



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

## Can Anyone Get into the Kingdom of Heaven? Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

If you were hearing these words for the first time from the lips of Jesus, what would you be thinking right now? Would you be holding your head high and beaming upon hearing that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Those images are high compliments indeed! Or would you be more concerned with the second part of the message which is more warning than praise? Would you be somewhat confused by the adulation Jesus offers followed by the unrealistic expectation he throws at you?

Jesus could have prefaced this section of his sermon by saying, "Now listen, I have some good news . . . and I have some bad news." The good news, according to Jesus, is that you are pretty special. You are the "salt of the earth." You enhance the world. You bring a distinctive flavor to life and you help to preserve those things that are of eternal worth. You are the kind of people who are admired. Other folks know they can depend on you and trust you. They look up to you, respect you, listen to you, and model themselves after you. You are something special: truly the salt of the earth!

You are also the "light of the world." You not only brighten the day when you are around, but you also scatter the darkness with your optimism and hope. You illumine what is good and expose what is bad. You help other people find their way and chase away debilitating fears. You offer a sense of security, safety, and comfort. You are special—a real light in the darkness!

Now the bad news: as it stands right now, the chances of your getting into the kingdom of heaven are pretty slim! What?!

Ironic, isn't it? After congratulating his followers for being salt and light, Jesus warned them that the requirements for entering the kingdom of heaven are stringent. In fact, he set an unlikely standard when he said to them, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Bad news indeed!

Keep in mind that the Pharisees and scribes took their righteousness seriously. The Hebrew scriptures contain 613 laws which the people in these

groups attempted to follow to the letter. They studied them, memorized them, practiced them, and pointed out when other people did not follow them. Even Jesus was not exempt from their critical observation. When Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, he was criticized for not observing the Sabbath since healing was a form of work. In the same way, when he allowed his disciples to walk through a field and pull grain off the stalk because they were hungry on a Sabbath, they accused him of forsaking the Sabbath. They accused him of ignoring purification rituals because his disciples did not always wash their hands in the proscribed way before eating. And they nearly went ballistic when he associated with sinners such as tax collectors, prostitutes, and regular folks instead of separating himself in order to remain "clean." The scribes and Pharisees took their righteousness seriously.

Imagine the shock, the frustration, even the despair the people felt when they realized that the standard of their acceptance into the kingdom of heaven was to exceed the righteousness of the people who had taken it upon themselves to define righteousness. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. But unless you live better than the folks who live by the letter of the law, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven. Good news and bad news indeed!

What do you suppose Jesus was trying to say to his followers? To the scribes and Pharisees who might have been present in the crowd? To us?

One of the things that Jesus pointed out over and over is that, in truth, the scribes and Pharisees were not all that righteous. Righteousness has to do with living rightly as communicated by God through commandments, laws, and the prophets. The scribes and Pharisees liked to check off those 613 laws as they went about their business day by day, but ultimately they had little to do with true righteousness. Jesus acted rightly when he healed people on the Sabbath and any other day of the week. He acted rightly when he accepted the people who were treated as outcasts in the communities he visited. He acted rightly when he made the point that the needs of another human being are just as important as communion with God through prayer, worship, and rest, as essential as those things are. Following the rules but failing to live out the spirit of those rules is often how the scribes and Pharisees lived. On the outside they appeared righteous, but in their hearts they were anything but righteous. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs—pretty on the outside but dead inside (Matthew 23:27).

According to Jesus, righteousness is not found in rule-making, rule-following, or rule-breaking. Righteousness is found in thinking and doing what is right. In other words, being salt and light in the world.

