

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Title: Salt, Light, and the Law

Truth: Jesus calls us to purity and holiness.

Date/Location: Sunday April 18, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

Recall the notes on Matthew 5:1 where I addressed in a little bit of detail the matter of how the Sermon on the Mount is applicable to the Christian believer. Some ask whether it is directly applicable at all. As I said in that message, I believe it is fully applicable to me today, and to you. Certainly its directives and its culture will not be fully implemented until the Kingdom of Christ actually appears. But as kingdom citizens, we are to follow the principles in this Sermon in our present world. In fact, I am hard pressed to find a place in the sermon that is *not* somehow very applicable to us today.

I. Salt, 5:13

- A. **Repentant believers are like salt.** Jesus refers to those who follow Him. They are the salt. This is entirely different than a title you may have heard: “an old salt.” That refers to a sailor who has a lot of experience on the sea. This metaphor is of the *mineral* salt. Salt flavors and preserves. It is tempting to suggest that the preservative effect is the main basis for the salt metaphor, but Jesus emphasizes its *flavor*. Indeed, the people of God do preserve good and the cause of God on this earth. But the metaphor focuses on flavoring—followers of Christ do flavor the world and help it to be a better place even though we are not a majority of the world’s population. Christians are the ones that show the world what it is to be a godly, repentant person. Their flavor is different. Their aroma, to change metaphors, is different than that of the world (like, but not precisely the same sense as in 2 Cor. 2:16).
- B. How would salt lose its flavor? If you have tried different kinds of salt than the standard iodized table salt—perhaps pink Himalayan salt, or grayish-white Celtic Sea salt, or regular sea-salt that has different minerals in it—then you know that different types of salt have different tastes to them from the minerals that they contain.

If salt has more impurities than pure salt, then it loses flavor and is good for nothing. If you have no good salt in the pantry, you cannot revive the taste of other salt that has lost its flavor. Maybe it became contaminated by some other substance. You do not want to eat it on your food at that point because it has no flavor and may be harmful. It becomes useless for anything else but ground cover, or perhaps weed killer for the pathway that you regularly walk upon. It also loses effectiveness as a preservative—and the loss of taste will tell you that fact.

- C. What is the meaning of this miniature salt parable? Pure salt is like a pure life. If it is un-contaminated by the prevailing sins of the world—or any sins for that matter. The pure life makes a change in the world.

Obviously no salt is 100% pure, and no life is 100% pure of sin. But there is a difference between salt and non-salt! The person who is contaminated and full of sin is of no use in the kingdom of God. He is left on the path trodden-underfoot, so to speak, and does not help the cause move forward. Salt that has lost its flavor is like believers who have lost their distinctiveness from the world; who have lost their holiness; who have lost their effectiveness; who appear not much different than all around them.

- D. Take a minute to taste your own life. That is, think about how you “taste” to God and to the world. Are you salty or pretty bland? Are you pure or contaminated

II. Light, 5:14-16

- A. Another “miniature parable” or metaphor for the repentant believer is that **repentant believers are like light**. Light refers to holiness or god-likeness in character = godliness. God is light (1 John 1:5). We are to be like Him! The world needs this light, otherwise it exists in pure darkness.

Presently, in many countries the individual and corporate light of the church is being shut down by persecution. Example: GraceLife Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada was locked shut and surrounded by chain-link fence in early April 2021 to keep it closed. Prior to this, its pastor, James Coates, was imprisoned for 35 days.

“Remember prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also” (Hebrews 13:3). Paul: “Remember my chains” (Col. 4:18). Thankfully, not even death itself can destroy the church, which is not a property or building, but a people redeemed by the blood of Christ. In fact, during times like these, the light may be even more noticeable!

- B. The light shining from God through His people is not designed by God to be hidden. It is supposed to shine as from the top of the highest point in the city or as a lighthouse on a prominent point of shoreline. It is not meant to be hidden under an upside-down basket. It tends to become hidden from the world when there is persecution, but even then it has to shine out somehow.
- C. Light is godliness. Jesus indicates in verse 16 that our light amounts to good works. These works are seen by men—not *done to be seen by them*, but seen nonetheless. The good works of people are clearly evident; or if not, they will become evident (1 Tim. 5:25). The difference between this and Matt 6:1 is that here, the works are done to glorify God and bring good and light to society; in Matt. 6:1 the works are done to glorify *self*.
- D. Take another minute to get out the digital light meter to see how many lumens your life is shining in the world. A standard 60W lightbulb emits about 800 lumens of light; a 4-foot fluorescent tube can put out 2500 lumens; an LED tube over 2000; and our auditorium lights just over 17,000 lumens. If your own spiritual light is a bit dull and people around cannot see too well, upgrade the bulb! Turn up the power a bit. Or just turn on the switch! Let God have more control of the switch and you less of it. More resistance to God’s work in your life will dim the bulb.
- E. About salt and light, what is the idea so far? Jesus commands that we shine the light of God before people. We *must* shine as lights in the world. If Christians do not, no one will. We *must* be real salt, not impure, useless salt. Our flavor, preservative power, and good works are to be clear and compelling so that people would turn to glorifying the God of Heaven. See 1 Peter 2:12.

It may seem hard to believe that outsiders would glorify God. But certain unbelieving people will become believers in part because of

the testimony and works of God’s people. God may well use that light and salt as an intermediate means to draw some to Himself. Furthermore, though some may not become believers, they may still recognize the hand of God in the believer’s life or in the church.

