

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*

**“You are the salt of the earth...” (5:13)**

**“You are the light of the world...” (5:14)**

**“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works...” (5:16)**

**“I haven’t come to abolish the law...” (5:17)**

**“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...” (5:19)**

**“Unless your righteousness is greater than the Scribes and the Pharisees, you surely will not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).**

How easy it would be to make this Gospel reading all about *you*.  
How easy it would be to lay the Law heavily upon your shoulders—  
to demand of you all these works:

to be salt

to be light

to shine forth in good works

to keep even the least of the law’s demands and commandments

to have a righteousness that surpasses the Scribes and the Pharisees.

The Law is easy—  
not easy to do, but easy to demand.

We love the law—  
not because we actually keep it,  
but because we think we keep it enough to be safe, and feel good about ourselves.

“Am I salt that’s lost its saltiness?  
“Has my light been put under a basket?”  
And then the real kicker—  
“Have I kept the law?”

We all know that we haven’t kept the law perfectly,  
that sure, we’ve lost some saltiness,  
or that maybe our light has dimmed a bit—  
but we take comfort that we’ve done some good.  
“Maybe I haven’t kept the whole law, but I’m doing pretty well,” we might say.

The Law lets us measure ourselves up—  
it lets us come up with a “good enough” and find comfort in that.  
It lets us say, “Yes, I’m a decent person, a good enough Christian.”  
It lets us be comfortable.

But have you noticed that the Law says nothing to us about Christ?

Have you noticed that we love the law because it's all about us—  
 about what we do,  
 how we measure up,  
 what we've accomplished?

The Law gives us do's and don'ts,  
 it sends us out on a mission, with a purpose, and a goal—  
 even with a check-list of various action steps, to make sure it's completed.

The Law puts the work into our hands,  
 it gives us responsibility and accountability,  
 it gives us rewards and punishments, depending on how well we've done—  
 and we all know how much we love a pat on the back.

But while the Law at first seems so enticing, so doable, “just a little here and a little there,”  
 as we continue to run in the way of the Law—  
 trying to be extra salty,  
 bright with light,  
 and more righteous than those hypocritical Pharisees,  
 we'll eventually wear out.

One day the reality will set in;  
 at some point our check-list of do's and don'ts will pile up too long;  
 eventually this Law,  
 from which not a jot or tittle is to be removed,  
 will kill us.

Our backs will break,  
 our spirits will be crushed,  
 our world will come collapsing in on us.  
 And what *righteousness* will we have to show for it?

The Law's too hard,  
 too demanding,  
 too all-inclusive—  
 and we can't keep it,  
 no matter how hard we try:  
 “just pray harder,  
 just read more scripture,  
 just do a little more for your neighbor.”

Is that what our Lord desires to give and preach in this Sermon on the Mount?  
 Is that what He means by salt and light and righteousness?  
 No, it's not!

That's not what our Lord is like—  
 remember, He's not like other lords.

When He says, “**You are the salt of the earth**” (5:13),  
He speaks of you in relation to Him.

That’s the only way He ever speaks of you.

In fact, you who are in Christ don’t exist apart from Him.

So, there’s no such thing as you being salt, as if you could ever be salt apart from Him.

And so you ask, “What then does He mean by calling us salt?”

Let’s turn to the Law, the word of Moses, from which not a jot or tittle is to be removed!

**“You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt”** (Lev 2:13).

When Christ calls you “the salt of the earth,”

He calls you the salt which is added to the sacrifice.

And as you know, the sacrifice is Christ Himself.

And so you being salt has little to do with your works,

and much to do with Christ and His sacrificial work on the cross.

In the same way, when Christ calls you “the Light of the world” (5:14),

He says so only in as far as *He* is the Light of the World (Jn 8:12).

Remember the whole Christmas bit,

**“the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great *light*,  
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,  
on them a *light* has dawned”** (Isa 42:7; Mt 4:16).

Jesus is the Light of the World.

And you are light only in as far as you are in Christ;

and being in Christ, you can’t help but to be light for the world.

And now for this righteousness bit—

what did Jesus mean when He said,

**“Unless your righteousness is greater than the Scribes and the Pharisees, you surely will not enter into the kingdom of heaven”** (5:20)?

Well, to be clear, He isn’t asking for *more* righteousness, or better living, or a closer adherence to the law—

Jesus is asking for a righteousness of a different and greater *quality*.

The righteousness of the Pharisees was in their keeping of the law.

They were great at keeping it—

so great they’d even pat themselves on the back,

and thank God that they aren’t like those other sinners.

They worked hard (but not on the Sabbath, even to heal or save),

they tithed properly (and yet gave less than the poor widow’s mite),

and studied their Torah diligently (though missed the chief actor throughout).

If you think Jesus is asking you to outdo the Pharisees—  
 more works, more study, more prayer—  
 you're out of luck, you can't!

Thankfully, that's *not* what He's asking for.

The righteousness Jesus wants you to have is a righteousness that doesn't come from within you.

It's not from your works or keeping the law,

It's not a righteousness that focuses on you at all—

The righteousness Jesus wants for you is His righteousness:

His perfect keeping of the Law,

His perfect sacrifice and atonement for your failings.

That's the only righteousness that could surpass the Scribes and Pharisees.

It's not a matter of how much good works and so forth,

but of who's doing the works.

**“Unless your righteousness is greater than the Scribes and the Pharisees, you surely will not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).**

Indeed, no one can enter the kingdom of heaven by his own righteousness,

by his own works and saltiness and light,

by his own keeping of the law—

the kingdom of heaven is open only to Christ,

and to those whom He's given *His* righteousness.

And so you see that today's Gospel reading is actually not all about you,

but about you in as far as you are in Christ.

And this Christ hasn't come to take away the Law—

it's demands, requirements, threats, and rewards—

He came to fulfill it, to pay for it, to suffer for it, and to die for it,

so that you would be free.

You may all rest assured because your righteousness *is greater* than the Scribes and Pharisees—

not because you've done more or better,

but because your righteousness is Christ's righteousness,

which He freely and joyfully gives to you in water, word, and now,

Holy Communion.

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*