

POINTS TO PONDER

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its savor, how can its saltiness be restored? It no longer has strength to give spice to anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."
— *Matthew 5.13*

"Salt is a spice that helps give flavor to whatever it touches. Jesus' metaphor that we are the salt of the earth is a reminder to us that we are to give flavor those we encounter. We are to help them to live more vibrant spiritual and ethical lives; to taste the beauty of goodness. We are to be savory beings who inspire others to be their best selves.

Saltiness, interestingly, has another connotation – one of pushing things to the edge, of being sort of an agitator, and of being a bit indecorous in personality. Jesus had a salty personality, and encouraged his disciples to be likewise; for being prim and proper does little to grab the attention of those in power who need to be held accountable for the injustices they create, allow, and perpetuate. You have to be salty to preach strength to power, and to call out those who use the system to advance their own aims.

Here, the two connotations blend seamlessly in Jesus' meaning. He wants us to add spice to the lives of those who have been oppressed, and he wants us to be salty towards those who have benefitted at their oppression. By being labeled the salt of the earth, we, his disciples, are called to these two tasks of living in this world.

Of course, it is easy for us to lose our spiciness and gumption. Our fears of speaking up for the oppressed and against the oppressors may take away our enthusiasm when we consider how those with power may respond to us. They may more than call us 'salty' people; they may decide to ramp up our oppression. We may be attacked for being too spicy for their comfort. They will inevitably try to water us down and take away our savor.

Of course, salt, like us, has a purpose; and if that purpose is diminished by too much atmosphere of fears, then we no longer have the strength to carry on and live in accordance to the use that God would have for us. We no longer have the ability to inspire anyone, for we have hidden our spiciness for fear of criticism and/or persecution.

Jesus has just given us the recipe of the Beatitudes on how to create a more just, peaceful, and loving world; which contradicts the values of rulers and empires. Here he is following up his vision with encouragement to live courageously in the face of our fears. We are to oppose the oppressors, and create a new world order. If we can keep the courage of our convictions, then we will continue to be the salt of the earth. But if we don't, then we are no longer any good to others. Our lives no longer matter, for we have sought for the blandness of security and comfort rather than for the spiciness of adding to the delectable flavors of justice, peace, and compassion."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/1/2023*

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.
In the same way, let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works and give honor to your Creator in heaven."

— *Matthew 5.14-16*

"Light shines through and alleviates darkness. The darkneses of injustice, hatred, violence, oppression, war, cruelty, apathy, fear, and other vices in our world cast a shroud of despair on our consciousness. When we look at our world, it is clear that evil often wins the day. But Jesus reminds us that we are the

light; the ones who harbor other values – those illuminating virtues such as justice, love, peace, compassion, nonviolence, benevolence, passion for goodness, bravery in living by our principles, and other excellences of character that shine rays of joyfulness on our countenance.

Given that we may seek to hide our light since others may wish to extinguish it, Jesus encourages us to let our light shine from the hills for all to see. Our concern is not to be about what may happen to us, but rather to let the best in us be seen and recognized, so that it may provide light to others living in darkness.

We need to be brave in letting our light shine, for we may be the only light others may see. We are to be light to the whole world – whether they want us to shine our light or not. We are not to hide our light, but place it on a hill or on a lampstand for all to see.

Yes, others may attempt to put out our light, but we are to let it shine all the brighter. Nothing should curtail our ambition to let love, peace, and justice be our *modus operandi*. This light of truth and goodness is what gives honor to our Creator – the one who not only created us all, but endowed us with heavenly values to uphold.

Our purpose in life is to lift up those values for all to view their light. We are not responsible for whether people avert their eyes from the light, or look to guide their own lives by it. We are only accountable for placing it on hills and lampstands in plain sight and let them decide to look toward or away from it...to try to extinguish it or let it live in them. We have our choices, and they have theirs. We must be concerned only with doing what is right and in accordance with the light; not how they may respond to or diminish our light.

How do you respond when others try to diminish, hide, or put out your light? What would God have you to do?"

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/1/2023

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.
For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away,
not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

— Matthew 5.17-18

"Jesus was a Pharisaic Jew who believed in the goodness of the Law of God, made manifest best by the Hebrew prophets. While he criticized those who perverted and misused the law, failing to live by its spirit, and using it for their own advantage, he believed that its purpose was to create the just, peaceful, and loving world that God had always wanted for creation. The Law, when followed by its Spirit, would enable us to live in harmony with one another.

There were those who, when Jesus criticized the wrongful use of the Law, believed that he was criticizing the Law itself; much like today's dissidents, who criticize those who pervert the laws and principles of our country, are thought to be criticizing the country itself. Jesus makes clear that his intention is to fulfill the Spirit of the Law, and not the legalistic ways in which scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and others had interpreted it for their own purposes.

