

Epiphany 5
February 5, 2017

"We Are the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World"

MATTHEW 5:13-20

¹³ "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 underfoot.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A town built 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 others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify 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 For truly I tell you, 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 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly 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.

A 30 second ad for the Super Bowl will cost five million dollars . There will be ads for chips and beer and cars and smart phones. Some people enjoy watching the clever ads even more than the game itself. I am sure there will be no ads that encourage people to read the Bible and learn about Jesus.

God's plan get the message of the gospel out into the world involves using ordinary, garden variety people like you and me. We are salt of the earth and the light of the world. Philippians 2 says that we shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the world of life. The time you have on this earth to encourage other people to get to know God's plan of salvation is priceless. This is a great privilege and also a great challenge.

The privilege

"You are the salt of the earth." I am sure you have heard people say, "She's the salt of the earth." That's another way of saying, "She's a wonderful person." Jesus says we are the salt of the earth, not because the good things we do are so wonderful. We are the salt of the earth because Jesus will uses us to preserve people and save them from the judgment to come by pointing to him as their Savior.

At the time of Jesus they did not have refrigerators to keep meat from spoiling but they did have salt. I remember from my childhood how my dad would cure bacon and ham by placing into large crocks filled with salty brine. The bacon and ham was then smoked with apple wood for several weeks. The result was meat that could be hung in the cool basement without the need for refrigeration.

What happens to meat if it is not refrigerated or salted? It will rot very quickly and it will perish. If people do not come into contact with Jesus and have him as their Savior they will perish forever. Job said, "Man decays like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth eaten." Jesus says this about people who do not have him as their Savior. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." Without Jesus people perish. With Jesus they will live forever.

We are the salt of the earth. We have the privilege of letting the world know what Jesus has done to remove our problem of sin so we will not be condemned forever. In a sermon on these words Martin Luther said, "The real salt is the true exposition of Scripture, which denounces the whole world and lets nothing stand but the simple faith in Christ."

What if salt loses its saltiness? "But if 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." I have never heard of salt losing its saltiness. But if it could happen then the salt would be useless. I don't want my life to lose its value. I don't want to lose my purpose in life of reaching out to people with Jesus and seeing them live forever instead of perishing forever. If the Lord leaves us here on this earth instead of taking us home to heaven, he still has important work for us to do. He wants to use us to be salt so people can be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

Satan likes to talk to us and tell us we are salt that is worthless. He says, "You are scum. Your life is not all that important. How can you be the salt of the earth when you are so weak and so often give into temptation? You are just a nobody and so are all the other Christians." But then we listen to Jesus say that we are the salt of the earth. I may appear to be a nobody to this world and sometimes even to myself, but then I think of what someone once said, "I am just a nobody, telling everybody about somebody that can save anybody."

Not only are we the salt of the earth, we are also the light of the world. "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." The Greek word used here for shine is the word "lampo" from which we get our word lamp.

What do you do with a lamp? Do you put it under a bowl? Do you cover it with a dark cloth? No, you put it into a place where it can strategically put out the most light. Your risen Lord and Savior Jesus has ascended up into heaven. He is sitting at the right hand of his heavenly Father and strategically placing you into various positions of life where you can shine for him and give glory to our heavenly Father. Sometimes it happens that in our most trying circumstances we have the best opportunity to shine light on the love of our heavenly Father that sent his Son into the world to save us.

It was a joy for me this past week to tell my son Daniel that in his new job, the Lord will use him to be salt and light. That's true of each of you whatever the circumstances of your life are. There is even a children's song that helps us appreciate this position we

have in life. "This little gospel light of mine, I'm going to let it shine....All around the neighborhood, I'm going to let it shine...Hide it under a bushel, 'No!' I'm going to let it shine, All the time. All the time. All the time."

Think of all the people watching the Super Bowl this afternoon. How many of them are still walking in darkness? How many are still refusing to have anything to do with Jesus who is the light of the world? The words of John chapter one come to mind, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understand it." It is an amazing privilege we have, this privilege of being salt and light and using our lives to point people to Jesus. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Being in the light is so amazing we want others to join us in that light.

The challenge

Yes, it is a privilege to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It is also a challenge because of what Jesus tells us next about the law. "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." God's laws don't change. Life is full of changes but God's law does not change. The law demands perfection. It demands that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and all our mind and all our strength. It demands that we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. Jesus did not come to abolish the law and lower the standards for eternal life. He came to fulfill the law perfectly for us in our place. As long as this world stands not the least stroke of a pen in God's law will disappear.

What if someone offered to put Jesus' words about the law in an ad for Super Bowl Sunday? Even if the commercial was done very well, the message would not be welcomed by lots of people. People don't want to hear the truth that God's demands for eternal life and their escape from the judgment to come are that we must be perfect. They want you to say, "God will love and accept you just as you are." God's plan is to use people like us to talk to other people one on one and tell them what Jesus says here about the law. He could send angels into the world to tell people the truth about breaking the law. He gives that challenge to us.

Let's hear more about what Jesus says about the need to keep the law perfectly. "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." If we teach people or give them the impression that they can be saved by keeping the law, then we give them a false hope. Then we are the least in the kingdom of God. Then we are not being salt and not being light. This is one of the hardest things we have to do as Christians.

Let Jesus help us. He says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of God." The Pharisees made up their own rules and they tried to keep them perfectly. To be save ourselves, our righteousness must not only exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees it has to be equal to God's righteousness. Romans 3 says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his (God's) sight by observing the law; rather, through

the law we become conscious of sin." That's the bad news we have come to see in the Bible and the bad news that people need to hear so they lose all hope in themselves.

Here is the good news as we hear it Romans 3, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify." There is a righteousness that we cannot find in ourselves by keeping the law. It is found in Jesus who kept every law perfectly in our place for us. He even died to wipe away from our account every unrighteous thing we have ever done. This righteousness is a free gift. It cost Jesus everything to provide it for us, but it cost us nothing. God's plan is to use us to let the world know about this righteousness that is found only in Jesus. This is a challenge because every human being in their natural condition wants to cling their righteousness for the hope of being saved.

Maybe you have seen the painting called "Rock of Ages." It shows a woman clinging to a cross on top of a rock in the middle of a raging ocean. She is clinging with one hand to the cross and with the other she is rescuing someone who is drowning. That's who we are. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let's carry these words of Jesus about being salt and light wherever we go and whatever circumstances we face. Amen.