

***The Distinct People of God***  
**Luke 14:34-35**

Our text this morning is only two verses long, at the end of chapter 14. And in these two short verses Jesus gives a mini-parable. And though it is short, it packs a lot of spiritual truth. And I want to jump right in so let's read them now...

**Luke 14:34-35**

**34** "Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? **35** It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

So again, a short passage but before we jump into what Jesus is saying here in this parable, I don't want us to miss what He says after the parable: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

This phrase is recorded for us only two times in Luke's gospel, here and in chapter 8 after the parable of the sower, and so when we hear Jesus say that, it is meant to cause us to sit up in our seats, to perk up and pay attention, to be ready to think and reflect, because whatever it is He just said, is extremely important and not everyone is going to catch it.

So with that said, let's pray together...

Well, we all know that salt is an important ingredient. Without it food can taste bland and lifeless. You might be one of those people who like salt so much that when you sit down for a meal you grab the salt shaker and salt your food before you take a single bite, because you know you are going to want it saltier.

Well, Jesus here says that "salt is good." Salt had many uses in the first century. Not only was it used for flavoring, it was also used for preserving, used for fertilizer, weed killer, and even as a catalyst for some kinds of ovens.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Strauss, *Luke*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, 129.

Of course, Jesus isn't giving a culinary lesson here, he is speaking of a spiritual truth, the truth that His disciples, followers of Christ, individually, and the Church, corporately, are salt in this world, in other words, we are supposed to be a distinct people. We are a people unlike all others, because we have a unique identity and from that comes a unique purpose.

And this such an important truth for Christians to recognize. Especially for us in a growing post-Christian or post-modern context. I mainly grew up in the Bible Belt of America, meaning there are churches absolutely everywhere and that there is a social advantage in saying that you are a Christian. It is an act of identification with the majority and not the minority. And that certainly brings with it some advantages. One example is that speech about faith and biblical values is not out of place in public forums, however there are some big disadvantages as well. One of them is the conflation between merely a cultural or familial faith and a true, vibrant personal faith in Christ.

But here in New York, we aren't in the Bible Belt. And that brings with it some difficulties. We all know this. Expression of faith in Jesus is often met with hostility or at least skepticism. There is no social advantage to being a Christian. Every culture expresses some form of faith, but that faith that is expressed in our context is certainly not biblical Christianity. But there is also an advantage for us in our context if we are willing to see it. When we, as the people of God, live out of our identity fulfilling the purpose that comes from that identity, our uniqueness, our distinctiveness, will be much more clearly seen. And it is that uniqueness, according to Jesus, that is useful for His work in the world. We are salt Jesus says, and unlike salt that is put on something already salty, we can think of ourselves as salt on the most bland food imaginable, we will only make it taste better.

First, we should grasp the unique identity we have as the Church.

## **A UNIQUE IDENTITY**

One of the clearest passages in the New Testament that speaks to this uniqueness of God's people is 1 Peter 2.

Context is important, of course, and this is a letter written by the apostle Peter, the same one who walked and talked with Jesus, considered to be one of the closest three disciples to Him and was eyewitness to so many miracles including the resurrection.

And in this first letter, Peter writes to Christians who have been scattered because of persecution for their faith. They are in new towns and villages, living as exiles. And this letter is meant to be an encouragement for them and to instruct them on how to live now as faithful followers of Jesus in a context that does not follow Jesus.

And I want to point our attention to chapter 2...

### **1 Peter 2:9-12**

**9** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of dark-

ness into his marvelous light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

**11** Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. **12** Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

In this section of the letter, Peter attributes followers of Jesus with some very important titles. We are:

“a chosen race” - a uniquely chosen people, a new humanity as it were, upon whom God has set His love before the ages began.

“a royal priesthood” - royal members of the kingdom of God, and as such people who represent God to the world.

“a holy nation” - we are a new nation, a group of people with a common culture, origin, language, symbols and beliefs,<sup>2</sup> described as “holy,” that is, we are set apart from the world for God.

