

Matthew 5:13-20

Children are often asked what they want to be in life. “A fireman,” “a policeman,” “a teacher,” are all common responses. Jesus does not do this when making disciples. He did not ask Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the others, if they wanted to follow Him. He did not say, “Do you want to be an apostle?” He simply said, “*Follow Me.*” He does the same thing with us. He does not say, “Do you want to be salt and light?” In our text He simply says, “*You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.*”

God’s Law holds out to us what we can be...if we obey it. But the Gospel of Christ declares to us who we already are. This is an important distinction. “Do you want to be a saint who enters the kingdom of heaven?” asks the Law, “then your righteousness will have to exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.” But the Gospel never holds out to us what we can be. The Gospel declares that because you are baptized into Christ, therefore His righteousness is yours, and Jesus’ righteousness does exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. With the Gospel it’s not, “You can enter the kingdom of heaven,” but “You have a place in the kingdom of heaven already; it’s yours now in Christ Jesus.”

Both salt and light, because of what they are--they are great blessings--have great responsibility. A world without salt and light would be a horrible place. There were no salt trucks back in Jesus’ day, but salt was necessary for the preserving of food. Today we may not realize how much we value salt until we are forced to cut most of it out of our diet. Light is a “no-brainer.” Without light we would live in darkness. It is incumbent upon salt, therefore, to be salty, and upon light to shine. But it’s not necessary to instruct salt and light in these things. Salt is salty by nature, and light shines. If salt is not salty, it is no longer salt. The chemical bond has been broken. And if light does not shine, it’s not light.

There are many who look to the Bible as a manual for how to be a Christian. But you were a Christian long before you were given your first Bible. Even before your brain was developed, through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, Jesus made you His Christian child. You were not salt at birth, nor were you light. But in baptism Jesus sprinkled salt upon you. He shined upon you with the light of His Gospel, and you became the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Apart from Christ we are nothing. But joined to Him we are salt and we are light.

And thus we have great responsibility. Not to make the world a better place. Anyone can do that. But to be instruments of Christ through which He salts those around us, and through which He shines the light of His truth and grace upon those still in darkness. A Christian who does not live his faith is useless to God, just as salt that has lost its taste is useless, just as a light that has gone out is worthless. Don’t you just love it when, in the movies, a criminal who runs out of bullets, throws his empty gun at those chasing him? As if his gun is still a weapon to be contended with. But an empty gun is worthless, just as a flashlight that has died, or a match that has gone out is completely useless. You’re not going to throw a dead flashlight at the darkness, are you? Without the ability to shine, it’s worthless.

And so Peter was useless to Jesus when he denied his Lord three times. He was salt that had lost its taste. He was light that had gone out. But the only way for salt to lose its saltiness is to not be salt anymore, for the chemical bond to break. And so Peter had severed himself from Jesus. His faith had gone out. He did not salt those who asked him if he knew Jesus. He denied his Savior instead. Peter broke his bond with Jesus. He was not salt nor light anymore. He was fit only to be trampled underfoot in the Judgment.

What about us? How is our saltiness, and is our light shining? Do not take a pen and notepad with you to see how often you witness to Christ every day. Do not check your giving statement to see how much you gave to the Lord last year. You are not the salt of the earth and the light of the world because of what you do, but because of who you are. You are in Christ. He is the Light within you. He is the Salt within you. Your actions do not make you salt and light. Nor will your sins stop you from being salt and light. You are salt and you are light because you are joined to Jesus. He baptized you. He preaches His Word into you. He feeds you His body and blood. It is His actions that make you salt and light, not yours.

So why does Jesus give us a warning in our text if we are salt and light because of Him, and not because of us? It's because, like Peter, we fall so easily. If it was up to us, we would sever our bond with Jesus each and every day. If it was up to us, we would always be hiding our light of faith under a basket. If it was up to us, we would lose our saltiness and be fit only for judgment. The Law condemns us because we do not measure up. We fail as salt and light. All of you do, and so do I.

But friends, if God can show mercy to Peter, then can't He show mercy to us? "*How shall its saltiness be restored?*" Jesus says about salt that has lost its taste. This is how: by becoming rejoined to Jesus. Through confession and absolution. Through repentance and forgiveness. By returning to our baptism. Jesus restored Peter by forgiving him. And He also forgives you. There is nothing that you have done which is so horrible that God cannot forgive it. If God did not forgive, then He would not be God, because it is the nature of God so show mercy. He who made you salt and light went to the cross because we keep hiding our light under a basket, and we keep losing our taste as salt. But Jesus was severed from His Father for your sake. The bond between them was broken as God forsook His Son on the cross. Jesus endured this for you so that no matter how much you fail, no matter how much you sin, you have a Savior who died for you; your place is in the arms of your forgiving Father.

If your light is not shining too brightly, if your saltiness has been rather bland, return to your baptism. Remember that Jesus joined Himself to you there. The more we distance ourselves from Jesus' Word and His Sacraments, the less our light will shine, and the greater danger there is of our severing our bond with Him. This is not what Jesus wants for you. "*Let your light shine before others,*" He says. Not so that they can see you, but so that "*They may see your good works and glorify (not you, but) your Father who is in heaven.*" We are not salt and light for our own sake, but for the sake of others. Our light of faith does not shine to draw attention to ourselves, but to point others to the mercy of Jesus. And so go out and salt the earth, go out and shine with the light of Christ. It's not that you must. But rather, you will. You will give glory to God in these ways because of who you are, because you are, in Christ, salt and light. Amen.