



Rev. George Ragsdale
“Salt and Light, Heart and Soul”
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Almost from the beginning, Christians have wondered what to do with what we call the Old Testament. The Law of Moses is complicated, confusing, complex. The Words of the Prophets cut deep, challenging and chastising at every turn. Do we live by them, follow them – or does the teaching of Jesus take their place? In today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel, we hear some of the hardest words in the Bible. Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Jesus just makes things harder. It’s no longer a question of “Will we follow the law and prophets?” With Jesus, the question is, “will our lives *fulfill* them?” In Jesus’ day, the Scribes and Pharisees were pretty good at following the law, the best at it, to be honest. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells this story about a Pharisee and a tax collector who come up to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee stands up in the middle of the place and prays, loudly, “Lord, I thank you that I’m not like this tax collector. I fast, I pray, I read my Bible, I even tithe. Lord, thank you, that I’m so good.” And the tax collector’s prayer? He stands in the corner, in the shadows, and prays, almost in a whisper, “Lord, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.”

There’s nothing really wrong with the Pharisee’s prayer – it’s like many of the Psalms. And there’s nothing wrong with his acts of faithful service. Yet, Jesus says, it is the tax collector who goes away justified in the eyes of God. The problem with the Pharisee seems to be his motivation – was he doing what he was doing to get attention, to make a show, to emphasize himself, or – like the tax collector – was it about God, about clinging to God, leaning on God’s mercy?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls us to a “righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.” That higher righteousness, it’s all about motivation. What is it, deep in your heart, that’s driving you?

That’s kind of been the question we’ve been asking together during the past month. How is it with your soul? It’s one thing to say go and do good things, be a good person, help others. It’s something else all together to ask, “What’s it like deep down in your heart?” John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, often spoke about “religion of the heart.” In a sermon he wrote on this very passage from Matthew, he describes it as having deep within us “the character, the stamp, the living impression [of Christ] who is the fountain of beauty and love, the original source of all excellency and perfection.”

Religion of the heart. How is it with your soul? That was really important to Wesley. So much so that he was often asked, “Well, isn’t that enough? If I have that character of Jesus, the fountain of beauty and love, in my heart isn’t that enough?”

His answer was always emphatically NO. Any religion, any faith, any relationship with God that’s all about you and your heart will always be a dying faith. Jesus says as much in today’s reading. “You are the salt of the earth,” he says. But salt has a purpose and if salt forgets its purpose, it’s not salt anymore. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. “But if you hide light under a basket, it just leaves darkness.” Faith and religion of the heart that has no outward expression is like salt that’s lost its flavor, or light that’s hidden under a basket.

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.”

In preparing for today's sermon I ran across a book that I would recommend to you. The title alone will make you want to jump up right now and run to the bookstore to get a copy. The book is called *Salt: A World History*. It chronicles the history of salt through the great civilizations up to the present day. What the book points out is that for most of human history, salt was one of the most valuable commodities in the world – in some cases, traded as currency. Only in the last 100 years, thanks to modern geology and chemistry, have we discovered that salt really is everywhere, in great abundance.

Salt is everywhere. Some would even argue there's too much salt. The First Lady was with Walmart executives a few weeks back announcing plans to reduce the salt in their processed foods by 25 percent. Salt is everywhere. The United States uses more salt than any other country in the world, almost half of it on roadways as a melting agent.

Salt is everywhere. I went out to dinner last week. We have a six-month old at home so we don't do that much anymore. I was trying to be healthy so I ordered grilled salmon with spinach, but when the food arrived and I took the first bite, I couldn't believe it – all I could taste was salt. No flavor, no texture, no taste at all, really – just salt.

I've had that salmon on my mind all week. Jesus' words, "You are the salt of the earth," and that salmon. I began to wonder if maybe we've let our faith become like salt in all the wrong ways? Has our faith enhanced and flavored and preserved life, or has it become something bland, banal, uninteresting. In the novel *Diary of a Country Priest*, the writer suggests that pastors have become the "syrup of the earth." What does syrup do? It sweetens and softens, coats and comforts – but it doesn't really change anything, there's nothing really life-giving about syrup. But salt? You have to have it, if you're going to live.

One of my mentors in ministry likes to say that his own call to ministry came, in part, from watching pastors and churches during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. He says they were doing – for lack of a better word – stuff that was really interesting, dangerous, transformative with their lives. As he watched them marching, as he watched them hauled off to prison, refusing to fight back, linking arms to sing and pray he says he began to think, "I want to know more about a God who could lead them to do stuff like that."

That's got to be what Jesus means when he says, "You are the light of the world," "you are the salt of the earth." Living life in such a way that people say, I want to know more about a God who make those crazy people down at Myers Park do something like that."

I think about those words from Jesus that we heard last week, the start of this sermon we've picked up again this morning. Jesus lists off all these people who are blessed, fortunate, joyful, lucky – and it doesn't make any sense. How are those who mourn blessed? Or the meek, how are they joyful? The merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted, how are they lucky or fortunate?

They are blessed because Jesus says they are, because Jesus knows something about the ways of God that we do not know. And those words, those promises, those blessings from Jesus enable us to be salt and light in a world overcome with bland, banal darkness.

I remember a trip I once made to Honduras with a group from Duke Chapel. I remember it for two reasons. The first reason is that I've never worked so hard in my life, building a house for a widower and his three children. One day I remember in particular we spent carrying 50 pound bags of sand up the side of a mountain in rain for seven hours.

The second thing I remember is a trip to meet some of the Mayan descendents, living on a nearby hillside in absolute poverty. There was no power, no running water, very little food. We met with them for several hours in the tiny church they had built from scrap boards and

heard how they'd been relegated to farming on a rocky mountaintop, taken advantage of by the government, even by the church. It was an awful visit, in part because many of us wanted to do something for them, to help out. But we were there just to listen and then, at the end of time, our guide asked if someone from our group would pray for them.

All of us, on the way back to our worksite, were incredibly frustrated. But our guide explained that while there was work to be done...what's really important is taking the time to listen to someone's story, to notice them, to really see them as best you can, to hear their sorrow, to begin to feel something, maybe just a tiny fraction, of the ache that comes from complete powerlessness, and just cry out to God. Standing in that little church, I think all of us felt like that tax collector Jesus talked about. A trip that had mostly been about us, what we could do, suddenly became about God. With nothing to do but pray, we had to lean a little deeper, a little harder on the mercy and grace of God.

Maybe that's the thing about being salt and light. It's not really about power or effectiveness or achievement. It is about faithfulness. So I might ask, as I often ask myself, what was the most faithful part of that trip? When were we most like salt? When were we most like light? When we were working, helping, getting our hands dirty? Or when all we could do was stand there and cry out, "God, we need your help." If all we'd done was work, that trip could've ended up being all about us. If all we'd done was pray, I suspect someone might've begun to wonder what the point of praying was in the first place.

John Wesley had it right. It's not religion of the heart or religion of the hand – it's not love for God or love for neighbor – it's not a prayerful life that seeks the mind of Christ or a life of serving as Christ served. It's both. One without the other is just not very interesting: bland, banal, dark. But both? They're a whole lot saltier, a whole lot brighter.

"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world," Jesus says. With our hearts and our hands, by the grace of Jesus Christ, we go to be who we are.