

Sermon: More righteous than the Pharisees
Matthew 5:13-20
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We began our worship service this morning by listening to the words of Jesus from his sermon on the mountain. In our Gospel reading we listened to what he said after those beatitudes. And next week we will again return to the sermon on the mountain.

You are the light of the world: Jesus spoke very directly about what it means to belong to Him; how do we follow him in this world? What are the implications of being his follower? What does it mean to be a light in this world?

1. Life of the Christian

Jesus spoke to the crowds, the masses, the common people of Israel. That word 'crowds' had a pretty negative connotation for the religious leadership of Israel. These were the people who did not live by the Pharisaic laws, and they were also not very strict in abiding by all the laws of Moses, to say it mildly.

That makes it so striking that Jesus says to them, normal people, you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.

The Jewish listeners of Jesus knew their prophets, of course; they knew the expectation of Israel, that one day, Jerusalem would be a light for the nations. 'Nations will come to your light', Isaiah foretold. The good Pharisees looked forward to that beautiful time of restoration of the land, but they were sure that this would only happen if all people would strictly abide by all the laws of God.

So they tried to convince the crowds to live by the laws of Moses, as strictly as possible, as that was the only way to qualify for bringing that Kingdom of God into the present, and for being assured that you would participate in his kingdom.

And now Jesus tells the crowds that they are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Now Jesus tells you and I: you are the light of the world. Is this not pretentious?

For Jesus to say, I am the light of the world, that is okay; He is God. But we?

Two things are important to keep in mind. It is exactly because Jesus is the light of the world, that we can repeat after him - we are the light of the world. It is our attachment to Him, the Sun or Righteousness, that has made us into small lights of righteousness. That is not pretentious, but all thanks to Christ our Lord. It humbles us.

And when Jesus tells the people that they are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, it is not something he congratulates them with, it is actually a mission. You are the light for this world, so shine in the darkness.

Imagine life without light, without salt. People would stumble around, and even eating in the darkness would be boring because it would taste like nothing. What Jesus says to those who listen to him, is that we have a social task. Light and salt are to impact society.

Let people see your lifestyle, your life, your good deeds, to the honour of God our Father.

So Jesus tells us - you are a light, but make sure that you live your Christian life in public. Visible. Our faith can never be relegated to being a matter of the heart, a private matter. It is personal, but not private, as it belongs in the marketplace.

Being the light for the world is our mission. The mission of those who are connected with Jesus Christ.

2. Radical obedience

Well, for the Pharisees, all this was wrong. They saw themselves as the light - the true followers of Moses and all his laws. Was Jesus actually denying the importance of the laws of Moses, but telling these people that they were God's light? While they did not even follow all the laws?

Jesus could guess their critical thoughts...

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. 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. 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.

Nice. So Jesus supports the strict fulfilment of the laws of the Old Testament after all? Is he telling the people that they can only be a light in this world, if they live as the Pharisees do, very meticulously obeying all precepts and a few more of the Old Testament?

But then Jesus again disappoints the Pharisees, and maybe even his followers, because he says:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Living even more in accordance with the laws of Moses than the Pharisees, is that possible?

3. A new understanding of the law

Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jews who had become followers of Jesus Christ, at a time when they had not developed their systems of theology yet. They did not have a new testament, One of their main questions was how to relate their holy book, what we now call the Old Testament, to their faith.

Matthew made clear: our Lord fully embraced the Old Testament. The Old Testament are His Holy Scriptures. All the books of the Old Testament are the word of God.

So Jewish people who met those followers of Jesus would ask them - if you believe this whole Old Testament to be the word of God, why do you not live by all its laws. Why do you not take it literally?

Why not follow all the laws of Moses as Christians? Well, Jesus himself did not do this. He touched unclean women, he told his followers that they could eat anything without defining themselves.

The first followers of Jesus, the disciples, decided to eat the food of non-Jews, not kosher. And Paul even taught that if people receive circumcision because they think that is how to please God, the Gospel has become useless for them. So Jesus and the earliest church did not adhere strictly to the laws of Moses.

