

Matthew 5:17-20
(Galatians 2:15-21)
“Holiness and God’s Law”

Introduction

“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” But what does it *mean* to be salt and light? What does it look like? What does it taste like? *Isn’t it interesting that Jesus turns immediately to a discussion of the law?* This is the last thing that many of us would expect him to do if he is going to describe how his disciples are to be different from the world. I wonder sometimes whether the most misunderstood aspect of the Scripture is not the relationship between law and grace, between faith and good works. We seem intent on building a wall of separation between things that were never meant to be separated. The apostle Paul states the problem this way:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works (Romans 9:30-32).

In other words, Israel made precisely the same mistake that many Christians down through the ages have made: they thought that they could keep the law in such a way that they would contribute to their own salvation and thus would have grounds for being proud of themselves and boasting over others who do not keep the law. This leads inevitably to moralism and legalism, and to other forms of self-salvation. In our first lesson from Galatians, Paul makes clear that we can never be justified by perfectly keeping the law. Christ kept the law perfectly for us. However, as he reaches the end of that same letter, he describes life in the Spirit as a life in perfect harmony with the law.

While we never want to lapse into legalism and moralism, we must always remember that Christ saves us for a life of joyful obedience to God’s law, because the law, rightly understood, is simply a picture of what it looks like to love God and to love one another. Sadly, but not surprisingly, the relationship between law and grace, faith and works, is often misunderstood. I hope that this passage will help us understand more clearly the nature of our calling as Jesus’ followers.

So the two main questions we will ask of the text are: What does Jesus mean by telling us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world? And how, then, are we to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

Body:

1. What does Jesus mean by telling us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

What do salt and light do?

Salt and light are preserving, life-giving and revealing. Salt brings out the flavor and light reveals the truth of a thing, whether its ugliness or its beauty. There are so many dimensions to this, that one runs the risk of making too much of what are clearly metaphors. But we should not make too little of them either. Salt is used to disinfect and to preserve. But it also brings out the flavor of food.

“Please pass the salt,” is asked, not by someone hungry for salt, but by someone who wants to taste their food. “Turn on the light,” is asked, not by someone who wants to admire the lamp, but by someone who wants to see something else clearly in the light of the lamp. So salt and light do not exist merely for their own sake, but in order to make everything else clear and fresh, full of flavor and lovely to behold.

Clearly, Jesus is telling us something about how we should see ourselves. It is not about us, but about others. Specifically, it is about the good of others and the glory of God, for Jesus says, “that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). How are people to know God? By knowing his children.

How do salt and light do their work?

To do their work salt and light must be immersed in the stuff of life to have an effect. As salt and light, Christians are called to give themselves away for the good of others (the earth, the cosmos, other people), and for the glory of God. Salt in a saltshaker is no good to the food. It must be shaken out. And salt on the plate near the food is no good. It must be absorbed into the food. So, too, God wants us to be in the world, although not of the world. If we are not engaged with people who do not know the Lord, how will we make him known? But that raises the question, how do we do that? What does Jesus mean by our “good works” that bring glory to our heavenly Father?

2. How then are we to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

Jesus’ righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus showed and taught us how to fulfill the law as an expression of love for God and for others, not as a set of rules to be obeyed superficially. He did not

come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. This he did in his perfect life and sacrificial death. He kept the moral law, the Ten Commandments, as an expression of his love for his Father and his love for humanity. He showed us what it means to love God heart mind and strength and to love each other sacrificially. He touched untouchables and ate with notorious sinners, to show that God's purpose was to seek and save the lost. He made the Sabbath day a delight rather than an obligation to be borne. He treated women with respect in a culture that saw them as property. And when he looked at the teeming crowds, he did not despise them, but was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus kept the law perfectly for you and me, and then offered himself as a perfect man in place of our sinful, broken selves. In this way, he fulfilled all of the Temple sacrifices offered by Israel down through the centuries, as well as the heart cry of all those within Israel and without who had cried out to God for grace and forgiveness. We even see him in his hour of agony crying out to his Father to forgive those who nailed him to the cross. Thus, in his sacrifice for sin he satisfied forever the ceremonial law and put an end to it. And as perfect Israelite, he fulfilled ethnic Israel's unique mission to be a light and to bring God's blessing to all the nations.

But how is our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees?

Our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. How can that be? They were scrupulous in keeping the rules. Clearly, our model is Jesus. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled for us in Christ. No more sacrifices for sin can be made, because sin has been dealt with once and forever in the sacrifice of God's Son, so we fulfill the ceremonial law by trusting in Christ's sacrifice as the basis of our forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

When Paul warned the Galatian Christians who had been saved by grace through faith not to turn away from the Spirit and back to the flesh and the law, he was making two points: First, he was warning them that they could not be justified before God by keeping any part of the law, moral or ceremonial. And he was, secondly, opposing those who told Gentile believers that they had to be circumcised and begin keeping kosher diet in order to be God's people.

But when, in chapter six, he turned to the behavior expected of a Christ-follower, he upheld the moral law, the Ten Commandments, not as a ground of salvation, but as pattern of living right, as a picture of our life in Christ. We are consistently told throughout the New Testament that we are now free from the ceremonial law of circumcision, dietary rules and temple ritual, but that we are to seek, through faith in God's Spirit at work within us, to keep the moral law, not as a means of salvation, but as an expression of our love for God and for one another.

This is precisely why we spend time talking about God's moral law. The first five commandments tell us what it looks like to love and trust God. They depict the grateful obedience of faith. We will not have other gods, whether work or family or success or pleasure. We will have no god but God himself and will speak his name with reverence, awe and gratitude. We will keep his day holy and not waste it on our entertainments. We will learn to love and revere God by loving and revering our parents, who first teach us to love, trust and obey.

And we are to keep the law as an expression of our love for one another. The rest of the commandments are a picture of what it looks like to love other people. They are summarized in the final command: we are not to covet the lives of those around us, wishing that we had what they have. It is covetousness that leads to murder and adultery, to stealing and lying about people. We will seek through the power of Christ within us not to covet what others have, but rather to love them self-sacrificially as Christ has loved us. And this we will do out of gratitude and love for the salvation already given us in Jesus Christ.

It is in this sense that Jesus says that we – who obviously are not perfect in our obedience – nevertheless are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). He says it in the context of calling us to love even our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (5:44). This is the perfection of love: loving our enemies even as God loved us while we were still his enemies,

Conclusion

Have you noticed that there is in Jesus' words both a warning and a promise?

Hear first the warning: Don't lose your savor, don't hide your light, or you will fail to be what you are and to do what you are sent to do. You will, Jesus said, "Never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). But hear also the promise: As you fulfill your calling, the created order – the earth and even the cosmos – will display more clearly and richly the glory of the Creator. People will see, come to faith and give glory to God. In other words, our obedience has both personal and cosmic consequences.

God has not just done something for us, but also something in us. He not only sent his Son to live and die for us, but he has sent us his Spirit, so that our righteousness is no longer merely a matter of outward religious and moral observance, but rather is an expression of God's love and grace, flowing out of our union with Christ. If we follow just a little way on this path of loving obedience, everything starts to change. People know that something is different, that there is, perhaps, hope for them as well. They begin to taste a little of what it means to be loved by God through the real flesh and blood love of another person. They don't see us as "religious," but as alive, and full of joy and hope and love. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:16).