

Righteousness That Cannot Be Hidden

5afterEpiphany

Pastor Josh Frazee

Matt. 5:13-20

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A good tree can only bear good fruit, and a bad tree can only bear bad fruit. That's what Jesus teaches later in the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter seven. But the same is also true regarding light bulbs. A good light bulb can do nothing but shine, and a bad bulb can do nothing but permit the darkness.

As you know, when you flip a light switch from off to on, electricity is moved into the light so that the bulb lights up. The bulb has no choice. When the electricity is put into it, it shines.

So also, we, brothers and sisters in Christ, have no choice but to be righteous and to produce the works of righteousness. The electricity of the Gospel has been proclaimed to us and we have no choice but to bear His light.

The light that Jesus shines exposes the good and the bad alike. It shows how the world and all in it attempt to justify themselves before God by their works, worst of all those who claim to bear the name Christ yet do not proclaim that fullness of the Law. They are those who make a big show of doing works but limit the Law so that they can accomplish it. This is what the Pharisees were doing at the time of our Lord Jesus, and that is what the Roman Catholic Church was teaching at the time of Luther, and still teach even to this day. As though somehow doing a Hail Mary or kissing a stair could make payment for a sin committed.

So we are called in our Gospel text this morning, twice, in two different ways, to live out our righteousness, that righteousness which cannot be hidden. We live these ways so that those living in the darkness of false teaching might see the error of their ways and turn to Christ, and so that those around us might give glory to our Father who is in heaven.

Verse 1

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.”

When Jesus spoke these words, those who were versed in the Old Testament may have recalled the words of Leviticus chapter two. In that chapter, God commanded the Israelites to season their grain offering with salt. God commanded this so that the Israelites would remember that He would preserve the descendants of Abraham as salt is used to preserve. This was ultimately completed in Jesus' teaching in our Gospel text, as well as in the rest of Jesus' teaching and life.

Today, we are called to be the ones to speak Christ's words and to preserve people. Of ourselves, we could not hope to do this. It is like the ministry or any other aspect of life: God has laid out His will for us in such a way that it is thorough and complete. It is so thorough and complete that none of us—not one of us—could hope to complete His Law.

Of ourselves, we can only admit that we fail to live as God desires. Yet that is why God sent not only His Son to die for us, but also His Holy Spirit. Everyday His Holy Spirit works in us through His Word—through the Word remembered day by day from the sermons heard from this pulpit, the Word heard from that lectern, and from your private devotions. The Holy Spirit uses that Word so that you believe in Christ as your Savior.

The necessary result of your believing in Jesus is that you will be not only a good tree producing good fruits, but you will be salty. You will preserve your neighbors, family, friends, and those around you by living and speaking God's Word. You cannot do this of yourselves. That is impossible. But with God, your saltiness is restored so that you might live as He desires from day to day.

Verse 2

Not only are you trees and salt, though; you are also a light. Jesus said, "'You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.'"

As we go about salting the earth, we are also a light. That's right; there's only one light. That of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not as the world says that there are several ways to heaven. There is only one—that one being through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ alone. It is dangerous to take away part of what the Scriptures say, and presumptuous to add to it, and yet so many other so-called lights in the world do just that. But no, Jesus says that you are a light, and where do you receive your light? The same place from which you receive your saltiness—Jesus' death and resurrection, which you believe by the faith worked in you through the Holy Spirit.

While we shine here at Augsburg, IL, our brothers and sisters throughout the nation and throughout the world shine that same Gospel light. Together, we are as a "city set on a hill (that) cannot be hidden." The Holy Spirit works in our brothers and sisters as He does in us so that we make a united light with the light of our Lord Jesus Christ. And through us, His light shines so that all other lights are proven to be false lights and so that others might be salted and preserved by His light. Then they can come and join us as we shine together the light of Christ before the world.

Yet none of us shines our light for our own glory. Even our Lord Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve others—and even that so that it may bring glory to His Heavenly Father, who is also your Heavenly Father. "In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Verse 3

Once more, we could not be good trees, salty, or shine with the light of Christ—we could do none of those things, if the last part of our text had happened. Jesus said, "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."

And Jesus did just that. He fulfilled the Law in your place and my place because we were and are unable to do that of ourselves. The Pharisees and even some false teachers today claim to be able to live God's Law without sinning—either before or after coming to faith. But Jesus knew better. He warned that not one "iota" or one "dot" would be removed from the Law. That's what these other teachers and Pharisees did and do—they make Law easier to do by removing parts of it or adding in parts that they do but others don't, won't, or can't. So at the end, Jesus said that the righteousness of those who would follow Him must "exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees."

The only way for that to happen would be either to do it of ourselves, or have someone complete it for us—and Jesus did just that. He would continue to live His life, fulfilling every iota and dot of the Law, and then die, leaving you and me His righteousness as His dying will.

He gave us His righteousness and His Holy Spirit both, so that we might be justified and sanctified in and through Him. You and I are justified—we know where we are going. At the same time, we have received the Holy Spirit of God the Father and the Son Jesus Christ, so that we might be good trees producing good fruit, salt preserving others from the sin of this world, and a Gospel light to the nations, starting for us with this one. In Jesus, our righteousness not only exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes, but it cannot be hidden. In Jesus' Name. Amen.