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Matthew 5:13, John 3:1-7

A GOOD-FOR-NOTHING RELIGION

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Jesus Christ has high expectations for those of us who are a part of His church. He is not going to be satisfied if we are only a religious institution in the community, which teaches people the difference between right and wrong. He would be very disappointed if we were only a social club, where we came to meet nice people. He would be heart-broken if we were only another group of do-gooders, who helped other people in need.

Now, mind you, each of these functions is a good thing, as far as it goes. Don't get me wrong. But, if this were all that the church was good for, I believe that Jesus would conclude that it is good for nothing.

I get this idea from what Jesus told the first men and women, who were to make up His church. In his Sermon on the Mount, He told a short parable, which made it quite clear that He had higher aspirations for His church than to be a benevolent institution, a place to learn morality, or a social club. His hope was that we would be the very "salt of the earth," preserving society from decay!

"You are the salt on the earth, but if the salt have lost its savor, with what shall it be salted? It is henceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."

This may not grab us today, like it impacted them back then. Today we have refrigeration to help us preserve things that decay. But, back then, they only had salt. By adding salt to anything, it was preserved from decaying and rotting.

Many of us have eaten ham that was cured by rubbing salt all over it. That's what gave it that strong salty taste, which a true Southerner loves, but a Northerner finds to be a bit too much. But, without the presence of that salt, the piece of meat would have rotted and decayed. Salt is one of God's great preservatives.

When Jesus told His people to be the salt of the earth, He was telling us that we were to be a preserving influence on society, whenever we were present. We were to keep our world from the moral and spiritual decay that always seems to take place, when man is left to his own devices.

Our great nation was established by Christian men. They tried to set it up as a constitutional republic, so that the very system of values and Biblical philosophy of life, upon which it was founded, could not be easily changed. And as long as these values remained, our nation grew stronger and stronger.

But, after 200 years of progress, which was the envy of the world, our leaders decided that after no longer should be a Christian nation. (Our Supreme Court so stated.) The Biblical philosophy and divine values, which had been written into our constitution, were cleverly removed or reinterpreted. In 1962, God and prayer were banished from our public educational system. Today, God's Ten Commandments cannot even be displayed in a public school, although they are more needed than ever, amid the crime and immorality which has become the daily fare on these campuses.

And what is the result of removing the salty Christian influence? Decay! Our society is rotting before our very eyes. Corruption is appearing in every area of national life. And our national leaders are pouring billions of dollars into social programs, and the best brains are trying to come up with new systems to educate and rehabilitate us. But the decaying process is running away.

Listen to people, as they converse about the state of the nation. Read the Mailbag in the newspaper and see what people are thinking, from the perspective which they have.

My heart went out to one dear lady, who wrote in on Thursday. "I had a worried and sleepless night pondering the situation of our country. Trying to see some light at the end of the tunnel---not an air conditioned tunnel like the one built from Mexico to San Diego for drug traffic or whatever. I try to see and understand what our governing body---our servants working for us and paid by us---are up to. There are midnight salary raises. They vote to give themselves millions of dollars for extra mailing so they can send us mail to convince us to re-elect them etc. Then there are private citizens who donate their time, money, and energy to try to help our country from a headlong fall into an abyss of debt and complete financial crisis, who are ignored by congress and the media. At the same time, the ones who victimize people through savings and loans and Post Office frauds are not apprehended. What is the answer? Or isn't there any?"

The signs are everywhere. There is decay eating away at our society. Our great nation is showing signs of corruption in politics, justice, business, morality, education, medical treatment, entertainment, and even religion! Yes, turn religion into big business and put it on nation-wide TV, and we find it full of corruption.

What can save us? Where is the salt? Where is that preserving influence that can keep society from corruption and decay? Why, 60% of Americans claim to be Christians. Many of our elected officials are churchmen. Why, our President and Vice-President are members of Southern Baptist churches. What's wrong? Where's the salt?

I believe that it is time we began to pay closer attention to a warning, which Jesus gave along with His parable, that we Christians should be the salt of the earth. Notice, He made it quite clear that "if the salt has lost its saltiness---its tang, its bite, its sting---it would be good for nothing."

Christianity could turn into good-for-nothing religion. It would be “used” by wicked men, just like they used insipid salt to throw on dusty paths. For salt, when it can no longer preserve, can still hold moisture and hold down dust. And a religious institution, called the church, can still be used by unscrupulous men, even after it has lost one sting that used to attack corruption in the lives of men and society.

