

A New Righteousness: Salt, Light and the Law

We pick up this week where we left off last Sunday in Matthew's relating of the great sermon which Jesus preached on the mountain, first to his disciples and then to an ever-growing crowd. It is an appropriate topic for this year's prolonged season of Epiphany, which we have thanks to a later than usual Easter and so a later than usual beginning of Lent. In Epiphany, we traditionally read Scriptures that tell of events that revealed Jesus to the world as the Son of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, we have Jesus' own revelation of the message that he bore from God. We might call it a new teaching of righteousness – how to live a life pleasing to God.

As I mentioned last week, this was the key question for those in the age before humankind began to assume that they were in control of the world around them. Faced with an always uncertain future, people wanted to know how they could propitiate the powers that controlled the universe so that they might live in relative safety and happiness. For the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles in the lands around them, this meant asking how to live according to the Law of Moses and how to be faithful to the covenants of the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah.

There were, of course, plenty of competing answers to these questions. We know from the witness of the New Testament as well as from other contemporary accounts and archaeology that there were at least four major religious parties attracting adherents in the time of Jesus. The Sadducees represented the old power elite – their answer to pleasing God lay in obedience to the written Torah but also to the priests of the Temple. They were accommodationists, politically speaking, working to get along with the current Roman regime so that they would be left in peace to perform the Temple sacrifices in which they saw the center of righteousness. Diametrically opposed to the Sadducees politically were the Zealots, whose desire for a ritually pure Israel fueled the fire of violence in their philosophy. They believed that the Romans were to be violently expelled from the Promised Land and that everything from murder to insurrection was fair game, justified by the warrior God of Israel. The Essenes likewise sought ritual purity but found their solution in withdrawal from the cities and towns overseen by the polluting foreigners and from the corrupted Temple controlled by the Sadducees.

The most popular party of the time was the Pharisees. Their answer to the question of how to live righteously was to keep the Law of Moses so strictly that all the people of God would follow the rules which had originally applied only to the priests. To insure this, they “built a fence around the Law,” using a system of guidelines that would keep the faithful from even coming close to breaking one of the commandments of Torah. Their careful, everyday piety was impressive to those looking for answers, especially those who were willing to curtail their own freedoms in favor of a feeling of more security that they were living in God's will.

It was into this competitive religious environment that two new Jewish prophets came in what their contemporaries might have called the sixteenth year of Caesar Tiberius and what we now call the year 30 of the Common Era or the Year of Our Lord 30. First John came with his baptism of water and his message of repentance. He disdained both the Sadducees and the Pharisees, calling them a brood of poisonous snakes. Their ideas of righteousness would not save them, he warned. God was not pleased with their answers to life. People must turn to God and live lives that included sharing what they had with others, treating others fairly and living in peace. But there was another one coming after him, he said, who would baptize not with water

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but with the Holy Spirit – changing people to their very cores and putting them in direct touch with the God of Israel. And then, one day, John identified that one. “Behold the Lamb of God,” he said, “who takes away the sins of the world.” That one was his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth.

And so, first two disciples left John to follow Jesus and then more. The power of the younger man’s teaching and the miraculous healings he performed enabled him to quickly eclipse his predecessor, who would soon be remembered only as the one who had come to prepare the way. They flocked to Jesus like sheep without a shepherd, from his native Galilee, from the Gentile-dominated ten cities known as the Decapolis, from Judea and its capital of Jerusalem and from the mixed populace east of the Jordan River. So many followed him, so many wanted to hear him, that he took to going into the countryside where he could find a high point on a rise to sit and allow his voice to carry over them all. “You want to know the secret to the Godly life?” he might have asked. “You want to know how to live in the will of God? Listen, here are the ones who have the answer – those who are humble before God, those who are concerned about their neighbors and about their own lives, those who show mercy and spread peace. They are happy already.”

