

+ The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany + February 6 and 9, 2020  
St. Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin. Pastor Curt S. Backhaus

*Matthew 5:13-20 | EHV*

*“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. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.*

*“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. 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. 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. 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.*

Remember when you were little and they told you that you could be anything you wanted to be? You just have to put your mind to it! How well has that worked out for you?

You wanted to be an astronaut or an engineer --but you discovered you weren’t very good at math. You dreamed of being a professional athlete --but you weren’t tall enough, fast enough, skilled enough. You never made it past Division II. You’re still shy. You tried to be outgoing, but you just can’t change how you are. Or you’d rather not be so talkative, but you just can’t stand being quiet.

And, if you’re at all like me, “the good you want to do, you can’t do. And the evil you don’t want to do, you keep on doing it...” And with the Apostle Paul we lament and repent, “What a wretch I am. Who can rescue me from my sinful self?” The answer? “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

You, dear disciple of Christ, are different. I’m different --and it’s all thanks to Jesus!

Sooner or later we learn that it’s impossible to be something we’re not. Especially when it comes to the spiritual perfection, the righteousness and holiness God requires of us. How did Jesus put it in today’s Gospel lesson? “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Pharisees tried harder than anyone to be holier than everyone. They raised the bar as high as any human being could. And yet, “all have sinned and fall far short of the glory of God.”

But what we could never do --in that it’s impossible for us to change who we are or to be any better or any different than just our sorry, sinful selves-- Jesus did. He made us different

—righteous, perfect and holy in our heavenly Father’s sight-- by living according to every last one of God’s commandments for us and then dying on the cross to take away every last one of our sins. He became our sin. We became righteous —holy with his perfection.

We’re different, thanks to Jesus. That’s what it means to be Jesus’ disciple —to be different, to be what Jesus has made us. That’s the whole message of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes that we started studying last Sunday —the “Be”—“attitudes” —we think different, we act different, --to the world-- we appear different, because we are different.

We’re poor in spirit and pure in heart. We’re humble toward God and meek and merciful toward others. We’re peacemakers.

“We are the salt of the earth.” Like salt, we’ve got a distinctive taste, a noticeable difference, a seasoning effect. Your Christian faith flavors and accents your life. The world is rotten. Full of conflict and strife. People bear grudges against one another. They don’t let things go. But Christians are different. God has forgiven us for Christ’s sake. So we forgive others. God has made peace with us by the cross of Christ. So we seek peace with others. It’s in our spiritual DNA. We’re salty.

That’s why, as St. Paul writes in Colossians 4:6, “We walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” God’s wisdom seasons our speech. Graciousness marks how we talk. Christian faith informs our speech. The fruit of the Spirit tempers our tongue. Our speech has a salty, Jesus accent. We talk differently —without harsh words or angry, foolish or coarse talk—because we are different.

And in the darkness of this sin-cursed world, that’s plain to see. Because, “you are also the light of the world.” Of course, that’s what Jesus is, first and foremost. Supernatural light. Life-giving light. Saving light.

But we have received light and life in Jesus and now we reflect and radiate Christ’s light out to others. Much like the moon on a cold and clear night. We say, “The moon sure is bright tonight” but it has no light of its own. It’s simply reflecting the light from the sun.

“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 light you have received in Christ is powerful and life-giving. It is the light of the gospel. Let it shine out into the world. Let others know how Christ has made you different. That his works have saved you, earned you a place in heaven.

And his work in your heart and life, motivates your good works toward your neighbor. All with the goal of people will learn of Jesus through you. And give praise and thanks and glory to our Father in heaven.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Different, thanks to Jesus. Exactly what the world needs. Embrace that identity as Christ’s disciple. Be who you are. To the glory of God and for the good of your neighbor. Amen.