

Matthew 5:13-20
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 5, 2023

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

Our text, the Gospel reading, as it begins “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.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today’s text is pretty Law-heavy, so it’s important that we recall that it begins with the very verse following last week’s text. In other words, in his sermon on the mount, Jesus moves from the close of the beatitudes – “blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of the Gospel” – he goes from there to the exhortation that begins today’s text: “You who confess the gospel are the salt of the earth.”

Now, consider that movement. His hearers just heard, “Blessed are you when others revile, persecute, harm you for my sake”... and now he says to them, “If you are afraid to (or simply refuse to) confess before men, the aforementioned blessing and comfort is wasted.”

Well, that leaves a lump in the throat, doesn’t it? How often do we like to convince ourselves that Christ is made

known to the nations (“epiphany”) by simply placing Bibles in every hotel or putting service times on church signs or simply wrestling with my own faith... that, yes, there are those ‘super-Christians’ who are willing to be reviled and persecuted for his sake, but certainly that isn’t the daily life at the foot of the cross for the *average* Christian... shouldn’t be the potential *result* of life at the foot of the cross for the average Christian!

But Jesus goes right from the comfort of the Beatitudes *for you* to the teaching for you to share with the world. Yes, you who are blessed by God in this theology of the cross and hated by the world for this same theology of the cross, you are the ones who are going to confess Christ before all the world. For, if you refuse to confess the faith, how can the doctrine of Christ salt the earth? Does it salt the earth by sitting in a doctrinal textbook the world refuses to read?

If you refuse to shine the light of the Gospel into the darkness of the world, how will the light bring the warmth of its glow to those who refuse to open a book and read for themselves?

Just because the doctrine and divine Truth is not ours but Christ’s does not mean the confession is not ours. We perhaps fail to appreciate on the day we each go through the

customary Rite of Confirmation what lies ahead of us in daily life, as Jesus says, “Whoever confesses me before men, I will confess before my Father in heaven; whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father in heaven.”

Such does not mean we ought pride ourselves in doing a great work for God. When the Pharisees wanted Jesus to hush the Palm Sunday crowd, Jesus replied, “If these remain silent, the stones will cry out.”

To which we reply, “Great! Let the stones cry out!” But is such the reply of New Adam? Is such the reply of the one who has been baptized into Christ’s death, who now lives as heir of the kingdom of heaven, who therefore cherishes life at the foot of the cross and eagerly anticipates the glory to be revealed to us in Christ’s return?

If we trust that Christ *is* returning to vindicate His Church, why would we fail to confess His goodness before men? Especially when those men know nothing but the bland, tasteless vanity of a despairing world.

Isn’t it amazing how often *we* think, “The world has something that will really improve and spice up my daily life, if only I downplay or hide Christ” ... when just the opposite is true. The daily life of this fallen world is so bland and dull in its

predictable slide toward destruction. (You know where it's headed. You know what ludicrous ideas will be championed next in every example of dark delusion: Is anyone surprised that the legalization fifty years ago of abortion in 'rare, but safe situations' has turned into – just last week in the once socially-conservative state of Minnesota – 'abortion as a right to be championed in every situation'? Is anyone surprised that a society that welcomed Christians unequally yoked with unbelievers slid into tolerance for divorce, premarital and extramarital sex, pornography, gay marriage, and now an entire agenda championing sexual deviancy? You see, man's sinful self-destruction is so predictable that people who want to make a name for themselves – want to add their own 'salt' – have to make the greatest effort of finding a *deeper* shade of darkness to gain any attention... and yet, within a year, their formerly 'deepest shade' of darkness has been surpassed and is just another dull, lifeless gray in society's color palette of all-things bland and dark in the shadows of death.

But, into the world you go each week, not with a secret knowledge, to be kept a secret (we're not Gnostics!)... you go each week carrying the salt and light of salvation, of redemption and a clear conscience before the Creator, you

carry the salt of genuine love toward your neighbor, the light of the holy God's expressed will and purpose for a fallen world lost and aimless in purposelessness. You go into the world with salt that preserves your own soul and brings a divine taste of truth for those living in the despair of false theology and nihilistic philosophy. You go into the world with the good news of the Christ's completed mission... for the benefit of all those whose ancestors gave up waiting long ago and (to deaden their despair) convinced themselves and their heritage that Christ is a fairytale.

Among them, you live; to them, you go bearing the salt and light of the Gospel. Yes, you live daily life as 'the few' blessed with the kingdom of heaven to share with 'the many' who live hopelessly dependent on worldly kingdoms. And, as they pin all their hopes on these worldly kingdoms, their cultures, and their utopian promises, you instinctively understand that they might not be so thrilled to hear that what they are hoping in is futile, but that what you have to confess to and share with them is certain and eternal. Yes, you instinctively recognize they might not be an appreciative audience.

Christ recognizes it, too... which is why he reassured you at the close of the Beatitudes that your share in the kingdom of heaven cannot be forced from you, no matter how much the world reviles and hates you because you confess Christ.

But, as Jesus' sermon continues, you might read between the lines and hear him say, "You do not confess my name simply for *your* sake; you confess it for *their* sake. And you do not confess it simply for *their* sake, but for *your* sake." Indeed, when the world needs the saltiness of the Gospel, and you have it but refuse to provide it, what good is that? When you yourself buy into the ways of the world and lose your taste of Christ's saving doctrine, how can *they* have it shared with them, and how can *you* be restored once you give it up? When you give up the Gospel so as to be loved by the world, you condemn the world and yourself, as Jesus says: "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."

