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Sermon

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Righteousness Defined by Jesus





When I was studying in graduate school for music, the apprenticeship model shaped our entire culture.

We deeply respected our teachers and took pride in being their students.



In a music department, who your teacher was represented not only your training but also your identity and honor.



When introducing ourselves, we didn't say which school we attended—as we might in seminary—but instead named our principal teacher.



Let us reflect on how the righteousness Jesus defines differs from our assumptions, and whether what we do truly corresponds to the identity to which we are called.



The Sermon on the Mount

Continuing from last week's online sermon by Pastor Grace on the Beatitudes, being salt and light and possessing a righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees form the second and third major teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.



The Sermon on the Mount

If you have been paying attention to the Sunday lectionary readings since Advent, you may have noticed how often the author of Matthew writes, “**This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet**” (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:3), and how extensively Matthew quotes the Hebrew Scriptures.



The Sermon on the Mount

The purpose is clear: to demonstrate repeatedly that **Jesus is the Messiah** foretold in the Hebrew Bible.



The Sermon on the Mount

Beyond this, Matthew also uses many literary and theological cues to suggest to Jewish readers steeped in Scripture that Jesus is the Moses of this generation—one who will again lead Israel out from under imperial domination and **establish the kingdom God has promised.**



The Sermon on the Mount

Just as the Exodus required unleavened bread and the blood of the lamb, those who would enter this kingdom are also expected to live according to certain commitments and patterns.



The Sermon on the Mount

Because the gap between Jesus' teaching and the Pharisees' practice was so wide, it was easy for some to assume that Jesus intended to overthrow the Law.

Yet Jesus insists, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill”** (5:17).



The Sermon on the Mount

In other words, while Jesus' teaching differs radically from that of the Pharisees, it represents the most faithful way of living out the Law. The Pharisees possessed the Law but failed to embody its true meaning. If one hopes to enter the kingdom of God, the Pharisaic path will not suffice.



Different Understandings of the Kingdom

What is striking is that the way many modern Christians imagine the kingdom of heaven **differs sharply** both from Israel's understanding rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and from Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God.



Different Understandings of the Kingdom

We often think of heaven as a place the justified go after death, disconnected from this world.



Different Understandings of the Kingdom

Many contemporary Christians, by contrast, resemble immigrants who have finally obtained permanent residency: having struggled to gain this status, they focus primarily on preserving it. Faith becomes centered on maintaining one's justification.



The Nature of Salt and Light

Jesus challenges all these assumptions by describing his disciples as salt and light. **“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid” (5:13–15).**



The Nature of Salt and Light

Salt and light are **functional elements** of daily life; they are meant to be used, not preserved. No one buys salt or lights a lamp only to store them away for fear of losing them. When salt and light are not used, they lose their value entirely.



The Nature of Salt and Light

This stands in stark contrast to the faith of the Pharisees. If Jesus' disciples are salt and light, then the Pharisees resemble antiques. Knowing their worth, they wrap themselves in layers of protection and hide themselves away, revealing their value only on special occasions.



The Nature of Salt and Light

They are not irreligious; indeed, they may observe the Law more rigorously than anyone else. The problem is not their piety, but whether their piety becomes a blessing to others.



Salt and Light—or Antiques?

The difference lies in how one understands oneself. If a person believes they are saved and therefore belong to a higher category, they may treat themselves like a precious antique—displayed, protected, and removed from ordinary life.



Salt and Light—or Antiques?

But if one recognizes oneself as a sinner among sinners, one begins to see one's calling in the world and to stand alongside others rather than above them.



Salt and Light—or Antiques?

Jesus himself is the perfect embodiment of salt and light. Just as God sent Jesus into the world, God did not exalt divine glory by condemning human sin. Instead, God humbled God's self, entered human life, and joined a dark and ordinary world, transforming it through self-giving love.



The Church as Salt and Light

But from my perspective, during my formative years from high school through graduate school, I witnessed a group of devoted members sacrificing vacations, savings, energy, and youth to serve faithfully.



The Church as Salt and Light

Through their commitment, I experienced warmth and love. They were salt and light—giving generously without calculating the cost.



The Church as Salt and Light

About a year ago, when I was discussing children's ministry with the pastor, I expressed concern that we were investing a great deal without guaranteed results.



The Church as Salt and Light

Pastor Grace responded, “We don’t know what the outcome will be, or how these children will remember the church. But if they can hear the gospel and experience love here, isn’t that the very purpose of ministry?”

In time, we saw real growth and transformation among the children.



The Church as Salt and Light

In two weeks, we will hold our 2026 congregational meeting. Yet our ministry is far more than what appears in a printed report; it includes every act of witness in our daily lives. Do we look for ways to give wherever we are called, or do we choose inactivity to protect our perceived value?



The Church as Salt and Light

Returning to the opening story: after completing a master's degree in music, what ultimately matters is not whose student you were, but how you sing.



The Church as Salt and Light

Unafraid of losing value, may we give ourselves for specific people, in specific moments, loving fully and bringing warmth, becoming faithful witnesses of Christ as salt and light.



Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for redefining righteousness through Jesus—not as an identity to be preserved, but as a life to be lived, as light and salt essential to the world.



Prayer

Remove our fear, so that we do not close ourselves off in self-protection, but open ourselves in love. Make us light in darkness and salt in a tasteless world. May we embody your kingdom in our church, our community, and our homes. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.