

When the Salt Loses Its Savour

By Maurice Roberts

IN A FAMILIAR PASSAGE OF THE SERMON ON the Mount our Saviour Jesus Christ informs us that his people are the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). This is a reference to the fact that Christians should be, and in their true character are, the ones who stop the natural tendency of human society to go rotten.

Christians are different from all others. Whereas other people exert pressure on society to become worse and to sink to lower standards, Christians exert an opposite pressure on the tone of public life. By their example and by their witness they tend to raise society in its moral and spiritual tone. They act as a brake on society's downhill movement and they neutralise to a great extent the harm which unconverted men's influence continually does to human society through sin and selfishness.

However, our Lord Jesus Christ goes on to say that the salt itself can sometimes “lose its savour.” He means to tell us that Christians may become so like the world around them that their value is lost. Christians “lose their savour” when they habitually behave in any way which is inconsistent with what they claim to believe or to be. A Christian is, by definition, a person who believes Christ to be the Lord of glory and the only Saviour of men from sin. But there is the possibility ever present that at some times in the world's history Christians may forget that Christ came to save from sin. The state of mind which hates and detests and shuns sin is the truly Christian one. But it can and does happen that at times a generation of Christians rise up which is too tolerant of sin both in itself and in others. In such times the “salt has lost its savour.”

In our Free Church today we have great reason to be thankful to God that we have up and down the land a good sprinkling of faithful and godly believers. This is a matter of special gratitude for several reasons. It is a sign that God is still among us. So long as a church has holy and spiritual people in its midst it will remain a true church. Only when “the salt has lost its savour” will a church be cast out by Christ and be “trodden underfoot” (Matthew 5:13). It is a tribute to the faithfulness of our preachers past and present that holy people are still in our midst. They are the product of evangelical preaching and teaching. Their very existence in the midst of a deeply corrupt society shows that the old gospel which is so much scorned everywhere today can still work its divine change in people's hearts, how ever great the pressure to live the worldly life.

We must not hide our eyes, however, from the fairly obvious fact that we, as Christians today, are not so holy as our fathers were in better days of the church. It is not extremism to say that godliness is rarer now than it was fifty or a hundred years ago. This point was again brought home to the present writer a few weeks ago while he was reading W. Robertson Nicoll's *Princes of the Church*. This book consists of about twenty-five rather short biographical sketches of preachers who passed away a little before or not long after the year 1900. What strikes the reader is that, at that period of the church, very eminent and spiritual men were departing from the stage of life. The list includes Spurgeon, John Kennedy, the Bonar brothers, James Begg, Alexander Maclaren of Manchester and others. They were remarkable men and they preached to remarkable congregations. In their time the salt of spirituality had a good deal more of its savour than it has today. This is not to idolize the past nor to overlook the presence of fine Christians today. But it is to be honest and realistic.

It would be very interesting if we were able to summon these good men from the grave and ask them to tell us what most surprises them about modern Christians. We suspect that they would notice several significant differences between the Christianity of their day and that of ours. But the main difference, we imagine, to which they would draw attention is the extent to which Christians of those days aimed at a holy life. That was their first and main concern. They had their spiritual heroes such as Rutherford, Boston and McCheyne. Their reading and general topic of interest was to be Christian. By contrast, we today are preoccupied rather with understanding the Christian faith mentally. They were changed by what they believed. This was still more the case in the very best ages of the church. On the other hand we today are largely unchanged by what we believe. The consequence is that we have not too many surviving Christians of whom it might be said that they are outstanding saints.

There is an obvious reason why we as Christians today are not more conspicuous for godliness. We point to the state of society all around us. It has to be admitted that “iniquity abounds” and that the love of many Christians has “waxed cold” (Matthew 24:12). We are assailed on every side by unclean thoughts and squalid ideas. The television imports the world's standards into the home of the godly. A fondness for empty pleasures, foolish fashions, cheap music, unprofitable sports and vain ambitions has blemished not a few Christians in our modern society. We all, indeed, blush to recall the extent to which we have forgotten the words of the New Testament: “the friendship of the world is enmity with God” (James 4:4). But this low level really cannot be excusable.

When the salt has lost its savour Christianity has become very much like the world around it. At such times Christians plead for more and more liberty to please themselves. They want to be able to justify themselves in their vices and in their worldly habits. There will be a general clamour to persuade others that there is “no harm” in going to dances, discos and public houses. They will talk like the world and behave like the world. They will praise those who indulge them in their pleasures and entertainments. They will dislike those who disapprove of their worldliness. They will speak evil of those who are wiser and more spiritual than they are themselves. They will be impatient of authority in parents or in ministers. Their good opinion of themselves is the only excuse they want or need to live as they please. This they will do either until they discover that they were never converted at all, or until God's humbling and chastening rod calls them back to a more teachable frame of mind.

There is one thing above all that we need to do if we are to put the taste of true Christianity back into professing believers. We need all to acknowledge the place which the Law of God ought to have in our lives.

It is a great, and yet a common mistake to suppose that the Christian has no further need of the Moral Law of God after he has come to faith in Christ. It is not to the point to quote the text which states that we are “not under the law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). That certainly is a wonderful and an important truth. But it does not mean the Christians are exempt from obedience to the Ten Commandments. Since this point is not very fully understood by all, it is worth our while looking at some of the main reasons for affirming, as our Confession and Catechisms do, that the Ten Commandments are a believer's Rule of Life and Conduct.

1. The Ten Commandments must be the rule of Christian's life because they are an expression of that holiness which is in God Himself.

