

## Relationships: Harmony

When you go to the store and a box of salt is on sale for 99 cents, you probably don't think of it as being an item of incredible worth. It's hard for us to imagine that salt was once traded even up for gold. If that were still the case today, then a 1 kilogram box of salt like the one on the screen would be worth about \$60,000 Canadian. How many of you have ever been paid a "salary"? - the word comes from "salt" because in Roman times the soldiers were often paid in salt rather than in coins of the empire -- it was an easier way to pay wages.

Why was salt so valuable? You can't live without it. You need a certain amount of salt to survive. It was also necessary in the preservation of food. You could kill an animal for food, but in the days before refrigeration, you couldn't eat all the meat before it went bad, unless you were able to salt it, which preserved it until you could eat it.

In ancient times, salt would be available to humans in two forms: one was in the outcroppings of rock salt, and you would find that by following the animals to their "salt licks", and the other was in sea salt, which was usually harvested in salt pools where the sun evaporated the sea water. Neither provided an abundant supply, and so salt became a valuable commodity, especially as human diets moved away from salt-rich wild game and more towards grains.

In the Roman world, one of the busiest routes into the city of Rome was called the Via Salaria, the salt route, and a soldier's pay was reduced if he was found to be "not worth his salt". That phrase came into use because the Greeks and Romans often bought slaves with salt. And in the sixth century, Arab traders would exchange gold for an equal weight of salt -- ounce for ounce.

Why the emphasis on salt today? The simple reason is Mark 9:50, in which Jesus says this:

*Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other.*

If Jesus tells us to have "salt in ourselves", it's important to know whether or not he's talking about something more than adding salt to our french fries ... right? And it's when we look at the function and the value of salt in the ancient world that we can get a clue about Jesus' meaning in this verse. The other thing that helps us get a clue is to look at the context.

They've been walking through Galilee and Jesus was keeping away from the crowds so He could spend time teaching His disciples. One day, as they're walking the roads, Jesus tells them that He is going to be betrayed, killed and rise again three days later. And verse 32 tells us that they didn't understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him about it. Then they arrived at their destination, Capernaum.

*When He was in the house, He asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

*He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, He said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the One who sent Me." (Mark 9:33-37)*

Jesus then goes on to teach about the results of being "for" Him and being "against" Him and how that is shown. And then the chapter ends with this question and a command:

*Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other. (9:50)*

So the context is an argument, a dispute - "which one of us is the greatest?" or, maybe put less philosophically, "which one of you thinks you're a better man than I am?" Jesus answers by redefining greatness for them: "If you really want to be important, if you really want to be the top dog, you have to take the last place, the least important position, and then serve all the others." Then He takes a little child, a toddler, and tells them that if they could serve this little guy, welcome him, include him, that they would be welcoming the presence of Jesus, welcoming God their Father. That's called turning one's values on their head. Someone called it the upside down kingdom. The least, the smallest, the overlooked and ignored, is the greatest, the one who shows us what it means to welcome God. The one who takes the most humble position, who is willing to sit at the wrong end of the table, and serve his brothers, to wash their feet, is the greatest.

And Jesus concludes with this phrase, "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another." Salt is used for several things. It is used as a cleanser, as when it is used to cleanse a wound, it's used to preserve things that would otherwise rot and it's used to enhance flavor.

But what is Jesus meaning when He refers to His followers having "salt in ourselves"? Is He referring to cleansing, to preserving or to adding flavor? I think the best interpretation will tie the saltiness in with the phrase that follows: be at peace with each other. If that's the case, then all three uses of salt may apply. The cleansing is the removal of proud and selfish characteristics that stir up disunity in the first place. It was the disciples' competitive desire to be better than the next guy that caused their dispute on the road to Capernaum. That needs to be removed, scrubbed clean from their way of thinking and replaced with the ambition to serve one another in humility and grace.

Using salt as a preservative simply means that without it rottenness and decay will pursue their course. Nobody likes to think of himself or herself as rotten, but allowing a proud and selfish attitude to control our relationships leads to their decay ... and it doesn't lead to good things in us, either. We go downhill as long as we are placing ourselves above everyone else and we need this salt Jesus talks about to keep us from going downhill, to preserve the grace of God that the Spirit is working in us.

