

Salt, Light and the Deeper Goodness

Matthew 5: 13-20

Today's text operates like an introduction to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. It's about the Deeper Goodness or a Truer Righteousness.

Those words, righteousness and goodness, may be a bit tainted today. Mark Twain talked about "a good man in the worst sense of the word." You may know the type. A little girl prayed, "Dear God, make all the bad people good and the good people *nice*."

And that word "righteousness." It is most often used as in the term "self-righteous", a person puffed up with their own goodness looking down on others, a "holier-than-thou", better-than-thou, smarter-than-thou, "woker"-than-thou type.

But there is, I think, a kind of goodness we aspire to, which we admire in others and hope for ourselves. Jesus leads us there. The word "righteous" in the Bible means being *aligned with God*, and the greatest alignment is the alignment of love. Without love all our attempts at goodness fall flat.

Jesus begins by talking about salt and light. We are, he says, salt and light for the world. It's about who we already *are* and who we are for others, for the world.

When salt loses its saltiness what good is it? Jesus says.

Some of you who have taken chemistry and studied periodic tables may say: "But salt cannot lose its salt-ness, sodium is forever!" So here is Jesus going all "metaphor" on us again! Here's his point: *Salt is not salt for itself*. Salt flavors the world, preserves it, heals it. It's no good, he says, if it stays in the salt shaker. A church that doesn't shake out its salt is like a salt shaker all gunky on the lid, the holes stopped up and no salt will come out.

The church is not the church for its sake but for others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in prison, awaiting his execution by order of Hitler, wrote that the church is only the church when it is a church for others. Barbara Brown Taylor has written that the church is most the church when it is a "poured-out" church.

The same with light. We are the light of the world, light for the world. We don't light a lamp and put it under a bushel, Jesus says, but on a stand where it gives light to the whole house. Have you noticed how one small candle can light up a darkened room? We don't have to be fireworks to make a difference.

So Jesus says “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” “Good works” are an important part of the Jewish-Christian faith. They are how we shine the love and compassion of God on the world. I see you, Grace, as everyday you are being light through your acts of service and love. You give people hope when they see you. People need to see others who are doing good stuff.

Sometimes we grow shy or get conflicted about shining our church’s light. But it’s God’s light we are shining. I believe Statesville needs the gospel we try to live here: God’s love for all, period; God’s lavish welcome to all; a ministering people. Jesus encourages us to shine that light. We are not saying “Look at us!” but, “Look at who God is”. Dean Smith would coach his players at Chapel Hill when they made a basket to point to the player who gave him an assist. We do that with the light we shine. We point to God.

Near the top of our list of innovative ministries we are working on the fuller use of social media to show our community who we are and the gospel we try to live to our community. Most people today first get to know a church not by visiting a Sunday morning worship service, but through a church’s presence in social media. It’s one way to shine God’s light.

We hear about how the church turned the world upside-down in the first three centuries and grew from a tiny illegal sect into an empire-wide religion. A

key way was how we loved people in extravagant and surprising ways. We set up hospitals for the sick and hostels for weary travelers when traveling was risky. During the plague in Egypt, we cared for the sick and buried the dead, at the risk of our lives, when no one else would get near the sick. We established welfare programs for the poor. Every Sunday in worship there was an offering for the poor. We do the same here as we give 20% of our offerings every week to missions, 20% of our yearly giving.

Let your light so shine! It is the light of love.

II

Now Jesus turns to an important and neglected part of his teaching: “I’ve come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them!” We’re talking about the essential Jewishness of Jesus here. The original sin of the church was anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. It planted the seeds of persecution and forced conversion of Jews, of pogroms and the Holocaust. And it denied the Jewishness of Jesus.

There was an old episode of *All in the Family*. Archie Bunker is spouting his bigotry against Jewish people. His son-in-law, whom Archie called “Meat-head”, began to argue: “But Archie, Jesus was a Jew!” Archie, thrown for a second, paused, then said, “Yeah, but only on his *mother’s* side!”

