

TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

February 9, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 13 through 20. It is on page 683 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us where our good works are necessary and where they are completely unnecessary. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 5, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³“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.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.

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 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught his disciples to do good works. He called them the salt of the earth and a city on a hill, a light that would give glory to their Father in heaven. He expected great things from them. But then he also went and hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and various other kinds of sinners. And he treated them just as well as the people who were trying really hard to be good. What gives? In the end it seems like Jesus doesn't care that much about the Law. If he's going to treat some wretched sinner just the same as his faithful disciples, then what's the point of keeping his commandments? Why should I even try?

Righteousness. That's the key word for the day.

There are two kinds of righteousness, and we see them both in this text. In fact, I think this text is rather difficult to understand if we don't recognize that there are two kinds of righteousness. And it's not just this text, but the entire Bible is difficult to understand if we don't recognize that there are two kinds of righteousness.

Now I don't know how novel this distinction will be to you. It could be a key that suddenly unlocks the meaning of the Scriptures. Or it could be one of those things where you say, “Yeah, I

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kind of knew that already.” And maybe you didn’t even know that you know it. You’ve just been reading the Scriptures with the implicit knowledge that there are two kinds of righteousness, even if you never put it in those terms or stopped to think about it. The distinction between the two kinds of righteousness is incredibly simple, but if it’s missing, or if we coningle the two kinds of righteousness into just one kind of righteousness, the Scriptures will be a closed book to us, and the Christian life will be extremely frustrating.

So here are the two kinds of righteousness: The first kind is righteousness before God. The second kind is righteousness before other people. These two kinds of righteousness are different in many ways. We obtain them in different ways, they have different standards, they have different benefits, and they benefit different people.

The first kind of righteousness—righteousness before God—comes to us as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ. That’s how we obtain it. We don’t work for it. We *can’t* work for it.

Its standard is perfection. God does not require us to be mostly good. He does not require us to do more good works than fifty percent of the general population in order to be saved; he requires perfection. The standard is not other people; the standard is his Law. He requires perfection. That is why this first kind of righteousness must be *given* to us through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by works of the Law. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight” (Rom. 3:20).

And since the standard of this kind of righteousness is perfection, then the benefits of it are also perfection. When you have the righteousness that Christ gives you through faith, you are an heir of God’s perfect new creation, where sin, death, and the devil have no place. And if there is no sin, death, or devil there, then none of their effects are there either. There is no evil, no suffering, no pain. There is no mourning, for there is nothing to mourn over. The benefits of Christ’s righteousness are perfect.

And the beneficiary of these benefits is you, all who trust in Jesus Christ. This kind of righteousness is absolute. You either have it, or you don’t. And if you have it, you don’t have just a fraction of it. You either have all of it, or you have none of it. This righteousness is a free gift from God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The second kind of righteousness—righteousness before other people—is completely different. This is the kind of righteousness that we see on this earth. We can see it in others, and others can see it in us, but it’s hard to see it accurately in ourselves. It’s not a gift. It actually depends completely on your good works. You do not obtain it by faith, although faith is beneficial in producing it.

The standard here is also different. The goal is still perfection, but we never actually reach perfection with this kind of righteousness. But it doesn’t take perfection to have value with this kind of righteousness. Being mostly good is better than being only sort of good. And being sort of good is better than being no good. Every little bit matters.

It’s probably not possible to measure it, but some people have more of it than others. Batman has more of it than the Joker. Abel had more of it than Cain. And Winston Churchill had more of it than Adolf Hitler. Those are extreme examples, and that’s the only reason we can say with any degree of confidence that one person has more of it than another. In most cases, we really can’t say who has more of it than another person. We could pick any two people from this room, and it’s likely that none of us would be able to say who has more. And measuring it isn’t the point. It’s actually sinful to try to measure yourself against another person. So if you think that you

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have more of it than another person, that's probably a sign that you actually have less of it. You also don't have to be a Christian to have this kind of righteousness. That's because it's not about faith. This kind of righteousness is all about works. It's simply about what you do to benefit your neighbor.

And so the benefits of it are simply the effects of your good works. If your good work is that you cook dinner for your children, then the benefit is that your children have something to eat. If your good work is that you go to work and make lightbulbs, then the benefit is that someone can buy lightbulbs, your employer makes a profit, and you make a wage to take home and care for your family.

