

Matthew 5:13-20
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 5, 2023

"But Mom, everybody else is going!" "I'm the only one who has to..." or "can't..." (You fill in the blanks.) Perhaps you remember as a young person making that protest or as a parent hearing it. We don't like to be different. We want to fit in, to be part of the crowd. Peer pressure affects all ages. When you look at the direction in which most people are heading, however, it might not be a good idea to be like them. As many a parent has responded to the above pleas, "And if everybody else jumped off a cliff, you would have to do it, too?" Besides, for you and me it just won't work. As our Lord Jesus tells us plainly in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount,

CHRISTIANS ARE DIFFERENT

- I. We witness to the world
- II. We possess Christ's righteousness

In our witness to the world Jesus described us as "the salt of the earth." We're familiar with that white substance. It was used as a preservative, especially before the days of refrigeration. We use salt to season our food and make it tasty. Of course, we know the warning about overdoing it with salt, but if we take a bite of something in which the cook forgot to put it we quickly respond with a "Yuk!" Regarding salt our Savior referred to an improbable condition: "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." It wouldn't be salt anymore. For that to happen a chemical change would have to occur. As far as the purposes for which we use salt, it would be worthless. It would be discarded.

What similarities exist between us and salt? Christians have a positive effect on the world. We counteract the moral rotteness that naturally occurs. That takes place when we convict sin with God's law. Applying the words of the law stings and is not always appreciated. The preceding verses, the end of the Gospel reading last Sunday, mentioned persecution that comes to the Lord's followers, which we might not be so eager to receive, but reproving sin can be effective. There was a Christian lady whose boss misused God's name. She spoke up, "Oh, I see you know him, too. He's a good friend of mine." He never spoke that way in her presence again.

Not all of our salting is verbal. The example of our life can have a positive effect. It may attract others to do the same things. Or it may lead to questions about why we march to the beat of a different drummer and provide opportunity to witness to the questioner.

The opposite will also be true. We set a negative example when we do not follow God's ways. That's when we lose our saltiness. Christians lose power when we lose the Spirit, who comes through the gospel to strengthen our faith. You may have heard the account of the young man who found a summer job in a logging camp up north many years ago.

His mom was concerned about how he would fare among the loggers with their rough reputation. When he returned home she asked whether they made fun of him for being a Christian. His reply was, "Mom, they never knew." How tragic! But he isn't the only one like that. Many a person has stated, "I never talk about religion." While there is no need to be obnoxious, if we never speak about our faith, we give another message about its importance to us (or lack of it). That's deliberate disloyalty. We're losing saltiness, becoming that contradiction in terms.

Jesus also stated, "You are the light of the world." Again it is an important role. Our light is reflected from him who is the true light source, as the moon reflects the light of the sun. Light is needed in a world full of the darkness of unbelief, ignorance and evil. We bring light by sharing the gospel, witnessing to the Redeemer of the world. As we have received blessings from him, spoken in the Beatitudes we heard last week, so we share blessings with others by telling of their Savior.

"A city on a hill cannot be hidden," our Savior continued. Christians are marked people, visible to others like a mountaintop city. Several towns of the Holy Land were located on the hills or low mountains of the land and could be seen for miles. Christians are seen as we apply our faith to our daily lives. The way we treat others, helping the oppressed and the needy, shows our faith in action. How we react to provocation or how we handle stress is noticed by others. So is where we spend our leisure time. When we regularly attend church and use our talents in serving here, that is noticed also. Don't fear being seen.

It would be strange to do any different. "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." In the old times they had oil lamps which would be placed on a projection from the wall or on a special stand. Today we would say, "If you don't want light, don't turn it on." Who would flip a switch and then run and cover the light?

Christ has lit us with the fire of faith and put us on a stand for a purpose. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Note the goal: God's glory, to bring people to praise him, which they will do when they have faith in him. It's not about us—it's about Jesus. Our deeds do not aim for personal admiration, seeking people to marvel at us but at the Lord who produces such changes in our lives.

