

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴ *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

¹⁷ *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:13-20)*

How Righteous Are You?

This week, I got an email survey from the synod about our congregation’s efforts to reach out with the gospel. I struggled with one particular question. Do I believe that God expects every Christian to personally share the gospel? Does it surprise you that I wrestled with that question? Would you? I struggled with it because I know some people – myself included – find it very hard to just launch into a personal witness especially with people they don’t know very well. I find it very hard to knock on doors and invite people to church. I know that there are people whom God has gifted to do that work much more than he’s gifted me. But is that just making an excuse? I tried to think of a Bible passage that says, “Thou shalt share the gospel” or “Every Christian must witness.” And I couldn’t think of one. Then I went on with the rest of my day and turned to the gospel lesson for today’s sermon. And what did I find? “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” And then Jesus goes to demand that we Christians live the way God commands us to. He finishes with a terrible preaching of the law: **“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Sharing the gospel *is* part of what God calls us to do. But do Jesus’ words scare you? My friends, **how righteous are you?**

I.

Are you salt and light? The words of our text were part of the famous Sermon on the Mount, which is really all about living a Christian life. In that context Jesus said, **“You are the salt of the earth.”** What did he mean by that? Well, Jesus was not saying, “You make the world taste good.” He wasn’t thinking about our modern obsession with whether salt is good for you or not. Jesus lived in a world without refrigeration. Meat was enormously expensive. When you butchered an animal, you had preserve whatever you didn’t eat right away or you would lose it. So how did you preserve your beef or your lamb? You salted it. That kept it from spoiling. What does that have to do with sharing the gospel? This world is dying. Sin is rotting everything here and demanding God’s judgment. But every day that we share the gospel, we actually put that judgment off, because God is still working through us to bring people to faith. So, Jesus calls us the salt that keeps this dying world from spoiling completely.

But notice his question: **“But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”** Now, to my knowledge, salt can’t actually lose the chemical properties that make it a preservative. But if it did, what would you use it for? You can’t eat blocks of salt. You can’t build with them. You can’t use it to fertilize your garden. If it doesn’t do what God made it to do, it’s worthless. Do you see the point? We are the salt of the earth. If we don’t do our job, what good are we to God?

But can I really say that our job is to share the gospel? Well, what did Jesus say next? **“You are the light of the world.”** All through this Epiphany season we’ve been talking about the light of the world. The Bible says that Jesus is the Light of the world. He shines the way to heaven through faith in him. The Bible says that the gospel is the light of the world because it tells us how Jesus saved us and it gives us faith. Now Jesus says to you and me, **“You are the light of the world.”** We share the gospel with people who are trapped

in the darkness of sin and death and God brings them to faith. You know what? That's God's only plan to save the world, so yes, it is our job to share the gospel.

Jesus said, "**A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.**" Light drives out darkness. The only way to keep people at night from seeing a light is to hide it – and who would ever do that? If we suffer a total blackout tonight and you get out candles and flashlights, you're not going to try to keep the light just to yourself, right? You're not going to say, "Hey! That's my light! You can't have any!" You're not going to put that light under a bushel basket or hide it in your room and close the door so that no one else can use it. You're going to set it up on a table or a stand so that the light reaches as much of the house as possible. Again, do you see the point? We are the light of the world. God has given us the only light that can drive out the darkness of sin and death. Are we going to hide that light under a bushel basket? Are we going to lock ourselves in our rooms – or in our church – and keep that light all to ourselves?

Jesus said, "**In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.**" In my mind, this is the single most important passage in all of scripture for sharing our faith, because Jesus lays out for us the most natural way to do it: live as a Christian. If you want to know what that means, study 1 Corinthians 13: "**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.**" If our lives looked like that, the whole world would be lit up with the love of Christ.

How does that follow? We can only love like that because we have been loved like that. Jesus kept no record of our wrongs. He died and paid for all our sins and failures. And he always protects us, he always trusts us to live for him, he always hopes that today we will show our faith, he always perseveres in building us up, no matter how many times we fail. That love changes us. It makes us love. And then, my friends, the love that Paul describes is so unique that people who experience it from us want to know what makes us different. And that love gives us credibility with them. It gives us the right to speak. And then all we have to do is share what Jesus did for us: he died, he rose, he took all our sins away and he promises to walk with us and care for us and bring us home to heaven. It's that simple.

