

SALT AND LIGHT

MATTHEW 5:13-20

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
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There was a film biography of Jesus done more than forty years ago. The script was the Gospel of Matthew, and that was the title of the film. It was shot in black and white. Directed by an Italian director, Pier Paolo Pasolini, it depicted Jesus as intense, active, moving. Throughout the film, he was walking and talking, and the Sermon on the Mount was not delivered seated on a grassy hillside, as we so often see it depicted in Biblical illustrations, but on the move, climbing a mountain. The words that Jesus spoke were short phrases, terse almost, uttered to His disciples as He was traversing rocky, rugged terrain.

Pasolini dedicated the film to the late Pope John XXIII. He said the pope was directly responsible for it. It seems that the director got tied up in a huge traffic jam in Florence caused by a papal visit to the city. So frustrated was he that he checked in to a hotel. There was nothing on television but news coverage of the pope's visit. He had nothing with him to read, so he picked up the Bible (yes, they have Gideon Bibles even in Italy!) and began to read. So startled with what he found there was he that he made a commitment to make a film, using the text of the gospel as his script, and he did.

It has been written (on Wikipedia) that "as a reputed atheist, the reverential nature of Pasolini's film was surprising, but the film maker himself said, 'If you know that I am an unbeliever, then you know me better than I do myself. I may be an unbeliever, but if I am, then I am an unbeliever with a nostalgia for belief.'"

The film critic Roger Ebert listed the film in his list of great movies, and said that it was realistic, in that it did not try to glorify or aggrandize, but presented the authentic words of Jesus.

During the month of February, we'll be looking at some of these authentic words of Jesus, some of the things He said in the Sermon on the Mount.

These are the authentic teachings of Jesus, and they are as fresh today as when he uttered them.

Some of them are crystal clear; some of them are hard to understand. Some build us up to the heights; others take us down to the depths.

Our teachings today span that spectrum.

First, Jesus calls us the salt of the earth. That phrase has exactly the same meaning today as it did then. It means we're the best, the greatest, the one to be chosen above all others. But even as Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, He issues a warning: "If the salt has lost its taste, its savor, its flavor, what good is it? It is good for nothing except being thrown out and trodden under foot."

Well, up north, there is a lot of salt being throw out, on streets and roads and sidewalks right about now, and that salt, once it has been used for that purpose, is of no use or value again.

A little pinch of salt is sufficient. Too much renders food unpalatable, inedible, and down-right harmful. Many of us are on a salt-free or low sodium diet, and we know what it means to have to give up salt.

Well, Jesus is telling us as Christians that we are to be that which adds zest, that which preserves, that which thaws out the ice and freezes the ice cream in the world in which we live. We are to be the agent that transforms for the better whatever situation we find ourselves in.

And we can't ever stop, for then, we're no good to anyone, especially the kingdom of God.

Then we are to be the light of the world. This is an awesome responsibility. Jesus is the light of the world. If He tells us that we are to be the light of the world, that means that we are to be like Him. Indeed, we are to be Him! Some days, the only Jesus that people will see is you. Or me. Frightening, isn't it? If the only Jesus the world will know is the Jesus we show them...but that is the way it is. We are often guilty of hiding our light under a bushel. We are called to let our light shine, so that the world may see our good works and give glory to God.

Now last week, I quoted that old first question and answer of the Short Catechism, and I talked about enjoying God, living in a state of blessedness. Well, that's the second half of the answer. The first is to glorify God.

How can we possibly glorify the One to whom all glory, power, dominion and praise belong? Well, we can give God the glory. You want to glorify God? Put a smile on your face. Have a kind word for every person you meet. Treat everyone you encounter with dignity and respect. Let your light shine, and you will give God glory.

Salt and light are easy. It is the law part of these teachings that is hard. There is an irony here. Jesus was accused, over and over again, of breaking the law, particularly the Sabbath law. And, if I read my New Testament correctly, Jesus did defy the Sabbath laws, and maybe even encouraged His disciples to do so.

That behavior stands in stark contrast with the words that are written here.

George Buttrick, in his commentary on this passage, points out that Jesus came as the Redeemer, and that He came to redeem the law as well as to fulfill it. He came to bring the law of love, not of license, the law of liberty, not of ligatures.

Buttrick says that there are six examples in scripture that follow this passage that show what Jesus came to do to the law. He writes: "Christ pioneered in that he enlarged the law. He changed its negative into positive: the old 'thou shalt not' became in his lips and life 'blessed are they that...' He changed its narrowness into wide horizons. The love shown by the old law toward friends is shown in the new law also toward foes, and the loyalty formerly given to one nation is to be given to all mankind. He changed its shallowness into depth: the constraint that before...rested on the act now rested on the motive...He pioneered in that he redeemed the law. Laws soon set teeth on edge, not only by their coercion but by the despair that follows (our) impossible attempt to fulfill them. Christ brought forgiveness for failure, and new power to indwell the new resolve. He redeemed the old Sabbath in the new Lord's day, the old Passover in the new table of the Sacrament, the old law of sacrifice in his Cross." *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 7, page 292.*

The next two weeks, we'll look at the six examples of how Jesus redeemed and transformed the law.

But one word in closing: the tone in which Jesus spoke, the inflection, the laughter, the irony in His words, is totally lacking in all recorded scripture.

I've come to realize that Jesus was the master of irony, and that so often His words of irony are taken literally.

I think Jesus had a wonderful time putting on the Pharisees, putting them down because of their righteousness, which was the worst form of self-righteousness.

Our closing verse in this passage says that except your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, then you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Knowing what sinners we are, we should turn in despair at those words. But wait! Here comes the irony: Jesus died for our sins. He paid the price for our transgressions. He literally purchased our admission ticket into the kingdom of heaven with His death upon the cross. He has become our righteousness!

And His righteousness, as our righteousness, surpasses all!

Isn't that the good news of the gospel?

Let us pray.

Lead us, Lord, lead us in thy righteousness. Make thy way plain before our faces. For it is thou Lord, thou Lord, only, that makes us dwell in safety, and in hope of heaven. Amen.