

February 5, 2017  
Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

“Declared Salt and Light”

Matthew 5:13-20

Let’s do a little bit of basic catechism review: Law and Gospel. The Law of God is good. It simply is the perfect design of love of God and neighbor to be lived by God’s created humanity. Adam and Eve breached this Law and ever since, although the Law is very good, because we cannot hope to perfectly keep the Law, it only condemns us.

The Gospel is simply the good news of what God promised to do and brought to pass in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, God made man to live a righteous life for us and then die under the penalty of our sin and rise again in victory. The Law shows us our sin. The Gospel shows us our Savior. It is through this lens of Law and Gospel that we read Holy Scripture. So now let me ask you, is this passage Law or Gospel?

*“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.*

*“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”*

Is this Law or Gospel?

I’m willing to bet that most folks sitting here today hear this more as law than Gospel. I know I usually hear it this way.

Salt of the earth? That which seasons and preserves that which it touches with holiness and godliness? Light of the world? Someone who shines God’s character and presence like a beacon in the night? Does anyone here look at their life and say, “That’s me”? I doubt it.

We hear these words and they strike us more as a duty, a burden, something that says, “Hey you, get off of your duff and get out there and start salting and lighting!”

Now I’m not going to say that’s totally wrong. The simple fact is that God’s Law does point out how we were in fact designed to operate in total faithfulness toward God in perfect love for one another. If we actually did that 100% we’d certainly be that salt and light every minute of every day. We’d probably do it to the point that the fallen world couldn’t stand it and we’d be persecuted, reviled and brought to an end and martyred. And quite frankly, that would be a great, godly way to go out.

But it is important to point out the fact that absolutely none of the people Jesus Christ is proclaiming this message to are doing that. The fact is, this message is directed at the twelve disciples, or possibly the larger number of disciples who are following Him. These are a bunch of guys who are following, trusting, but really not getting Jesus. These are the ones who are going to abandon and even deny Him when push comes to shove in Jerusalem. These are guys who are struggling in the faith, and who even after the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, will still struggle with sin in their lives.

So at the core what are these words of Jesus? These words are Gospel. These words are good news to everyone who calls on the name of Jesus as Lord and struggles to walk in His holy way. These words are not Law that crushes a person with a demand we cannot meet. These words are a declaration of the identity of all those who call Jesus Christ Lord and Savior.

Jesus doesn't say, "Try to be the salt of the earth." He doesn't say, "Work really hard to muster up some brightness and shine a bit on the world." Jesus declares those who follow Him to be salt and light.

And you might be thinking, "That's nice. What difference does it make? I'm still just me."

Actually no, you're not. The Word of God is creative and recreative. This is the same Word that spoke "Let there be"...and spoke all creation into existence. This is the same Word that spoke God's name onto your body and soul in Holy Baptism and washed away your sins and moved you from the kingdom of Satan and death into the kingdom of heaven and life eternal. This is the same Word that declares simple bread and wine to be the body and blood of the risen Christ fed you for salvation. This is the same Word that rolls off the lips of a fallen sinner and mediocre pastor and is in fact the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the declaration of God that your horrible, awful sins stand completely forgiven and nothing stands between you and the presence of almighty God forever!

This Word declares you to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world and you are, because by God's grace received through God's gift of faith, Christ is in you and you in Him; this makes you light and salt.

Now to us it may not seem that way. In our worldliness we're always still looking for the signs and wonders; the powerful happenings that are glorious and bring glory. And unfortunately that sinful flesh sticking to us is always looking for some glory for itself.

But remember; Jesus comes humbly in water, bread, wine, words...as a little baby born in a stable...as a mocked and scorned joke of a messiah dying on a cross. The salt and light of Christ seasons and shines on the earth humbly also.

Think about it. A poor, miserable Christian struggling with addiction says in some twelve step group, "I know Jesus forgives my sins, but it's still so hard to stay sober." That doesn't sound like salt and light to us. But to the self-loathing addict a few seats away it may be, "Wait, Jesus loves and forgives even us addicts? Really?" Salt. Light.

It may be in the midst of a horrible hurtful loss in your life; a death of a loved one or even facing your own. A hurting Christian whimpers of looking forward to health and life again in the resurrection. Someone nearby hears and wonders, "There is hope in the midst of this death? Where? How?" and asks and is answered. Salt. Light.

Somebody, anybody, crosses your path in pain and anguish because of any of the endless bad situations that plague fallen life on broken earth has come near. You speak some comfort and offer to pray with them; a halting, stuttering really poor prayer where you just can't come up with the right words. Salt. Light. The hope of Christ.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You have the Gospel of Jesus. You know the Gospel of Jesus. In any number of ways you are the Gospel of Jesus to a world that just doesn't have that Gospel.

So am I speaking Law or Gospel to you about this? Yes. But first and foremost Gospel.

You are Christ's and your sin stands forgiven. That's the good news. It is a glorious gift you have received from God through humble word and Sacrament. That's Gospel. It's a gift worth sharing wherever God gives you opportunity. That's the happy law here; By virtue of Christ crucified you are salt and light because He says so. Season and light your world.

Amen.