

The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany
February 13, 2011
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Matthew 5:13-20

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (NIV)

Perhaps you've heard it said you are the only Bible that many people have ever read. Do we understand what this means? People are watching us. People that know we are Christians, people that know we regularly get up and go to church here on Sunday morning, are keeping their eyes on us. People who may not have ever studied the Bible are surely studying us. And Jesus reminds us the same thing this morning as He calls us the salt of the earth and light of the world. We stick out in this world and others are looking our way.

So when they watch us what kind of Bible are they reading? What are people observing as they look at our lives? And what do we want people to see? As we turn to God's Word before us I pray we all come to the same conclusion about what we want others to see in our lives. May it be our prayer today and goal everyday that when people look at us: **We want people to see Jesus.**

Jesus continues to preach and teach the famous Sermon on the Mount to His followers sitting on a mountainside. Jesus tells His disciples "*you are the salt of the earth,*" and also "*you are the light of the world.*" Jesus is teaching His believers, telling us, that we have a very important role on earth. Salt back in the day was not just a seasoning, but a vital preservative. God is preserving this world for the sake of His people. Think of how God would have spared even Sodom for just 10 believers. For now God preserves the whole world so we may serve God as lights in it. Jesus says people would not take a lamp and put it under a bowl. How many of you have ever lit a candle in the house and covered it up? It defeats the purpose of it. You put a lamp up on a stand and place lights on the top of a hill. So we too are to serve the purpose God has given to us - to let our lights shine.

All people could agree there are many ways to do this. One day away from Valentine's Day we will hear a lot about love. True love shows itself in actions, doesn't it? Be kind and patient and caring and gentle to all people. Look for ways to lend a hand

and help others. Shovel your neighbor's driveway and watch over their house and property. Speak well of people. Children obey your parents, and parents be consistent and do not frustrate your children. Be dependable at work. Look to be selfless and giving, instead of selfish and taking. Take time to pray, praise, and give thanks. Be a friend to someone who needs one. Offer comfort to someone who is hurting. Give generously. ***"Let your let shine before men that they may see your good deeds."***

Can't we all agree these are good things to do? But as important as these are, there is something even more important to God - why we do them! Why do we follow God's commands? What do we want people to see? Do we want people to see us - to see what good people we are? Do we want people to see our good deeds so they might praise us? At times, because of our sinfulness, we would say that is exactly what we want. In Jesus' day there were also people who longed for this kind of attention. They had the titles of teachers of the law and the Pharisees. They loved to make a show of their good deeds. They prayed each day in a place they would be sure people could hear them. They gave generous gifts, but did so especially when eyes were on them. They loved to be praised by men.

But even worse, they thought they deserved to be praised by God. They felt they earned something before the Holy One. After all, not only did they not break any of God's big important commandments, but these teachers of the law even added some of their own laws to keep. When we do good things do we ever feel this way? Do we think we have a pretty good standing before God based on our actions? Do we feel we have earned something? Do we ever have the attitude that turns to God and says *"Hey now, Lord, you owe me one here?"* If so, we too need to listen carefully to these shocking, startling words of Jesus. ***"Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."***

To understand just how earth shattering this news is, try to think of the nicest, most generous, best do-gooder you have ever known. Maybe it is someone famous for their kindness or good deeds, maybe it is a sweet grandmother or friend. No one had a better reputation for giving and doing and being the best people around than the Pharisees! Now, Jesus says you need a righteousness that surpasses the best of the best. That's impossible! Who can do this? Jesus is teaching that if you break the least of God's commandments (not just commit perjury but tell a little white lie; not just murder but have anger or hatred toward your brother; not just commit adultery but lust after another) you will be least. God demands perfection - absolute holiness. Anyone who sins is a law breaker and is guilty before Him. That would include you and me. On our own we will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is why, dear friends, when people watch our lives we want them to see more than just us and our deeds. Because based on who we are and what we have done we come up short of God's glory. That's why we want them to see Jesus. Because Jesus has done what we could not. Did you listen to what Jesus said here? ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest***

letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Because of the message of forgiveness Jesus preached and the company He kept, the Pharisees accused Jesus of setting aside the laws of Moses. But this was not the case at all! Jesus came not to abolish God’s laws but to fulfill them. Jesus came to meet all of God’s demands. Not one word, literally not one little mark or *yod* (the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet), will be set aside. All of God’s Word will be fulfilled - in Christ. All of God’s promises will be kept - in Christ. Every *T* will be crossed and every *I* will be dotted until the Christ would bring for us a perfect righteousness. Not the least stroke of a pen would disappear because Jesus will carry out all of God’s demands. Those demands included Jesus paying the price of our sin by suffering and dying on a cross. God demanded payment in the form of His own Son’s innocent blood to save us from hell. And our salvation was secured on the third day! Our sins are washed away and Jesus covers us with His righteousness.

Now you and I have the easy part. We are salt. We are lights. It is not about what we must or should or have to do. It is all about what we are. In our baptisms we have been clothed with Christ. Through the good news of the gospel our hearts have been changed. For those of us who are now filled with faith in Jesus Christ we can’t help but be a light in this world. When Jesus’ love fills us we will shine. What do we want people to see when they look at our lives as we let our lights shine? ***“That they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”***

That’s exactly why we want people to see Jesus. We want to attract others to us that they may know the Savior too - that they too may praise our Father in heaven who sent them salvation. That’s why when people look at me I don’t want them to see a person that is better than everyone else - just a person who stands forgiven in Christ. I don’t want them to see a person who never has any fears or troubles - just a person who has a refuge and strength in a God who is an ever present help in trouble. I don’t want to be a person who needs people to praise me for the things I do, because I only love because He first loved me. When people look at me I know on this side of heaven they will never see a perfect person, but I pray they see a person rejoicing because Jesus has covered me in a righteousness that far surpasses that of the Pharisees and is my ticket to heaven.

What could be better when people watch us and read our lives than having them see the same thing they would if they opened up their Bibles - we want them to see Jesus. There is nothing better than to be able to say with Paul ***“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”*** (Galatians 2:20). Dear friends, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Amen.