I'm reminded of the quote I passed by every day on my way to seminary classes, of M.L. King, Jr., taken from his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and inscribed on the sculpture in front of Marsh Chapel and by the School of Theology classroom building at Boston University. One of the quotes, the one that faced me as I walked up the street to my classrooms, stated:

“I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.”

King followed in the footsteps of Jesus in recognizing that laws can be distorted and perverted, and that we are not to throw out all law because of this, but rather raise the spirit of the law to be followed even more fervently. Unjust laws, and unjust applications of just laws, are not to be tolerated. They are to be denounced, resisted, repealed, and made more just. Jesus believed God’s Laws would help us to be the people God had called us to be.

Are we willing to abandon unjust laws and substitute laws that create justice for all, so that peace may live among us? What are we willing to do to make this happen?”

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/1/2023

“Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments,
and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven;
but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

— Matthew 5.19-20

“Notice the conjunctive clause that is used here. It is not those who only break God’s commandments, but those who do so **and** teach others to do the same, that will be considered least in the kingdom of heaven.

We all don’t follow God’s ways at times, but it is a different matter to occasionally not follow God’s commandments despite a desire to do so, and to repeatedly not follow them and teach others not to do so in order that we won’t be alone in our waywardness. Some people try to relieve their own consciences for acting wrongly by teaching others to act wrongly. They falsely assume that if others do it too, then they themselves are not that bad. Jesus claims, however, that such people are the worst of people; for they not only do wrong, but teach others to do wrong.

Jesus often criticizes the scribes and Pharisees, those in the Jewish faith that he himself most identifies with – in contrast to the Sadducees and Herodians that were rather different in their views. He criticizes those who are most like him because he doesn’t want their example to distort what they know to be true. They have been given positions of authority, and they have abused their positions by justifying their own actions rather than obeying the spirit of God’s Law.

In other places, Jesus even tells his followers to listen to the scribes and Pharisees, for they know the Law well. But the way they use it for their own purposes is what he despises. Notice that he claims that it is their ‘righteousness,’ and not their ‘knowledge,’ that we need to exceed if we are to live by the ways of heaven. Jesus is not concerned about them not knowing the Law well, but rather their faulty application of the Law. The scribes and Pharisees are quite literate, but still degenerate. And their willingness to teach others that their own perverted interpretation of the Law is what the Law really means peeves Jesus on multiple occasions.

We must remind ourselves, contra conservative theologians, that the kingdom of heaven was not some other-worldly realm in the thinking of Jesus, but was rather a this-worldly realm in which people acted by the virtues and values of heaven (i.e., of God) in the living of their own lives here and now. This is not a quote about whether or not God will show us mercy to us in some after-life, but rather whether our own conduct and character on this earth will allow us to let God’s virtues and values live in us (i.e., “enter the kingdom of heaven”). If we don’t live by God’s values, then we will not know the experience of living by heavenly ways.

Consequently, God doesn't condemn us; our own actions do. Notice that it is our righteousness, Jesus says, not God's grace, that is needed here. Our behavior needs to be more just, loving, and peaceful; and this will in turn result in grace in our lives. Grace, a constitutive of righteousness, arises when we act in the Spirit of God's virtues and values. It is not doled out to us in spite of ourselves or as some divine act of mercy where God thinks we don't deserve it, but gives it to us anyway. This depiction of God as thinking we are unworthy is the perversion of Jesus' message by conservatives (and the Apostle Paul). They tell us how wretched we are, when Jesus tells us otherwise. The Reformers, too, focused on how we are all undeserving sinners; while Jesus claims we are the light of the world and made in the image of God. Sadly, many have believed the false prophets rather than Jesus himself.

Which view lifts us higher? Which inspires us to be better persons? If we are wretched sinners, what is the point of trying to be any different? But if we are called the salt of the earth and the light of the world, then this motivates us to be that – even when our behavior may point to the reality that we're not quite there.

It is by earnestly trying to live by God's values, and habituating those values in our lives through diligent actions and practices, that we become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We can all be this; right here, right now. We simply have to choose to do so and act on it with our lives. This is how the Beatitudes, the immediately prior text with its vision of how to create heaven on earth, will come to fruition.

Jesus believed in us (i.e., in our capabilities of being virtuous persons). Why do we find it so difficult to do the same? What is our motivation for thinking we can't be as good as Jesus tells us we can be? Will we ever see ourselves as the salt of the earth and the light of the world? And how might that help us to actually create a more loving, just, and peaceful world?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/1/2023*