

Sweet or Salty?

Matthew 5:13

Rev. Dan Schumacher

There are lots of ways to be church in this world.

Several years ago, Brett Younger reflected on that possibility. He said:

“Most churches have figured out that telling people to deny themselves and take up a cross isn’t going to help their church get bigger.”

Younger points to one of the largest churches in the United States: Lakewood Community Church in Houston. You might recall that at one point, they purchased a 16,000 seat arena that used to be the home of the NBA’s Houston Rockets. An estimated 45,000 people attend each Sunday and millions more watch on television.

Joel Osteen, the smiling preacher, as he’s referred to, has had seven best-sellers, including, *Your Best Life Now*. This is one reviewer’s summary of that book: “Improve your attitude, keep your chin up, and God’s blessings will rain down on you.”

“In the book, Osteen suggests that if you can’t find a parking place, claim God’s victory and see God at work as someone pulls out and leaves you a space in the front row.” Let me just say that if that works, then I’m going to need you to do the same thing over here on our street parking, but I need you to pray the ice away.

Osteen preaches, “Friends, you have to start believing that good things are coming your way and they will.” He says that positive thinking is the key to improving marriages, jobs, health, and finances.

“Friends, are you satisfied with that little house you live in? You shouldn’t be. You should want the sort of mansion the Osteens live in.” Those are his words, not mine.

He writes, “If you’re always thinking positive, happy, joyful thoughts, you’re going to be a positive, happy, joyful person, and will attract other happy, upbeat positive people.” It’s easy to think that if only Jesus could have heard Osteen’s message things might have turned out better for him.

Joel Osteen is doing some good things. He’s a good storyteller. He’s funny. His counsel has helped people have better marriages, families, and careers. And yet, some religious commentators still have questions. Brett Younger points to one of the Sunday school teachers back when he was still the pastor at Broadway Baptist in Fort Worth – a woman who wrote an article for a church newsletter named Ginny Howell. This is what Ginny wrote:

“Joel Osteen appears to be an earnest young man, smiling, attractive, and self-deprecating, but his messages have been described as *cotton candy Christianity*. This is a

Christian message full of sweetness and fluff, easily swallowed, but which leaves one unfulfilled, holding a useless cardboard spool.”

Ginny quotes a member of Lakewood who when asked why he attends that church said, “Instead of being biblical and scriptural, they are about what you do in everyday life.”

Ginny writes, “If this is said about our church, may we pack the dishes, turn out the lights, and go home, *for we will have failed in our mission of being church*. Motivational seminars can influence persons to make positive changes in their lives, but without a faith based on scriptural truths, one fades into eternity, dying of malnutrition (“Giving You Life Away,” a sermon preached at *Broadway Baptist Church*, August 28, 2005).

Cotton candy Christianity... sweet and fluffy, but no real sustenance. Jesus calls us to something different.

Right on the heels of his beatitudes, Jesus commissions his followers to a different model of discipleship. “You,” he says, “are the salt of the earth.”

Not a cotton candy kind of discipleship, but something more substantive, something that isn’t just about what we *get* — a bigger home, a front row parking space — but about what we *give*.

Jesus’ nine beatitudes broke with the conventional wisdom of the Jewish faith. Conventional wisdom said that you were blessed if you were healthy and wealthy and had lots of children and land. But in the kingdom Jesus is inaugurating, those who are blessed are quite the opposite: the broken-spirited, the broken-hearted, those starved for justice.

That’s a very different way of thinking about what it means to be blessed than what Joel Osteen and others might say. There’s a message that says, if you can dream it you can achieve it.

But Jesus’ beatitudes are about what we can’t achieve, what we can’t accomplish on our own, what we can only receive as the most startling of gifts. The *-ed* at the end of the word *blessed* is a hint: there is something passive about *being* blessed — about receiving something we cannot achieve.

But the Sermon on the Mount doesn’t end with the Beatitudes. Jesus keeps preaching. Just after he finishes describing this new vision of what it means to *be* blessed, he immediately turns to what it means to “be a blessing.”

“Ok,” he says, “You are blessed with the keys to God’s kingdom. Now don’t just sit there. Go and be salt of the earth.”

If you are blessed then how do you use that gift to bless others?

It's a theology as old as Abraham. God calls on Abraham to leave the safety, comfort, and familiarity of his people, but that call comes with a promise: "I will bless you and make you a blessing; and in you *all the families of the earth will be blessed*" (Genesis 13:1-3).

Blessing us so that we might bless others. This is how God has worked since the very beginning.

Susan Pendleton Jones points out, "The word 'blessing' has its root in the word *bene*, like the words 'beneficial,' 'benefactor,' and 'benediction.' Each of these has the idea of 'good' or 'well' at its root. So one way to be a blessing is to focus on the 'good' — to 'call forth' or 'draw out' the good in others" ("Salt and light," *Day1.org*, February 5, 2023).

And isn't that exactly what salt does?

Jesus blesses his disciples and then he, in effect, says to them: "This is how you become a blessing. This is how you draw out the good in those around you. You are *salt*."

By itself, salt is actually pretty terrible. None one of us — I hope — would ever sit down and eat a bowl of salt with a spoon. That sounds like a terrible Youth Group game. Salt by itself is of no use. Rather, salt only works in relation to other things. It draws out the flavor of the food it touches.

And it seems to be such a small thing, but its effect is profound.

