

SALT IS GOOD
Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, 2018
Mark 9:38-50

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before, Mark 9:38-50: ³⁸ **John told Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone who is not one of us driving out demons in Your name. We tried to stop him because he was not one of us.”**

³⁹ **Jesus said, “Do not try to stop him! For no one who works a miracle in My name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ will certainly not lose his reward.**

⁴² **“If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were put around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life maimed than to go into hell with two hands, into the fire that will never be put out. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁷ 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 and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm does not die, and the fire is not put out.**

⁴⁹ **“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good. However, if salt loses its saltiness, how will you make it taste salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another!”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth, Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus said, ⁵⁰ **Salt is good. However, if salt loses its saltiness, how will you make it taste salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another!”**

At first glance, it may seem a bit difficult to understand what Jesus means by these words, but Jesus has something important to tell us here. In order to understand what He means, we need to rethink the way we look at salt.

If you go to the supermarket to buy salt, you’ll find it on the shelf where all the other spices are, and generally, salt is the cheapest item stacked there. It’s very cheap to buy, however, in biblical times, it wasn’t like that; salt was valuable.

It has been recorded in history that soldiers in the Roman army were paid part of their wages in salt. The Latin word for salt is *sal*. That’s why we call our wages today a salary.

Salt isn’t just good for making food taste better; it’s good for preserving it. In the days before refrigeration, salt was critical for keeping food from getting spoiled. Without salt to preserve food for the future, day-to-day survival was much more difficult in years gone by than it is today.

Salt is good and is necessary for health, although today we are told to keep away from having too much salt in our diet. Nevertheless, salt was an important commodity, and without it, peoples health was put at risk.

Salt is good. It’s good for sacrifice. In the Old Testament, sacrifices were first salted before being offered. In Leviticus 2:13 the LORD commanded the Israelites, *“You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt,”* (Lev. 2:13). Salt preserves, so it reminded the Israelites that God would preserve His covenant with Abraham, including the messianic promise that through Abraham *“all the families of the earth”* would be blessed.¹ Ultimately, this was fulfilled in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.²

When Jesus says, **“Salt is good,”** He’s appealing to all of these benefits of salt, but perhaps most of all He was appealing to the *purifying* qualities of salt.

¹ Genesis 12:1-3

² Cf Matthew 5:13

Elijah was leaving this earth. Time after time, he tried to send Elisha away, but his loyal disciple would not leave him. Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted. Elisha turned his head toward his master and said, *“Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.”* *Elijah said: “You have asked for a difficult thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, let it be so for you!”* They continued to talk as they walked along. Suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind, (2 Kings 2:9-11).

Elisha took up the mantle of Elijah and returned across the Jordan as he and Elijah had come. His first miracle took place at the city of Jericho. The men of the city said to Elisha, *“Please look! This city is in a good place, as my master can see, but the water is bad, and the land is unproductive.”*²⁰ He said, *“Fetch me a new bowl, and put salt in it!”* When they brought it to him, ²¹ he went out to the spring, threw salt in it, and said: *“This is what the LORD has said, ‘I have purified this water. It will not cause death or infertility any more.’”*²² *The water has been made sound to this day, according to the Word that Elisha spoke,* (2 Kings 2:19-22).

Salt is purifying, as Jesus said: **“For everyone will be salted with fire.”** You see, salt is like a little crystal with fire in the middle. If you put it on your tongue, you can taste it burning. If you put it on a cut, you can feel it burning. Fire is purifying. It’s used to burn away impurities and to remove dross from metal. Fire sanitises and sterilises. The Israelites used fire to dedicate pagan polluted places to the Lord. When Jesus says that **everyone will be salted with fire**, He’s referring to trials, difficulties, and temptations which purify and refine them. Salt in its burning property destroys the germs of corruption. It is the Word of Christ in its power to burn out of our hearts the evil desire to entrap others, for example, as Jesus says, ⁴² **“If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were put around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea,** and the evil desires that would allow our own bodily members to entrap us ourselves, as, for example, when Jesus mentions our bodily members (v. 43-48). Being salted is not pleasant, but Jesus desires to preserve us from the corruption of this age.

