

Matthew 5:13-20 *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. 14 "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. 17 "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. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

I've heard it said before: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." That's a rather unique way of saying that you are preaching the gospel every day with the way that you live your life. From what you say and do to how you say it and do it, you are letting your light shine and letting people in your world know what Jesus is like and what it is like to follow him. You preach a sermon every day with the way that you live. Here is an example: The story is told of a homeless man who walked into church. He didn't look like he belonged—wild hair, t-shirt and jeans with holes in them and no shoes. On the day that he went to church, it was packed and he couldn't find a seat. As he got closer to the front and realized there was nowhere to sit, he just squatted down right there on the carpet. You could cut the tension with a knife. Finally, an older parishioner in his 80's, wearing a three-piece suit—a very godly and dignified man—began walking with his cane down the aisle toward him. Everyone was thinking to themselves that you couldn't blame him for what he was going to do. As he walked towards the man, the church was totally silent except the clicking of the cane. It was like the whole room was holding its breath. Finally, the man reached him. He dropped his cane on the floor and with great difficulty lowered himself to the floor to sit next to the man so that he didn't have to worship alone. That old man was Jesus for that person. The people may not have remembered the Pastor's sermon that day. But they would never forget the elderly man's sermon.

So what sermon are you preaching with your life? Maybe you've never thought about this before. It's easy to think that you don't really matter in world so full of people. It's easy to think that you are just one person and what you say and do can't really make a difference. Yet Jesus today says just the opposite! You do matter. You have a purpose. You do have an influence and make a difference in the world in which you live. You are salt and you are light. You matter—no matter what your vocation in life. You don't have to be a full-time pastor or teacher to preach a sermon or teach a lesson about Jesus. You do so every day in the way that you live as God's people. You have a purpose. Your life matters. **You Make a Difference.**

I think is important for us to establish right from the start that nothing Jesus is talking about in our text deals with how to become a disciple of Jesus. For that to be able to happen, your righteous living according to God's law would have to be even better than the Pharisees...and even that wouldn't be enough. The Pharisees were one of the ruling sects of the Jewish people. They prided themselves on how well they kept God's law. Truth be told, there probably wasn't anyone in Israel who followed God's law more closely than the Pharisees. They were the best earthly model of righteousness to which Jesus could point. Yet even their lives were not good enough to win God's favor because they weren't perfect. They might have been really, really good people. They might have been the best. But they weren't perfect. To earn God's favor and with it salvation they would have had to be perfect in every way—thought, word and deed. And that just can't happen. No matter how good we try to be, we can't be perfect. Therefore, we can't become disciples of Jesus by slavishly following God's law. All that the law does is remind us that we are sinners who deserve hell. Only one person could keep that law perfectly and that person was Jesus. He came as the light to overcome sin, wickedness, ignorance and unbelief by living perfectly in our place and offering that perfect life as a sacrifice for our sins. He shone his light into the darkness by rising from the grave to conquer death. And through the Holy Spirit, he let his light shine into our hearts to enlighten for us the path to eternal life. We are disciples because of God's grace, through Jesus' sacrifice, and the work of the Holy Spirit. This entire text is talking about our lives now as God's people and how we are to live as disciples of Jesus.

As disciples of Jesus, who know about God's grace and trust in Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, he tells us that we are now the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Just as salt is salty and as a light bulb gives off light, we naturally exhibit these characteristics of being a Christian. It's not that we are holier or better than everyone else, it just because we've been changed through faith in Christ. We've been transported from the darkness in which we used to live into the light that is Jesus. We now naturally reflect the light of Christ through our lives. Notice Jesus doesn't say that we should be salt and light. He is not suggesting that we try to be salt and light. He simply lays out the fact that as disciples of Jesus, this is exactly who we are. Being disciples of Jesus makes us salt and light. That's who we are. His encouragement is simply to be who he made us to be. Go out and be salt and light and by so doing, you will make a difference in the lives of people that you meet.

Let's look a bit deeper into what Jesus means when he says that we are salt and light. In Jesus' day with no refrigeration, salt played an important role in preserving food, especially keeping meat from rotting and decaying. As the salt of the earth, we have the important role in keeping this earth from rotting into moral decay. We do that by living as God's people and standing up for what is right. The world that we live in is in moral decay. The morals of our country have loosened greatly the past 20-30 years. I think the half-time show of the Superbowl last Sunday gives a clear testimony to the abyss into which we are sinking. While you can applaud the way that Shakira at 43 and Jennifer Lopez at 50 can move and dance at their age, their dancing was nothing more than a striptease which simulated sexual acts. Along with that, their outfits left nothing to the imagination. But what surprised me even more than the dance itself was the complete justification of their actions not only by the unbelieving world

around us but even by many Christian people. I've heard many justifications of their dancing as supporting "two empowered, talented, unapologetic Latina moms dance their hearts out on stage as they radiated confidence, beauty, and strength." I've heard the same people say the problem isn't with their dress or their dancing but with the way that other people view them. Truthfully, it's hard to see that dancing as anything but inappropriate for public display. Left unchecked and unstopped, this decay will only continue. God preserves our world and allows it to continue so that his people can live lives of glory and service to him. The actions of God's people act as salt to keep the world from rotting and to preserve it from total corruption.