Then, as Matthew recorded it, his teaching took a new tack. “You are the salt of the earth,” is how we are used to hearing it. As with the switch from “blessed are” to “happy are,” perhaps we can hear what he said with fresh ears by turning to different translations. “You are salt to the world,” says the New English Bible. “You are like salt for all mankind,” says Good News for Modern Man. Jesus is telling his followers to live their lives acting as salt among their neighbors. But how should we understand what it means to be salt?

That may seem like a silly question. So many sermons have been preached and articles written on this topic that I doubt that I have anything new to tell you this morning. Still, it’s always good to review the things that Jesus said to allow them to sink into our lives in new ways. But it will probably come as no surprise to anyone when I repeat the common refrain that salt is necessary to life and that it was far rarer and more expensive in the ancient world than it is today when we can routinely buy huge bags of rock salt to clear ice and need never pay more than a few cents a pound for the salt we use in our kitchens. An online article from Scott Hoezee reminds us that “in history some cultures exchanged salt as money. The earliest roads were built to transport salt, the earliest taxes were levied on it, whole military campaigns were launched to secure salt. Salt gave Venice its start as a commercial trading empire in Europe and it helped Gandhi bring India to independence in the mid-twentieth century.” We likely also remember that the Latin word for salt is the root for our word “salary,” as salt formed the basis of payment for the Roman soldier. For Jesus to call his listeners “salt for the world” implied that they were valuable to the world around them, as are we.

Why was salt so valuable and how does that translate into how to live the Godly life? Well, just as it is now, salt was important in food. For one thing, it was a preservative agent. We still eat and enjoy foods cured in salt. We mostly use it with pork products, something Jesus and his friends most decidedly did not do, but those of Scandinavian ancestry still eat fish that have been preserved in salt and most of us eat brined foods, like pickles. It could certainly be argued that the presence of followers of Jesus has kept human culture from rotting away. We are salt to the world when we stand up against the forces of destructiveness that are so often seductive to all.

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And when we carry the message of Jesus to those who have been caught up in those negative ideas, we assist in their purification, much as salt was used to kill germs in food and in wounds as well. In ancient times, before the advent of antibiotics or even ready access to pure water, salt was poured in wounds to prevent the onset of gangrene. The world may occasionally find the message of Jesus and those who bring it about as welcome as salt in a wound but we have something they need even if they do not recognize it as such.

Of course, we most often think of salt now as a flavor enhancer in food. Connie and I watch a good deal of food related programming and “Top Chef” is one of our favorites. At least two or three times a season, a chef is sent home from the competition because one of the judges, usually Tom Colicchio, says, “you just didn’t season your dish.” What Chef Colicchio is missing, of course, is salt. It doesn’t take much – just a little salt will spread throughout a dish, raising its flavor profile. It is, as Episcopal scholar Robert Farrar Capon writes, the “music of cookery, the indispensable bass line over which all tastes and smells form their harmonies.” Can we Christians be the same in our world? Can just a few of us subtly alter the flavor of the community in which we are immersed by providing a faithful witness to the teachings of Jesus and the love of the Father? Jesus apparently thought so. To quote again from Scott Hoezee, “Following hard on the heels of his Beatitudes, Jesus is saying that if you’re going to live those grace-filled attitudes, then it’s not enough to work inside the church community, it’s not enough to nurture a strong interior life of spirituality. No, the result of all your piety must be pouring yourself out onto this earth so as to bring out life’s complex and beautiful flavors.”

Again, these observations about salt are commonplace but I did come across one this week that I found quite new. Perhaps it will be so for some of you as well. John J. Pilch of Georgetown University writes about a still-common sight in modern rural Israel-Palestine that would have been ubiquitous in Jesus’ time. In villages with traditional ways, homes feature a clay-oven built outside the house. These ovens would have shared by extended families or even by the entire village in the first century. They are fueled by patties of what would seem to us an odd mixture of animal dung and salt. Pilch writes, “A slab of salt was placed at the base of the oven and upon it the salted dung patty. Salt has catalytic properties which cause the dung to burn. Eventually the salt slab loses its catalytic ability and becomes useless. Or as Jesus says, “It is good for nothing but to be thrown outside where it can still provide a sure footing in a muddy road.”” If you are not convinced by this parallel, it’s worthwhile to note that in the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his contemporaries, the word for Earth and clay-oven is the same. We are the salt of the clay-oven.