Could it be that the salt has lost its savor...its sting that attacks the bacteria of sin, which causes decay in the lives of men and nations? Are the thousands of churches, which dot the communities of our nation, in danger of being good for nothing? In our desire to be popular and successful in the eyes of our society, are we in danger of losing our bite, our tang? Is McGregor Baptist Church, the very love of my life for the past 25 years, in danger of becoming popular but good for nothing, as far as our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned?

These are the questions, which sometimes keep me awake at night, praying. They make me uneasy. They gave birth to the heart’s cry that I am trying to sound forth in this message to you. We are in real danger if we lose our saltiness.

Chuck Colson sat me back with his new book, The Body. He has found, in a personal study, that churches in America are tempted to take on a consumer mentality...like McDonalds. They are seen as offering a product which people can consume or leave alone. And, if they want lots of people to buy what they are offering, then they had better offer people what the people want. He calls it the McChurch mentality like McDonalds which caters to people’s like. The church becomes just another retail outlet, faith just another commodity. And people change congregations and preachers and even denominations as readily as they change banks or grocery stores.

Polls show us what these consumers are seeking. According to a USA Today survey, of the 56% of Americans who attend church, 45% do so because “it’s good for you”; 26% cited “peace of mind and spiritual well-being.” Specific doctrines and truth taught did not seem important to the people who were polled.

In Christian book stores, the best sellers are the “touchy-feely” ones, which focus on self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-analysis, while doctrines, devotionals, and missionary biographies gather dust on the shelves. So do books that encourage self-sacrifice.

It seems like the consumers of religion are more interested in feeling good than they are interested in being right with God. One of Colson’s acquaintances surprised him, when he learned that they were now attending a Unity church. “Why?” he asked, “you are a Christian, and they are a cult.” “Really?” the man replied. “Of course it is.” Colson answered. “They don’t believe in the resurrection or even one true God.” “But my wife and I love it,” answered the friend, “we always come away feeling better.”

This demand to feel better has tempted churches to lose their saltiness. In order to impress and draw-in these religious “consumers,” they are tempted to offer a product that is popular and palatable, but may be insipid and good for nothing in its overall effect.

What many are looking for is a spiritual social club, an institution that offers convivial relationships but does not really influence how people live or what they believe. They are not as interested in what the church stands for as in the fulfillment it can deliver.

This McChurch consumer mentality pressures churches to give people what they want. If the church is competing, for people's leisure time, with cable TV, Nintendo games, theme parks, and health clubs, then the church must furnish a competitive product. Subtly, pastors and church leaders feel the pressure to make the message as appealing as possible in order to draw people in.

The process is gradual: a little rationalizing here...a little rounding-off there...and the truth of God has lost its edge, the salt has lost its sting...and it is good for nothing.

With some churches, it is not so subtle. One church felt that its denominational name would be a turn-off to many, so it adopted the name "Happy Church." "It draws people," says the Pastor. To each his own!

But some have gone beyond this. In their attempt to become "user friendly," they have decided to abandon standard theological terms. Our "sins" are really our mistakes. "If we used words like redemption or conversion," one pastor said, "they might think we are talking about bonds." All "hellfire and damnation" preaching would be "out of touch" with people and their daily struggles.

Some churches claim a spirit of putting people over doctrines. These churches totally accept people as they are, without any sort of do's or don'ts.

But what will this do to the church's impact on society? If we dilute the truth of God and water-down the strength of our message, will we be any real help in preserving our society? If we airbrush a word here or there long enough, will we lose our bite? If we try to give people what they want, are we going to be able to give them what they need?

Wait a minute, what are we here for...to be popular, successful by worldly standards, businesslike and efficient? Or are we here to be the salt of the earth, which stings the conscience of society and attacks the bacteria of sin that threatens to eventually bring rotteness and decay to our nation?

The church---God's living Body through which He wants to bless a sin-sick world---has little to do with slick marketing and fancy facilities. It is meant to be the salt of the earth. And, if it is not, then it is good for nothing!

And, on the eve of my flying half way across this world, I want to plead with McGregor Baptist Church to remember what we are here for. Let's do everything we can to reach out to more people, but let's make sure that we are offering them the true gospel and the truth of God. Let's never lose our savor, our bite, even if some people find that it stings. The salt must sting the wound, if it is to heal. Never be afraid of stinging the putrid sores of sin in people's lives. We cannot water-down God's truth, or we will be good for nothing.

