
Salt and Value

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Mark 9:31-50

Jesus said, "Have salt in yourselves." -Mark 9.50

There's a funny commercial on television these days, showing a hip young man, with sunglasses, in the locker room, talking to a sportscaster. The man, who seems to be the epitome of today's superstar, is talking about how much "value" he adds to the team. "I bring value," he says. It turns out that what he does he run down to the fast food restaurant and bring back a value meal. He is the delivery boy, and the real sports superstars don't even return his greeting.

A lot of us talk about value these days. Maybe we've been talking about it since Socrates and Plato. Maybe we've been talking about it ever since Robert Pirsig wrote, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. I remember when my good friends, 30 years ago, were getting into the real estate development business. "What do you actually do?" I asked. "We add value," was their usual response. "We buy property and add value to it." And they did!

This was about the same time that our country found itself in common conversation about "values." What are the "values" behind this or that public policy? Educators started talking about "values-based" education. Other countries have now used the word in their tax systems. When certain merchandise is sold, a "Value Added Tax" is tacked on to the purchase price.

Ben Graham and David Dodd invented the phrase "value investing" for the stock market; its biggest and most successful proponent these days is probably Warren Buffet.

This morning, it is worth asking the question again: What is it? What is value? How do we live it? How do we add it to life?

I offer an answer to the question this morning, a different sort of answer, but an answer. What is value? It is salt.

Can you define what salt is? Well, it is primarily sodium chloride, two elements necessary for human life, combined with other trace minerals. But most of us do not need to know its exact chemical composition. We know its properties. Salt adds taste to things. It is also a preservative. It is necessary for growth and it regulates water content in the body.

Salt was intrinsic to the first human civilizations. As an early product of the mining industry, it became a trading commodity. During the first millennium BC, Celtic communities grew rich trading salt and salted meat to Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome in exchange for wine and other luxuries. Some say the word "salt" is related to "Celtic." The Hebrews used salt to ratify covenants.

Some say the Roman Empire paid its military troops wages in salt, but that is disputed. Whether true or not, it makes a good story because the background of our word, "salary," comes from "salas," or "salt." The word "salarias," in Latin, means "of salt." Wages were given to the Roman soldiers so that they could buy salt. If he was a good soldier and worker, he was "worth his salt."

Did you have a salad in the last few days? The word "salad" means "salted." It was the dressing of salt put on leafy vegetables.

Over history, salt has been deemed so valuable that it was often taxed, as the British Empire taxed the citizens of India early in the twentieth century. In protest, Mahatma Gandhi led 100,000 people on a "Salt Satyagraha" to the sea, where they made their own salt and thus avoided the tax. It was illegal in that era to make one's own salt; the empire controlled it.

"Salt" has come to mean so many things. It can mean a smart, lively wit; and it can mean earthy language. It can mean a veteran sailor.

I suppose my earliest memory of what salt is came when I used to swim constantly in the ocean. What joy to dive under the waves and emerge with salt in my nose and mouth! I felt like I tasted the source of life itself.

My second earliest memory was learning to eat tomatoes and carrots as a young child. I didn't like them, even though I loved picking them from our farm garden. It was when my mother suggested I put a little salt on them that tomatoes came alive for me. How delicious!

So, "salt" adds zest to life, adds spice to life. Salt adds life to life!

Too much salt, however, can be dangerous, can't it? The Bible speaks of salting the fields and destroying it forever. Lot's wife looked back and was turned to salt. Too much salt has been associated with dehydration and illness. Indeed, this is why salt is a preservative. It sucks the water out of cells and thus kills microorganisms in the meat. Salt preserves, but too much of it kills.

(It reminds me of my old theology professor's definition of "heresy." To the question, "What is heresy?" he would answer, "Heresy is truth taken to the extreme." Salt is good, but deadly in the extreme.)

Since the dawn of civilization itself, salt has been a part of all that is life-giving: food, community, taste, and covenant. These are the values of life, and salt is a part of them.

Jesus uses salt several times in his teaching. "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" (Matthew 5.13). "Have salt in yourselves!" (Mark 9.50).

I believe that Jesus is talking about value. Jesus is talking about spiritual value when he uses salt as a metaphor. "Be of value in the world!" he says. "When you have lost your saltiness, your values, how can your soul be restored?" "Have value in yourselves!"

Value is strong and mysterious; it goes way beyond simply the price we put on a piece of merchandise or a piece of real estate. Value is what gives life, what gives spiritual life, to the world!

Values are like salt. That's why these sayings of Jesus concerning salt appear so close to his sayings about values. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks about salt just after he has delivered the beatitudes of his sermon on the mount, talking about the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. These are the values for you; you are the salt of the earth!

Here in the Gospel of Mark, these sayings about salt occur just after the disciples have argued about who is the greatest, and just after they make the colossal mistake of trying to stop someone from doing good just because that someone was not following their way. Jesus notes that value, true spiritual value, transcends our own particular interpretation. "Whoever is not against us is for us," Jesus says. Value transcends our narrow designations and biases. Just because someone is not following your particular road does not mean he or she has no value.

We might ask why these sayings about salt in the Gospel of Mark are also mixed in with such violent images, like hanging a millstone around one's neck, or like chopping off your hand if it offends you.

Yes, these are harsh images. But these violent images are designed to get our attention in the same way the grotesque images of Flannery O'Connor get our attention. The activity of life, true life, is serious activity. The work of soul-making is serious activity. The activity of salting life is serious activity.

The activity of salting life is long-term activity, too, just like the formation of values is a long-term activity. Values are not formed immediately. They cannot be purchased with a quick transaction; value is not a quantifiable commodity, whose price rises or falls with the market. Value is what creates life, steadily and patiently, over time.

Salt is a good symbol of that long-term activity, too. The Roman statesman Cicero said to "trust no one unless you have eaten much salt with him." That takes a lot of time. Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, said much the same thing about true friendship: "a man must eat a peck of salt with his friend before he knows him."

Our values are what lay steady beneath us, when the rest of the world might be floating away in floodwaters. Values are the rocks that remain unmoved when the heavy rains come. Values were the foundations of so much good will and assistance during last week's floods here in Atlanta. Values are our rocks, our foundations, when the storms come.

Margaret Visser, a Canadian writer who knows about rock, and who writes often about food and the spirit, said this about salt:

"Salt is the only rock directly consumed by man. It corrodes but preserves, desiccates but is wrested from the water. The contradictions it embodies only intensify its power and its links with experience of the sacred."

Put some salt in your life. Put values in your life. Make it zesty. Liven it up. Be salt in the world, and be that part of life which adds true value. It is your soul, your spiritual soul that adds true value to a situation or to a relationship. Your soul is the salt of the earth. It can preserve and it can give zest. It is a rock, which stands for what will endure in a situation. Your soul is the house high on a hill, the rock, able to withstand the floods of the world and which shines with the fire of life.

AMEN.

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