

# The Use of ἅλας and Cognates in the New Testament

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There are a number of instances in the Old Testament in which salt is referred to in a symbolical sense. The Israelites were commanded to sprinkle salt upon both their grain offerings (Lv 2:13) and their burnt offerings (Eze 43:24). Salt is called “the salt of the covenant of your God” (Lv 2:13). “It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for both you and your offspring” (Nu 18:19). Elisha made the bad water at Jericho wholesome by pouring salt into the spring (2 Kgs 2:19–22). Custom demanded that newborn babies should be rubbed with salt (Eze 16:4). We shall not study these references, however, because they shed no direct light upon the use of ἅλας and its cognates in the New Testament. We shall rather focus our attention upon the four passages in which ἅλας appears in the New Testament: Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:49,50; Luke 14:34; Colossians 4:6.

## Matthew 5:13

*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt has become flat, with what will it be made salty? It has potency for nothing further than having been cast out to be trodden down by the people.*

This verse follows the beatitudes. They indeed tell us what the believers are to be like, but especially what God does and will do for them. Here the emphasis shifts to what believers do for the earth, the world. This is no command, no admonition. It is a statement of fact: believers *are* the salt of the earth. But what does that mean? Salt was used either to impart flavor to food (Job 6:6) or to preserve it by counteracting decay. Do believers make it possible for the earth still to be palatable to God so that he does not spew it out of his mouth in utter disgust? We might think of the time when he told Abraham that he would still be willing to put up with Sodom and Gomorrah if there were ten righteous people there. But the arguments supporting the view that the “salt of the earth” makes the earth palatable to God are not very strong.

Do believers then counteract the spread of corruption on the earth as salt counteracts decay in meat? Their Master did. Jesus said: “The world...hates me because I testify that what it does is evil” (Jn 7:7). Whenever he gave such testimony he left a barb in the conscience of those who did evil. When one is made to feel uneasy about what he is doing, he may not do it and thus the spread of corruption is checked as salt checks decay. Believers as disciples of Jesus, their Master, follow his example. They do so by what they say: “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph 5:11). They do so by the kind of life they lead: “You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Pe 4:3,4). When believers make the people of this earth feel uneasy and guilty about sinning, they are functioning as salt. We would say that by what they say and do they are preaching law. We know that preaching law is not our sole function. When the people of this earth feel the guilt of their sin and look for help to escape from the punishment which sin deserves, believers are to proclaim remission of sins (Lk 24:47). Jesus reminds his disciples of this privilege and duty with his next metaphor when he calls them the light of the world. For he says that when they function as light the outcome will be that men will “praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16).

Jesus appends a word of warning to his positive declaration that his disciples are the salt of the earth: “If the salt becomes flat, with what will it be made salty? It has potency for nothing further than having been cast out to be trodden down by the people.” Commentators go to considerable length in discussing whether it is possible for salt to lose its potency. Some insist that the salt mined in the Dead Sea region is low grade and can deteriorate. Others cite evidence that the chemical composition of salt makes it impossible for it to deteriorate. Be that as it may, Jesus at times spoke of something impossible in order to arrest attention. Think, for example,

of his comment about a camel going through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:24). You will not forget it. So whether or not it is possible in the natural realm for salt to lose its character, it is possible in the spiritual realm. Paul admonishes Christians “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world” (Ro 12:2). Here Jesus directs a warning to our old man. If we were to stop functioning as the salt of the earth, we would be treated like salt which has lost its character and is thrown out on a path and trodden underfoot. We would have ceased to be Christians and would be cast out to share the eternal fate of the unbelievers. From this prospect the old man recoils. This warning will be used by believers to crucify “their sinful nature with its passions and lusts” (Ga 5:24).

This warning is a constant call to self-examination. We may lament the spread of moral corruption: abortion, homosexuality, extramarital sex, drunkenness and alcoholism, the deterioration of the work ethic both on the part of those who do not look for a job and on the part of those who have a job but do not perform, humanism, fiscal irresponsibility, dishonesty. But we also ought to ask ourselves whether in our individual and corporate lives we by word and example are endeavoring to counteract this growing corruption. We have, for example, sad examples of clergymen who want to be recognized as Christ’s disciples advocating situation ethics, defending the gay community, or supporting programs to take from the rich and to give to the poor. Is the line of demarcation between the church and the world sharply defined or becoming blurred in our case? If that were so, it is not because the world is becoming better but because we are becoming worse. In our individual and corporate life as Christians we want to be guided by God’s standards and not by what is the “in” thinking, the popular attitude, the “modern” way of looking at things. Being the salt of the earth is a high privilege but also a grave responsibility.