Now, having set the stage, let's ask: What is the sting that makes the salt beneficial? What is the truth, which God has put into the church's trust, that can save mankind, and yet it stings people so much that they react to it? What truth is it that turns people off so much, and yet it is the very truth that they need to know most if they are not going to go to rot and ruin? What is the truth that the church can never water-down without becoming insipid and good for nothing?

Certainly, it is not the truth of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Everybody agrees with that, although very few practice it. That bit of truth is not offensive. It has no sting in it.

Certainly, it is not the truth about the Ten Commandments...about what is right and wrong. Even those who flaunt the laws of God must admit that there are some standards of decency, without which we could have no workable society.

It is not even the truth that God loved the world enough to send His Son. Look at Christmas. Most everyone is touched with the sentiment of God's love for man. That doesn't sting anyone's conscience.

No, the truth that stings like salt in society's wounds is the truth that man is a fallen creature, incapable of pulling himself up by his own bootstraps to the place where he can stand before a holy God. Man is totally depraved. He is beyond the hope of education, reformation, societal reorganization. His only hope is regeneration: a spiritual new birth.

Ouch! That stings man's pride. That bites too much for man to swallow.

God says that we are helpless and hopeless without His divine intervention.

All our attempts at dealing with our own problems are only minor surgery, when we really need major surgery. We need a heart transplant that only God can give in Jesus Christ.

Oh, how that stings! Oh, how mankind hates that message. Society just does not want to admit its own helpless condition. It keeps trying new leadership, new changes, new reforms, new programs to educate and reorganize. All around us are wars and oppression and man's inhumanity to man. Corruption keeps rearing its ugly head in every arena of man's activities, and yet we keep pointing the finger of blame at everything except our basic fallen natures. We simply refuse to admit what Pogo used to say in the funny papers: "We have met the enemy, and they is us!"

And God has placed His church in society to herald the message that the enemy is ourselves. There is something twisted and perverted and wrong in the very nature of man, which needs fixing. And only a spiritual rebirth can begin to fix it. All our vaunted programs and methods and educative processes and laws can only deal with the surface. The real problem is down deep within us. We were born with a fallen nature. We need for God to give us a new nature, when we admit our need and throw ourselves on His mercy.

That's the truth which stings! How men react to it. How men would like to prove that there is at least a little good, a little worthiness in all of us. But God's Word comes back with the words: "There is none righteous, no not one. There is none that even understands. They have all become UNPROFITABLE" (Romans 3:10-12) to the very God who made them. Ouch! That hurts to hear!

But that is the truth. And until we start there, no healing will be possible in our society. We will keep on spinning our wheels all the way to the destruction of life on this planet.

You must be born again. You must be born again. You must be born again, or you will never see the kingdom of God! That is the message, which we must never water-down nor try to make any easier to swallow, no matter how much we want to attract people to our church. Anything less than this truth will never meet people's deepest needs.

But don't even expect this to be a popular message. It flies in the very face of all the humanism and New Age philosophy, which has infiltrated our media, entertainment industry, politics, and even our secular education. They will not be pleased at us, when we keep reminding them that the mankind, whom they honor as having the solutions to his own problems, is really just a fallen creature.

The spirit of man, which they love to glorify in the their humanistic and New Age philosophies, is really depraved from birth. There is something warped and twisted and unexplainable deep inside us all. Our own hearts are deceitful. We have an endless capacity to rationalize any thing to our own selfish ends. That's why our political servants will rob us blind, and our doctors will take an oath never to destroy life except in their abortion clinics, and our educators will teach us untenable theories (evolution) – as if they were laws – and even some of our religious celebrities will live double lives while they preach to us on TV.

The evidence is all around us: there is something wrong with man, deep down inside. There is some sinister flaw in our character. And all the laws and policies and programs and studies are only like putting band-aids on the problem.

And the church of Jesus Christ must stand there and say: "Face up to it...You must be born again. Except a man be born of the flesh and also reborn of the Spirit," he has no chance of ever finding what God wanted life to be on this planet!

We don't need reformation. We need REGENERATION.

We don't need information. We need TRANSFORMATION.

We don't need change in government. We need a CHANGE OF HEART.