“a people for his own possession.” - we belong to the Lord, He is our King and we are His people. Out of all the people in the world, we are uniquely His.

We are so unique, so distinct, that we are described as sojourners and exiles. Now, they were literal exiles, but that description is true of all Christians. A few weeks ago Kevin preached a great message on the city of God about being citizens of the Kingdom of God and what that means for us. God's people recognize that is our true homeland, we are citizens of the kingdom of God longing for it to be fully realized here. As pilgrims, like Abraham in Hebrews 11, we await a better country, that is, a heavenly one. A city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God (Heb. 11:10, 16).

Again, this is so important for us to remember right now. Let me give you a completely random example, let's say...politics. In the midst of the tribalism and identity politics that so characterizes our culture right now, the people of God have a unique identity in the world. This is why so many Christians have expressed lately why they feel so politically homeless.<sup>3</sup> We don't and probably shouldn't feel perfectly at home in either one of the political parties. Again, because we have a unique identity given to us not in the form of politics but given to us in the gospel. And of course, the realm of politics is just one example.

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<sup>2</sup> These characteristics of a nation come from historian and journalist Colin Woodard, *American Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Just a few examples, “How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't” by Tim Keller (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>) and “Wanted: Christians Who Defy Categories” by Trevin Wax (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/wanted-christians-who-defy-categories/>).

Again we have a unique identity give to us by the gospel, but that brings with it a unique purpose.

Look again at 1 Peter 2...

**1 Peter 2:9, 11-12**

**9** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.... **11** Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. **12** Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evil-doers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Our distinct identity is given to us for the express purpose of “proclaiming the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Our mission, to make disciples, is inseparably connected with us walking in our new identity as the people of God.

And Peter gives instruction to the exiles of his day and to us as exiles today on how that can happen. One of the major ways that the people of God are distinct is in their conduct. That is, the way that we behave ourselves, the way we treat one another in the church, the way we treat others outside the church is to be different than the way the rest of society behaves. We are to keep our conduct “honorable.”

So, when the world seeks to destroy and debase their enemies, followers of Jesus love their enemies, pray for them, desire their good.

When the world thrives on spin and falsehood, followers of Jesus rejoice in and actively pursue truth.

When the world cancels each other over the slightest of disagreements without any hope of redemption or reconciliation, followers of Jesus offer grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

When the world assumes the worst in each other, God’s people assume the best in one another, offering the benefit of the doubt.

When the world proudly flaunts its strength and might, God’s people are meek and gentle.

When the world preaches that to live an abundant life, you just need to indulge in whatever your heart and body wants. Followers of Jesus know, however, that the path to abundant life is through the denial of self and the pursuit of holy and godly living.

I mean, over and over again, the world that does not know God lives in such a way that proves that it’s true. And that shouldn’t shock us by the way. Why should we expect anything different? However, those who claim to be a part of this unique and distinct people created by and shaped by the gospel, their lives should look much different.

And don't miss that one of the main differences as brought out in this passage and many other places in Scripture is in our speech.

Look one more time at 1 Peter 2:9...

**9** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Again, the identity that we've been given as God's people brings with it a purpose, and Peter here points it out. We are to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

What the people of God talk about and what the world talks about should be different. And I don't mean, we don't enjoy talking about sports, or current events, or even politics. What I mean is that there should be a constant and common topic in our conversations, and that is the gospel.

And the gospel is certainly a distinct message in our culture, isn't it? Negatively, it is a message that tells the world that you aren't the God of the universe, you are not even the Lord of your own life. It is a message that tells the world that there is absolute truth, there is absolute morality, and you don't get to define what is right and wrong, what is good and evil. Again, that is a distinct message today.

Positively, the gospel is distinct by telling the world the good news, that your worth is not in what you do or in what you possess. That you do not need to work your way to God, to try and earn the approval God. That there really is peace and joy and hope in this broken world found in the person of Jesus.

And all of this is in a message that must be spoken. God's people are a speaking people. We speak a unique and distinct message that the world desperately needs to hear.

But, we are distinct not in just *what* we talk about, but in *how* we talk.