Using salt for flavor also expresses the idea of enhancing our relationships within the body of Christ. You know when you walk into a room and the people are at odds with each other, where there's tension. You also know what it's like to walk into a room where there's a sense of joy, of peace, where people are comfortable with each other. The salt that brings a flavor of contentment and joy is the salt that leads to people being at peace with each other.

But there's another purpose for salt that is especially appropriate to this passage and that was the Ancient Near Eastern use of salt to seal a covenant between people.

Leviticus contains the laws of Israel and right near the beginning, in 2:13, we read this:

*Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.*

To eat salt together meant to make peace and enter into covenant with each other. So you see a direct connection here between the disciples having salt in themselves and being at peace with each other. They are in a close relationship with their Master, Jesus, and must also preserve unity in their walk with one another. This is part of the covenant that Jesus is establishing with them, an important part that He makes more clear in the commandment of John 13 that we looked at earlier: "a new command I give you: love one another." (v. 34)

Notice that this is a command. We have to do something here. "Have salt in yourselves" is not a passive thing, like the previous verse, which says, "Everyone will be salted with fire." That is something that happens to us, whether we like it or not. There is a purifying, cleansing influence that is coming and it appears at the end of the previous passage which describes the separation that occurs at the last judgment. But in the next verse, in the verse we've been looking at, the command is for us to do something: "Have salt in yourselves." We are the ones, in this case, who have the opportunity to pursue the wholeness that God desires for us, to welcome cleansing and purification. And we can choose the attitudes and actions that lead to being at peace with each other. This is on us. We can stir up trouble, cause unhealthy kinds of competition, spark nasty debates about troublesome issues ... or we can look for the positive things that need to be affirmed and encouraged and blessed. Jesus says that this is our choice, and He tells us what we should choose.

Okay, so we're to welcome the cleansing, preserving, enhancing, covenanting influences of Jesus' teaching and His specific commands into our lives. This sounds a lot nicer than the idea that popped into my head, which is how painful it is to rub salt into the wound. I'm sure we've all heard that expression and we know what it means. Rubbing salt into the wound means that we are making a difficult or painful situation worse. According to "Wiktionary", the phrase originates in "the stingingly painful sensation of table salt being rubbed into an open, bleeding wound, as for torture, interrogation, etc." Ouch! Salt may cleanse us from things that are dangerous to our health in physical terms, and the salt of Jesus' words will cleanse us from things that are spiritually destructive, but that doesn't mean it's an easy and painless process. In this

case, choosing to be salty is choosing to endure some pain, some discomfort, some burden, in order to preserve peace and harmony in the body of Christ.

A little over a week ago I read an amazing story of grace that I just have to share with you. It tells you how people can go through deep personal pain and still maintain a high commitment to loving one another for Jesus' sake. You may remember the story that appeared in the media in October of 2006 - a man had walked into an Old Order Amish elementary school and shot 10 girls, killing five of them, before turning the gun on himself. The event became known as the West Nickel Mines school shooting and made the news, not just as a horrific crime but as an amazing story of forgiveness.

The man who committed the crime was a husband and a father to three children of his own. His wife was unaware of his mental state until she came home from a prayer meeting and found a suicide note. She had last seen him after they had walked their children to the bus stop.

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one the girls who had been killed was heard warning some of his young relatives: "We must not think evil of this man." An Amish spokesman was quoted in international news of the shootings, "If we will not forgive, how can we be forgiven?"

Last year, the mother of the man who committed these crimes published a book called "Forgiven" in which she tells of the amazing, gracious treatment their family received from their Amish neighbors, many of whom had lost a dear relative in the tragedy of October 2.

Terri Roberts heard the sirens during her lunch break and wondered what could be happening in her small, rural community. As she got back to her desk, she received a phone call from her husband: come to Charlie and Marie's home, right now. As she drove, she heard on the radio that there had been a shooting at an Amish school house nearby and that children had been killed and some wounded. When she arrived at her son's home, she asked a state trooper if her son was alive: "No ma'am."