So? If the Old Testament is our book, if Jesus says that this book is the abiding Word of God, how do we have to understand it?

Jesus, in his sermon on the mountain, gives us some clues, that were picked up by the church after Him.

If Jesus Himself is the true light, and if we are his lights in this world, then obviously, what is written about the Jewish nation in the Old Testament, and about Jerusalem, also applies to us, non-Jewish followers of Jesus.

And if Jesus uses terminology like 'I am the Light of the World' which was originally Temple language, Jerusalem language, then it seems we have to read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees had a very literal interpretation of the Old Testament, but Jesus and the Early church offer an alternative reading of the Jewish Scriptures. Those Scriptures are the Scriptures of Jesus. He believed them, He lived them, he fulfilled them. He was, through the Holy Spirit, even the author of those Scriptures.

So when we read the Old Testament, we see Jesus in it everywhere. After his resurrection, Jesus, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [he] explained to [the men with whom he walked to Emmaus] what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

The Old Testament is the book of Jesus our Lord. And all the laws in the Old Testament have to be seen in his light.

What is really important, Jesus tells us, is to see all Scriptures from the perspective he sheds on it. And what is truly important, He underlined, was that we see all laws, yes all things in our life, in the perspective of the heart of the law: that is, to love God, and to love other people.

If you visit your neighbours and they give you pork to eat, against the laws of the Old Testament, what do you do as a follower of Jesus? You eat pork. To reject the food of your neighbour will not be seen as an act of love by your neighbor, so you eat!

So the very early church realised, food laws are really not important anymore - and many early theologians argues - they were never that important, they should always have been seen in the light of the promised Messiah, and love was always much more important.

Jesus himself exemplified this more spiritual, deeper approach of the will of God. He began his speech on the mountain with his beatitudes. It is as if, on the mountain, He is a new Moses who gives a new version of the law. He hold in front of us how God wants us to understand his complete and perfect will.

Jesus shows us how to interpret the Old Testament, our Holy Scriptures with he himself as the center.

Who is qualified to enter into the kingdom of God? Those who literally follow all the laws?

Poor in spirit, people who mourn, those who are meek, people who hunger for justice, merciful people. people with a pure heart. Peacemakers.

Those are called the sons of God. For them is the Kingdom.

Be careful not to make this into a new law. These words of Jesus describe character above all. And you cannot get up in the morning and tell yourself: today i will be meek. Today I will mourn. Today I will be poor in spirit.

You can do that with food-laws, or with rules for how to sacrifice. But when it comes to character, something else is needed.

Jesus lived the sermon on the mount. In fact, this describes perfectly his character. He is the true light of the world.

And we are only lights for the world, if we are connected with him and in as far as we are connected with him. We are only able to live the beatitudes, by being connected with our Lord.

The Pharisees said, in line with the laws of the Old Testament, that people would find true rest by keeping the sabbath. Jesus replaced the sabbath. He said: come to me if you are tired, then you will find rest.

This was the major shift in thinking in the early church - and this is extremely important for us. The Christians life is not about rules, it is about being with Jesus. And if we are with Him, we are his lights in this world.

This must mean that we are ever so careful not to put loads of laws on the backs of people. If we do this, we do the opposite of what Jesus did. As the Light of the world, he lifted our burdens. So in how we raise our kids, deal with colleagues, lie with each other, be careful to not load people with the feeling that they are only good enough for you - let alone for God - if they behave in a certain way.

Law is not the way to God - Jesus is the way to God. Rules or habits are not central in our lives - Jesus is.

Conclusion

I began by saying, being a light, and being salt, is not a private matter. It is personal, however.

We can only be the light of God in our society, if we are connected with the Great Light, Jesus Christ himself. And the Word that He inspired, the New Testament and the whole Old Testament, is our book that points us the way.

Because Jesus himself is at the center of that book, and Him we find on every page. From the beginning where God spoke his word and the Word created the world, till the end where we see how the Word, Jesus Christ, renews this earth. He is the center

And in this world of Him, we have our mission to continue what He did. We are to let our light shine, to love people, to help, to make peace, to live as our Lord himself lived among his people.

Amen