



The Gospel according to St. Matthew has been called “The Church’s Gospel.” Of all the gospels it presents the teachings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ most completely. The Fathers of the Church quote this gospel more than the others so that you might say that this gospel was the Church’s first catechism. Central to our Lord’s teachings is the *Sermon on the Mount* (the Beatitudes) followed by his discourses on various topics. He tells His disciples and the crowds that they are to be “*the salt of the earth*” and “*the light of the world.*” Their lived discipleship would bring God’s “saltiness” and “light” to a world rendered tasteless and dark by the Evil One.

“*But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?*” It’s no secret that the Gospel has lost its “saltiness” and this age seeks to extinguish the light of Christ. So how can we bring back this saltiness and the light of Christ to our age? One way is to look at the lives of our Christian ancestors who lived in the Roman Empire during the first three centuries of the Christian era, before Emperor Constantine ended the persecutions. Theirs was a very “salty” gospel and from them we can draw inspiration on how to restore the Gospel’s saltiness.

A good reference work that parallels this period and can serve as a sort of Christian manual is “*The Didache: An Instruction of the Lord Given to the Heathen by the Twelve Apostles.*” It dates from around the year 90 A.D. so we’re talking a very authoritative work that goes back to the very beginnings. Every Christian should be familiar with this work. (It makes excellent matter for a Sunday sermon). Reading the New Testament together with this work can put some saltiness in our own discipleship as it did for our Christian ancestors who lived in perilous times.

The *Didache* begins: “*Two Ways there are, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a **great difference** between the Two Ways.*” Notice the emphasis on the words “great difference.” Back then, when you became a Christian you made a radical statement. In our own time we have lost that “great difference” and hence the “saltiness” of the Gospel. For the past fifty odd years we have mistakenly thought that if we could move away from this “great difference” and “be like everybody else” we would be able to build the “City of God” on earth. That song, “Let us build the City of God” well summed up our hubris. Priests and religious no longer wanted to look or be “dif-

ferent” from everyone else. So many jumped on that bus. The moral teachings were ignored or even rejected under the guise of “what unites us is more important than what separates us.” The way of the Cross, indispensable for discipleship, was rejected for a sexual revolution and a life of self-fulfillment. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass went from being a divine sacrifice worshipping God to being a community “Happy Meal” where the “community” celebrated, worshipped and talked to itself. By rejecting the “great difference” we lost our saltiness.

Our Christian ancestors teach us an important lesson: Christian spirituality is different. People who are good Christians, who follow Christ the way they **should** are distinguishable from others. The principal mark of distinction is the moral life that Christ’s true followers lead. The conduct of Christ’s followers is unique and sets them apart from other people because the Christian lives on another plane of existence. They are living on earth a life that is not of this earth. Our Christian ancestors were very conscious of the fact that this earth is **NOT** our true home. That can be called lesson number one: **We’re supposed to be different.**

Look at the reality that existed in pre-Christian Rome. Over 100 forms of contraception existed back then. If that failed, they had a backup (just as abortion today serves as a backup to contraception) which was exposing the baby to the elements or wild animals to ensure its death. Many of the pagan religions featured “sacred prostitution” where you joined yourself to a prostitute in order to “commune” with the pagan deity. Divorce existed and was easy to obtain. For entertainment, plenty of blood sports existed; you watched men kill each other for entertainment. The Christians did not accept this as part of “pluralism” in the ancient Roman Empire. No “*different strokes for different folks*” for them!

The *Didache* spelled out how they were different

and hence salty: you rejected the *Way of Death*. It reads: “*Do not murder, do not commit adultery; do not practice pederasty* (quite common back then); *do not fornicate* (no co-habitation); *do not deal in magic* (“magic” was the ancient term for contraception); *do not practice sorcery* (tarot cards, fortune tellers, séances); *do not kill a fetus by abortion or commit infanticide.*” By rejecting these, the Christians showed themselves as having that separation and moral distinctiveness that must characterize the true followers of Jesus. Remember, we are pilgrims in a strange land.

The *Way of Life* in the *Didache* gives us the following duties of the true follower of Jesus Christ. Christians have the duty to love God and their neighbor. True followers of Christ love their enemy. The early Christians being told to love their enemies must be seen against the background of the Church’s first three centuries – the best commentary on the Gospel. Their neighbor was their enemy in every sense of the word. **Nothing converts like a love that suffers. Souls are saved only by the Cross.**

There’s Primacy of Patient Love. There’s an extraordinary stress on selfless and patient love of one’s neighbor: a patient love that causes suffering. If you do not want to suffer, then you really do not want to love. To save this world we have to suffer this world, we have to be hurt by this world. To save the world we have to be patient, which means we have to take it from the world. If we’re not willing to take it, then we’re not willing to save it.

There’s the practice of Asceticism. The virtues emphasized were the direct opposite of the vices of those days. What virtues should we “moderns” concentrate on? Those which are opposed to the vices of our day (those glorified by the media and Hollywood). The early Christians practiced Christ-like chastity. The Church’s earliest tradition was absolute chastity. The married were to practice conjugal chastity by perfect fidelity to

their spouse until death. The unmarried were to practice pre-marital chastity by keeping their bodies and their passions under control. All were to practice asceticism which meant self-denial of the body and restraint of the senses and control of the appetites so as to remain a true disciple of a suffering Master.

Here was the saltiness that brought Christ to ancient Rome and can restore it to our formerly

Christian West. So here is our challenge and our response. Remember, our Lord has promised always to be with us. The Incarnate Son of God would never command us to live in an “impossible” way. He will always provide the graces necessary. The same grace that enabled these ancestors of ours to remain faithful. May we become His salt.

