

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5 : 13 - 26

Matt. 5:13 “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

Matt. 5:14 “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matt. 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

I am having the sense today of being reacquainted with an old friend. It’s like you know that person, but time has gone by and some details of the relationship and the nature of the person are not sharp. But as you spend time together, you have a new and deeper appreciation for what is there between you. Slowing down to focus on the details of the **Sermon on the Mount** is a very meaningful experience, and I am enjoying one of those right now. BTW, if you would like to read ahead for next Sunday, we will cover another chunk of Matthew 5, verses 27 - 42. So if you’d like to work ahead, that would be great. So let’s go ahead and jump in here and swim a bit.

You should all know that some biblical commentators look at these first few verses as being filler a little. They are there to help with a transition away from the Beatitudes to the next big issue where Jesus will challenge people to go beyond the minimum requirements of the commandments of God. So, sometimes these first words are just zipped over, without seeing them as having great value. I am here to offer this morning that I believe they have great value. So let's talk a while about the call for US (emphasis on US together) as being salt and light.

I really hate to point these things out, but it is common for things to go into the ditch in life. Things that should mean one thing end up seeming to mean something else. I have heard for most of my life that there are people who are, quote, *“Salt of the earth.”* *Old Joe up the road, well he's just salt of the earth, old Joe!* Just like with the story of the Good Samaritan, the salt of the earth has gone off course here. The actual words say

Matt. 5:13 “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

If we want to think that being “salt of the earth” means that someone is not full of him or herself, is not trying to show off, that you are a good or kind person, like old Joe, then the rest of the words here don't make sense. There is much more going on here than just being a kind, humble person (which is still a very good thing to be!). But that's not what Jesus has in mind here. He just finished talking about how if you are persecuted for his sake, then know that you are in good company! We need to connect these salty words with that. Old Joe might be a great guy, and I hope he is, but

Jesus is not talking about Old Joe here. He is talking about the Church. The YOU is plural, as it almost always is. One person cannot be “salt of the earth.” It takes a group. But then there is a warning that helps make the whole thing make sense: **YOU cannot lose your saltiness. You cannot lose your spice, your ZING, your zest.** What good will you be if you lose your saltiness? You will be thrown out.

We must hear this warning. Any church that simply blends in, in a lukewarm way with society around it, has lost its saltiness, and has become useless. That is one of the big problems the American Church has experienced in the last 60 years, maybe longer. We have just blended in with American society, so that there doesn't seem to be much difference between those who attend church and those who do not. Since it has gone this way, most people choose not to be a part of a church. Being a part of the Church is seen as an option, just like rooting for the Browns or the Steelers. Church is not a big deal. You can take it or leave it. If we have lost our saltiness, then it makes perfect sense that most people will ignore us, because we are really no different than the society around us.

The book that I showed a few weeks ago by Chuck Colson, **THE BODY**, this book is a direct assault on churches that just want to blend in with the world around them. He tells a true story about a big mega-church in the South, in a very affluent community. The building is impressive, immaculate, and it runs like a fine Swiss watch. The Sunday service must run like clock work, and it cannot end even two minutes over the limit because so many of the church members have to make their way to the Country Club for brunch, and they don't want to have to wait for a table. So, the sermon

cannot go long! People have places to go, and church cannot interfere with that!

This big fancy church at one point has a chance to do something that will be for the glory of God. There is an old fire station which was closed down so that they could build a new nicer one closer to the nicer developments out of town. A young Episcopal minister came in and bought the fire station to start a mission church that would help the poor and those who were recovering addicts, and just anyone. They just need to be able to use a few parking spaces that belong to the big church, along with the spaces they already had. Zoning regulations and all. The big church didn't need them all. But the big fancy church blocked them. They did not want the bad element who might be attracted to this little ragamuffin mission church, they didn't want them anywhere near their fancy church.

Luckily, a mechanic with a garage next to the old fire station gave them the spots they needed so they could go ahead and open. The little ragamuffin church opened, and almost every night they had things going on. The big fancy church was all locked up, but with glaring lights shining on its greatness. Chuck Colson said that you could drive away from the big fancy church over to the little ragamuffin church, and the lights were on, it had a warm feeling, there was an AA group meeting, a guy was strumming a guitar and people were singing together. Which church had lost its saltiness? If and when we decide that the best thing we can do is match the society around us, then we are useless, and will be thrown out. How many big churches now sit empty and unused, in communities all over this country? Jesus says to us, in all times, "You all are the salt

of the earth...you are needed to be salty. If you are not different from the world around you, you will not be useful, and you will be cast aside.” That cannot be what we want. We must be careful.