As we live our faith and let our light shine, we don't keep a count of our good deeds. Neither do we sit down and consciously plan, "I'm going to be nice to that person as a witness to my faith." Presenting a living testimony is natural, just as salt seasons and light shines. Jesus was not giving a locker room pep talk, "Now get out there and be salt and light." He stated a fact. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the

world." As a Christian who knows your Savior's love, your life has been transformed. You love the Lord and all those he has surrounded you with. Don't be afraid to show it.

It is appropriate to reflect as we hear the descriptions. "Am I living as salt and light? Does the difference show up? Am I driving people away from faith or attracting them to it? Am I having an effect on the world or have I become like the soup around me?" As you reflect, no doubt you will see failings. Do something about it. Repent. Go to the power source, that is, to God's Word. Come, grow in Christ and witness to the world in word and deed.

II.

Another difference exists with Christians. We possess Christ's righteousness. That righteousness was achieved by him, with his keeping of God's law. Jesus often criticized the ways of the religious leaders, but he did not oppose the Old Testament Scriptures. He countered those charges here: "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." "The Law and the Prophets" was a designation for the Old Testament. Jesus' work was to fulfill it. It contained many prophecies about the Messiah, what he would be like and what he would do. Jesus carried them out exactly. He left nothing incomplete.

Included in what he did was keeping God's law for us. He lived his entire life in perfect compliance with its demands. Absolute perfection was there for all of his Father's precepts. He was righteous and he placed his holiness as a credit on our account.

Righteousness was also required by him. He was not ending the message of the Old Testament and replacing it with something else. Rather he affirmed its endurance. "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." The smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet is the yod. It has a y sound and is about the size of an apostrophe. "The stroke of a pen" was a piece of a letter, similar to the small slash the changes a capital O to a Q. A different translation rendered the thought as an i or the dot of an i. The point is that it will stand absolutely until the end of time, until every bit has come to pass.

Jesus further backed up its message with strong words for those breaking any of its commands or teaching against any of it. Such opposition may come through ignorance or deliberately. Why would anyone oppose the message of God's Word? Well, we may think it cramps our lifestyle. Some think it's OK to get drunk at the holidays or other special occasions like weddings. Premarital sex isn't wrong if you are really in love and plan to marry, we hear. Personal use of company supplies or services isn't really stealing—it's taken for granted. Some will say that you can deny certain portions of God's Word, such as miracles. You don't have to accept them as historically true. You can view them as legends and still believe in Jesus as Savior. Or the standards of Scripture were only meant for the past, not today. Sad to say, not all such denials come

from open unbelievers. Many are raised within the church as well. Whatever gets in our way or causes a problem for our reason or our personal preferences is unimportant.

No teaching of the Word of God is unimportant. "Least" only occurs in human opinion. The disciple of Jesus holds to his teaching, all of it.

The Lord Jesus maintained the standard of righteousness and he also provided it. His standards were clear in the denunciation of the enemies. "I tell you the truth, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees were a group that emphasized the law and prided themselves in their keeping of it. They were regarded as special but really set aside the Word. They added extra laws which enabled them to get around the provisions of God's laws. In another chapter of Matthew Jesus listed some of their faults. They sought honor for themselves. They declined to help those in need. They encouraged false oaths by saying you didn't need to keep an oath if you swore by something other than God's name. They were hypocrites, giving only an outward impression of piety. While they observed many details of God's law they missed the heart of what it said.

The teachers of the law used the Word only professionally. They taught it. They copied it. But they did not follow it or see the Savior in it.

So Jesus said we need to be better than those viewed as the best. That means to be perfect. But we aren't. The solution isn't to try harder or find more feats to perform. Nor will it work to seek a reduction in God's demands. We need what Paul wrote about in Romans, "Now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." His life served as the substitute for the world. His righteousness for us is revealed in the gospel and credited to us by faith.

That righteousness along with the forgiveness he won on the cross is the whole reason we are saved. Because of Christ we appear holy before God. That's how we are different. Be glad you are different, for you are going to heaven. Since that is assured, live as a citizen of heaven now.

Christ's work for us gives the whole motivation for living as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Knowing the Savior is why we live for him, why we obey him, why we strive to bring him glory. As you possess righteousness by faith, feed your faith with the gospel, both for the strength to witness to the world in word and action and for forgiveness for the times you have failed. The Sermon on the Mount will give guidance for your life. Dare to be different. You are different and by God's grace, you will be different forever.