### Mark 9:49,50

*For everyone will be salted with fire. But if the salt has become saltless, with what will you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.*

The great number of variants for verse 49 shows that copyists had a hard time understanding it. This difficulty remains to the present. Some commentators think that *πᾶς* means every believer and that the salting with fire refers to the purifying effect of tribulation. Now it is true that in 1 Peter 1:6,7 Peter does compare tribulation to the fire which refines gold. But it seems to be an importation to bring tribulation into this context. As much must be said about the attempt to have fire refer to the Word and its purifying power.

The *γάρ* seems to tie in with what precedes by way of explanation. The *πᾶς* would then be referring to the individuals covered by the *ἀπ᾽ ὅλων* of the previous verse, those whose fire is not quenched. They are the ones who were guilty of giving offense, either to the little ones who believe in Jesus (42) or to themselves by catering to the impulse to use their hands (43), their feet (45) or their eyes (47) in the service of sin. Harking back to our interpretation of the symbolism of salt in Matthew 5:13 we could say that these people had not served as salt to counteract corruption but rather had encouraged its spread. But when they are in the eternal fire, they will at last take on the character and function of salt, *ἀλισθήσεται*. We know in advance what God’s verdict will be upon the ungodly and wicked because he has told us, for example, in 1 Corinthians 6:9,10. Seeing a thief in hell is enough to frighten the old man from thievery. The world would be much more bold in sinning if it did not know what happens to sinners in hell. Thus those in the fire serve as salt.

The root *ἄλας* in *ἀλισθήσεται* provides an easy transition to our Lord’s next remark: “Salt is good.” This holds true in both the natural and the spiritual realm. The next words are reminiscent of the warning in Matthew 5:13: “If the salt were to become flat, with what will it be made salty?” If salt loses its character, it is useless; if a professed believer fails to function as an antidote to corruption, he too is useless. The Savior’s point, however, is not that repentance is in such a case impossible.

He concludes by saying: “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.” Differently from Matthew 5:13, where believers are told that they act as salt over against the world, Jesus here tells them that their influence is to be reflexive: they are to have salt in themselves by counteracting corruption in themselves.

In what way? The *καί* is expegetical: by being at peace with one another. A corrupting force had shown up in them. Jesus had made them squirm by getting them to admit that they had been arguing among themselves as to who was the greater (34). Now if it is not checked, pride can lead to other sins: envy, hatred, violation of the 8th Commandment, a desire for revenge, frustration, dissatisfaction. So after touching upon a number of matters which were related to this incident, Jesus wound up by telling his disciples to have salt in themselves and counteract the evil beginnings and, on the positive side, to live in peace with one another. This would be possible if, acting like salt upon themselves, they had crucified their flesh.

### **Luke 14:34,35**

*Salt is good; but if even the salt has become flat, with what will it be seasoned? It is fit for neither the land nor the manure pile; they will throw it out. Let the one who has ears listen.*

In the preceding verses Jesus had spoken of another corrupting influence which is apt to insinuate itself into the heart of his followers; the desire for comfort, ease, security. He demands absolute top priority in the affection of his followers. To drive home his point he tells them that they must hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes, even their own life. If not, they are unable to be his disciples. We understand that “hate” is used not in an absolute but in a relative sense for “love less.” As little as he allowed his mother or his brothers to come between him and his Father by telling him to act while he was waiting for the time set by his Father (Jn 2:4; 7:6), so little are his followers to let even those who are nearest and dearest to them, or considerations of personal welfare take precedence over him. And that is not easy. Although we cannot understand how it was possible in his sinless state, Adam did not say No to Eve when the Lord should have come first. It is hard for a wife to say No to her husband when he coaxes her to do something which the Lord forbids. Indulgent parents find it hard to say No to their children when they want to do something which is contrary to the Lord’s will. It takes real effort to keep Jesus first in our affection always. But it is either—or; either we hate those who are dearest to us and even our own life or we cannot be his disciples.

He adds a second demand: “Pick up your cross and follow me or you are not able to be my disciple.” Carrying a cross is an essential feature of discipleship. While in a broader sense crossbearing could cover everything that a believer has to endure, including the ills which are common to the entire human race, specifically it involves the suffering which results from following Jesus: ridicule, exclusion, physical abuse. And that is not easy either. Witness Peter in the courtyard, John Mark, Demas. But again it is either—or.