And that's exactly what happens when you want to be loved by the world. In their despair, they digest your 'wisdom' for a moment, but – if you have given up Christ for their

relativism – “your truth” is just as bland as “their truth” and they get bored of you quickly and trample you under foot.

But, when you – made steadfast by Christ’s Word and Sacraments – confess before men, their darkness is pierced by Christ’s light, and his light (our text says) gives light to all in the house, including sustaining yours. Of course, as Jesus says in John’s gospel, the world loves the darkness more than the light, because to come to the light reveals our sin for what it truly is... and who wants to be shown the truth of their quagmire? We’d much rather want to believe in our utopian dreams, made possible by all the promises of a culture that – by the time you ask to see the results of their promises – they’ve left those promises behind for something else, lest there be actual accountability for their unreliability.

Let me give you a concrete example of how quickly harmed the Church is by *following*, and not *confessing before*, men: Three years ago, I spoke these words in a sermon on this same text:

We see how irrelevant Christian *worship* becomes ...when it tries to resemble worldly [ways]. Doesn’t Christian *life* suffer the same if it adopts worldly ways? The church buildings might as well be bull-dozed, the church signs be torn down, and the people not gather – for they live and are

preserved in no divine truth, but only bland worldly falsehood and rot.

Five weeks later, the church adopted worldly ways, all the church doors were closed, and the people did not gather. And, because so many churches in America have lost the salt of the gospel, *very few* people even cared that the church doors were closed, and *many* thought the world's ideas of 'virtual worship' would sustain the church. It seems most of those who cared to return were those craving the truth of Christ's doctrine and his flesh-and-blood gospel in the Word and Sacraments. *You* came back to church right away – some of you are here *now* as members because your fellow Christians of Calvary did not put worldly restrictions on coming back to God's altar – and, in this little corner of the earth, the light of God's grace in Christ Jesus shined brightly as He safeguarded, forgave us our doubts, and sustained His Church throughout those dark days.

But, what's the lasting result for those who exchanged the salt and light of the Gospel for men's favor and promises? In some cases, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, or $\frac{1}{2}$ of churches' members have lost their salt and light and have been assimilated into society. Now that churches who've lost so many as the reward of trusting the world more than God seek the social leaders' accountability

for such unreliability, the leaders are already on to the *next* social problems – Climate Change agendas, Transgenderism, historic inflation, impending World War III... the same bland despair the world has always served up.

But Christ's promises are reliable, and his fulfillment of them all is true. As we said last week, God has always proven his faithfulness. The blood-stained cross and empty tomb prove it forever. And, as every word of His is trustworthy to cling to, we need not move on to something 'new and shiny' that will soon grow dull, but we may confess and shine the light of God's Word before the darkness of all.

Indeed, we may confess that Jesus said He came to *fulfill* the Law and the Prophets... not *just* to fill/keep, but to *fulfill* (the word is *plerao* and means "to make come true, to bring about and bring to completion")... yes, in Christ, all the *promises* of old – not just *commandments* – but also the *promises* of the Old Testament are brought to life, they come true, so that in his fulfillment of the entire Old Testament, Jesus the Messiah brought us righteousness from above, laid that righteousness on the altar of Calvary in our stead, shed the blood of righteousness to cleanse us from all unrighteousness... indeed now "bespeaks us righteous" in the adoption of sons, in

the pronouncement of forgiveness, in the share of the Holy Supper.

And, if the righteous Messiah has fulfilled the entire Old Testament, all of its commandments and all of its promises, if he has lived the righteous life, died the righteous death, risen again *because* of his righteousness that death cannot hold... then what he calls the Church to now is to rejoice in confessing its share of such marvelous wonders before – and for the benefit of – the world.

Of course, there are those who only want to shine God's Word selectively: "What does the world *want* to hear, what does it *not* want to hear?" That's so often the question of those who hide their desire to be loved by the world behind the cover of 'mission.' Jesus says that the true confession of the faith is not concerned with what people want, for – by Jesus' own testimony – sinners in darkness never want to be saved by the light. Rather, the true confession of faith points sinners to their need *and* to the truth. They need salvation. And the truth is, the God who saves them is just as holy and righteous as He is merciful.

Thus, if we are to confess before men the whole counsel of God, we ought hear Christ's exhortation to love the holy Law just as much as we love the saving Gospel.

“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. 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.**”

He's hit the nail on the head, hasn't he? How many false prophets, in order to feed the world what it wants, relax the holy will of God and teach others to do the same. How many churches lead the way in promoting the most godless agendas of LGBTQ, DEI, or “Jesus was a refugee.” “Sins” become “burdens”; “sinners” become “victims.” “Repentance” becomes “my truth”... and the call to repentance and forgiveness becomes “hate-speech.”

If the world is going to have the Gospel confessed to it for its salvation and rejoicing, it must also have the Law and the Prophets confessed to it for its recognition of sin and repenting. And, when we confess the truth of God's holiness in

the presence of sinners' unholiness, we are right to expect the world's disdain.

But you confess not because of what you are owed, but because of what you have been gifted by the One who fulfilled all the Law and Prophets. Blessed are you... yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you... you shall be comforted in the resurrection. Blessed are you... you shall inherit the earth. Blessed are you... for Christ has come as the Holy One to lay down His life for you. And, in the theology of that cross, Christ has claimed you by creating faith in your heart through the same salt and light of the gospel being carried to your own ears and heart which you now carry with your own mouths and lives before the world.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
February 5, 2023