

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. ¹⁷ “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. ¹⁹ So whoever 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 them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Next Sunday. Eagles just a point and a half favorite over the Chiefs. It should be a great game, right? In fact, it should be super. That’s why they call it the Super Bowl. Even if you’re not into football, there’s the expectation of a spectacular show; the most creative commercials; stunning halftime extravaganza. And of course, great drama, talent and excitement in the game itself. All the fans have very definite expectations as to how their team should do. High hopes for a great victory. But the reality is that no one can know for sure how it’s going to end up. Because even though you expect these players at this important event to perform at their very highest level, some of them for whatever reason are not at their best or, they’re mentally or emotionally out of it. And they make physical and mental errors. Poor decisions. They can appear unprepared for whatever reason. They can disappoint. Same with the singers and half-time performers. There’ve been some notable bombs in recent Super Bowls. And the ads, the commercials, which should be super at seven million dollars per 30 second spot. But sometimes you wonder what they’re even supposed to be about. Or who thought they were clever. They disappoint. And it just doesn’t seem right, that here on what should be the biggest stage, the most important event for many of these people, and they don’t rise to the occasion. We don’t see their best.

Okay, then, how about us? You know, us, the people of God. Members of Christ’s body, the holy Christian Church. How are we when it comes time to shine? One summer I worked on a factory line with some pretty rough characters. They got even rougher when they found out I was studying to be a pastor. Well, at the end of the summer – just as I was leaving the plant for the last time, a co-worker came up to me in the parking lot and said, “Man, I really admire the way you got to be persecuted for your faith and suffer for

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the sake of Jesus. I'm a Christian too." And I answered, "Well, doesn't anyone give you grief for it?" And he said, "Well, nobody here knows." Kind of sad, isn't it? But probably quite common. How many times don't we keep our faith to ourselves? Or feel it's easier to go along and not stick out as different because of our beliefs? Well, here in his famous *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus specifically tells us we are to make it obvious that we *are* different. To live our faith. To shine. It's what God's people do.

Now it's important to remember to whom Jesus is speaking here. He is talking to disciples, followers. This isn't a platform for social improvement in society at large. It's not a course of action for getting into God's kingdom. Here God the Son is talking to people who are already in that kingdom. Sure, anyone can listen in, but if these three chapters of Matthew are all they hear, they could say they believe it and still not be a Christian – not be saved. Jesus is saying "Let your light shine" to those who have a light to shine; who know the true God. The only source of the light. And to let our light shine is to let our Christianity, our love and respect for God, to show. By doing what God expects. More than that, it's what he demands. Being totally dedicated to him. That's his will; his law. And Jesus coming into the world did not change that. He tells us here, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them." Jesus fulfilled everything those Old Testament Scriptures foretold of his person and work. He kept every aspect of their commands.

But he wasn't getting rid of them. He wasn't setting up a new way, an easier way. In fact, as Jesus explains those timeless commandments, he makes it even clearer how impossible they are for sinful humans. How foolish that some think they can keep them to save themselves, when really they're not just laws about activities like murder, theft and adultery. They even covered deceiving or spiteful *words* and hateful and lustful *thoughts* and discontent *attitudes*. Jesus is crystal clear on how serious God is about those things. "Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter (their smallest letter was like our apostrophe and the least stroke of a pen like the dot over the letter i) will in any way pass away from the Law..." Note to anyone who feels God's will revealed in the Old Testament is outdated and out of touch. Extra-marital and pre-marital sex are not okay now. Getting ahead at someone else's expense is not okay now. Divorce is not okay now. Overindulging in food or alcohol is not okay now. Nor are gossiping or running others down. God does not change and his will does not change.

And he expects his creatures to keep his will. But we don't. We're constantly breaking his commands, consciously and unconsciously. James 2: "Who keeps the whole law and stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." And we don't just stumble at one point; we violate many points, time after time. We break the commands God is so serious about. So there are serious consequences. "Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments...will be called least in the kingdom." Which might not sound too bad – maybe like

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you're just further back in the line or end up with a little lower cloud – but the next verse equates being “least” with not getting in at all. God requires perfection. The consequence of imperfection is very serious.

