

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

GETTING THE WORLD LOVED

Matthew 5:13-20

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

13You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. 14You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. 17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19Therefore, whoever breaks 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. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

DIAGNOSIS: God's Law Is Mangled, the World Isn't

Loved

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The World Doesn't Get Loved*

These words of Jesus, which follow the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, primarily address the disciples (and by extension, the church and us). Apparently, there has been a hoarding of good works (hiding light under bushel baskets, v. 15), a keeping of righteousness strictly for one's own benefit. Good works that are being done have become insipid, neither spicing up life nor acting to preserve it (salt has lost its taste, v. 13). In extreme cases, some disciples are deliberately breaking the laws of God and teaching others to do the same (v. 19). The end result is that the world just isn't getting loved, and worse yet, God gets blamed for it.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *God's Law Gets Junked*

Jesus pinpoints the problem: The Law is being misinterpreted and mangled on several fronts. Some assume falsely that Jesus makes the Law and Prophets irrelevant, that he abolishes them (v. 17). But this is foolishness-salt that has lost its taste. [Peake's Commentary suggests that "salt" here refers to "wisdom" since "has lost its taste" can also be translated "to be foolish." Perhaps Jesus/Matthew intended the pun.] Others hoard their righteousness, their good works (light) because they are operating according to their old (throwback) interpretation of the Law, namely, that one still needs to justify oneself. Still others have mangled the word righteousness to mean rightness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God's Law Junks the Junkers*

Jesus declares, "I have not come to abolish but fulfill [the Law]" (v. 17). The sermon ends with Jesus upping the ante on all the commandments, which he finally summarizes: "Be perfect,

therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). In short, the Law in all its harshness will get its way in the end. Tasteless salt which is "no good for anything" will be "thrown out and trampled on" (v. 13), junked by God. Law breakers will "never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20).

PROGNOSIS: The World Gets Loved, God Gets Glorified

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Law is Fulfilled, the Junked are Salvaged*

When Jesus said, "Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (v. 18), it's doubtful that anyone understood that he meant he was going to be the "accomplisher" -the one who fulfills the Law. His "accomplishment" occurs, not by a junking or disregarding of the Law, but by absorbing the Law's verdict into himself and suffering its full brunt. He is thrown out, junked, executed on a garbage dump called Golgotha. His cry of dereliction indicates that even God dumped him (27:46)! But then, God salvages Jesus on Easter morning and the Law is up-ended.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Salvaged Receive Righteousness*

When Jesus, who is righteous, is put to death by the Law, the Law itself is abrogated. The Law's kind of righteousness, such as the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20) possessed, is now replaced by Jesus' righteousness. And this righteousness he offers gratis to those others whom God salvages, including disciples. The result in one amazing rehab job! Salt-less disciples become salty. Their "lights" shine brightly. They become "wise" about the Law; a wisdom that stems from "the mind of Christ" that they now have been endowed with (epistle lesson for today, 1 Cor. 2:16).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Salvaged Love the World, the World Glorifies God*

Rehabbed disciples throw away their bushel baskets and become “the light of the world” (v. 14). The “light” that they beam, namely, their good works, their mercy, their forgiveness, their love, has a see-through quality to it. These shined-upon wordlings see the source of their light, namely, the mercy-forgiveness-love of the God who cared so much that he fulfilled the Law himself. And guess what happens as these “enlightened ones” love and care for the world? Answer: They glorify God.