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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
February 9, 2020
5th Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 58:5-9, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Hymns: 411; 408; 416; 409:1

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:13-20

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹ Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: The Sermon on the Mount -- is perhaps the best known of any of Jesus' sermons. It begins with the oft quoted beatitudes that describe the Christian life and the blessedness of spiritual joy that comes with the Christian's humble submission to the will of God for our salvation. This morning's text follows after those beatitudes, in fact immediately after Jesus' promise of joy and rejoicing that comes to the child of God in the face of persecution. What Jesus speaks to in our text is the Christian life that is so vital to the advancement of the gospel but will almost certainly bring negative repercussions from the world. It will happen when the Christian lives a life that shines the light of God's Word on the evil of this world. Jesus teaches us about --

THEME: True Righteousness' Impact on the World.

Does your life make a difference? That is a question that everybody in the world thinks about. Most in the world will talk about how even the smallest things that we do will cause the ripple effect, or what is sometimes called the butterfly effect. This principle of the world states that every little thing anyone and everyone does impacts the world, the entire world to some degree. Some in this world seek a greater answer than that. Some people will dedicate their time and resources to charitable causes to help alleviate poverty, tyranny, and sickness in the world. Some will pursue a career in research to seek a cure for cancer, or another disease that afflicts many people throughout the world. This is commendable, and in our minds these are people that make a difference in the world!

Now, can an individual Christian who most people have never heard of and may never hear of, a Christian who works as a secretary or a bookkeeper or as a truck-driver or a landscaper, do we as individual Christians impact the world? You might think to yourselves, "Maybe in some small way I might make a difference." That is not Jesus' answer in our text. In the opening verses of our text Jesus states in clear and powerful terms how --

I. Christians Impact the World.

Matthew 5:13-16 "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

You **are** the salt of the earth! Modern translators struggle with this verse and so for most of us diminish its impact. It's not simply about flavoring; it's also about preservation! It is the preserving quality of salt that is especially significant here. When Jesus spoke these words this was a paramount consideration in possessing that valuable commodity of salt. Salt was so valuable and so important that at times it was used as payment for the Roman legions. We still use salt to cure meats and so preserve them, but we don't really think about this preservation quality much anymore. We find such salt cured and then smoked meats palatable. We like to serve ham instead of pork roast, or well cured bacon rather than fresh side pork. But it was a matter of even being able to preserve the meat from spoiling that was the first consideration among the people at the time Jesus preached this Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus says “You are the salt of the earth” He is telling His disciples, He is telling us Christians today that as children of God we bring a **preserving power** to the world around us, that world that is corrupted by sin and immorality, and false philosophy. We bring something very different to the scene, to the community in which we live, to the nation of which we are citizens, to the entire world. We are those righteous ones that the Lord knows are His who preserve a society from complete corruption and destruction!

Now if the Christian community loses its preserving power, its “salt quality” what good is it? It is good for nothing! It is then nothing more than white sand that should be swept up and thrown away. Isn’t that what we see in so much of American Christianity today? Those churches referred to by the media as mainstream denominations for the most part have accommodated the godless philosophy of this world. They teach theistic evolution, which supports the lie about how and why death entered into the world, that it was not sin, but rather an inept God who was incapable of doing things right the first time. Denying even the unnatural as being sin in the name of love and acceptance of **all** things, they do that which is the more unloving thing by escorting someone to their eternal destruction. “If the salt loses its *saltiness how shall it be preserved?* It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men!” (v.13)

This makes it all the more important for us as a small confession church body and as individual children of God who do care about people’s souls to maintain our saltiness! “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove (that is to demonstrate as true and real) what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*” (Romans 12:2) We are not only about preserving the truth, we are about

preserving **souls** from death and preserving society from ultimate destruction!

Jesus went on to speak of us as being the light in this world. The light didn't start within our hearts. Our hearts were as dark and clueless as any heart. That is the way of natural man. Christ Jesus is the Light of the world. Jesus came to shine the light of the gospel into the hearts of sinners. Jesus came that the grace of God might be revealed and the righteousness of God for salvation should be known among us. Jesus came to speak to us of the forgiveness that God secured for us through the all-atoning sacrifice of His Son that we might know that the lovingkindness of our God endures forever. John wrote in the first chapter of his gospel: *"That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."* (John 1:9)

We didn't perceive that light because we are smarter than other people, or more astute, or possessing a sharper spiritual vision. No, that light has enlightened our hearts by the grace of God. So Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *"It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."* (2 Corinthians 4:6)

So God lit a light that it might shine! God lit a light and set it on a hill. God's Church is Mount Zion! A city set on a hill cannot be hidden! It is seen for miles and miles and shines like a beacon! This light of God's people shines as the beacon of salvation for a fallen world.

