

The citizens of Jesus' kingdom have righteousness.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ **“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.**

¹⁴ **“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.**

¹⁷ **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Try to imagine the Ten Commandments as 10 big stone jars. They are empty, because it is our job to fill them. As we keep those commandments the jars get filled with water. How full would your 1st commandment jar be? Have you feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things? How full would your 4th commandment jar be? Have you honored and obeyed your parents and others in authority? How full is your 6th commandment jar? Have you lived a pure and decent life in words and actions? Are you showing honor and love to your spouse?

In His Word, God demands that we keep His commandments perfectly. God's Word declares that those who fall short—those whose jars are only partly filled—should be cursed eternally. God's Word declares that those whose jars are completely filled are righteous. They can enter eternal life.

If that is true, how can anybody be saved? Can anybody be righteous? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus assures His disciples that they have righteousness. They shine with righteousness. They shine with God's righteousness.

Part One: They shine with righteousness.

As we studied last week, the Sermon on the Mount begins with eight beatitudes. Eight times Jesus says, “Blessed are those...” The first four talk about the blessedness of Jesus' people in relation to God. They confess their sinfulness before Him. They mourn because of sin. They live under God with meekness. They hunger and thirst for righteousness. Christians are blessed because Jesus gives them forgiveness and makes them heirs of eternal life. Jesus gives them eternal comfort. The Lord blesses and keeps them throughout their earthly lives. Jesus covers them with His righteousness and leads them in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

The last four beatitudes talk about the blessedness of Jesus' people in relation to the world. Because God has been so gracious and merciful to them, believers want to show mercy to others. Because believers have been freed from the devil who is the “father of lies,” they put off all falsehood and deal with others in openness and honesty. Because believers know that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, they proclaim His name and His eternal peace to the people around them. But Christians will be persecuted in this world. In the last beatitude Jesus says, **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

Jesus repeats the 8th beatitude with these words: **“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** Did you notice the change in these words? Jesus changes from “blessed are those...” to “blessed are you...” The beatitudes are about Jesus’ people—about us!

In the words that follow, Jesus continues to use the word “you.” He says, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” He says, “Your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.” The citizens of Jesus’ kingdom are blessed because they have righteousness. They *shine* with righteousness. They shine with *God’s* righteousness.

When Jesus says “You are the salt of the earth,” He means to say, “You *alone* are the salt of the earth.” In Jesus’ day, salt was a preservative used to prevent food, especially meat, from spoiling. Christians are the salt of the earth. Because they love God and are living lives of repentance, and because they proclaim God’s name in this sinful world, they are the reason this world does not turn completely evil. In Noah’s day, when only Noah and his family believed in God, God saved them but destroyed the world through a flood. Still today God is patiently waiting for the full number of believers to come into His kingdom. Once that happens, Jesus will come to judge all people and destroy this world.

Jesus’ disciples are like salt in this world. They proclaim God’s law to others. They proclaim the Savior to others. By doing this, they become a blessing to the people of this world. But the world prefers that we would be like sugar instead of like salt. The world wants us to say, “You can believe in whatever God you want. You can say ‘There is no god,’ if you want. You can live however you want.”

Jesus tells His disciples that they are the salt of the earth. Everyone who is connected to Jesus by baptism and by faith has this purpose in life. If someone does not want to carry out this purpose, then they are not really Jesus’ disciples. If salt loses its saltiness, it is worthless. If we are not serving as salt in this world, we are worthless. Think of the harm that we cause to the people around us if we claim to be Jesus’ people but live sinful lives. Think of the harm we cause if we turn away from our Savior. We will be telling them that we tested God’s Word and decided that we did not need Jesus.

Jesus also calls us the light of the world. He is the true light that came into the world. He shines on the human race with the Light of life. Because Jesus is the eternal Son of God, He shines with His own glory. He is like the sun. But Christians are like the moon. We shine in this world as we reflect His light to others. For that reason Jesus also uses the example of a lamp. A lamp does not light itself. Someone must light it. We shine in this world because Jesus, who is at the right hand of God, is shining on us with His light of forgiveness and life and love. Jesus is the Light who makes us shine as “the sons of the light and sons of the day” (1 Thessalonians 5:5).