III. The Law and the Prophets, 5:17-20

- A. The Law and the Prophets refers to the Mosaic Law and the Prophets of the Bible’s Old Testament. This is a shorthand way of describing the entirety of the Old Testament revelation, that is, the Hebrew Bible from Genesis to Malachi (or 2 Chronicles, if your Bible has it in that order).¹ Sometimes this is called “the Prophets and Moses” (Acts 26:23). Sometimes the NT speaks of the “writings” of Moses (John 5:47), or of the entire OT (2 Tim. 3:15). Other times it uses “Psalms” (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and sometimes uses Psalms as a shorthand for the other OT writings (Luke 24:44).
- B. Jesus deals ahead of time with an objection that He knows will be made against what he is saying—an objection that is baseless, false, and arises from someone not carefully listening to what He is saying. The objection is, “It sounds like you are destroying the Law of Moses.” They suppose that Jesus is arrogantly replacing the Law. This objection resurfaced several times in the New Testament.
1. The Pharisees thought Jesus said that He would destroy the temple (Matt. 26:61), when He actually indicated that THEY would destroy Him, and He would rise again on the third day (John 2:19)!
 2. Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemy against the Law and threatening to destroy the temple (Acts 6:14). Nothing could be farther from the truth or the spirit of Stephen.
 3. Paul was accused of a similar crime in Acts 21:28—“This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place...”

¹ See Zech. 7:12; Matt. 7:12, 11:13, 22:40; Luke 16:16, 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 13:15, 24:14, 28:23; Rom. 3:21 for another example.

- C. It is strange to us Christians how someone could think that what Jesus was doing was destructive. In fact, as He explains at the end of verse 17, He is not coming to destroy—just the opposite! He comes to fulfill the Law. What the Law says about Him in Moses, and the Psalms, and Job, and the major prophets, and the minor prophets, He is coming to actually *do*. They promise that He will suffer and be glorified, and give His soul as an offering for sin. And He did.
- D. Jesus teaches that no part of the Bible will *ever* go unfulfilled. That is what it means that one little bit of the Law will not pass until it is all fulfilled. The Scripture has continuing authority; its prophecies will never fail; there are no errors or shortcomings in it. As a result, any new revelation that is given can only fulfill or add to it; it cannot undo, alter, or change the “older testament.” A wholesale change of terms of the OT promises, or a change of meaning, or an escape from the original meaning, is simply not compatible with what Jesus says here. We could say that His phrasing implies, “I did not come to destroy *or to change* but to fulfill.” I say this because a change would destroy the original intention and meaning of the promises and directives of that law.
- E. Consequently, if anyone advocates breaking the law, or does so, this one will be reduced in standing in Christ’s kingdom (v. 19). Depending on the infraction, some will even find themselves *outside* of the kingdom where there is darkness and gnashing of teeth because they are false teachers.

I have thought about this with areas in which I teach that certain OT laws are not constraints upon Gentile believers (or Jewish believers, for that matter) today. The Sabbath command is explicitly set aside in Col. 2:16, for example; Jesus taught us that we need not keep the dietary laws to be “clean” before God (Mark 7:19, Acts 10:15).

The hardest part of that problem, I think, is what to do if you are a Jewish person—does the Law still hold sway over you?

For a Gentile, it is rather easier because the Law of Moses was not given to Gentiles as a rule for conduct. Yet it displayed God’s holiness and separated the people of Israel from the world and

thus expresses God's holiness. To solve this important conundrum, it is my understanding that in fulfilling the Law, Jesus also "completed" it. Then, Christ gave us the righteousness which we could not attain in keeping the Law, through the imputation of His own righteousness. In this way, teaching what seems to be clear instruction in later revelation that supersedes or obsoletes earlier instruction does not make us guilty of violating the Law in the way verse 19 describes.

F. Furthermore, it was those *at that time* like the Pharisees who were teaching the traditions of men rather than the commandments of God. The injunction is particularly for *them*, not for us who exist in a different era and entirely new stewardship arrangement.

Jesus is teaching his disciples *at that time* that they are to follow the Law, because that was the operative regime at the time. They did not have further revelation so the problem I explained above was not even an issue for them. People then who were undercutting the Law by not teaching it and not doing it (read: Pharisees) were in big trouble.

G. The opposite side the equation is that those who teach and obey the Law of God are great in the kingdom of Heaven. Those who taught the Law genuinely—and what that is will become clear in the rest of the Sermon—would be rewarded with greatness.

H. The righteousness of the Pharisees seemed to be very high—from all external appearance. But in reality, they were frauds. The appearance of righteousness, however, was something that the Lord Jesus said that you need to far exceed if you have any hope to enter the kingdom of heaven. Righteousness was not merely external. It had to be a thorough-going characteristic of one's life inside and out.

Conclusion

What this would do to the audience is drive them to despair that the works they could do would never be good enough. There is where the poverty in spirit and hungering for righteousness become relevant. Works-based righteousness was insufficient to meet this impossibly high standard. The poor-in-spirit would recognize they

needed something else, and that something is a righteousness from another Source, that would constitute them right before God.

The Law always had that function, by the way: to point out sin, to condemn. It could not *make* anyone righteous. Law just does not do that.

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