

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20).

Oof. That’s quite the statement. We’ve got to be *more* righteous than them? Sounds like a tall order.

But I think it’s important to remember the ways in which the scribes and Pharisees are talked about in the Gospel of Matthew. The portrayal is not particularly flattering...and this unflattering portrayal has led to some really harmful discourse about Jewish people in general. Matthew portrays these particular religious leaders as legalistic hardliners who set nearly impossible to follow rules in the name of righteousness, but who end up leaving most people on the outside looking in.

And so, if Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is saying that we need to be *more* righteous than them, it doesn’t mean that we need to follow the rules *better*. Jesus spends lots of time in Matthew breaking down the deeper meaning of God’s law, how focusing on the more holistic nature of God’s will for humanity is the more righteous path. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law,” Jesus says, “I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matthew 5:13). In other words, his approach is not doing away with some of these practices for the sake of doing away with them, but because they miss the bigger point.

This morning’s excerpt follows immediately after last week’s Gospel reading, the Beatitudes:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:3-11)

Here, Jesus lays out who is blessed, who is righteous, who the “you” are who are named salt and light.

The “you” Jesus is speaking is all those folks he just named: the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

These are words of hope, words of promise to people who have little to look forward to. All of these groups who Jesus has just identified as blessed have bleak prospects. They are oppressed. They are grieving. They are trying to find peace and justice and goodness when all those things seem in short supply. They are looking for the light.

...and Jesus tells them that *they* are it. *They* are the light that the world needs. *They* are blessed with all these things from God and those blessings shine through *them* out into the people and places around them. *They* are the face and hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world.

And we know that it's not only meant for them, but for us, too, today. When Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," his words are for all of us as well. Aren't we also facing a bleak world filled with injustice? Don't we also see corrupt forces win the day? Don't we also see people mistreated or allowed to suffer? Don't we also hunger and thirst for righteousness?

So, *we* are the light of the world in the here and now. And remember that Jesus says, "You *are* the light of the world," not "you will be" or "you could be." Jesus is making a declarative statement about the present, not some conditional proposition that we could choose to live up to or not. It is something we are already in place to do—something we are already *empowered* to do.

That might feel like a lot of pressure. You might be thinking, "How can *I* be salt and light in a meaningful way?" And that's almost the wrong question. We miss it sometimes because the English language doesn't have a great word for the plural "you," but that's what this is. Jesus isn't saying, "You, individually, are salt and light." Jesus is saying, "Y'all, *all y'all*, are salt and light *collectively*."

This changes how we understand it. The pressure for any one of us to do it all "right" or to have it all figured out is lessened because we have our community that we can lean on. When one of us is struggling, others can lift us up, can continue to shine and taste salty. Do you see? If we're on our own, we can't be salt and light, not all the time. But, working together, the Body of Christ *is* and *continues to be* salt and light for the earth.

And we don't need to guess at what that means: scripture gives a pretty good idea, especially in today's reading from Isaiah. The Lord is speaking to Israel and telling them that empty gestures of worship aren't cutting it. Instead, God lays out the "fast" that would be preferred. Let me repeat it for you:

"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?
⁷Is 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? ...
^{9b}If you remove the yoke from among you,
 the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
 and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
 then your light shall rise in the darkness
 and your gloom be like the noonday.” (Isaiah 58:6-10)

Did you catch all that? Let’s break it down.

“...to loose the bonds of injustice and undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke.” What might that look like?

It might mean working to fix broken systems that disproportionately impact certain groups more than others. It might mean ensuring that people aren’t taken advantage of by their employers as they seek to make a living wage. It might mean seeking out and providing mental and physical health care to all who are ill in body and spirit.

Then, what’s next? “...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.” This shouldn’t be too hard to parse out, right? How can we get food to hungry people? How can we provide shelter to folks who need it? What can we do get people the basic necessities of life?

And how about that last line: “hide yourself from your own kin.” We need to not cut ourselves off from each other. Instead, we are called to connect with one another to hear each other’s needs and bear each other’s burdens.

Nowhere here does it say to serve ourselves and only ourselves. Nowhere does it say to gripe and gossip and grow our own sense of self at the expense of others. Nowhere does it say to ignore the needs of this world—the needs of all of creation. As part of the light and salt God has sent into the world, we put our own selfish and individualistic tendencies aside for the good of all.

Together. Not alone.

All of you, all of *us*, are the salt of the earth. All of you, all of *us*, are the light of the world. And God has created us to shine.

Amen.