Salt is like that, and we are like salt. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, *“You are the salt of the earth,”* (Matt. 5:13). This is what’s behind the next curious statement that Jesus speaks: **“However, if salt loses its saltiness, how will you make it taste salty again?”**

This is difficult for us to understand because of what we have for salt today. Salt is sodium chloride - a very stable molecule. It’s not quick to divide in a chemical reaction. It doesn’t degrade over time. If you buy a pot of salt and leave it in your cupboard for fifty years, when you finally take it out, it will still be salt. It may be one solid chunk, but it will not have become anything else. That’s because we have pure salt. In biblical times, they didn’t.

In those days, salt was harvested from the surface of salt marshes or pits where salt water had flowed from the Mediterranean or the Dead Sea. Mediterranean Sea salt had mineral impurities, plus other impurities from the rocks it was scraped off, and from the algae, sand, and sea life that flowed in with the seawater. Dead Sea salt is even worse. Most of the salts in the Dead Sea are not sodium chloride. Anyhow, if salt is collected and simply stored in the open on something like an earthen floor, it soon becomes spoiled. That is how salt can lose its saltiness. Humidity, sun, heat, and constant contact with the earth leach away the easily dissolved sodium chloride, leaving behind the impurities. Bits of rock and sand, mineral crystals, dirt and debris remain to make it look like it might be salt, but it’s tasteless. It has lost the fire of the salt within.

Is this not exactly what St. Paul warns us of in 2 Timothy 3 where he says, *“¹ However, know this, that in the last days difficult times will come! ² For people will love themselves and love money. They will be boastful, proud, blasphemous, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ unloving, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, savage, and without love for what is good. ⁴ They will be treacherous, reckless, conceited, and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. ⁵ They will have a form of godliness, but will have denied its power,”* (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

The Holy Spirit is the fire of the salt for the Triune God’s people. What Paul describes is what happens when the fire of the Holy Spirit is driven out of us by our love of self and the rest of the nasty things Paul mentions. We become empty crystals, having the form of the godly salt of the earth, but denying the work, presence, and power of the Holy Spirit. The salt can be leached out by the humidity of a life not fed in the Word of God. We can become flavourless, going through the motions, without faith. We can be hypocrites: actors who look like believers by outward action but having no faith.

Even whole church bodies can become saltless by refusing to salt the world. St. Paul bids us, *“Be wise in the way in which you act toward those who are outside; and make the most of your opportunities! ⁶ Let your speaking always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each individual!”* (Col. 4:5-6). We lose our saltiness if we refuse to stand against evil. A church that says “all roads lead to God” is a church that has lost its savour. Salt must purify; it must preserve. Salt substitute is not salt.

“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another!” That’s still Jesus’ word to you - even though you, even though a whole church body, can lose its saltiness. Because, you see, Jesus wouldn’t talk about losing saltiness unless you have salt, unless He’d in fact given you salt. You are still the salt of the earth, Jesus says. And it’s true. You have been purified, salted with salt, just like those Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus was your salted sacrifice. He was the one who purified you. By His death on the cross and His resurrection, He has accomplished what all those salted sacrifices of the Old Testament promised: forgiveness of all sins. Now by God’s Word and Sacraments, that forgiveness, that purity, is given to us. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. We have salt in ourselves.

