

the spice box_ Grace seasoned with salt

By Sharon Robertson, Lt. Colonel

The Hebrews liked their spices! They were familiar with a variety of plants, herbs, seeds and spices useful in seasoning foods. Ancient manuscripts, including the Bible and the Mishnah, mention using cumin, caraway, mint, garlic, leeks, mallow, chervil, “bitter” herbs (probably wild lettuce or wild endive), dill, mustard, rue and another herb sometimes identified as an eryngo variety. (I had to look that one up, but my references say one variety is grown in Texas, so it must be OK).

Jesus talked about spices and herbs being tithed by the Pharisees, indicating that while they were meticulous in keeping the rituals of the Law, they were not so meticulous in practicing the more important matters of justice and the love of God (see Luke 11:42).

Yes, condiments were important to the Jews, but the most important condiment of all was not a vegetable. It was a common, but vital, mineral: salt. Salt was used as a seasoning, an antiseptic, a preservative, an element for preparing offerings for sacrifice and a commercial commodity. It was not a luxury, like the garlic and leeks of Egypt that the fleeing Israelites longed for. In a hot desert climate, like Israel’s, quantities of water and body salts were lost through sweat. Both water and sodium are essential to human life. Body salts aid the retention of water in the body; if they are not replaced, dehydration occurs, with devastating results.

Salt was relatively easily procured in Israel: all one had to do was travel to the Dead Sea and pick up the salt crystals along the shore. (Or, of course, if you had the money you could get it even more easily by paying someone to collect it for you.) Dead Sea salt was abundant, but not always pure. The crystals tended to be adulterated with other natural minerals. The salt may be dissolved, leaving the other less tasty minerals. That fact may be the basis for Jesus’ statement that if the salt has lost its taste, it is good for nothing, and is discarded. Pure salt is beneficial, but if what you have only looks like salt, it is of no use as a seasoning or preservative.

A curious New Testament reference to salt is found in Colossians 4:6 (NIV), where Paul exhorts his readers to Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know



how to answer everyone. In today's lexicon, a "salty" joke or conversation generally means one that includes references (presumably meant to be amusing) to mildly (or not so mildly) indecent behaviors or speech. Clearly that was not Paul's intent, so just what was Paul asking of his readers?

The context of this verse makes it clear that Paul was advising his readers as to how they should interact with others, especially unbelievers. He wanted them to avoid some of the pitfalls we tend to fall into as we share our faith, including: 1) over-aggressiveness; 2) trying to impress by "doing people good," whether they like it or not; 3) representing ourselves as unnaturally, unbelievably good (what my grandmother used to call "too sweet to be wholesome," 4) letting our attitudes and actions seem to disprove our claims 4) presenting our faith as a panacea that will make the world go away.

Paul believed that to win others to Christ it is necessary to demonstrate the reality of Christ in our daily walk and conversation. People should be able to see the grace of God reflected in us. But Paul also understood that we might have a tendency to perpetuate the myth that all is sweetness and light for the Christian—that we inhabit a world that is bland and uninteresting, when the opposite is true.

For the person who has found new life in Christ, life presents exhilarating challenges. We view his creation from a different perspective: we have available the power to see possibilities and potential victories in situations where others see only disaster and inevitable defeat. We haven't lost our sense of humor, but instead of laughing at the blunders and mishaps that befall others, we delight in the good, the truly funny things that arouse our sense of irony and enjoyment of the unpredictable. Our conversation should reflect our interests in life, not simply those things we think we ought to be interested in. It should have "staying power," keeping the message of Christ fresh in the mind of the unbeliever.

Jesus called us "the salt of the earth." He expected us to be seasoning, arousing the appetite of an ungodly world to discover the "salty possibilities" available through life found in Jesus Christ.