And since these benefits depend on your good works, then they are not perfect. If you forget the salt, your kids' dinner won't be as tasty as it should be, but it still fills their bellies. If every tenth lightbulb you make is defective, then ten percent of the people who buy them will be upset, and your employer's reputation will take a hit. The benefits of this kind of righteousness are completely dependent on the quality of our good works. And if our good works are mixed with a lot of sins, then the benefits of this kind of righteousness are greatly diminished.

The beneficiary is also different. The beneficiary—or at least the *primary* beneficiary—is not you; it's your neighbor. It's the person you do the good work for.

This kind of righteousness is very natural and worldly. The first kind of righteousness—the perfect righteousness that God gives to us—is foreign to our natural minds. But this second kind of righteousness is very natural. It's the kind that we instinctively understand. If I do good things that benefit my neighbor, that is good. If I do bad things that hurt by neighbor, that is bad.

If you're taking notes, you can draw a flowchart to illustrate the two kinds of righteousness. And if you're not taking notes, it's simple enough that you can just close your eyes and draw it in your head. Start with a vertical arrow pointing down. The direction of this is very important. This is the righteousness that comes down from God and is given to you. Then draw two horizontal arrows. These arrows start with you, at the bottom of that vertical arrow, and they point left and right, going out toward your neighbors.

The point of this is to show that, yes, your good works matter, but they do not affect your righteousness before God. The vertical arrow only goes one way: down. The only righteousness that is worth anything before God is the righteousness of faith, which is given to you freely on account of Jesus Christ. Your good works benefit your neighbor, and that is why they are valuable, but they do not impact your righteousness before God in even the slightest way.

God loves you. That is why he gives you Christ's righteousness as a gift. And God also loves your neighbor. That is why he has commanded you to do good works. Your good works do not benefit God, though he is pleased with them, but simply for the fact that they benefit your neighbor. Here's a simple motto for you to remember: "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does" (Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 10). So keep your good works where they belong: in service to your neighbor.

This is what we see in the gospel lesson. Jesus speaks of our righteousness before other people when he calls us salt and light. Salt and light are parallel illustrations. The point of both is exactly the same. Salt and light help the world to taste and see the Lord's goodness.

First, Jesus calls his disciples "**the salt of the earth**" (5:13). God has given his Christian disciples to the world so that the world might taste his goodness. That's what salt does. Salt helps you taste the flavors that are already there. If you cook something really nasty, no amount of salt

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is going to help it. But if you cook something really good, a little bit of salt will help everyone experience just how good it really is.

Light works the same way. Jesus calls his disciples **“the light of the world”** (5:14). God has given his Christian disciples to the world so that the world might see his goodness. Light helps you see what is already there. If the inside of your home is really ugly, like you have holes in the wall, stains on the carpet, and garbage piled up in the corners, accent lighting is not the place to start. On the flip side, if you have a really beautiful home, but you leave the lights off whenever you have company over, they will never know just how beautiful your home is. They’ll also think you’re kind of weird. Good lighting will help everyone see the beauty of your home.

This is what salt and light do. They do not make a thing either good or bad; salt and light reveal what is already there. And this is the effect our good works have on the world. They reveal *God’s* goodness. Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to *you*.” Wait, no. “... and give you a person of the year trophy!” Nope; not that either. **“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your *Father* who is in heaven”** (5:16). We are salt and light so that the world may “taste and see that the *LORD* is good” (Ps. 34:8).

The most obvious benefit of good works is the direct result. If you help a guy jump start his car, the direct result is that he now has working car. And if that’s the only benefit that comes out of it, that’s fine; it was worth it. But, occasionally, and usually over time, that act of kindness, or repeated acts of kindness, may also testify of God’s goodness. The world should see that Christians naturally do more good works than other people, and this should testify of God’s goodness. This is why it’s important to not hide the fact that you are a Christian. You don’t have to accompany every act of kindness with a sermon. But we should be open about the hope we have in Jesus Christ. No one is converted only by seeing your good works. They also need to hear the good *words* of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of their sins.

There’s an old saying that sounds kind of good. It goes like this: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” It sounds kind of nice, but it’s dead wrong. The Gospel consists entirely of words. They are the words of what God has done in Jesus Christ to save a fallen world. Our good works are not the gospel, but they can aid the gospel by drawing attention to the goodness of God. This is why our good works should always give glory to God, and not to ourselves.