Jesus also says that you are the light of the world. It is the very nature of light to shine in the darkness. Light that doesn't shine...isn't light. Like a city on the top of a mountain, it can be seen all around. The light of Jesus came into your hearts not only to reveal the salvation that he won for you but also to show you the path of life God wants for you. As a Christian, you reflect the light of Jesus in your life the same way the moon reflects the light of the sun at night. As a Christian, it is your very nature to speak and live for your Savior. It is your nature to shine into this dark world with your life lived for Jesus. People are watching you. They want to know what makes the Christian different. They want to know how important your faith is to you. They want to know how Jesus changes you and what effect he has on your life. They want to know if what you have is authentic and real. They want to know if Jesus is essential to you or just for show. You might be the only way they can come to know who Jesus is. God may have put you into their lives to let your light shine into their hearts to make an eternal difference in their lives.

This is the really cool thing about this text. God made you salt and light so that you can shine your light and salt the earth as you live out your daily vocations. In other words, you don't have to go into full-time called or public ministry to carry out the great commission of Jesus. You do this in how you live out your every day lives. A vocation is simply where God has put you in this world. You might have the vocation of spouse, parent, child, student, employee or friend. You most definitely have multiple vocations. Your vocation might be nurse, construction worker, accountant, loan officer, manager or lawyer. Wherever God has placed you in life is your vocation where God gives you the opportunity to be salt and light. And as Christians, we carry out these vocations in a different way than others. Being salt and light as parents will cause us to make different decisions for our children than what the world around us might make. We carry out our work or studies in a faithful way that pleases God and thanks him for the gifts, talents and opportunities that he has given to us. No matter what station of life we are in, no matter what our age, our gender, or our vocation, we do all that we do so that others will glorify God and come to faith in Christ who saves them from death.

People are watching you! So what sermon are you preaching? Does the way that you talk to people let your light shine and reflect God's love? Does the way that you react to decisions show your love for God and those God has given to you? Do you have an air of confidence and trust in God despite the challenges or trials that you face? Do you lovingly give the benefit of the doubt to others? Do you engage in fair and ethical business practices that bring a profit but don't overcharge or take advantage of those you are serving? Does the way that we take care of each other as a family of believers make us attractive to those who see us? You preach a sermon every Sunday just by dressing nice and leaving your house to attend worship. Don't think your neighbors don't notice how important faith is to you by taking your time to be at God's house every Sunday morning. You preach a sermon when you tell your children's sports teams that they can play on Sunday but after you attend worship first. You preach a sermon when you drop what you are doing to help your neighbor when he/she needs some help. You preach a sermon when you stand up to defend someone that others are talking ill about. You preach a sermon when you stand up to say something isn't right even when everyone else around you is defending it. You are not only letting people see what is important to you, but you are helping to keep people on the right track morally as well as leading them to the see the light of Jesus and ask more about the salvation he offers. Whether you believe or not—people are watching and you make a difference in their lives.

Sadly, we can preach negative sermons too. When some are asked to give descriptions of Christians, you might hear things like "judgmental, rigid, intolerant and self-righteous" rather than "loving, kind, gentle and sacrificial." While these might not be fully accurate, there may be a kernel of truth in them. At times, we allow ourselves to be defined more in terms of what we are against than what we are for. We hear stories of Christians who leave church on Sunday and cuss out the waitress over breakfast or are stingy about the tips they give or impossible to work with. Rather than standing up for what is right, we too often keep our mouths quiet and let those who are loud and confident rule the day, even if what they are advocating is completely against what God says is right. This isn't letting our light shine or being salt of the earth. It is being like the rest of the world. It gives God a bad name and reflects poorly on him as our Lord and Savior. More importantly, it is sin that brings God's wrath and punishment.

Thankfully, the responsibility for eternal life doesn't rest on our shoulders, but on that of our Savior. He met the standard of perfection which God set for us and kept God's law perfectly as we could not. His light shone perfectly at all times. He succeeded where we failed and with his sacrificial death he paid for our imperfections. It is now as God's people who know the forgiveness and life which God offers in Jesus that we with grateful thanksgiving go about our lives to let our light shine and be the salt of the earth and know that when we do, that not only glorifies God but makes a difference in the lives of those who are watching.

When I was working with college students at my previous congregation, I would from time to time get calls from parents who were mad with me. Students from our pastor/teacher college, Martin Luther College, would come talk to me because they were unsure if they really wanted to be a pastor or teacher. I told them then and still believe today, being a pastor or teacher is not the only way to serve God and be a light to this world. Whatever your calling in life, your purpose is to serve and glorify God by letting your light shine and being the salt of the earth. God has placed you where you are in life for a reason and with a purpose. Be who God made you to be! Your life matters and you make a difference. Amen.