

Saltshakers, Light and Bars

Today, we continue with a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the beginning of this sermon when we heard the text about the Beatitudes. Since last week I looked at the Micah text for the sermon, let me touch a little on the Beatitudes before we get into today's Gospel text. When we look closely at the Beatitudes, we see that these are not states of being in which people strive to achieve, but rather are more states of being poor in spirit and afflicted. I don't think that Jesus is telling people who are marginalized by society to just accept their place in society and they will get their 'just reward' in heaven after they die. I think that what Jesus is saying is that He is giving the people who are most often overlooked and forgotten by society a measure of hope in that they are blessed. Being blessed, especially by God, means that they are being seen, even if they are invisible to the society at large. Being seen and blessed by God reinforces the belief that a person is more than their lot in life, more than their situation says they are, and that their situation is not something that is permanent. That being said, we can now turn our focus to today's text, a continuation of the text from last week.

To fuller understand what Jesus means when He calls His followers 'salt of the earth' and that we should be a 'light to the world,' we would need to get a sense of how those first hearers would have heard them. Salt, back then as today, was used as a flavoring and as a preservative. Back then, salt was a valuable spice. In fact, our English word 'salary' is derived from the Latin word for salt since at that time, Roman soldiers were paid in salt. Additionally, salt is basic to maintaining a proper balance in our bodies and in nature. There is another connection to salt that the Jewish hearers would have made and that is to the 'covenant of salt' that God made with Aaron and the priestly class which is found in the Book of Numbers and then given to King David in Second Chronicles. This could have been where Peter got the inspiration for his

understanding of the priesthood of all believers. With this particular understanding of salt, Jesus is telling us that we are important to the world. However, unlike Aaron and his descendants of the priestly class who were the 'go-between' for the people and God, Jesus is saying that we have a direct connection to God through Jesus. The idea of a human 'gatekeeper' to God has been removed.

In a similar way, Jesus uses the analogy of light to emphasize our importance to the world and showing the world what we can be. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that if you are going to light a lamp that you would not cover it up so that it does not do what it is meant to do. God does not do that either. God uses us the way that we would use a lamp - to give illumination to the dark, to be able to see what previously could not be seen. In a similar way, God uses us to show the world that lives in darkness something about God's love for the world, a something that the world did not and would not recognize as being legitimate, so to speak. That 'something' shows to the world about God's presence in the world as well as the things that people would prefer to keep hidden in the darkness. Perhaps Jesus is using some positive psychology, building up the confidence of followers. Also, since the Beatitudes were talking about the kingdom of heaven, alluding to an after-death future, Jesus is letting His followers know that He is not only talking about some far-off time into the future, but about the here and now. Jesus is saying that His followers have a vital role in the world today, in the here and now.

The second part of this Gospel text is about the 'law' which is how our English translations translate the Greek word in the text. When we hear 'the law' we normally think about what we can and cannot do. However, Jesus' listeners would have heard Jesus say the Torah, which is more than the Jewish law and it would have included the teachings that accompanied the Torah. These first listeners to Jesus would have understood the less restrictive 'teachings' rather than the narrower view of 'law.'

So, here Jesus is saying that He is completing or fulfilling the teaching started by Moses. Through Jesus, we have complete understanding of all the teachings that began with Moses. By understanding that Jesus is saying teachings rather than law, then we would not get into the issue of whether the law applies to us or not. We still follow the law, but with a different understanding - one not of what is prohibited, but an understanding of what makes life meaningful for everyone.

The last verse about having a righteousness exceeds the scribes and Pharisees seems to say that Jesus is raising the bar of how 'good' we have to be to enter the kingdom of heaven. However, another way to translate 'exceed' in the text is 'to surpass' the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The implication of this is not to necessarily have 'more' but a different or better righteousness. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was based on what they did. But when we look at Abraham's story in the Scriptures we see that his righteousness was because he had faith in God, not by what he did. Perhaps Jesus is saying we need this kind of righteousness - where our faith in God and in God's actions make us right. Next week, we will hear another portion of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus will expand the understanding of the laws, seemingly to push them further, raising the bar of acceptable behavior. But is that what Jesus is really doing? Is Jesus pushing the requirements of the law so great that no one could ever hope of keeping them?

While that may seem to be the case, when we factor in the rest of Jesus' teachings and His actions, we actually come to different a conclusion. We see that Jesus was about breaking barriers, barriers that prevented people from having right relationships with each other, not constructing, new higher barriers, especially the barrier between God and us. We can understand Jesus' teaching is about breaking those barriers that we put up that prevent people from acting towards others with compassion. So, Jesus is **not** replacing the law with a new law; setting the bar higher; or

completing it so that it no longer is in effect, but completes our **understanding of the word of God** so that we can have the kind of relationships that God intended when we were created.

May we strive for this kind of righteousness, the righteousness of Abraham and may the Holy Spirit guide us in shining our light in the darkness, reflecting God's glory.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/GpkKMdupkvk>

Service: <https://youtu.be/hCnYxtkOlqE>