**Be at peace with one another**

Text: Mark 9:49-50

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 16:1-4; Matthew 5:2-16; Mark 9:42-50

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 122, 407, 133b, 390, 284, 487, 525

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#11)

**Theme:** Gospel writer Mark records the words of Christ who speaks of the purification of His disciples, the dangers of worldliness and calls His disciples to preserve peace with one another.

**Proposition:** Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another

**Introduction**

Would you describe yourself as an ‘influencer’? You might well reply ‘who, me? Certainly not! I don’t have a channel on YouTube, Instagram or TikTok with 10,000s of followers subscribing! I don’t work for a marketing company promoting their product by leveraging off my popularity, personality and perhaps my knowledge. In fact, doesn’t the Word of God urge us to pray for all people, ‘*for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way*’ (1 Tim 2:2). We are certainly called to live quiet peaceful lives as disciples of Christ, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), however we do influence others. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you leave an impression with those you come into contact with. It has been said, brothers and sisters in Christ, that “people who have never read the Bible are reading us!”

Jesus our Lord does call us to be ‘influencers’ – although He doesn’t use that word and He certainly doesn’t call us to market the gospel like a commercial product with our popularity, personality and knowledge. Jesus says to His disciples ‘*You are the salt of the earth*’ (Matt 5:13). This is emphatic, He doesn’t say ‘You might be’, or ‘you will be’, but ‘you are’. So the question with us brothers and sisters is not ‘are we the salt of the earth’, but rather, ‘are we salty salt’ or ‘are we salt that has lost its taste?’ ‘Salty disciples’ influence the world in which they live, just as good salt preserves and purifies what it comes into contact with. In contrast, ‘unsalty disciples’ are so much like the world in which they live that they have little or no preserving and purifying effect.

As we come to the command of our Lord Jesus in Mark 9:50 “*Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another*” there are a number of questions that we must answer before we can gain an understanding of what the Lord’s revealed will for us is here. What does it mean for us to have salt in ourselves? What does being at peace with one another involve? What is the connection between being ‘salty salt’ as disciples of Jesus and being at peace with one another? We’re going to examine the Scriptures to uncover the answers to these questions under three headings:

1. Purifying salt
2. Unsalty salt
3. Peaceful salt
4. **Purifying Salt**

Salt is a mineral substance that we are all familiar with, especially on our meal tables as a seasoning for food. How many times have you said to someone you are eating with ‘please pass the salt’. For me personally I enjoy eggs as a regular part of my diet, but without salt – yuk!

Salt has always been important in human history. In the ancient world, people were familiar with themaxim “*the world cannot live without salt*” (Tractate Sopherim, XV, 8). During the period of the Roman Empire, roads were specially built in order to make the transportation of salt into the capital city easier. Some historians have suggested that Roman soldiers were paid in salt as the Latin word ‘salarium’ (meaning stipend, money allowance) is related to the word for salt (sal). It is more likely is that the military were paid an allowance for the purchase of salt. It is from this background that our English idiom of a person who is competent at their job comes. We say that they are ‘worth their salt’.

Salt was an essential and high valued commodity in the ancient world. In Bible times, salt was used to season incense (Exo 30:35) and food, as a disinfectant on new-born babies (e.g. Eze 16:4), to render an enemies field unproductive (Judges 9.45), and as part of the Old Testament offerings (Ezra 6:9; Eze 43:24). God’s promise to David is called a ‘salt covenant’ (2 Chron 13:5) reflecting the use of salt symbolically in the ancient world to depict a binding relationship. Throughout most of human history, before technology for refrigeration was invented, meat was preserved from decay salting it. Above all other uses, this is what made salt especially important and valuable within human societies.

So, given all this, what does Jesus mean when He says to His disciples “*For everyone will be salted with fire*” (Mark 9:49)? Various explanations have been given by Bible scholars. However the one which fits best with the context of not being a snare to others (9:42) and to oneself (9:43-48) is that ‘salted with fire’ means being purified by fiery trials. Here the ‘salt’ has a cleansing and preserving effect on all God’s people who are ‘salted with fire’. We see the pattern in Scripture of God’s transforming power at work through the sufferings and distresses of those He loves. For example:

* The humbled psalmist declares “*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word*” (Psalm 119:67).
* The prophet Malachi reveals “*He is like a refiner's fire*” (Mal 3:2).
* The Apostle Paul who had been extensively salted with fire wrote “*For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*” (2 Cor 4:17).
* The Apostle Peter also suffered for Christ and wrote “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed*” (1 Peter 4:12).

Just as fire purges away impurities from molten metals so that they increase in their degree of purity, so the Lord uses the trials, troubles and tribulations of our lives to transform us to become more holy. This ongoing work of grace is **not only** for God’s glory. This ‘severe mercy’ is **not only** for our own good. It is **also** for the benefit of others as we influence them. As you and I live our lives, we inevitably have an affect on those around us. We are, in the words of the Apostle Paul “*the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life*” (2 Cor 2:15-16). Being ‘salted with fire’ is not a pleasant experience. It is hard, uncomfortable and it weakens us before we then gain greater strength in the Lord.