Mainstream New Testament scholarship in the 19th and 20th centuries played down the Jewishness of Jesus and accentuated the difference between Jesus and the Jews of his time. I swallowed it, and now know I was wrong. Amy-Jill Levine, Jewish professor of the New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, has been among my teachers here. She says rightly that most preachers and scholars have tried to make Jesus look good by making the Jews look bad. She's ruined a lot of my former sermons!

But Jesus says, I've not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them, and adds, "Not one iota, one brush stroke of the pen, of scriptures will pass away until all is accomplished."

Amy-Jill Levine points out how Jesus dressed: Jesus wore fringes! Rabbis then and now wear garments with fringes, 613 tassel-like threads that hang at the end of their garment or stole. There are 613 of them, corresponding to the 613 commandments of God. Jesus wore fringes. We see it when we read the gospels. Remember the story of the woman who had the issue of blood, who came up from behind Jesus and said, "If I but touch the fringes of his garment I will be healed"? Fringes, not "hem", as we have read it. Jesus wore all 613 commandments. He came not to abolish but to fulfill.

So now let's think about what "fulfill" means. We could say "deeper", or "make whole" or "get to the heart of it."

Jesus ends his introduction to the Sermon on the Mount by saying

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

First, in line with what I've said earlier, we cannot make it anti-Jewish. Jesus was referencing the religious elite of the time who used religion to serve themselves, not God's people. It happens all the time.

So we might translate, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the preachers and the deacons, the Bible-Thumpers, and religious big-shots, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven!"

So what does *exceed* mean? Is Christianity more than following the rules, more than moral perfectionism? What is this deeper goodness, this truer righteousness Jesus is calling us to?

I offer two illustrations I have used before. (Yes, I remember I've used them before.) The first is from Frederick Buechner as he writes about "Righteousness".

"You haven't got it *right!*" says the experienced piano teacher. Junior is holding his hands the way he's been told. His fingering is unexceptional. He has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the notes with deadly

accuracy. But his heart's not in it, only his fingers. What he's playing is a sort of music but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping. He has succeeded in boring everybody to death, including himself.

.... The scribes and Pharisees were playing it by the Book. They didn't slip up on a single do or don't. But they were getting it all wrong.

Righteousness is getting it all *right*. If you play it the way it's supposed to be played, there shouldn't be a still foot in the house.¹

That's the deeper goodness. It's got not just the words but the music too. And the music is love. You know it when you see it. It's the real thing.

The second illustration is from the acclaimed writer Madeleine L'Engle, who wrote *A Wrinkle in Time*. She writes of being on a ferry boat and watching the birds. First, she watches the pigeons. They would flap their wings against the wind until they finally got to the ferry. Then a gust of wind would come and blow them back again, and then they'd begin to flap their wings furiously until they got even with the boat, when inevitably another burst of wing would blow them back. Do you ever feel like that pigeon?

Then she watched the sea gulls as they sailed almost effortlessly with the wind and on the wind. They glided while the pigeons flapped! Jesus is saying, be seagulls not pigeons! But let me turn the illustration another way. Pigeons are

beautiful too. They just shouldn't be chasing ferry boats! Let them be who they are, taking bread crumbs from the old man on the bench. Another way of saying it is: You are enough! Be the light you are, not your imitation of someone else's light.

Sometimes we in our faith try to be super-pigeons, chasing ferry boats. The scribes and the Pharisees were super pigeons. But a deeper truer goodness is like the seagulls gliding on and with the wind, or like a pigeon being who she is. Remember the book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*? What about *Amelia Livingston Pigeon*?

It's all about love. The salt is love because it is poured out for others. The light is love because it shines for others. It is the light of love, and when it shines, it's like a city on a hill and cannot be hidden.

It is love that fulfills the 613 commandments. It is love that fulfills the prophetic vocation to call the nation back to the ways of God.

Think of those whose goodness seems good through and through. It's like they've become almost transparent with the love of God.

That's the kind of goodness Jesus lived. He came to love the world, not scold it. That's why we love him. He is the secret to the Sermon on the Mount and to a deeper goodness.

Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (N.Y.:Harper & Row, 1973), 82.