When I was a kid, my mom made me eat canned spinach. God-awful stuff — green, slimy. It didn't so much pour of the can as it slithered out. But it was full of the stuff growing kids needed, so my mom insisted I eat it. The only thing that made it edible was the salt she let me sprinkle on it.

And note what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, "You are the roast" or "You are the potatoes or the brocolli" or even "you are the canned spinach."

He says, "You are the *salt*." You aren't the main thing. You're the seasoning. Our behavior, our actions, our ministries are supposed to point passed us to the One who is the main thing. We — First Baptist Church — are not the main course, you see. We're just a salt-shaker.

Our little bit in God's hands can have a profound effect in this world, can make a profound difference. *But* we have to be "in this world" to make a difference.

All of us salt crystals hanging out in this building never doing anything, but just being a big bowl of salt together is absolutely useless to God's kingdom. "You are salt *of the earth*," he said. We are called out of the salt shaker and into the world. We are not meant to keep God's blessing for ourselves.

And if you don't think Jesus is serious about that part, the very next thing he says is a warning: "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."

How can salt lose its saltiness? The truth is, it can't. It is a chemical impossibility for salt to go flat, to lose what makes it taste like salt.

But to assume Jesus is trying to make literal what is clearly a metaphor is a mistake. He's speaking in hyperbole — not that different than when he says, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? (Matt. 7:3)." Do we really think he's talking to someone with a 2x4 sticking out of their eye? No. He's making a point.

What he's saying is, "Imagine a buying a shaker of salt that doesn't taste like salt. What would that shaker of salt possibly be good for now?" The answer is, not a dad-gum thing. And especially not for cooking — which is the primary purpose one buys a shaker of salt.

So you do what anyone who has a shaker of salt that doesn't taste salty would do: you cut your losses and toss it. You don't sit around trying to figure out how to make something that is supposed to be inherently salty salty again. You just toss it out and don't waste anymore time on it.

Clarence Jordan says it like this: if salt loses its saltiness, "it isn't good for a thing except to fill up mud puddles in the road" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 26).

And that is the crux of Jesus' warning to us. He says that we're the salt. But if we lose our saltiness, what do we think God's gonna do? Sit around trying to figure out how to make us salty again? No!

You see, salt that loses its saltiness is like a church that has lost its sense of mission in the world. It's not just lost its purpose, it's also lost any sense usefulness for God's kingdom.

The temptations to become useless to God's kingdom are legion, because — well, because, frankly cotton candy tastes so good.

Too often we give up being salt in favor of being cotton candy Christians. It's not a new temptation. But it is a persistent one.

Years and years ago, Clarence Jordan said this:

"I just got a real beautiful, slick advertisement in the mail a while back. It's put out by a publishing company of religious books and albums. It says, '*This is your personal invitation to set sail on a Christian voyage of self-discovery in the company of three great Christian leaders.*'"

And when you open it up, you find that you can get an inside berth for \$360 that week. But that's where the poor folks sleep. The really elite who are going to discover themselves sleep on the A deck in a deluxe outside room at \$630 for the week.

'Where could you find a better place for Christian self-discovery than in the comfortable, congenial atmosphere of an ocean liner?'

Where can you find a better place to find Christ than in the congenial, comfortable atmosphere of an ocean liner? That's easy to answer — anywhere! If these people want to know where to make a self-discovery, let them walk down the streets of Calcutta. Let them go to the market in Kinshasa. Let them go to Accra, Ghana. Let them go to any ghetto in America or any little country shack in rural America.

But you can't discover Christ in those places. You got to have more congenial circumstances.

'There's something about sea travel that breaks down the conventional barriers between people, and makes it possible for them to discuss spiritual matters with frankness, spontaneity, and informality.'

And here I am — old-fashioned, fundamentalist me — unaware that sea travel breaks down the middle wall of partition. I was always under the impression that it was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ hanging on a cross that broke down the middle wall of partition and abolished the enmity. And now I'm learning in this modern time that it wasn't Jesus on a cross, it was a bunch of Christians on a cruise liner.

'You'll be refreshed and renewed by the many vacation pleasures the trip has to offer. The luxury of shipboard living aboard the M.S. — (Well, let's call it, the M.S. "Cotton Candy") — basking in the warmth of the Caribbean sun, swimming the ship's pool, enjoying concerts, entertainment, Christian movies, and community singing.'

I'm going to get a note off to St. Paul to the effect that he got on the wrong boat going to Rome.

Now this is the clincher, this is the sales pitch:

'There is nothing newer, more modern, or more magnificent for your cruise to Nassau and Jamaica than the M.S. ("Cotton Candy"), which was selected and chartered because it's the perfect setting for meaningful, spiritual experience in today's world of jet aircraft, trips to the moon, and other technological achievements.'

So, having substituted sea water for blood, a luxury cruiser for a cross, pleasure for pain, excitement for salvation, and a \$630 berth for spiritual rebirth — having done all that, we have not reshaped our lives to conform to the Gospel. We've made a paltry

little attempt... to reshape the Gospel to fit into our materialistic way of life" (*The Cotton Patch Sermons*, 29-30).

You see, we aren't called to be cotton candy in this world. We are called to be salt.

And salt must be poured out and given over to blessing others, to bringing out the good in others.

And it's in that being poured out and in that being given over that we finally reshape our lives to conform to the gospel, and not the other way around.

So what will it be, First Baptist Church?

Sweet or salty?

Amen.