There are two other verses in Scripture that use the salt metaphor: Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34-35.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways are we "set apart" as Christians (that which separates us from the rest of the world)? What does this mean for our everyday lives?
2. Like salt adds flavor and brings the best out in food, how can you affect others to bring the best out in them?