But wouldn't that leave everyone on the outside? It should. “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And those guys made an exaggerated point of keeping the details of all 613 laws they counted and even added some of their own laws. No way can we surpass that. And obviously they couldn't either. Yet, all their self-righteousness and hypocrisy went for nothing. And they couldn't have been any more righteous. No one could. Except... except Jesus, the sinless Son of God who made himself man to put himself in the position of being under those same laws. And fulfilled and kept them all perfectly. And then for all the times we haven't and don't keep them, he stuck his divine sinless head in there when the law's bloody axe was coming down. He took the blame for all sin; suffered the shame and pain of God's righteous wrath; and gave himself into death, the just for the unjust. And really, in bowing his head and calling out “It is finished,” our Lord Jesus proved the seriousness of the law in that it took his divine sacrifice to pay for the breaking of it. And then he proved the price was sufficient by rising from the dead. No, we didn't have enough righteousness to fulfill what God demands. But Jesus did. And the faith God the Holy Spirit gives us makes Jesus' righteousness our own. And makes us want to shine.

Not just because that's what God expects. But because that's what his believers do. Our righteousness *is* greater than that of the Pharisees. It's Jesus' perfect righteousness. So Jesus can say here, “You are the salt of the earth.” Not, “be or become salt”. But “you *are* the salt of the earth.” Salt was a very valuable commodity in those days. It was used, as today, for seasoning food. Even more importantly it was used for preserving certain perishable foods. It was also a necessary part of Old Testament sacrifices. Now Jesus says that the people who believe in him are salt. Maybe it's the preservation aspect – the fact that without believers spreading the Gospel, there is no reason for the world to exist. Or the salt that cleanses but stings, like when it gets into a cut. When the way we live and the way we are true to God's Word points out sinfulness. Or maybe it's the seasoning effect, the decency and sense of order that those who love God bring to the world. The salt that makes things taste better, as we tell of the Jesus who saves. At any rate, it is obvious that those who are the salt of the earth live lives of faith. Preserving our faith with God's Word. Seasoning other people's lives with our kindness and love. Making others thirsty for Jesus. “But if salt has lost its flavor ... it is no good for anything...” Unsalty salt is worthless. In fact, salt doesn't lose its saltiness. Either it wasn't really salt – just looked like it – or it got mixed with something else. Salt is salty. And Christians lead Christian lives.

You have the excitement and purpose of being God's people. That's your identity. You couldn't imagine a *Mission Impossible* episode starting out with the trained agent saying, “Nah, I choose not to accept the mission,” and throw the tape player away. There's no doubt he's going on the adventure. And you.

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Trained and equipped, licensed to be God's people. And here's your mission. Shine. You are the lights of the world. As salt, by its nature is salty, so lights shine. True light comes from God. In fact, 1 John 1 says, "God is light." Jesus says, "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." We were once darkness, doomed to separation from God. But now that the Holy Spirit has worked faith in us, we see what Jesus has done to save us. And we shine. A lamp's not lit to be put under a bowl. Not only wouldn't it be serving its purpose; it would snuff itself out. We shine.

And like the light doesn't shine for its own benefit, we don't just shine for ourselves. That's clear from what Jesus says about hypocrites who do good works just to make themselves look good. "They've already received their reward," he says. We shine because we're believers. We can't help it. The natural response to knowing what God has done for us is to live for him. Verse 16, "In the same way, let your light shine in people's presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." The ultimate purpose of a Christian's works is to bring praise and honor to God. That's the reason he has made us his own. Remember 1 Peter 2, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people who are God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Now on this side of heaven we will never be perfect doers of God's law. Even our best good deeds are contaminated with pride or motivated by less than God-pleasing desires. But even those less than perfect works are made pleasing to God because of Jesus, just like we are. In that same chapter of 1 Peter it says our "spiritual sacrifices" are "acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Because of Jesus' righteousness, God sees us as his own people. Sees us as saints. Because of Jesus' righteousness, we want to act like it. And we can. Letting our light shine glorifies our heavenly Father who has given us eternal light. And it benefits those around us. It's a witness to others and can lead them to Christ. Which means in the biggest game of all, we are not merely spectators. We are players. We have what it takes. God gives us the desire and the ability to shine. Get out there and be salt. Be light. Be super. Because – thanks to Jesus – that's what you are. Thanks to Jesus. Amen.