

If we looked at a Top 10 list of misconceptions people have about the church right at the top of the list would be the idea that the church specializes in making people feel guilty. Why do think some people get that idea?

One pastor decided to interview his congregation to ask why they went to church, and what they expected from sermons.

Their response surprised him. What many of them said was:
"I go to church to hear what I'm doing wrong
and to be told what I need to do to get right."¹

When Jesus calls us to "repent" and follow him we certainly hear a call to turn our lives around, but can Jesus' message really be boiled down to a command?

"Do this, but don't do that."

This morning we're going to take a hard look at verse 20, in today's Gospel reading from Matthew.

This is what Jesus said:
"For I tell you, unless your righteousness **exceeds** that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

To get at the meaning of this verse, let's take a step back and look at the larger context in Matthew. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew definitely doesn't hold back Jesus' call for repentance.

In chapter seven, we hear these words from Jesus:

- "Judge not, lest you be judged."
- "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction."
- "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Matthew a the gospel with a strong call to discipleship, to responsibility and accountability.

So, knowing this about Matthew, gives us a clue to an important part of verse 20, from today's Gospel. You'll notice that the Scribes and Pharisees are mentioned, in verse 20, not because they were so bad, but because they were so good.

¹William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 19.

Jesus tells us,
 "that our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees."

So did Jesus' come simply to tell us we need to be good, as the Pharisees were good?
 Is that the point of verse 20?

If that were the case, we'd all be in trouble,
 because when it came to following the letter of the law, no one out-did the Pharisees.
 When it came to outer-righteousness, they had a corner on the market,
 and they didn't let anyone forget it either.

But notice, verse 20, doesn't mention anything about being good, like the Pharisees.
 It doesn't say be good as the Pharisees were good.
 Rather, Jesus tells us, that our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Somehow, we're being called to a different kind of righteousness,
 a righteousness that goes deeper and higher than that of the Pharisees.

Today, Jesus gives us a glimpse into that kind of righteousness,
 as we tune in to the second section of His Sermon on the Mount.

Last week, in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 1-12, we heard the Beatitudes.
 "Blessed are the poor in spirit.
 Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.

Jesus blessed those who are failures in the eyes of the world.

Notice that we aren't hearing any commands here.
 No imperatives to "do this" or "do that."

Instead, Jesus gives us himself. He is at the heart of each blessing.
 He declares us blessed. He gives us his kingdom.

He blesses all the poor, hungry, and persecuted. All who thirst for righteousness.
 All those whom the world has cursed.

And then in verse eleven, just before the beginning of today's Gospel reading,
 the Beatitudes shift from the third to the second person.

Jesus turns from the suffering multitudes
 toward his own disciples..... toward us, and says,
 "Blessed are you."

Can you see him turning? And saying, "Blessed are you."

And yet we begin to squirm a bit with his gaze fixed so directly on us.

"Blessed are you when they revile you, persecute you,
utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...
that's the way they treated prophets before you."

Is Jesus calling this rag-tag band of fishermen and ex-tax collectors, prophets?

Simon Peter might've looked over his shoulder,
Nathanael might've turned to Mary Magdalene and shrugged
"Is he talking to us? Is he calling us prophets?"

"Yes," says Jesus.
"Prophets. Truth-tellers."

"You." "You are the salt of the entire earth...
"You are the light of the whole world."
"Let your light shine."

Literally, in the Greek,
Jesus' words read..."You are Salt, You are Light."

There isn't a command here.
Jesus doesn't say that we ought to be salt, or we should be light.

He says to his disciples, and he says to us, "You are."

So how does this new self-definition, this proclamation of who we are in Christ,
lead us into a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees?

Let's take a look at the image of salt first.
By itself, salt doesn't seem very significant.
Just tiny grains of white crystals.
But without the flavoring of salt, food just isn't the same.
If you've ever had to go on a salt-free diet, you know exactly what this means.

Jesus is saying to the disciples, "You are Salt,
you are important for the effect you produce in this world."
Even just a few of you, sprinkled around in the right places, can have an important impact.

Remember that God has placed each of us in a specific family and in a specific circle of friends
and co-workers. God has placed us there for a reason. And God says to us, "I want you to live
your life in such a way that everyone who knows you, can look at you and see me."

You are the salt of the earth. Let the flavor of your life impact the lives of everyone around you." And when we do, Jesus promises that our faithfulness will make a difference!

Light like salt, is most important, for what it enables to happen.

You don't stare at a light bulb.

Light is valuable in that it enables us to see something else.

Switch on a light, and a dark room is transformed.

One congregation that I know of, every year on Good Friday, toward the end of the service, pauses for a moment in total darkness. And at night, their Sanctuary is pitch black.

Then one candle is lit on the altar and the whole sanctuary is reached by the light, of just that one candle.

"You are the light of the world," says Jesus.

Without you, the world cannot see what it is.

"Worldly" people don't know how superficial they are, until they come face-to-face with someone who isn't.

People don't realize how many things they've become a slave to, until they meet just one person who knows the freedom of living in Christ.

Without you...without the light of God's grace and forgiveness shining through, others will look in the wrong directions for peace.

Even people who look good on the outside, can point others in the wrong direction, if they point to their own moral goodness, instead of Jesus' mercy and love for sinners.

Taking credit, for being a "basically good person" will only point others down the same dead-end road of the Pharisees.

Instead of finding peace, people will only find the emptiness of pride and hypocrisy.

As Jesus said in Matthew, chapter 23,
"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!
You clean the outside of the cup and dish,
but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."

"First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

That's what it means to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees.

It means not putting up a false front. Not having to pretend you have it all together. Because, honestly, not one of us does.

Instead, give your sins to the only one who can make you whole.

Jesus says, "You don't have to pretend to be righteous. Trust in my righteousness."

"Put your faith in me once and for all, sacrifice for your sin."

"Then, let the joy of living in my mercy and grace, shine through."

Trust in the promise that "You are salt and light."

Because through you Jesus is busy blessing this world.

It's in the little things you do...

...little things like the way you spend your money,

...the words you use to speak to other people,

...the way you use your bodies,

...and the ways you use your time and talents...

...all of these decisions are transformed from being merely personal choices,
into part of God's great plan for bringing Light to the world.

These are the kind of decisions that give a person the power of integrity.

And having integrity is what being salt and light is all about.

In just a few minutes, you'll be coming forward to this altar,

to receive the true Body and Blood of Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who is the Light of the World,

calls you, his salt of the earth. He calls you, his light of the world.

And in giving you, His bread, you receive His blessing,

that He might give you, to a hungry world. Amen.