Brian Maas, a Lutheran minister, invites us to think a bit about what it means to be salt and light in the world. Salt, as we know, is most effective in good measure. In cooking, too little salt is ineffective while too much salt ruins a dish. Rev. Maas reminds us that salt works best when it dissipates into the food so that it is not the saltiness but the flavor of the food that we enjoy. In the same way, when light is not obstructed by bushel baskets or anything else it can be seen for long distances. Salt and light are beneficial only when they are used for their intended purposes. For us, he says, "Being salt and light involves giving ourselves away completely."<sup>1</sup>

That is the problem the scribes and Pharisees had. They loved living by the letter of the law, but they did not want to consider how God might want the spirit of the law applied to daily life and to one's neighbor. Jesus, however, lived the law which he summarized for a lawyer who was trying to test him: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40).

I have to wonder if, when Jesus told his followers that their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, he did so with tongue in cheek. I imagine him smiling to himself as he saw the self-righteous among them puffing up with pride upon hearing these words while he thought, "That is really a low standard to achieve." Being self-righteous is a far cry from being righteous and living as salt and light in the world.

So, can anyone get into the kingdom of heaven? Good news! The answer is, "Yes!" But God's kingdom, God's community, involves a life of faith in action. The prophet Isaiah spoke to the same issues centuries before when people were using fasting days for self-interest and to take advantage of other people but wondered why God did not notice their righteousness. Through Isaiah, God answered and said:

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<sup>1</sup>Brian Maas, "Living the Word: February 5, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany," *The Christian Century* (January 18, 2017): 20.

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist . . . Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly . . . .

Isaiah 58:3b-4a,6-8a

Through Isaiah, God said essentially what he said through the prophet Micah: "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). That is being salt in the world. That is shining your light into the world.

Can anyone get into the kingdom of heaven? Yes! But it is not because of our works or righteousness. It is through grace that we enter into the kingdom of heaven, that we become a part of the family of God. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the kingdom of heaven is a manner of reward for the life we live here. No, the kingdom of heaven—the community of God—is our calling here and now. We become a part of God's community through grace and we share the reality of God's way of doing things through our service to one another. It is a high calling and it is not easy to fulfill. As Rev. Maas said, "Being salt and light involves giving ourselves away completely." When we give ourselves away through service, there is nothing of us left to boast about. True service leads to humility for we realize how fortunate we are to be chosen for such an honor and how inadequate we are until God in Christ transforms us into salt and light which God scatters out into the world.

Good news: You can get into the kingdom of heaven, but only by giving yourself away. Scatter your salt. Shine your light. Live as God's grace in the world! Amen.

February 5, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is always good to be reminded of the ways in which you renew our lives and lift our spirits, O God. It is good to know that you bring refreshment to parched spirits, that you rebuild broken relationships, that you restore trusted foundations that we have ruined, and that you repair our broken hearts. We rejoice in your goodness, O God, for we know that you are always with us no matter what happens to us.

Accept our praise and thanksgiving for the love you lavish upon us. Receive our gratitude for the guidance you offer. Know our deep joy for the salvation that is ours. Enjoy our love which springs from the deep well of our gratitude.

As we gather around this table which you have prepared through the sacrifice of your own life, we are mindful of the life you have given us. Help us to live faithfully, O God. Help us to live truthfully. And help us to live sacrificially, giving ourselves to others just as you have given yourself for us.

We do pray on behalf of our friends and ourselves. We have many needs of body, mind, and spirit. We know that you have prepared many people to help meet these needs, and we are grateful. We pray that everyone in need will have access to help. We pray for the people who render aid and for the treatments offered that they will be effective and bring healing. We pray for strength and rest, for hope and wholeness, for awareness of your presence, and for peace.

We pray as well for our community, our nation, and our world. The challenges we confront are so large and complex. The scope of need is enormous. And the animosity throughout the world seems to grow day by day. We pray that we will find ways to get beyond our partisan ideologies to the needs we all share. We pray that we will stop fighting and bickering and begin talking. We pray that we will cease erecting barriers that divide us and embrace one another as brothers and sisters created by God.

Bring us to this table and feed us, O God, with the life-giving Spirit of your Son and our Savior. Amen.