**Colossians 4:6**

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Again, being salt in the world, is to speak in a certain way. And notice how Paul describes that unique way of speaking: gracious

If you think about it, gracious speech really is distinct in our angry, polarized culture. But Christians speak differently, at least they *should* speak differently. Our goal in communication should not be to tear down and belittle someone else. Our speech should not be characterized by condescension, sarcasm, or anger. Our speech should be gracious, ready to build up and to speak truth in love.

And by the way, that is true both offline and online. There should not be a difference in the way you speak to others in person and the way you speak to others on social media. Somehow many have believed that the pattern of Christian speech can be different online than offline. But social media is an extension of your speech and what the Bible instructs about godly communication applies to your facebook and twitter use as well. If there is a difference between the two, that is hypocrisy, and you are failing to live out your unique identity and purpose as part of the people of God.

But again, we are “salt” in this world, unique and distinct as we live as pilgrims and sojourners, well, at least we *should* be...Look again at Jesus’ mini-parable...

**Luke 14:34**

**34** “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?”

Jesus says, salt is good, BUT there is a chance for the salt to lose its saltiness.

That sounds strange because table salt, or sodium chloride, cannot actually lose its saltiness. At least that is what I’ve read, I am definitely not a chemist or scientist or whoever it is that would know that.

So in saying that Jesus could be expressing a few different things. He might just be pointing out just how absurd it would be for that thing we would identify as salt to not be salty, for it to not embody its very characteristics. However He could be referring to the salt that is found around the Dead Sea. That salt is actually a mixture of sodium chloride and other compounds. And what happens is the water evaporates from the mixture, the sodium chloride crystallizes and can be removed. And then what is left is gypsum and other impurities. It becomes like salt that is not actually salty.<sup>4</sup>

And what Jesus is warning us with here, is that we must be careful that we don’t lose our distinctiveness in the world. We might say, just as salt must be salty to be salt, a disciple must be disciple(y) to be a disciple. There are certain characteristics that make a disciple truly a disciple, and lacking those things make one an imposter.

Again, this is a massively important truth we need reminding of in our culture that moves further and further away from biblical Christianity. Because in an effort to gain a hearing with those outside of Christianity, Christians and churches are tempted to bend or compromise those distinct beliefs and values that are not acceptable to the culture at large. We’ve seen this over and over again, as churches move from historic, biblical stances on issues related to sexuality, supernaturalism, and the exclusivity of Christ. This is true of a number of mainline Protestant denominations over the last century or so.

But we need to be careful because what Jesus warns us here that it is possible to look like salt, even claim to be salt, but in losing our uniqueness we become something altogether different.

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<sup>4</sup> Strauss, *Luke*, 129.

A classic Christian book of the 20th century is a book titled *Christianity and Liberalism* written by J. Gresham Machen. It was named one of the top 100 books of the millennium by World magazine and one of the the top 100 books of the twentieth century by Christianity Today. And to give a little background to the book, Machen was a theology professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 1900's but what happened was the board at Princeton shifted to embrace more liberal views concerning a number of aspects concerning the Christian Faith and Scriptures, namely the supernatural. They denied the miraculous in favor of the liberal naturalist view which was seen as more intellectual and scholarly. And understand they were not trying to tear down Christianity or refute it, in their minds they were trying to progress it. They believed they were doing something good.

But Machen, and others, couldn't agree to it. They saw this as a tremendous mistake that would lead to further theological compromise across the board, and so Machen and others left Princeton and began Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1929. And so he wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* to refute the claims of the liberal theologians of his day, but in reality, it's just as relevant today as ever.

And this is the main thrust of his book; he wrote:

*"In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology."<sup>5</sup>*

*"...what the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category... and that in abandoning the embattled walls of the city of God he has fled in needless panic into the open plains of a vague natural religion only to fall an easy victim to the enemy who ever lies in ambush there."<sup>6</sup>*

What was Machen doing here? He was saying, liberal theology is not similar to Christianity, it is something altogether different. Again, if salt has lost its saltiness, it is no longer salt. It might sound like Christianity, it might use the same terms as Christianity, but it "belongs in a distinct category" of its own.