We are to be holy because we belong to God and He is holy. Holiness means likeness to God. The Ten Commandments are not an arbitrary set of rules chosen at random. They are a logical and structured code for man's behaviour and they refer to all the main duties and relationships of life.

The first four commandments tell us this: to worship only the true God, to do so without any picture or image, to have a reverent attitude to Him and to give special care to keep His Sabbaths. The last six commandments tell us to respect all authority in human society and to have a regard for our neighbour's life, purity, possessions and reputation. In addition, the tenth commandment tells us that we ought not to deviate from perfect holiness even in our secret thoughts. This is God's standard. It is based not simply on what God wills but also on what God is. This is God's will for us because this is what God Himself is like.

2. Jesus Christ Himself makes it very clear in His Sermon on the Mount that the Ten Commandments are to be taught by the Church's ministers to be the permanent Rule of Duty.

He states it in the strongest terms: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18). Christ knew that there would always be a tendency in fallen human nature to want to get free from the Ten Commandments. So He emphasizes their permanence in this absolutely unmistakable way. He then goes on to say that if preachers and their hearers do not, even when they are converted, habitually keep the Ten Commandments as their Rule of Life, they will suffer great loss. He puts it in these terms: “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

Jesus Christ does not of course mean that we are saved by our obedience to God's law. He makes this clear at once in the statement found in the next verse: “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness

shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). The Pharisees attempted to earn salvation by their strict observance, as they supposed it to be, of the letter of God's law. But a real Christian has a righteousness which far “exceeds” theirs. It is, of course, the righteousness of Christ Himself, which is reckoned to all who believe in Christ for salvation.

But when we become believers and are saved by Christ, we are to make these glorious Ten Commandments the Rule of Life for ourselves and for others. In short, we are not saved by keeping the Ten Commandments; but we are saved in order to keep them. And, so that we may understand just how perfect and spiritual the Ten Commandments really are, the Lord Jesus Christ proceeds at once to expound them to us. This He does in this very passage of Scripture (Matthew 5:21-48). The sum of it all is in the last verse of this chapter, where Christ's exposition of the Decalogue is recorded for us: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Our heavenly Father is perfect. So must we, as Christians, be. The way to this perfection is not by some mystic postconversion experience but by a careful keeping of the Ten Commandments.

The Commandments are therefore the “schoolmaster” who brings us to saving faith in Christ (Galatians 3:24). But once we are saved, Christ takes us back to the commandments as the way we are to live for Him.

3. The Apostle Paul similarly teaches that the Ten Commandments are a believer's Rule of Life.

Of the many important places in Paul where the law is referred to, we confine ourselves to one: “And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law, to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law” (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). He is making a statement about our methods of outreach in evangelism. It is right for us, he says, to accommodate ourselves to the prejudices of people, provided that we do not offend Christ in the process. We may “bend over backwards” to avoid giving different groups of people any offence. But in all evangelistic (as in all other) situations, we are to act like men and women who are “under the law to Christ” (v.21).

Paul is stating that he regarded the Ten Commandments as Christ's law and that this law was binding on him. So every Christian ought to reason and to argue. The Moral Law is God's absolute standard for every child of God. We are all, like Paul, “under the law to Christ.”

Before leaving this passage it is worth our while noticing that we are to have a high regard for the Moral Law in all our outreach and evangelistic work. There are very definite limits to our liberty. We may only go so far in avoiding giving possible offence to the world by what we say, or how we dress, and so on. At all these times we must be most careful not to do what would offend God. It is a point which Christ also Himself makes when giving the famous and often-quoted evangelistic mandate: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:18-19). In case we should be carried away with ignorant zeal, He at once adds these words: “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (v.20). We are to evangelize so as not only to have converts but also converts who obey the will of Christ in every respect. Our converts, then, are to be themselves taught to keep carefully the law of God. This involves us in setting the best standards for them to follow.

We as Christians are to strive to excel in the keeping of God's law. It is the way to glorify and enjoy God in this present life. It is the way to keep ourselves from the world. It is the way to give credibility to the gospel and to bring back that godliness which is not merely in “form” but in “power” (2 Timothy 3:5).

We began our meditation by referring to Christ's Sermon on the Mount with its definition of Christians as the “salt of the earth.” With that also we must conclude. It is the unhappy fashion of our age to be visibly bored by the subject of law and of authority. That is reflected in society in a score of ways from the breakdown of marriage to noise in the classroom. The modern Christian, therefore, must be all the more careful to honour and uphold the claims of God's law upon the life of man. God's law is good and it brings only good to those who keep it. On the other hand, those who spurn His law will certainly reap a harvest of misery and of needless trouble, whoever they are. Our nation's aborted babies, if they could speak, would tell us that with one voice. It is the message which shouts to us from every corner of our lawless society:

“The way of transgressors is hard!” It is certainly hard for the innocent in the meanwhile. If we live after the flesh we shall die. The loose life is not for those who have a holy God.

For us to talk about our Christian faith to others is very good and necessary. But if it is talk unaccompanied by a holy life it will do nothing to put right the world around us. People in our modern society are miserable and hopeless. What is called for is preaching and evangelism, most certainly. But let us be sure that these things are united to a hearty and sincere love of holiness and of the Moral Law. A lawless Christianity is, after all, no real Christianity in God's sight. What are needed besides more preachers and more evangelists are more “saints.” If we come to have an increased number of them in our churches, we might well look for expansion and blessing. But if the salt should lose its savour—what then?