

“Salt, Light, and the Law”

Isaiah 58:6-12; Matthew 5:13-20

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Last week we considered the contradictions of Christ as expressed in the preceding verses of Matthew, as well as some equally perplexing words from Paul. We considered how to be ‘poor in spirit’, and to be ‘insulted’ and ‘persecuted’ because of our Christian faith would result in our being **blessed**. Paul spoke of how the world’s greatest strength and wisdom was far inferior to God’s foolishness and weakness. Perhaps we might suffice it to say that the BEST we can be *without* Jesus cannot compare to what we can be *with* Him...

Jesus continues to speak in this dichotomy of our walk of faith between the **good** that we can be in a world filled with **bad** influences. He tells his followers, ***“You are the SALT of the earth”***... unless the ‘saltiness’ is lost, and then ***“it is no longer good for anything.”*** He further says to His friends that ***“You are the light of the world.”*** And then, seems to warn that ***“no one puts it under a bushel basket.”*** No one should ‘hide’ that light, but put it out where it ***“gives light to all.”*** Jesus goes on to implore his disciples to ***“let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*** (Matthew 5:16)

So, let me ask you, how well do YOU think you fit these descriptions of being a follower of Jesus Christ? Do you think of yourself as being the ‘salt of the earth?’ Or are you concerned that you have ‘lost your saltiness’... perhaps ‘no longer good for anything?’ Are you a ‘light of the world’ whose good works ‘shine’ for all to see? OR, are you hiding your light under a basket?

I would say that most of us see ourselves in the not-so-positive ‘light.’ Perhaps because our human nature bases so much of our value and worth on our **performance**. Which, of course, is natural from a secular, *business* perspective. Job evaluations usually reflect an attitude of ‘what have you done for me *lately?*’ But that can also spill over into our personal, spiritual lives as well. Jesus speaks of the importance of how others ‘see your good works.’ He then goes on to address the manner in which we either break, or uphold, the ‘letter of the Law.’ If I were to base my value to God simply on the basis of my ‘good works’... or of how well I live by God’s commandments... I could sometimes, to put it into not-so-theological terms, be in ‘deep doo.’

But thanks be to God that my status with Him is NOT ‘performance-based,’ but ‘**GRACE-BASED.**’ That in the words of Ephesians, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8-9) It is precisely BECAUSE we are unable to save ourselves by our works, by our perfect fulfillment of God’s commandments, that Jesus came to earth.

This being said, it is yet quite important to not discount the manner in which we live by God’s laws. As Jesus was quick to point out, He did not come to earth to ‘abolish,’ to ‘do away’ with the commands of the Old Testament, but to **fulfill** them. Jesus did not come to do away with us living by the law, but rather, because we couldn’t do so without Him! **A ‘new life’ in Christ did not mean a whole ‘new set of rules’ to live by! We will still fail... but must ‘die trying’. For to live in Christ means to NEVER die!**

The ‘good works’ that people are to see in us are not to point out how great we are, but how GREAT IS OUR GOD! In the words of our *Westminster Confession of Faith*, those “**Good works**” are not determined by US, by some human standards, but only as God has commanded in His **Holy Word**. They are “**fruits of a true and lively faith.**” (WCF 16:1-2)

How do our ‘good works’ bear the ‘fruits of a true and lively faith?’ How are we to truly be ‘salt and light’ in our world? Well, with regards to that former title, **salt**, we should think of its function. To add **flavor**, of course. We ALL know well about that, esp. here in S. LA. Salt to help make our everyday need for nourishment more pleasurable, more ‘palatable.’ There are, in truth, many who have lost their ‘taste’ for life and need their ‘bland’ lives ‘seasoned’ with the ‘savory’ nature of Christ. But in Jesus’ time, there was a more fundamental function of salt. As a **preservative**. To keep food from spoiling. And as I thought about how salt acts in this way, I was a bit puzzled. I didn’t think salt EVER ‘lost its taste.’ How could it reach a point of being “***no longer good for anything?***” I would come to find out that in that region around the Dead Sea, salt could be mixed in with a lot of other minerals. Rather than just pure ‘NaCl,’ there were a lot of impurities; and therefore, with those added ‘ingredients’ the salt could evaporate, dissipate.