When we then forgive one another, we bring a purification and peace that is from God. When, earlier in our text, the disciples asked Jesus about a nameless exorcist, a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name but who wouldn’t follow them, Jesus said, **“Do not try to stop him! For no one who works a miracle in My name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is for us.”** That nameless exorcist had salt in himself. He had faith in Christ, and he was acting as a believer in Christ. He was making peace and driving back the kingdom of darkness. Not only that, but he was doing better than Jesus’ own disciples. Earlier in this same chapter of Mark, a man brought his son to Jesus’ disciples to have them drive out a demon who was doing great harm. The disciples could not. Jesus chastised them, *“O faithless generation! How long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?”* (9:19). The disciples hadn’t recognised this man who was casting out demons as having the salt of Christ in himself, and so they thought they were in conflict with him when no conflict existed; they didn’t realise that by their shared faith in Christ, their shared saltiness, they were actually at **peace with one another.**

In our Second Reading for today, James tells Christians how they can have peace with one another. He says, *“confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed! The effective prayer of a righteous person can do much... My fellow-Christians, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that the person who has turned a sinner back from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins!”* (James 5:16, 19-20). Having learned the joy of being cleansed and free in Jesus, having His pure salt, we also have the opportunity to be the vessel to carry that forgiveness to others.

But we must realise that salt has no power in itself. Our holiness, our forgiveness, our power come from Christ. The salt in us only has power because it is from Christ. The salt of His sweat in Gethsemane, the salty blood He shed for us, these are what has won our forgiveness, filled us with salt, and given us power to do battle against the powers of evil, to purify and cleanse, to flavour and preserve, and to forgive one another. The world leaches the salt from us, but Christ salts us with His Word and Spirit to have peace with one another. May Christ so live in you in peace. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord God, You are eternally faithful and true to Your Word. You have kept every one of Your great and precious promises. Today we again come before Your throne of grace in gratitude for all Your goodness, in particular, for the gift of Jesus Christ Your Son, and for all the rich blessings we have received in Him. We thank You that He has accomplished our rebirth and salvation when it was humanly-speaking impossible. We thank You that in His life and being we see Your glory, that in the truth, goodness, and love He showed we see Your mercy and love, that in His obedience even to death on a cross we have forgiveness of sins, that in His resurrection from the grave we have the assurance of our own resurrection to life everlasting, and that in His ascension to heaven we have in Him One who brings before You all our needs.

Renew us day by day by Your Holy Spirit, that we may firmly believe in Jesus, love and serve Him, and show His saving power to others in all we think, do, or say. Free us from all love of earthly values, and strengthen our hope in Your promises. Make us more trusting in your mighty power and grace. Deepen our sympathy and love for all people,

and remove every trace of selfishness. Keep us firm in Your truth to the end of our days. Enable us all to build one another up in common mind and purpose.

Heavenly Father, guard Your Church from false and disloyal preachers. Keep it obedient and faithful to all the teachings of Your Word. Enable us to acknowledge the work of Your Spirit through the Gospel wherever it is. Refresh us by Your Spirit, that we may remain in living fellowship with Jesus Christ, proclaim Your truth with living power, and minister to the needs of people around us with living compassion. Bless the AELC with Your presence, that we may continue to gather around Word and Sacrament.

Give peace and harmony to the nations of the earth. Enable people everywhere to live without fear or want, and free them from all oppression, injustice and cruelty. Influence all in our land to live in uprightness, and overthrow all evil. May those in positions of government and authority honour You. May Your truth hold sway in politics, business, industry, education, and the mass media. Frustrate all attempts by those who wish to promote murder through abortion. Bring shame and discredit on those who advocate homosexuality and single-sex marriage. Help those who set their minds on earthly pleasure and material prosperity to see that there is no lasting value in them. Protect us from spiritual decay, and strengthen those who warn us of moral danger. Save us from every danger within and without, and help us to live under Your continued favour and blessing.

Live in our homes, O Lord, and be the head of our families. Prove Yourself a helper in every time of need. Bless the weary, the sick, the troubled, and the sorrowful, that they may look to You as the unfailing source of all healing and hope.

All these things, and whatever else we should ask for, we bring before You in the name of Your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

⁴ The non-Israelite rabble among them began to have a strong craving, and the Israelites wept again and said: "If only we had meat to eat!" ⁵ We remember the fish that we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. ⁶ Now, however, our appetites are shrivelled. There is nothing but this manna to look at!" ...