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Last Sunday we sang “**This Little Light of Mine.**” I wish I had saved it for today, but that’s OK. In the same way here, Jesus builds on the call for us to be salt in our society, by talking about something that would have been so very important and understood by his listeners. *You are the light of the world.* The Prophets of the Hebrew Bible called for the people of Israel to be “a light to the Gentiles,” a light to the people who do not know the Living God. But this idea is even more special. What is the first thing that a person, usually a Jewish mother does on Friday night, when the sun goes down? (They do this in Fiddler on the Roof!) Sunrise, Sunset. The mother will light a candle. Why? Because every Sabbath is a celebration of Creation; and what is the first thing that God creates? God creates LIGHT.

There is something I learned many years ago from some teachers. According to Jewish tradition, the Rabbis always would teach that it is so special that God first creates LIGHT, which is not to be confused with sun or moonlight. This light is a mystery. They never tell us what it is. But they all say this about the light: it is a gift from God that reveals the truest nature of God. How can that be? Well, what does light do? It is a real thing, after all. Light basically

allows everything else to happen. And the really great thing about light is that *it requires nothing in return*. It is just a perfect gift, reflecting the nature of God. God desires that everything would exist, and really God does this without requiring anything in return. God is just this way. Now Jesus is asking the Church to also be the light of the world, to shine for all to see.

Before it gets away, I mentioned the little ragamuffin church while talking about the salt of the earth. Guess what the name of the ragamuffin church was? The Light House. How great is that? Those folks understood what Jesus was asking of them. And in the darkness of a lot of people's broken lives, that old fire station sat there shining light in people's lives, doing exactly what Jesus had asked them to do. The big church was locked and only shining light on itself. This was not what Jesus asked. The Light House Church was being the light of the world.

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I don't want to spend a lot of time with this, but this is a very teachable moment. First of all, at the time of Jesus there was no Bible. They had nothing like what we have. Most official Jewish people had Torah Moshe, the “Teaching of Moses,” the first 5 books. But, thanks to the people we call the Pharisees, they pushed that these other books were holy as well, the writing of the Prophets.

So at the time of Jesus people would simply say “The Torah and the Prophets,” mistakenly called “the law” here. They don’t have the big Bible yet, but they do have Moses and the Prophets. And Jesus tells them that in no way is he saying to get rid of these things. We need to spend 30 seconds to clarify something old that is confusing: according to what many people grew up hearing in this passage, you had Jesus saying with red letters *“For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”* I remember hearing that and wondering a little about the meaning of a Jot and a Tittle. Actually this would have made perfect sense to them long ago, but this is what it actually is. Kristina, can you show everyone our Jot and Tittle? (show slide) יְהוָה Χριστοῦ

Here they are: the *Jot* is actually a “yodt” a Y sound in Hebrew, and it is little. יְ And the *tittle* is actually “iota” which is the letter I

in Greek which looks like this: ι

So what is Jesus saying here? Nothing, even the smallest letters in Hebrew or Greek will be forgotten or pushed aside. So that is that. Not a yodt nor an iota. Nothing of ancient holy words will be lost. But now Jesus is going to push for them to be tightened up, even more. We can see it now, and next week as well.

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insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

What is at the heart of this? Well, Jesus is pushing people to do better than just keeping the 10 Commandments. People could actually say **“Well, I didn’t murder anyone today, or commit adultery, or steal, or lie in court. So I am good enough!”** Well, what happens if you do not actually murder someone, but you are angry and nasty all the time? That cannot be good. Jesus is not suggesting, as some do, that the 10 Commandments are out of date. Jesus is taking things farther here by saying that he is condemning the use of abusive language. Jesus warns later in Matthew that “... every thoughtless word you speak you will have to account for!” And we certainly have a lot of thoughtless words spoken here in our time.

Jesus warns about abusive language and mentions that if you are estranged from another person, maybe you have had heated words with them, then don't come to bring your offering to God as if nothing is wrong! Go find that person you hurt and patch things up. This is serious business, where we, for the first time are seeing the word “Gehenna” in Greek, which we translate as the word “hell.” I will explain more about that next Sunday, so I hope you'll join us to get the rest of the story!

You all are the salt of the earth, and you all are the light of the world. Do it. Nothing of Moses and the Prophets is to be lost, not

even the tiniest letters. And just doing the bare minimum is not good enough. If you speak to others with hatred and violent words, you might not be killing, but you are doing harm, and you must reconcile and do better. I look forward to our next adventure with the Sermon on the Mount. I am thankful to Jesus for offering these special teachings for us today. Let them become realized in all of us. AMEN.