**Salt of the Earth**

Based on [1 Cor. 2:1-16](http://biblia.com/books/esv/1Co2.1-16) and [Matthew 5:13-20](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt5.13-20)

Preached on February 5, 2017

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

The Gospel lesson ends with these words from Jesus, “**Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**” That sounds like a tall order, except when we remember that we have one thing that the scribes and the Pharisees lacked. We have faith, and we are righteous before God by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

There are two things that happen when one becomes a true disciple of Jesus Christ by faith, first he has full assurance of the Love of God and of his salvation. The other thing is that your old self, which was dead in its trespasses and sins--unable to freely do the commands of God--was buried with Christ and a new man was born in you. And this new man is a new creation, and actually wants to do what God commands. He knows Christ has won the victory; he knows that suffering on account of that faith is the only guarantee given him; nevertheless he believes, he believes and wants to advance the kingdom of God.

But Jesus teaches his disciples that this desire to advance the kingdom and to obey God’s will can grow cold. “**You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?**” Salt without taste is worthless, like a lamp that doesn’t give light, or a fire that produces no heat. Disciples are salt; and yet they are a type of salt that can lose their taste, that is, they can become of no earthly good. The rest of Jesus words explain how this can be. Disciples can lose their taste if they hide their Good Works. Second, disciples can lose their taste if they relax God’s Law. Salt is meant for taste; disciples were meant for Good Works.

Disciples can lose their taste by restraining their Good Works. It’s important here to remember what Good Works are. Good works are the fruit of faith, and never exist apart from faith. **For instance, an unbeliever—someone who doesn’t believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ--can certainly help his neighbor, and be an upstanding citizen, win and deserve community service awards for his volunteerism--but when he does these things, they are not Good Works in the biblical sense, because they do not bring Glory to God, but to themselves.** In the same way, if an Christian works, but does not teach Christ in doing so, that is not a Good Work. So when Jesus says, “**let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven**”--the “Good Works” Jesus urges here *is the full teaching and expression of the Christian faith.*

That disciples are salt means that they are the full teaching and expression of Christ to the world, and the first temptation for this salt to lose its taste--is for the disciple to conceal the teaching of Christ, to put the light of God’s Word under a bushel, and not preach or let it show. The reason for this would be to avoid suffering for the gospel. The message of Christ Crucified is opposed by the world, there have been countless martyrs, even in this age. All of the 12 apostles were martyred for preaching Christ Crucified, save one who was exiled unto old age.

This is why Paul, weak and fearful as he was, did not employ human wisdom or eloquent speech in delivering the message of Christ Crucified. You can imagine how much safer it would have been had Paul simply used craft and eloquent speech, which he could have, to rally people to Christ. **He could have covered the crucifix of Christ with garland, wrapped it in a pretty package and delivered it to people without scandal or shame.** And he could have avoided the whippings and beatings and chains he bore as a result. Instead he preached Christ crucified even unto his own violent death, because he is salt of the earth. And he knew that to veil the cross of Christ is to veil the glory of Christ from those who believe. To veil the cross in human wisdom and eloquence is to hide the light of heaven itself under the bushel of worldly ignorance, let it not be so.

Now someone might say, “**Had Paul done what you say here…had he airbrushed the crucified Christ and preached a less offensive gospel, he would have been a false teacher, a wolf among the sheep, incapable of Good Works because such a charlatan surely has no faith to begin with.**” But I will tell you, there are Christians and Pastors, who bear the fruits of faith and Good Works, but their light shines brighter when they are among friends, colleagues, and fellow Christians. And so they will talk one way about Christ in private, such that they confess and know, believe and love the truth; but in public, in the pulpit or elsewhere, where they have reason to believe the full council of God might be rejected or even violently opposed, they censor the hard teachings of Christ.

And I don’t doubt it happens slowly and subtly. Rather than evangelists they become opportunists, and selectively preach only the teachings of God that their audience already believes. They know what Paul says, “**The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned**.” “The unbeliever won’t accept it, so I shouldn’t preach it”, or so they think. So, when such a one does evangelism before the unbelieving world, they will freely tell about the love of God. Who is going to oppose that? Whose going to throw them off a cliff, or throw tomatoes at them for that? Nobody. But they won’t preach about the wrath to come; that there is an eternity in hell destined for those who do not repent and believe the Gospel?