We don't need more self worth. We need a NEW BIRTH.

This is the message which God has entrusted to us as His church. It must be the major premise, upon which our entire philosophy of life is built. It must be our starting place, when we try to help anyone to find the solutions to their problems and needs. It is the truth on which we cannot compromise, no matter how unpopular it is and no matter how it cuts across the grain of current thought.

The great missionary, Paul, had to face up to the offense of the gospel message. He was criticized and attacked again and again by those who would have preferred a religion of works---of things that they could do themselves in order to earn favor with God. Man loves to hold out hope that he can somehow save himself, if he just tries a little harder. But our problem is too deep. So Paul sums it up once and for all in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace are you saved through faith. It is NOT OF YOURSELVES. IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD. IT IS NOT A RESULT OF YOUR OWN EFFORTS, *LEST ANY MAN SHOULD BOAST.*"

Oh, how proud man is. How we would like to think that we are deserving. How we would like to point to our own efforts and feel that we are responsible for all the good that has befallen us. But the truth of God is always emphasizing that we don't need another chance...we need mercy and help from God.

And this is what Paul calls the offense of the cross. We were such hopeless sinners, that God had to send His Son down here to take our punishment for us. He came to seek and to save that which was hopelessly lost and to give His life a ransom. He had to suffer on that cross, in order to pay for the penalty of my sin. I was that far gone! "When we were without strength (to save ourselves), Christ died for the ungodly."

To the average man, that is an offensive idea. It stings his pride like salt stings an open sore. It is humiliating to have to admit that I was so bad off that God had to go through all of that to save me.

But whether it offends or not, we must share this needed truth. Whether the salt stings man's innate pride or not, the salt must be applied to man's mortal wound. It is the only truth that can offer mankind any real and lasting solution to its most basic problem.

If a doctor found out that you had cancer, but he was too afraid of hurting you, and instead he gave you an aspirin and sent you home in ignorance, would you appreciate that? Of course not. And if you have a spiritual problem deep within you that needs major surgery from the divine physician, don't you want to hear the truth about the matter? Of course you do.

And the church is the custodian of that truth. It is the only voice in our society that is saying to mankind: "You are deep-down sick. You need a cure that can only come by a work of God, called the new birth." Any message less than that is insipid, savorless, good for nothing!

Oh, my friends and co-workers for Christ, let's never lose our saltiness. Let's never compromise the only message we have that can do mankind any lasting good. Let's remind our sin-sick world that we must be born again into a new life with a new heart that only Jesus Christ can give. That must be the first step to any lasting improvement in our condition, both as individuals and as a society.

We must not water down this truth, whatever else we do, or we will become good for nothing, as far as Jesus is concerned. As you Pastor for 25 years, I beg you to help me make sure that we do

not lose our savor, our sting, our truth that alone can get to the bottom of man's problem. Let's always make it clear that you must be born again and that you can be born again!

My friend, are you here today and you have never dealt with your deepest need? You may have come here today to learn what is right and wrong or to make sure your kids learn what is right and wrong. Good. But don't stop there. Go deeper. You cannot do all that is right, even when you know what is right. You will find that there is something wrong inside, where you cannot always do what you know you ought to and even what you want to. You need to be born again. Don't leave here without letting God give you a new life in Christ.

You may have come here today in order to find some love and caring friendship. I'm glad you did. You came to a good place for it. But friends can only do so much. They can't be with you in all of those moments of temptation and stress. They can't even stop you from doing those strange things that keep pulling you down. Don't you see? You have a problem that only Jesus can help you with. You need a spiritual rebirth, a change of heart that only He can give you. Ask Him right now for that new birth.

Someone here may have been a member of the group called the McGregor Baptist Church for years. You may have your best friends here, and you may have worked hard on many of the projects that we have done through the years. But, if the truth were known, there has been no deep down change in your heart and life. You cannot remember the time when you realized that something was wrong in your life...that all your efforts at reform and self-discipline were not really doing much good except on the surface...that you are a little different from everyone around you, except that you happen to have your name on the roll book of a church.

Be honest with yourself. Have you been born again? Have you ever admitted to yourself and God that there is something radically wrong down inside and that you have been helpless to change it? Stop playing around on the surface. Ask Jesus to give you that rebirth, to regenerate you, to save you!

Then, together, we can be the salt of the earth!