Our role as salt for the world, then, is to allow ourselves to be mixed into the often dirty realities of our world to become a catalyst. As long as we continue to carry the message of Jesus, we can be a catalyst, changing those around us so that they, too, can be set alight by the Spirit of God. But if we lose our distinctive nature as the followers of Christ, then we become indistinguishable from the world around us and we can no longer catalyze the world. As salt for the clay-oven, our task lies in mixing with the world and changing it.

Of course, if we are the kind of catalyst that causes the world to ignite, then one of the by-products will be light. Pretty clever of Jesus to go from the salt-fire of the oven to the fire of a lamp, wouldn’t you say? Just as the salt for the clay-oven must be mixed with dung to be of use,

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so the light of a lamp is no good to anyone if kept isolated under a basket. Instead, it must be allowed to spread throughout the house. Nor can we hide our light under a bushel. Faith that is strictly a private affair, faith that is carefully compartmentalized so that it does not affect our whole lives, faith that is not shared with those who need the light, that kind of faith is no faith at all. No, our light must be the way for others to see God working in our lives, so that they will learn the ways of God and give God glory by beginning to live in the same way. We must let our light shine.

What follows Jesus' teachings about salt and light is a passage that has troubled readers and preachers for centuries. I am certainly not going to claim to solve those problems for you this morning but I will offer some questions and observations. Like good Baptists, you will have to decide for yourselves how much stock to put in them. Is Jesus' teaching about careful observance of the Law here meant for a strictly Jewish audience? We read in Acts that the first Church Council released Gentile believers from most of the strictures of the Law of Moses but those Jewish believers continued to keep the Law in its entirety. Was that understanding of Jesus' teaching by those who'd heard him consistent with his intent? Or are we safe in understanding that Jesus' fulfillment of the Law meant that his resurrection, his victory over Sin and Death, meant that the Law should now be redefined? I will say that I have faith as a believer of Gentile descent that the decision of James and Peter and the rest apply to me but what should be my relation to the jots and tittles of the commandments given to Moses? I am content to follow in the teaching of Paul, who held up the Law as that which teaches us just how far from the will of God we will drift, left to our own devices, bereft of the Spirit of Christ which comes to dwell in us and to change us forever.

I am also strangely comforted by Jesus' assertion that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. For even though the Pharisees were scrupulous about keeping the Law, Jesus found their approach wanting. Why? Because they allowed the letter of the Law to override the spirit of the Law. As Jesus reminded them on one occasion, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." Tithes and observances are far less important than our loving attitude toward our Loving Creator and our fellow creatures. If we live lives of service, if we put the needs of others before our own desires, if we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God, then I believe that we are living lives that fulfill the Law in the way Jesus intended.

This is, after all, the way Jesus lived. Jesus, who was known from time to time to break a small rule or two in favor of compassion, said on the night that he was betrayed that he had a new commandment for his disciples. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." How did he love us? By giving himself for us; by living a life of true righteousness, completely obedient to our Loving God, and being willing to die to point us on the way to Life. "My body is broken for you," he said, "my blood is poured out as a new covenant." And what did he ask us to do in return? To remember; to go to those in need and to minister to them as he would have done; to be a blessing to the weary and the sad; to seek first the will of God in our lives. My sisters and my brothers, the calling is upon us. We are to be the salt that lights the fires of faith in the world; the salt that changes those around us; the light that enables folks to see the way of the Lord. Let us take up our calling and impact our world in remembrance of Jesus.