Imagine what it was like for the first readers of Mark’s gospel who likely lived under the government of Emperor Nero (AD54-68). Nero unjustly put the blame for the burning of Rome in AD64 on Christians. According to Roman historian Tacitus, Nero had Christians covered in wild beast skins and torn to death by dogs, nailed to crosses and burned to serve as evening lights. Christians became the hated underclass of Roman society. Brothers and sisters, we should not be surprised if we are despised by the unbelieving world around us for following Christ (Matt 10:22).

The issues and details are different today from those in the 1st century Roman Empire, but the principles are the same. We are not to be purposefully offensive to others (e.g. 1 Pet 3:16), but the gospel message we bring is an offence, a stumbling block and foolishness to many (1 Cor 1:23). God is pleased to prepare us as gospel messengers by ‘salting us with fire’. It is by this means that He both purifies and preserves us so that we may not be ‘salt that has lost its saltiness’. Which brings us to our second point:

1. **Unsalty salt**

Have you ever noticed that your table salt becomes less salty over time? Probably not, because it probably doesn’t! Most of the salt we use in our homes is either naturally pure rock salt or highly refined white sodium chloride. Commercial salt works today treat raw salt with chemicals that precipitate out most impurities (mainly magnesium and calcium compounds). Multiple stages of evaporation in salt ponds then follow. In contrast, much of the salt in the ancient world contained significant impurities. The salt taken from the marshes, lagoons and ponds of the Dead Sea area in Israel contained gypsum (calcium sulphate dihydrate) which caused the salt to taste stale when the sodium chloride had leached away.

The loss of saltiness from salt is a metaphor that Jesus uses to describe disciples who no longer have a purifying, preserving effect on the world in which they live. Just as salt that has lost its saltiness is ‘good for nothing’ other than to be thrown away (Luke 14:35) so, disciples who no longer influence the world in which they live with the gospel are like unfaithful, unfruitful servants. Jesus said to His disciples “*If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you*.” (John 15:19).

You’ve likely heard the phrase about Christians being ‘in the world, but not of the world’. This refers to the truth that we are called by Christ to live our lives as part of the unbelieving world and not to separate ourselves completely so that we have no contact with those who do not know Christ. Imagine if the salt on your dinner table never left the shaker? If it remained completely separate from your food, it would not influence the flavour. Imagine if you lived in the time before refrigeration and you left the salt apart from some meat, that meat would then decay apart from the preserving properties of the salt.

When Christians live lives according to the principles and standards of the unbelieving world, our spiritual ‘saltiness’ is gradually drained out of us until we become undistinguishable from our worldly environment. This is what Jesus was referring to by salt losing its saltiness. If we, brothers and sisters, become unsalty we still influence others, but not with the purifying power of the gospel, but with our worldliness. Jesus warns of this critical danger when He speaks about influencing children and/or those who are newer Christians, saying: “*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea*” (Mark 9:42). If you have a millstone of the kind that was used in ancient times to grind grain tied around your neck, then its weight would certainly cause you to drown if you were thrown into water. This was the punishment inflicted by the Romans on some leaders of a revolt under the early Jewish zealot, Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37). Jesus powerfully conveyed the truth that God cares especially for the vulnerable, children and young believers. We must be a preserving, purifying influence in their lives, and not contaminate them with our worldliness.

We can also become unsalty through sin in our lives if we do not turn away from ungodly habits. Persistent, unrepentant, unaddressed sin in a person is an indication that that person is on the way that leads to destruction, not to life (Matt 7:13-14). Jesus drives this reality home with graphic language in which He uses the exaggerated imagery of cutting off body parts to restrain sin in yourself: “*If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell*” (Mark 9:47). “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” (Matt 11:15).

Why is there so much conflict, hostility and division in the world, including in our own country, today? We could accurately say – there’s not enough salt! Salt in society which is present when salty disciples of Christ influence the world around them has a preserving effect which restrains evil and leads to greater harmony, wellbeing and peace which brings us to our third point:

1. **Peaceful Salt**

I have learned much this past week about salt and about what it means to be ‘the salt of the earth’. I hope that you have learned much so far in this sermon! Now we’re going to focus our attention on the last part of our text, where Jesus says to His disciples “*Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another*”. The Greek word translated ‘peace’ literally means to join or bind together that which has been separated or divided. When we experience internal conflict, perhaps with competing emotions or uncertainty about what to think or do then we may say ‘I am not at peace within myself’. When there is a lack of harmony between people then there is the absence of peace and a need for reconciliation.

The Apostle Paul writes to Roman Christians and to us “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”* (Rom 5:10)”. “*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross*” (Col 1:19-20). Brothers and sisters, Christ has won peace with God for us!

The word ‘reconciled’ means to put someone into friendship. So, to be ‘at peace with one another ‘is to be in friendly relationship with one another. This is expressed in the Biblical term ‘fellowship’ which conveys the idea of having and sharing something in common with others. We sometimes talk about having a time of fellowship together. Someone looking in from the outside might think we just mean sharing a social time with one another over a cup of tea or coffee. As you likely already know, Biblical fellowship, whilst certainly including social interaction, is much deeper and richer.