So Jesus tells us to count the cost. He makes his point by means of two examples. If a man started to build a tower without counting the cost and his funds were to run out when the tower was only half built, he would end up as a laughingstock. Likewise a wise king would not think of going to war against an enemy whose army was twice as large as his own unless he had calculated whether there could be a prospect of victory under such circumstances. If not, he would try to negotiate the best possible terms of peace rather than to go down to disgraceful defeat. So Jesus shows the folly of not counting the cost and the wisdom of doing so. Then he makes the application. “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33).

He adds: “Salt is good.” We have already mentioned that our old man wants to put family first in our affections, for their love for us is tangible, satisfying, comfortable. He wants to put our own well-being first. He shrinks from the pain of the cross. These impulses would undermine and corrupt our spiritual life, our faith, our relation to the Lord Jesus. We need salt in our spiritual makeup to counteract these corrupting influences. This salt, this antidote against corruption, is Jesus. He does not demand the cost of hating family and one’s own life as a general policy applicable in every conceivable situation, but only when it is involved in being “my” disciple. The Spirit brings us to realize the horrors of damnation from which Jesus saved us, to appreciate the peace which comes from the forgiveness which he gives us, to await with eager anticipation the eternal blessedness which he won for us. Then Jesus is far more important and precious to us than family, life and ease. Then whenever an either—or arises, as arise it will, Jesus will come out on top. We can say with Peter: “We

have left everything to follow you!” (Mt 19:27). We can say with Paul: “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus had given me” (Ac 20:24). Of us too it will be possible to say what was said of the apostles: “...rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name” (Ac 5:41). We shall have salt, and the salt is good.

Again Jesus warns against the danger of losing our saltiness. This time he reminds us that salt which has deteriorated can serve no good purpose either by direct application to the soil or by being thrown upon the manure pile to become a fertilizer in time. He closes with the admonition to use the ears which have been given to us to listen to what he has to say. Stern though his admonition may sound, it was still spoken in love. He does not want us to lose the salt which we have in our love for him. With his help we will not!

### Colossians 4:6

*Your words, (let them be) always in grace, seasoned with salt, to know how you must answer each one individually.*

The imperative idea carries over from the previous verse even without the use of a verb. “Words” seems to be more idiomatic in translation than the collective singular of the Greek. Generally commentators look upon the phrase “seasoned with salt” as an appositional modifier to words which are “in grace.” Grace is then taken in its meaning in classical Greek; that which affects pleasantly. In this sense we still speak of a gracious manner. The context points to our way of speaking to those outside the Christian fellowship. If when doing so we are courteous, kind and warm, our words will be gracious and affect the listener as favorably as well-seasoned food affects the palate. Certainly the law of love does forbid us to be gruff, rude, harsh, overbearing or sarcastic when we speak to others whether they are part of the Christian community or not.

But instead of being taken as an appositional modifier “seasoned with salt” might also be taken as coordinate to “in grace” so that we might read “in grace and seasoned with salt.” Then we can understand “grace” in its New Testament sense. When Christians speak to unbelievers, their words ought to be spoken in the interest of grace, in an endeavor to find an opening to speak of saving grace. “Seasoned with salt” would then present the other side of the coin. Unless there is also salt in our conversation, it will not be properly seasoned. A Christian may be so eager to talk to someone about Jesus that he forgets that the one to whom he is speaking needs to be helped to realize his sin before he will want to hear about the Savior from sin. We are familiar with the caricature of the preacher who babbles sweet nothings. Paul was very gracious in his remarks to the Athenians. But because he was paving the way to proclaim grace, he was also sharp: “Now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Ac 17:30). Salt smarts but it also counteracts corruption. If there is no call to repentance, men will continue in their sins under the illusion that they need no help, only to be lost in the end. But if the call to repentance is heeded, they will be ready to listen to the words of grace which tell of the Savior, words which the Spirit will use to work saving faith.

As our words are in grace and seasoned with salt, they are to be used “to know how you must answer each one individually.” We need to evaluate the state of the one to whom we speak. If someone is down and desperate, we shall hasten to speak of grace. But if someone is self-righteous, we shall season our words with salt. Elsewhere Paul calls this “correctly handling the word of truth” (2 Tm 2:15). This is a facet of the proper distinction between law and gospel.

When I began this study, I had no firm convictions about the figurative meaning of salt in the New Testament other than about its use in Matthew 5:13. But I do believe that unless there are contextual reasons for not finding the same meaning in each occurrence, each use ought to be interpreted in the same way. The use of salt to make food palatable does not seem to explain its figurative use in some of the passages. But its use to counteract corruption does make sense in each of the passages which we have considered. For ourselves we ought to have that saltlike quality in our Christian character which counteracts pride and self-indulgence. Over against others we ought to exert that saltlike influence which counteracts moral corruption and impenitence. With this interpretation we can operate.