

THE MISSING INGREDIENT

Matthew 5:13-20
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First Christian Church

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*Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."
Matthew 5:13*

I wonder if you have watched the cooking competition called "Chopped"? Professional chefs face off for the prize of \$10,000. They prepare a 3-course meal and for each course they open a basket of mystery ingredient and have 20-30 minutes to imagine and prepare a dish incorporating all those ingredients. Think of "Julia Child" on speed. After each round, a panel of take-no-prisoner judges decides who is "chopped" and who goes on to the next round. There have been 388 episodes since 2009 and the judges have now compiled a list of the top 10 mistakes made by the contestants.

Now if you're a home chef who doesn't want to be chopped at your Super Bowl party this afternoon, I suggest you listen closely...

10. Under and overcooking—have your ingredients diced, chopped and prepared before you begin cooking.
9. Cross-contamination—due to mishandling raw proteins
8. Crowding the deep fryer—fry in batches, not all at once
7. Volcano effect of hot liquids in a blender
6. Opening the oven too often
5. Grinding meat that has not been chilled (grinder, too)
4. Pan temperature—wait until the oil is shimmery and dancing before you add your ingredients
3. Putting room temperature ice cream base into the machine
2. Resting meat before you slice it—15 minutes for steak.
1. Under seasoning

Speaking to a crowd at the Borgata Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City, longtime Chopped judge Geoffrey Zakarian said under-seasoning is by far the most common error in competitors' dishes.

"It's amazing," Zakarian said. "Shocking really. Nobody puts salt in their food." These talented chefs demonstrate the most advanced knife skills, navigate pasta cooking on the stove while vegetables roast in the oven and simultaneously decorate their plates with a brilliant reduction sauce of exotic ingredients. But they forget the salt. That's why after the commercial break we see them walking down the hallway because they have been eliminated from the competition. They were this close—just a pinch of salt away—from \$10,000.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus tells his followers.

I worry every time I read Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13 because it is so easy for us to miss the point of a lesson this basic and direct. Jesus reminds us again and again that one day you and I will stand at the judge's table, asked to account for the days we spent on this planet and how we used the basic ingredients God provided us along with the amazing gift of each new day. The one thing I don't want to hear when it's my time at the judges' table is that I missed the true meaning of Jesus' lesson about being salt.

In one of his commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount, the late Fred Craddock points out that Jesus isn't urging us to be salt. It's not as if the coach pats us on the back at the end of the day and say, "Nice job but try to be a little more salty tomorrow." We're not urged to be salt. We are defined as salt. Each new believer who confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior and follows him into the waters of baptism becomes the salt the world needs in order to survive. We are called to season a world in desperate need of the Good News of Jesus Christ. And if we don't, there's a missing ingredient...

From the earliest days of civilization humankind has relied on salt for preserving and purifying and seasoning. Merchants traded salt. Workers were paid in salt. Ancient trading routes were dependent on salt.

Did you know that salt rescued Marco Polo's reputation? In 1995 historian Frances Wood released a book titled *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* in which she made her case that the famous Venetian never made it past the Black Sea. She noted that his travelogue leaves out important details—such as the Great Wall of China, the practice of binding women's feet, chopsticks and tea drinking, among other details; furthermore, Dr. Wood notes that Chinese documents from Polo's day make no mention of the explorer and his retinue.

Now the tables have turned. In 2013 German historian Hans Ulrich Vogel published a groundbreaking book pushing back against Wood and other nay-sayers of the great explorer. Here's what reviewers said about Vogel's book:

“The author's rigorous analysis of Chinese sources and all the important Marco Polo manuscripts as well as his thorough scrutiny of Japanese, Chinese and Western scholarship shows that the fascinating information contained in Polo's journals agrees almost perfectly with what we find in Chinese sources only available long after Marco Polo's stay in China.”
What sealed the deal for Vogel? The detailed information Marco Polo recorded in his journals about salt production in China. Marco Polo's reputation was saved by salt. Fortunes have been won and lost over salt. Salt has been a matter of life and death. So I ask you: Is it surprising that Jesus would define his disciples as the salt of the earth?

Let's talk about the distribution of salt—the Jesus kind-- in the world today. The latest count in 2010 told us there are 2.18 billion Christians around the world, representing nearly a third of the global population of 6.9 billion. Christians in the world today are geographically widespread – so far-flung, in fact, that no single

continent or region can indisputably claim to be the center of global Christianity.

