

heaven" (v. 20). The Pharisees might be better than anyone else in terms of following religious rules, but Jesus offer a new approach to righteousness not based on rigorous law-keeping. Jesus asks us to be salt of the earth and light to the world, fulfilling the law in new ways, as he does.

So what do righteous people look like? They look like salt. Jesus says his disciples are to be *"the salt of the earth"* (v. 13). In Jesus' day, salt was a valuable commodity used for sacrifice, purification, seasoning and preservation. Christians are to play all of these roles in the world, and are to remain salty by staying true to their mission and avoiding contamination. *"If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"* asks Jesus. It can't, of course. Contaminated salt *"is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot"* (v. 13).

Jesus doesn't say, *"Try to be the salt of the earth."* He doesn't say, *"It might be good for you to take a course and learn how to be salt."* He doesn't say, *"Go to the elders and have them pray that God will grant you saltiness."* He doesn't say, *"Take 30 minutes every morning to meditate and try to reach, and to be in touch with, your inner saltiness."*

His comment is quite straightforward. *"You are the salt of the earth. This is what and who you are."* It's not a command, but a description. Too often, we're afraid that we're not "salty" enough; but when we get agitated about our saltiness, we make it all about ourselves instead of about Jesus. Whatever Jesus actually had in mind when he said, *"You are the salt of the earth,"* we know that salt as an element has no value to itself. Salt is salt. The value of salt is in its application to other things Jesus calls us "salt" because we exist for others.

Righteous people also look like light: lighthouses, spotlights, flashlights, lamps, candles in the darkness. *"You are the light of the world,"* says Jesus (v. 14). Once again, Jesus' statement is a description, not a command. And, like salt, light does not exist for its own benefit, but for the benefit of everything it illuminates. Light provides warmth and energy to the world around it, and encourages life and growth. We do the very same thing when we act as the light of the world, and when we reflect the light of Christ to others.

"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket," says Jesus, *"but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house"* (v. 15). Our righteousness as Christians depends on doing whatever we can to be lights to each other and to the world around us.

We are to be open and honest instead of hiding in the dark, to offer other people warmth and encouragement instead of being cold and discouraging, to be an energy source for others, so that together we can advance the mission of Christ in the world.

"Let your light shine before others," says Jesus, *"so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"* (v. 16). Our challenge is to shine as a Christian community so that others will see what a life of love and faithfulness looks like. In a world of self-righteousness, we can be an example of Christ-righteousness, in right relationship with God and neighbor. There is so much darkness all around us, so much loneliness and isolation. Righteous Christians can truly be a light to the world, beacons of peace and reconciliation in a world that is so often full of conflict. When we perform such good works, people will see them, says Jesus, and they will *"give glory to your Father in heaven"* (v. 16).

The Pharisees may have been the spiritual superstars of their day, but their righteousness was rooted in rules and regulations. Jesus respected their passion for the law, but criticized their failure to put it into action. He encouraged his followers to do what the Pharisees *"teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach"* (23:3). The Pharisees were, no doubt, good people: they were not necessarily cruel, heartless or unpleasant; but, when all was said and done, they were trying to be good for the wrong reasons, and Jesus could not lift up the Pharisees as the norm for righteousness. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"* he said. *"For you tithe mint, dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith"* (23:23).

The Pharisees cannot be our role models for righteousness, because they neglected the justice, mercy and faith that are part of a right relationship with God and neighbor. Nor can we look to the modern day Pharisees who make other Christians feel unworthy through an excessive focus on religious rules and regulations. We have only one role model for righteousness: Jesus Christ, the one who invites us to be salt and light. He offers us the very best peer pressure, that which inspires us to rise to the challenge of advancing his mission in the world. As salt, we can talk with openness and honesty about who we are as Christians. As light, we can bring warmth and energy to the world around us.

There's a story about a troubled mother who had a daughter who was addicted to sweets. One day she approached Gandhi, explained the problem to him and asked whether he might talk to the girl. Gandhi replied: "Bring your daughter to me in three weeks' time and I will speak to her."

After three weeks the mother brought her daughter to him. Gandhi took the young girl aside and spoke to her about the harmful effects of eating sweets excessively and urged her to abandon her bad habit. The mother thanked Gandhi for this advice and then asked him: "But why didn't you speak to her three weeks ago?" Gandhi replied: "Because three weeks ago, I was still addicted to sweets." That's the lesson of being salt and light to others: we must do more than just point out the right road to others, we must be on that road ourselves. For this reason, the integrity of our private lives and private morals, down to the smallest detail, is the real power behind our words.

The difference between the Pharisees' righteousness and the righteousness of Jesus is that one must work for the former, while the righteousness of the latter is a free gift. Paul makes this clear when he writes that he wants to be, "found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith" (Phil. 3:9).

Through our faith in Jesus and the power of his crucifixion to remove our sins, we are already righteous in God's eyes. We need not worry if we are righteous enough. Worrying is what the Pharisees did. In Christ, by his resurrection, we are freed to live anew, as salt and light for the world. Jesus calls us to embrace this new life, flavoring the world by our character and shining into the world by our example. No peer pressure. Ours is a righteousness even a Pharisee would envy.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you said your followers must be the light to the world. Help me, Lord, to be a light to this world, so that my life radiates your message of love, hope, and joy. May I be the beacon leading to You those who seek truth. You also said your disciples must be the salt to this earth. Lord, may I be the salt that takes away the blandness in the routine of living, that prevents the rottenness of hatred and greed from expanding around me, and that brings compassionate healing to anguished souls I encounter. Lord, help me to be light and salt to my neighbors, in your name. Amen.

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Peer Pressure from the Pharisees

Sunday, February 5, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 5:13-20

When it comes to righteousness, the Pharisees are tough to beat. They are the spiritual superstars of their day, exerting an enormous amount of peer pressure on the people around them. Jesus knows that these Jewish leaders are passionate about the law of God, supportive of synagogues and schools, attentive to purity rules and regulations, focused on the resurrection, with a powerful hunger for heavenly rewards. "*I tell you,*" says Jesus, "*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" (v. 20). Jesus says our righteousness is to *exceed* that of the Pharisees. Not just match it, but surpass it. How are we supposed to respond to this?

Peer pressure is a powerful force that can both help us and hurt us. David Greene, host of NPR's "Morning Edition," explains that peer pressure can help us by inspiring us to do the right thing. Sit next to a good student in class, and her study habits can rub off on you. Watch your neighbor install solar panels on his roof, and you might be motivated to do the same thing. Peer pressure can also hurt us: exposed to our very best and brightest peers we may find ourselves discouraged about ourselves: such peer pressure might even cause us to quit.

Todd Rogers, professor of public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School, studied the effects of peer pressure. Says Rogers: "When you are compared to people who are doing a little better than you, it can be really motivating." Someone who is conserving energy might inspire you to use less energy, and someone who is voting might motivate you to vote. But peer pressure turns negative when you are compared to people who are unattainably better than you. If you decide to train for a 5K race with an Olympic distance runner, for example, you are not going to be inspired: you're going to be really intimidated and probably drop out. This is exactly the effect of the Pharisees on the people around them: they were seen as so righteous, no one could live up to their impossibly high standards, so no one even tried.

But Jesus is not interested in making people give up when he says, "*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of*