And we would agree. We want to hold onto orthodox, biblical doctrine and values in a world, even a world that might label itself as Christian, moves away from those doctrines and values for the sake of progress or acceptance.

The church has often been called a community within the community. We are a city within the city. And that is true, but we are to be a "contrast community." We are to be a "contrast society." We speak differently and live differently, not for the sake of being

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<sup>5</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

different, or with some kind of elitist attitude or posture. We are different for the sake of the world. We are salt and light in the darkness and when we walk in our distinctiveness, we do so to the praise of the One who has created us as His people but also so that as others hear the message of the gospel and see lives that exhibit grace and love and mercy with the hopes that they might be added into the fold.

And to lose our distinctiveness is to weaken that effect. And Jesus provides a clear warning. Look one more time at Luke 14:35

**Luke 14:35**

**35** It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away.

Our usefulness is tied to our distinctiveness. If we are going to be useful in this world, individually and corporately, we cannot take on the world's distinctives but rather embrace and exhibit the distinctives of the people of God. If we are going to reach our cities and nation, local churches which are local expressions of the people of God, must live in a way that proclaims the excellencies of the One who has called us out of darkness into marvelous light.

Again, Jesus says, he who has an ear, let him hear. This is a cause for reflection, so it's good for us to consider, what should our response to these words of Jesus be?

Let me offer us four responses to the call to be salt and warning to not lose our saltiness.

**We should respond with:**

**1. Attentiveness**

We need to be attentive to our lives, individually and corporately as a church. Are we living in a way that would be considered in contrast with the world? Is our behavior, speech, and attitudes shaped more by the gospel or more by the surrounding culture that knows nothing about the gospel? We need to be attentive to that.

The apostle Paul gave similar instruction to Timothy who was a young pastor in Ephesus in his first letter to him, saying...

**1 Timothy 4:16**

**16** Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

As a church leader, Timothy needed to be attentive that his personal life and his teaching, his doctrine, would remain in line with the gospel, because it had serious implications for himself and those who see his life and hear him teach. And though this was instruction is certainly important for us as pastors, I think this is important for all Christians.



It is good to remain attentive and consider, is my life exhibiting the unique and distinct characteristics of those who claim to belong to God?

Secondly, we should respond with:

## **2. Repentance**

We should repent for all of those ways we have failed to live in a way that accords with godliness and holiness. The good news is that just as God has shown us grace by adopting us as His own and creating a new people for His possession, He continues to show grace even when we fail Him.

Like a good Father who does not kick out a son or daughter for failing to live up to the family name, God does not kick you out either.

David wrote in Psalm 103...

### **Psalm 103:13**

**13** As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. **14** For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

Come to Him this morning in your frailty and weakness to live up to the high calling of His kingdom, knowing that He forgives you, keeps you, and equips you by His Spirit to continue on.

Which brings us to the third response:

## **3. Perseverance**

Knowing that we have a unique identity and purpose in the world tells us that it will feel lonely at times. At work, at school, or even at home there will be countless opportunities to allow your thinking and behavior be shaped by non-biblical influences.

But we are called to hold fast...

### **Hebrews 10:23-25**

**23** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

And notice the call to gather, to be with other members of the distinct people of God. When we are so bombarded by society's ideologies, philosophies, and theologies that go against biblical teaching, and when we are so bombarded by our own flesh to not live by the Spirit but by the old nature, we need one another to spur each other on to faithful perseverance.

And finally, we should respond with:

## **4. Faith**

It's tempting to think that uniqueness, when defined by gospel faithfulness, is a terrible strategy for reaching a world that is hostile to that gospel. But let's believe that God is working through us as the salt of the earth, accomplishing His purposes, drawing others to Himself, adding to His people.

And we have that faith as we look to Jesus, who came to a hostile world, endured hatred, rejection, and cross, and yet, has accomplished redemption and ultimate and eternal victory.

So, let's be the distinct people of God in our world to the glory of God.