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping in their family groups, everyone at the door of his tent. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was upset. ¹¹ Moses asked the LORD: "Why have You brought trouble on Your servant and why are You not kindly disposed towards me? You are placing the burden of all these people on me!" ¹² Have I fathered all these people? Have I given birth to them, that You should tell me: 'Carry them in your arms, like a nurse carrying a baby, to the land that You have promised by an oath to their fathers'?" ¹³ Where can I get meat to give to all these people? For they are weeping beside me and saying, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I alone cannot carry all these people. For they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If You are going to treat me like this, and, if You are kindly disposed towards me, please just kill me outright and let me not look at my misery!"

¹⁶ The LORD answered Moses: "Gather together for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and officers over them!

Bring them to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you!

²⁴ Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He also gathered seventy men from the elders of the people and made them stand around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in a cloud and spoke to him and took some of the Spirit who was on Moses and put Him on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied but did not continue to do it. ²⁶ Two men, the one named Eldad and the other named Medad, had remained in the camp. The Spirit also rested on them. They had been among those who had been listed but had not gone out to the tent. However, they prophesied in the camp.

²⁷ Then a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!"

²⁸ Joshua, the son of Nun, who had been Moses' assistant since he had been a young man, spoke up and said, "My master, Moses, stop them!"

²⁹ Moses asked him: "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the people of the LORD were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!"

²⁴ Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He also gathered seventy men from the elders of the people and made them stand around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in a cloud and spoke to him and took some of the Spirit who was on Moses and put Him on the seventy elders. When the

Spirit rested on them, they prophesied but did not continue to do it. ²⁶ Two men, the one named Eldad and the other named Medad, had remained in the camp. The Spirit also rested on them. They had been among those who had been listed but had not gone out to the tent. However, they prophesied in the camp.

²⁷ Then a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!”

²⁸ Joshua, the son of Nun, who had been Moses’ assistant since he had been a young man, spoke up and said, “My master, Moses, stop them!”

²⁹ Moses asked him: “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the people of the LORD were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!”

James 5:1-20

¹ Come now, rich people, weep and wail over the miseries that are coming on you! ² Your riches have become rotten, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³ Your gold and silver have become corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴ Look! The wages that you have held back from the workers who mowed your fields are crying out, and the outcries of those who did the harvesting have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous man, who does not resist you.

⁷ Therefore, be patient, fellow-Christians, until the Lord comes! See how the farmer waits for the valuable crop of the ground and waits patiently for it until it receives the Autumn and the Spring rains! ⁸ You too, be patient and remain firm! For the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, fellow-Christians, that you may not be judged! Consider! The Judge is standing in front of the door. ¹⁰ Fellow-Christians, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of being patient in the face of wrong treatment! ¹¹ Remember that we call those people “blessed” who have persevered. You have heard how Job persevered and have seen what the Lord finally brought about, because the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

¹² Above all things, my fellow-Christians, do not swear, either by heaven or by the earth or with any other oath! Rather, let your “yes” be “yes,” and your “no” be “no,” that you may not come under judgment!

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering misfortune? Let him pray! Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise! ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with olive-oil in the name of the Lord! ¹⁵ The prayer offered in faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up, and, if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed! The effective prayer of a righteous person can do much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with the same nature as ours and prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain and the ground produced its crops.

¹⁹ My fellow-Christians, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and someone turns him back, ²⁰ let him know that the person who has turned a sinner back from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins!

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ John told Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone who is not one of us driving out demons in Your name. We tried to stop him because he was not one of us.”

³⁹ Jesus said, “Do not try to stop him! For no one who works a miracle in My name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were put around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life maimed than to go into hell with two hands, into the fire that will never be put out. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁷ 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 and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm does not die, and the fire is not put out.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good. However, if salt loses its saltiness, how will you make it taste salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another!”