Now, that light is in each of us individually as well. The light of faith has been lit in your hearts. God didn't light that light that illuminates our spiritual understanding of the truth of God so that we might throw a bucket over it and hide it! God has His children living on this planet so that we might stand out as lights shining in a dark place. We shine with the light of the love of God in Christ Jesus

who died for us and rose again that we might have life in His name! That is the light that shines from your heart and that makes an impact on the world, a far greater impact than you will ever know this side of heaven!

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works;” (v.16) that is your faith in action in your life, that you stand up for the truth, and that you represent the **love** of God, “*who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” (1 Timothy 2:4) When you let your light shine, and refuse to blend in with the darkness of the world in your language, in your choices (including coming to church on Sunday) and when the world regards you as quaint and maybe even funny, know that your Light which is Christ, shines! People will glorify your Father, not you, your Father which is in heaven. They will know and believe and praise the Lord!

True Righteousness’ Impact on the World includes -- II. Preserving the Righteous Authority of the Word

There is a standard for right and wrong. There is code of conduct that has been established by Almighty God. We refer to it as the Law of God. It is imprinted on the heart of man even in man’s corrupt and lost state. There is a natural knowledge not only of God but also of His law! Now it is true that it may be clouded by man’s corrupt reason and evil desires, but the standard of right and wrong is evidenced by so much universal natural law that it cannot be denied even by this godless world!

God’s holy will is clearly presented in the inspired Word of God. Many already at the time when Jesus first spoke these words accused Jesus of dismantling the Word and denying its authority. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Jesus declared:

Mathew 5:17-19 “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth

pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹ Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus established the authority of the Word of God in every way! The ceremonial law pre-shadowed Christ. He observed its every tenet and fulfilled its covenant of grace and forgiveness. Jesus "*Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.*" (1 Peter 2:24) That was to free us FROM sin, not to free us TO sin. Jesus consistently called for repentance telling sorrowing sinners not only that their sins were forgiven, but that they should go and SIN NO MORE! (John 5:14 & 8:11)

To establish the righteous requirements of the law for sinners everywhere, Jesus throughout His entire life perfectly fulfilled the law's every requirement. While He was tempted by the devil, He did not sin! And so Jesus' righteousness has been credited to us through faith. What an impact that has on our lives, to know we stand perfect and righteous before our Father in heaven. Jesus established the authority of the law and fulfilled its righteous requirements down to the last letter of the law!

Now, some teach that frees men to sin, and that actually the authority of God's law has been set aside as antiquated. Some churches embrace people and *endorse* their sin. They ignore Jesus' warning here in the Sermon on the Mount. Those who break the law and teach others to do the same will be least in the kingdom of heaven! Indeed they endanger not only their own souls but most certainly the souls of those whose sins they celebrate. All types of sexual sins have been celebrated within the visible church in our nation, and people struggling with sin no longer see a need to struggle **against** sin, but are

encouraged to **embrace** their sin and to be true to themselves, and ignore the authority of God's Holy Word.

The righteous authority of God's Word makes an impact on the world, and **not** a negative one! Stand up for the truth. Call sin the sin that it is. Let the law do its work of convicting the conscience, and then the Spirit can bring peace to the sin-sick heart with the gospel. Then and only then can one know --

III. The Superior Righteousness of Faith.

Among the most admired people among the Jews of those days were the scribes and the Pharisees. They were thought of as the pinnacle of righteousness! They studied the law of the Scriptures and wrote many books of interpretation called the Talmud, and they were on top of it all! They defined precisely what it took to fulfill the ceremonial law, and how one must finagle things to be sure the law of God didn't get in the way of everyday life. They dressed to display their righteous status and were careful to be seen at prayer hour so others would know just how righteous they were.

All agreed that these were righteous people, at least all those who couldn't see into their hearts! "*The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*" (1 Samuel 16:7)

For Jesus' audience it was mind boggling for Jesus to prescribe a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. How could anyone do that? Today people are still caught in the mire of the *appearance* of righteousness. One presidential candidate is calling on another to take the pledge to give all his money away to help the poor. Hard to argue with that. The Lord is quite clear that He doesn't just give wealth to people that they might spend it on themselves. They are to do good and help others! Is that the righteousness that

exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Need I give all my money to the poor to enter into eternal life? Paul writes about this in his first epistle to the Corinthians; *“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, **but have not love, it profits me nothing.**”* (1 Corinthians 13:3) Paul calls for that **pure love** which comes into our hearts *only* through faith in Christ Jesus.

The righteousness which **exceeds** the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is that righteousness which Christ secured with His sinless life and His innocent sufferings and death. This superior righteousness of Christ comes to us purely and alone through faith in His name. That is the righteousness which makes the ultimate impact upon this sinful world, as well upon the life of the individual plagued by sin and guilt. We who have no righteousness of our own have been credited with the excellent righteousness of Jesus Christ through faith in His name, and so we shall enter the kingdom of heaven.

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans 15:13)