And Jesus said that those people who see our good works will glorify our Father in heaven. That is the response of faith. Sure, unbelievers might appreciate that we're nice people. But to truly give glory to God, a person has to know the one true God and trust in him. They have to know their Savior. So Jesus is calling all of us, every Christian, to follow this simple path: know what love is and live it, and be prepared to talk about Jesus and what he did for us in love. Let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

II.

Do we do that? If we're honest, we might have to admit that we don't. So Jesus turns up the heat in the second half of our reading by comparing those who are great in heaven with those who aren't. So **how righteous are you? Are you great in the kingdom of heaven?**

Jesus tells us not to think that he had come to abolish the Old Testament laws. God didn't suddenly change his mind about how he wants his people to live. He still expects his people to live according to his will – not just to parts of his will, but to all that he commands. Jesus said, "**Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**" Jesus upholds all that God calls us to do and to be. Again, if you go back to 1 Corinthians 13, Paul talks about keeping no record of wrongs. Paul talks about being humble and controlling our temper and being committed to each other. Paul says that love rejoices in the truth – the good news that Jesus is our Savior.

Jesus at least allowed that not all of God's commands may seem to us to be of equal importance. Even when it comes to Paul's description of love, some of those things are going to seem like a bigger deal than others. So how important is sharing the gospel? If I asked everyone who thought it was one of the top five commandments to raise their hands, I would guess that lots of us would. But if I then asked everyone who has shared the gospel with someone this week or even this month to raise their hand, do you think as many hands would go up? If I asked how many of us have taken a class on how to share our faith, how many hands would go up? So, whatever we say about how important sharing the gospel is, what do our choices say about it? What does our personal commitment to it say?

Whatever our answer is, Jesus said that whoever breaks even one of the least of his commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. If we don't share the gospel, aren't we breaking one of God's commandments? If we as a church don't teach that this is God's will for us, if we don't encourage and train people to do it, aren't we actually teaching people to break this commandment? According to Jesus' own words, wouldn't that make us some of the least in the kingdom of heaven? Who would ever want to be that?

Jesus goes farther and says that unless our righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, we won't even get into heaven. Right there at the most terrifying point of all Jesus says here, we actually come to the key to finding some peace. I have to believe that by this point you're either feeling pretty guilty or just wishing I would stop hammering away with the law. Well, it's time to lay that hammer down: your righteousness does exceed that of the Pharisees, even if you have never shared your faith with anyone, because your righteousness comes from Jesus.

Jesus came to fulfill God's law: his Old Testament law with all those sacrifices and ceremonies, and his moral law, the things God commands all people, even us New Testament Christians. Jesus came to be the perfect witness you and cannot be. Jesus came to let his light so shine before men that they would see his good deeds and glorify his Father in heaven. His witness replaces all our laziness and fear and failure. His life of love replaces all the times that all people could see in us was sin and selfishness. His joy in the gospel replaces all the times we really did hide our light in our bedrooms and our church. It all counts for us and God calls us perfect, righteous witnesses. He actually calls us all great in his kingdom because Jesus was.

And Jesus died and paid for our excuses and our failures in sharing the good news. He paid because knocking on doors terrifies us. He paid because we can always find a way out of telling other people about Jesus when the time comes. He paid for all the times we would rather do anything but shine the light of Christ. He paid for all the ways we let our congregation get away with not making sharing the gospel a priority. He washed that sin and guilt away. He rose to tell us that we are free. He shines his light of forgiveness on us and takes away all our guilt. He lifts up our hearts in the joy of knowing our Savior.

And that joy is the key to doing what Jesus calls us to do. It is still hard. We are weak. It's easy to be afraid and lazy and distracted. But Jesus came to us in the gospel and he made us new. The believer inside us does want to do this. God calls us to commit ourselves to letting our light shine and to sharing that good news. The joy of being Jesus' child is where the desire and the commitment come from. The power to face down our own weakness, the power to live for Jesus comes from that gospel he gives us. My friends, that gospel is yours. You belong to Jesus. You are washed clean and forgiven. Use that joy and that peace to power your efforts to let the light of Christ shine in your life and to open you lips to tell what Jesus has done for you. Amen.