If you saw a group of people about to march off a cliff, what would you think about someone who saw them about to do so, but didn’t warn them. You ask him why and he says, “**Well they won’t listen to me anyway, they don’t believe in cliffs**.” Friends, if hell exists, and I assure you it does, wouldn’t it be among the greatest deeds to go and warn as many people as you can before it’s too late? But there are Christians who believe they’ve done their job when they tell the unbeliever that God loves them, but not that apart from receiving his Son, they are destined for eternal damnation?

Rather than suppress the full council of God , Paul says, “**And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.**” Paul was not concerned about tweaking the word of God, or playing the emphasis game in order to find out how to interpret spiritual truths to the unbeliever. Instead he lets his light shine forth in preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God to spiritual and unspiritual alike. Those who are Christ sheep will hear his voice and will come forth and find pasture in the sheepfold of the saints. Those who are not Christs sheep will either flee in indifference or murmuring scorn; or they will revile and slander and persecute the messenger. Fight or flight, right? Either way we are to carry in our hearts and on our lips everything Christ has commanded, everywhere we go, and in everything we do; and as Paul, we are to bear in our body the marks of Jesus (Gal. 6:17).

This is a good segue into a second way Jesus says the salt of his disciples can lose its saltiness. Someone might say, “I can’t be speaking and defending Christ’s teaching all the time. We are living in a world where there is so much false teaching and around every corner people are publically glorying in their shame. Can’t I just relax and talk about the Superbowl with my unbelieving friends? Can’t I just put my baptismal garment in the closet while I go and have Christmas dinner with family who’s living in sin?”

Friends, the premier calling you have as disciples is to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching all Christ has commanded. And you are asking if you can just put that aside in order to have a good time with people whom you love that are apparently going to hell? Some do teach that, or suppose that, or reason to that absurd conclusion, that our call to Good Works can be suspended in order to keep peace in the family, with friends, and coworkers; because to do so is an impossible task. These are those who relax God’s law, supposedly in the name of the Gospel. But Jesus says, “**Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven**.” Those who relax God’s law, are also salt without taste.

Jesus says you are the salt of the earth. When you blend in with unbelievers, rather than show them Christ, have you not lost your taste? What earthly good are you if you have Jesus in your heart, but not on your lips? This is a hard teaching, but it is the teaching of Christ and I cannot relax it for you. No one is called to salvation without being called to discipleship. And Jesus says to you disciples, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The righteousness of the Pharisees is a righteousness without faith; a righteousness that shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. The Pharisees relaxed God’s law, by replacing it with their own rules and religious observances…ones they could keep better than others…while hiding their true contempt and indifference towards God and neighbor. That’s why they would break the Sabbath to rescue their own son or ox from a well, but cry foul when Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath, would heal his people. And for them, salvation is a game of comparison about who measures up and who doesn’t. They relax the law for themselves, and stiffen it for everyone else.

And so we are tempted to relax the law for ourselves and others. We are tempted to set up a good ole boys club in the church, where we relax the law for ourselves our family and friends, but leave everyone else in contempt. Don’t you see, that’s just moving the Goalposts, and the referee won’t allow it. The true measure of the Law is perfection, and all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ as a gift. Because He Himself fulfilled the perfect law in his body, every jot every tittle, and it’s demands were satisfied when he made atonement, made things right with the law, purchasing you by paying the price for your sin.

By faith, you have been redeemed and called to a new life of salt. And remember, this is not a curse or a burden. Christ is your righteousness by faith. What could you possibly want more than for him to be your neighbor’s righteousness too? He kept the law perfectly, ahead of you, not so that you can ignore his commands, but so that you can keep them with joy, knowing that if and when you fail, due to weakness or frailty or even a bout of stubbornness, God always provides a way out, repentance and forgiveness. Christ has kept God’s law, not so that you are free from all commands, but so that you can keep them freely, without fear. That’s what makes you, his followers, salt of the earth, seasoning the world with the teachings of the Lord of Glory who bought you.