Fellowship is a powerful word which expresses the gospel: “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the* ***fellowship*** *of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (1 Cor 1:9). “*That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have* ***fellowship*** *with us; and indeed our* ***fellowship*** *is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1:3).

Reconciliation and fellowship are at the heart of the gospel, which is the ‘*good news of* ***peace*** *through Jesus Christ*’ (Acts 10:36). Having ‘peace with one another’ means much more than not being in conflict with each other. It means having undisturbed, untroubled, fully reconciled close relationships with one another - as evidenced by close intimate fellowship.

Now I am sure that you don’t need me to tell you that maintaining good relationships takes time and effort. In a fallen world, peace must first be won and then maintained. Pressure in our lives, being ‘salted with fire’, puts strains on our close connections to others. That is exactly what happened to the Apostle Peter who singled himself out to Jesus as the would-be most loyal disciple “*Even though they all fall away, I will not*” (Mark 14:29). That very night, Peter denied Jesus three times, swearing ‘*I do not know this man*’ (Mark 14:72). He betrayed Jesus, not with a kiss, but with a lie.

Lies, mistrust and betrayal break many close relationships. Ask anyone who has been divorced from their husband or wife. Do you know what the first words were that Jesus spoke to Peter after His resurrection (and the other disciples gathered in fear behind locked doors)? They are recorded by gospel writer John “*Peace be with you*” (John 20:19). Through His willing self- sacrifice unto death on behalf of others, Jesus restores the relationship with God of everyone who believes in Him as their Lord and Saviour. Just as He did for Peter, He reconciles us to Himself, and thereby to God the Father when we receive Him by faith as the resurrected Lord.

We proclaim that He has won peace for us when we celebrate Lord’s Supper together. The Apostle Paul asks two questions both expecting the answer ‘yes’: “*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*” (1 Cor 10:16). The word translated ‘participation’ is the fellowship word ‘koinonia’. We visually portray at Lord’s Supper that we have peace with God through the sacrificed body and blood of Christ. We visually portray that we have peace with one another because we all share in in one bread as one body (1 Cor 10:17).

However, just as salt in Bible times could be of varying degrees of saltiness, so peace between the disciples of Jesus, both then and now, can be of varying degrees. Here is the connection between being ‘having salt in yourself’ and being ‘at peace with one another’. The more you and I are purifying and preserving one another in our mutual relationships, the greater will be our peace together.

Peace is actively pursued by salty disciples (Rom 14:19, 1 Pet 3:11) who thereby preserve and purify both themselves and others. Salty disciples know that peace is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and they desire to be fruitful for the glory of God. Salty disciples are ‘*eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*’ (Eph 4:3). The peace of Christ rules in the hearts of salty disciples (Col 3:15). Salty disciples are at peace among themselves (1 Thess 5:13). Salty disciples strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). So, I hope that you are asking yourself ‘how do I become a saltier disciple?’ Here are some steps:

* Come to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, believing in your heart that He has secured you complete peace with God by living a perfect life for you and dying in your place.
* Believe that all the suffering, distress, turmoil and trouble in your life is used by God for your good as you are ‘salted with fire’ being purified, sanctified and preserved so that you can have a powerful influence for the Lord in your life.
* Seek the Lord’s forgiveness for the various ways in which you have been contaminated through worldliness and sin, thereby reducing your ‘saltiness’ and weakening your own witness for Christ. Trust in God’s grace that you are indeed forgiven.
* Accept that you are called to be one of Christ’s influencers in the lives of others and actively pursue peace with one another.

What happens if you put one grain of salt on your meal? Would it be seasoned and taste very different at all? If you tried to preserve a piece of steak with one grain of salt, how long would it last on your kitchen bench before it started to turn blueish purple and smell bad? Notice that Jesus says ‘*have salt in* ***yourselves***’. He is taking about us in the plural! Just as He did when He said ‘***You*** *(pl) are the salt of the earth*’. When you put a good quantity of salty salt on your meal you can certainly taste the difference! Plenty of good salt rubbed into a steak will preserve it from decay!

We live in testy, uncertain, troubling times when peace between and within nations seems more fragile than ever, when our New Zealand society is divided and the ‘team of five million’ is not at peace together. We also live in times of great gospel opportunity. Times where we can together be salty, purifying and preserving one another as we live with one another at peace in close relationship with one another. We also have an important role as a whole church in purifying and preserving the dirty, corrupt and decaying world in which we live. Why bother you may ask? So that we can be used of the Lord, until He comes again, to gather in His children whom He rescues from darkness into light.

So let’s move forward with confidence, hope and joy in our Lord, having salt in ourselves and being at peace with one another. Then we will be like a city on a hill at night with all the individual house and street lamps burning brightly (Matt 5:14). A single united light shining in a dark place (2 Pet 1:19). Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the salt of the earth, so let’s be salty!

Amen.