The temptation of self-righteousness is to do good works in order to be seen by others. There is a very real difference between good works that give glory to God, and good works that are done to bring glory to ourselves. Later in this same sermon, Jesus says, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them”** (6:1). That almost sounds like a contradiction. In one place Jesus says, **“Let them see your good works.”** Half a chapter later he says, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others.”** The difference is in our motivation. Am I doing good works out of love for my neighbor, so that they can have whatever it is I’m giving them, and so that they can see the goodness of God? Or do I really just want them to see my righteousness? It might seem like a fine distinction, but God can clearly see the difference, and I think our neighbors can usually see the difference too. We’re the last people to see it. Our neighbors can usually see our self-righteousness before we can. I’ve seen it in others, when I perceive that someone is doing something only to be seen by others, and they don’t even recognize what they’re doing; they just think they’re really great. And I’m certain others have seen it in me, where my motives are completely selfish, and everyone can see it but me. I just

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think I'm great for what I'm doing, and everyone can see that I think I'm great, but they don't agree, and justifiably so.

That's like having too much salt. Too much salt ruins a thing. Salt is never about tasting the salt. No one has ever said, "Wow, that's some really good salt you put in these mashed potatoes." And light is never about the light. No one comes over to your house and just stares at your light bulbs. The only times people notice salt and light is when there either isn't enough, or there's too much. The right amount of salt and the right amount of light usually go unnoticed.

Now, I'm not saying, of course, that you should avoid doing too many good works. It's not possible to do too many good works. But our good works should not draw attention to ourselves. They should draw attention to our Father in heaven, and how he has loved the world by giving his Son, Jesus Christ.

This is our righteousness before the world.

Then Jesus shifts to our righteousness before God. He says, "**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**" (5:17).

At first glance, it might seem like this second part of the gospel lesson is completely disconnected from the first, but it's not. The first part shows the way that Jesus cares about good works, even though they do not make us righteous before God. It's just not possible for our good works to make us righteous before God. That's why Jesus says, "**Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven**" (5:20). That's not a challenge to try to be better than the scribes and Pharisees. These were the people who devoted their entire lives to establishing their own righteousness. If their righteousness could not get them into the kingdom of heaven, what chance do us ordinary people have? None. We have no chance ... unless our righteousness is not our own, but someone else's righteousness that is given to us. That's why Jesus came to fulfill the Law on our behalf.

Jesus would be accused of abolishing the Law and the Prophets. He hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and various other sinners. And not only did he hang out with them, but he ate with them. He treated unrighteous people like they were righteous. He forgave them, just like that, and he didn't require them to clean themselves up first. He accepted them just the way they were, with all their sins.

Now Jesus did not accept them in the sense that he said their sins were okay. He did not do that. He actually did something far more radical. He accepted their sins as his own. This is what it means for Jesus to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Every commandment of God, and every promise of salvation, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is why he took on human flesh. He took on human flesh to fulfill the Law on our behalf. He kept it perfectly. He never sinned. He always did what is right. And then, when the time came for him to die, he acted like he hadn't. He acted like he was a sinner who deserved that cross. And in that moment, he did, because every sin of humanity was laid on him. And that means your sin was laid on him. He fulfilled the Law, so that when the time came for him to die the death of a sinner, it wouldn't be his own sins that he died for, but yours and mine and the sins of the whole world.

This is how Jesus can receive sinners, and eat with them, and love them, and treat them as righteous people without abolishing the Law or the Prophets. He did not abolish any of it. Instead, he fulfilled it all.

This is the righteousness of faith. It's the righteousness that God gives to you freely. It's not because of your good works, because you don't have any that are righteous before God. It's not because of our good works, and it is in spite of all of our sins. It is a righteousness that comes

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down from God. It is free. It is complete. It is perfect. We cannot add to it. We need not add to it. This is the most marvelous truth in all the universe.

If we understand this gift kind of righteousness wrongly, which is always a bad thing to do, we might think that our good works don't matter. And in our standing before God, they don't matter. On that vertical line, they don't matter. But they do matter here, because we still live in a world with neighbors and family and friends. There are hungry children here. There are people who need lightbulbs for their houses. There are people who need neighbors who won't rob and murder them, but will instead protect and befriend them. And more than anything, they need to "taste and see that the LORD is good." They need the kind of righteousness God gives freely through faith in Jesus. We do everything we can to keep God's Law, because our neighbors need it from us, and Jesus already fulfilled the Law on our behalf. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.