How much do you and I ‘dissipate’ our faith with a lot of ‘impurities?’ Can we not be guilty of putting a lot of ‘foreign substances’ into our bodies... and I don’t just mean food and

drink. Can we not fill our mind and spirit with a lot of stuff that will 'take away' from the purity of our relationship with God? What is it in your life that detracts, that takes away from the One who 'preserves' your life...keeps you from 'spoiling?'

Aside from being concerned about what takes away from the 'composition' of our 'bedrock' of **salt**, we must think not only of what we are made of inside, but how we show it on the outside... of how we are being **light**. How are you and I 'letting our light shine' so that others may see God in us? This is where I found the words of the prophet Isaiah to be so valuable. In the first two verses of today's passage, Isaiah said ***"Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free... is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...?"*** (Isaiah 58:6-7)

"The fast I choose." When you and I think of 'fasts,' we most often would think of preparation for a medical procedure, or a means to lose weight. As a *spiritual* discipline, however, it is a way to show devotion to God by denying oneself... usually food. Probably most of us... me included... could employ this means of demonstrating our reliance on God to our advantage in many ways. Both spiritual AND physical! But Isaiah speaks of other ways besides the denial of food to tangibly express our faith. We 'give up' something of ourselves when we work to correct 'injustice' in our society, and our world... to let those who are 'oppressed go free.' That 'oppression' might be social injustice... or the chains for alcohol and/or drug abuse... or the bondage of mental illness. In speaking of this latter, I read just this week that **1** out of **5** Americans will suffer from some degree of mental illness this year. (Welsh – 4-5; LC – 9-10)

Other 'fasts'... other sacrifices we make... might involve 'sharing your bread with the hungry,' or to 'bring the homeless poor into your house.' Now THAT sure hit close to home, right? But perhaps the last one might be the 'deepest cut of all': ***"not to hide yourself from your own kin."*** Is it not a cruel irony that the very people whom we should most steadfastly care for and about are the very ones that we can so most readily drive away? That the ones whom we should be most 'transparent' with are the ones we most 'hide' from...?

As you and I, children of God, seek to live lives that honor the God who has blessed us in so many ways, we must in turn honor His other children. In those words of Scripture... you know, the ones that Jesus said HE 'came to fulfill'... it is AS we free the oppressed, feed the

hungry, house the homeless, care for our kinfolk... it is ***“THEN your light shall break forth like the dawn...”*** It is ***“THEN you shall call, and the Lord will answer; (THEN) you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”*** (Isaiah 58:8-9) God speaks to ancient Believers and modern ones, ***“IF you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, THEN your light shall rise in the darkness...”*** (Isaiah 58:9-10)

God’s love for us is unconditional. There is nothing we can do to EARN God’s love and salvation. The question is, just how ‘unconditional’ is our love for one another? Aside from ‘feeding the hungry’ and ‘satisfying the needs of the afflicted,’ how well are we doing at not ‘pointing fingers’ at one another... how often do we ‘speak evil’ of others? Members of another political party... or of our very own family?

As you and I seek to be ‘salt and light’ to our world, I leave you with three statements....one quote from a man-made confession, and two from God’s confessions in His Word: ***“Our ability to do good works is not at all of ourselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.”*** (WCF 16:3) Our ability to PRAY... is by the Holy Spirit. Our ability to LEARN... is by the Holy Spirit. Our ability to MINISTER... is by the Holy Spirit. It was just that power of the Spirit that was at work in God’s servant Abraham, of whom James wrote: ***“His faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”*** (James 2:22) May that same Spirit be at work in us, giving us strength to stand strong in the face of an oft-times foolish, weak, contradictory world. As our faith is made complete by our works, may we know: ***“For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.”*** (1 Peter 2:15) No matter what foolish ignorance we may encounter... even by that man/woman in the mirror...let us live by that commandment of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ***“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*** (Matthew 5:16)