*I turned to my husband. With pain in his eyes, he choked out, "It was Charlie. He killed those girls."*

Her husband was a retired police officer, and now the two of them were driven home in a police cruiser, feeling like criminals. The two of them sat and sobbed at their table, unable to comprehend what had happened to their son, and why he would do such a thing. Eventually, they saw a man walking towards their home, dressed in black, in the formal visiting attire the Amish wore. After she had let him in, the man, Henry Stoltzfoos, walked over to Chuck, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, "Roberts, we love you. This was not your doing. You must not blame yourself." He stayed for more than hour, consoling this grieving father, saying again and again that there was no reason to move away, that they loved him, that they forgave, that he wasn't responsible for Charlie's actions. "I think the devil used your boy," Henry said.

The next day, a group of Amish leaders walked into the yard of Marie's parents house. Every one of them had a family member who had died in that schoolhouse. They reached out to Marie's father and embraced him. And together they wept and prayed - families of victims and father-in-law of their killer.

A fund was soon set up to aid the families of these girls. The Amish don't believe in medical insurance and so weren't prepared for the hospital bills that were soon coming in. But they insisted that a share in the funds received would go to Marie and her children, because they had lost a husband and a father.

One grieving father of a girl Charlie had killed visited Chuck and Terri and, during his visit, Terri shared how brokenhearted she was that their son Zach had refused to attend Charlie's funeral - that he couldn't forgive him. She asked him to pray that he would have a change of heart. "Of course," he said. Then, "Would you like me to call him?" The Amish don't keep telephones in their homes; they have a distaste for modern technology. But this man was willing to overlook that in order to reach out to their son and left a message asking Zach to forgive his brother and come support his family. A few days later, Zach was there. The Amish man's phone message had been the turning point for him.

Media showed up for Charlie's funeral and, after the service, began jostling in to take pictures. All at once, at least 30 Amish emerged from behind a shed, the men in tall, wide-brimmed hats and the women in white bonnets and they fanned out into a crescent between the grave site and the photographers, offering compassionate protection from these intrusions into a grieving family's privacy.

Terri describes what happened to her next as Chris and Rachel Miller stepped forward, the parents of the two sisters who had died in their arms in the hospital. "We are so sorry for your loss," they said softly and Terri was stunned. Sorry for our loss? Through it all, Terri has learned to forgive, especially to forgive her own troubled son who had so devastated the lives of dear and godly people. She learned that forgive-ness is not a feeling; it's a choice, a choice that we make to let others off the hook. And it isn't done because we feel like it; it is usually done in spite of our feelings.

I've told this long story to illustrate one aspect of what I believe Jesus was teaching when He said to have salt in ourselves. Salt cleanses and preserves, but it can be painful to use.

The week after the shootings at West Nickel Mines School, the building was demolished and a new building opened the following spring in a different location. The Amish believe that their willingness to forgive doesn't undo the wrong, but constitutes the first step toward a more hopeful future and the school that opened the next April is called "New Hope School". Forgiveness brings cleansing from the poison of bitterness, the corrupting desire for revenge, the evil influence of wishing harm to another human being. When you have been wronged, no matter how severely, forgiveness is the only way to go forward, the only way through to new hope.

Two weeks ago, we looked at two verses that mention forgiveness specifically. One was Ephesians 4:32:

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.*

And the other was Colossians 3:13:

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.*

There are numerous examples of this teaching, especially from Jesus, in the New Testament.

But today I want to close with some other verses, ones that show us the kind of heart it takes for us to find the unity, the grace and the forgiving spirit that God wants to see in His church:

*Live in harmony with one another* (Rom. 12:16)

*Live in peace with each other.* (1 Thess. 5:13)

*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.* (1 Cor.1:10)

*Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another.* (Rom. 14:13)

*Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another* (James 4:11)

*Don't grumble against each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.*  
(James 5:16)

*Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another.* (1 Peter 3:8)

Where forgiveness comes easily, I would hope that there would also be a graciousness towards those who are weak, who have fallen, who are making their first faltering steps back to the Father. I would hope that we who have been forgiven much, would also be able to forgive others ... after all, it was our Lord and Master who said we should pray like this: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."