We shine in this world as individual Christians and we shine together as His church. We are like a city built on a hill. Jesus gives us faith and enables us to express that faith by showing love to Him and our neighbor. ¹⁶ **In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.** We shine before the world when we gather in Jesus’ name to hear His Word and receive His Holy Supper. We shine before others when we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and support the preaching and teaching of His Word. We shine before others when we defend God’s Word against error and when we send His Word to the ends of the earth. We let our light shine before others by the way we talk to others. We admit our own faults. We forgive others as God forgives us. We show mercy to others. We live humble lives of service before God. We are able to let our light shine before others because the Holy Spirit causes us to bear fruit that is pleasing to God.

Part Two: They shine with God’s righteousness.

Jesus’ disciples shine with a borrowed righteousness. Their righteousness was accomplished by Jesus. ¹⁷ **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.** Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament—Moses and the prophets. Jesus obeyed all of

the commandments perfectly. He has filled the jars to the brim. And Jesus also fulfilled all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. He did not discard, deny, or destroy any part of the Old Testament. By His perfect life as our Substitute and by His innocent death on the cross in our place, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. He accomplished the will of His Father. Jesus came to destroy the power of the devil and bring us back to God. When Jesus said, "It is finished" on the cross, He declared that He had done everything to redeem us.

At God's right, Jesus continues to fulfill everything written in the Old Testament. He continues to plead for us in heaven. He continues to rule all things for the benefit of His people. He continues to gather His elect from every nation. And He will come back to judge the world in righteousness. ¹⁸ **I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.**

While we are in this world, the Bible is our treasure. We learn so many things from it and receive so many blessings through it. But in heaven there will be no need for us to read the Bible. What was written in the Bible will stand fulfilled forever. The complete redemption of God's people will be accomplished. God will be our God and we will be His people forever. We will experience all the things the Bible promised. Sometimes human plans and endeavors must be changed or put on hold or discarded altogether. But every word God has written in the Bible will be fulfilled. All of God's promises will stand forever like a jar filled to the brim.

¹⁹ **Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.** The commands or requirements of the Law include everything that God's Word says. This includes teachings about God, about the world, about sin, about salvation, about repentance, and about God-pleasing lives. Jesus is fulfilling everything written in the Bible. It is not our duty to fulfill the Bible. But it is our responsibility to teach God's Word and live according to God's Word. We must not set aside any part of God's Word. Denying part of God's Word or ignoring it or twisting it or using it for selfish gain is a serious sin.

Because God's Word is perfect, and because Jesus has come to fulfill it all, His people will hold on to all of God's Word and teach the world everything He has commanded us. We will be unwilling to set aside even the smallest teaching of God's Word.

God himself is the One who will call some least in the kingdom of heaven and some great in the kingdom of heaven. 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 explains how some pastors and teachers who mixed human teaching with God's Word can do harm to their people. They will have to give an account to God on the Last Day. If they believed in Jesus they will be saved, but they will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. Those who were faithful will be called great. About these degrees of glory in heaven, there are many things we do not know. We will have to see when we get there. In the meantime, let us take our stand on His Word.

²⁰ **For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.** Many people considered the Pharisees and teachers of the law to be great in God's kingdom, but they tried to gain righteousness by their own efforts. They tried to fill up the jars with their own good works. They refused to accept the free gift of righteousness earned and offered by Jesus. But they fell short. Sinful mankind cannot cleanse his own sinful heart. They could not enter the kingdom of heaven. True righteousness is a gift of God, given through faith in Jesus. **"In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The just will live by faith'"** (Romans 1:17). Jesus is our Righteousness from God. He has fulfilled the Law and the prophets. He has filled up the jars for us! His righteousness is our righteousness. He will help us to shine with this righteousness. Amen.