Here's the list of the 10 countries with the largest number of Christians:

10 Countries with the Largest Number of Christians

Countries	ESTIMATED 2010 CHRISTIAN POPULATION	PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION THAT IS CHRISTIAN	PERCENTAGE OF WORLD CHRISTIAN POPULATION
United States	246,780,000	79.5%	11.3%
Brazil	175,770,000	90.2	8.0
Mexico	107,780,000	95.0	4.9
Russia	105,220,000	73.6	4.8
Philippines	86,790,000	93.1	4.0
Nigeria	80,510,000	50.8	3.7
China	67,070,000	5.0	3.1
DR Congo	63,150,000	95.7	2.9
Germany	58,240,000	70.8	2.7
Ethiopia	52,580,000	63.4	2.4
Subtotal for the 10 Countries	1,043,880,000	40.4	47.8
Total for Rest of World	1,140,180,000	6.3	52.2
World Total	2,184,060,000	31.7	100.0

Population estimates are rounded to the ten thousands. Percentages are calculated from unrounded numbers. Figures may not add exactly due to rounding. See Appendix C for details on the range of estimates available for China.

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Historian Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, predicts that Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the coming decades. It will happen in the global South—Africa, South America and Asia. Jenkins points out that the number of Christians in Africa is growing at around 2.5 percent annually, which would lead us to project a doubling of the continent's Christian population in 30 years.

If we look ahead to the year 2025, the global South predominance becomes still more marked. In 2025 there will be around 2.6 billion Christians, of whom 695 million would live in Africa, 610 million in Latin American, and 480 million in Asia. Africa and Asia would thus be in competition for the title of the most Christian continent. By 2050, only one-fifth of the world's 3.2 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites. At that point, Jenkins notes, the phrase "white

Christian” may sound as mildly surprising as “Swedish Buddhist.” Jenkins says what is happening in Christianity today will be far more significant than the Reformation. Not only is the geography changing dramatically, but the Church in the global South is much younger, very poor, and increasingly orthodox.

Let me tell you how this explosion of Christianity in the global south came to bless one of our sister churches a couple years ago. During my time as Area Minister I was called by the board chair of Hurst Christian Church. They were shrinking, no longer able to pay a full-time pastor, and had received an offer on their property. It wasn't an offer they intended to accept, but some of the leaders wondered if it was time to put out a “For Sale” sign and think about closing the church.

The leaders invited me to come for a visit, I asked questions that usually helped me understand where the flame was still burning ministry-wise, but it was a strange conversation. Good people around the table, to be sure, but everyone was tired of leading. Nowhere in the conversation could I discern a spark where ministry was still alive. I drove home frustrated with myself for failing to ask the right questions. As I prayed and thought further about the responses from the lay leaders, it occurred to me that perhaps for the first time I might have visited a congregation where the ministry had already ended and the good and faithful remnant were still showing up.

I promised to come back with some options for the leaders and when I walked into the same room with the same people 2 weeks later something had changed. That's when they told me about Pastor Meshack Rwumbuguza. For a month or more he had been stopping by to visit the church only to find the building closed. Of course that was because the church had run out of money for someone to work in the office. Finally he stopped on a day when the board chair was working on the

newsletter. Pastor Meshack told her that every time he drove past the building, God nudged him to “stop and help that church.” He told her about his past as a Disciple minister for almost 40 years in the Congo, a country where Disciples missionaries had an impressive presence a hundred years ago. Pastor Meshack listened carefully to the story of Hurst Christian Church. He asked the board chair if there was a room where he might come once a week and pray for the church.

On my next visit, I met Pastor Meshack. He told me his story. He said “I owe everything to the missionaries who came to my people in the Congo. I am a pastor because of them. Now we want to return the favor and help our Mother Church. We believe our Mother Church is sleeping, and we have come to wake her up.”

How about that! Just as remaining leaders were ready to lock the doors and call the realtor, God sent Pastor Meshack to fill up the salt shaker at Hurst Christian Church. And Pastor Meshack has been faithful. Not only did he support the leaders with his prayers and his presence on Sunday mornings, but with their permission and encouragement he began a new worship service on Sunday afternoons—an international service where the pews are filled with young families and more small children than you can count. Pastor Meshack’s grown children help with the music. And the sanctuary of Hurst Christian Church is filled to the rafters with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Historian Philip Jenkins notes that just as Christianity is exploding in the global South, the church in the West has been backing away. We are consumed with our own struggles and lack the funding to support new churches in Africa and Asia and South America. Surely we don’t want to miss the opportunity to be part of what God is doing around the globe. Let’s take a minute now to pray for all our brothers and sisters who are called just like us to be salt in our world today.