Matthew 5:20 Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Okay, here again is one of those texts that just contains so much information and instruction and in order to get to all of it let me just skip any kind of clever and snappy introduction and let’s just jump right into the text for ourselves. Our theme will be: **HEY, IT’S ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS!**

First two verses. **“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people.”** The first thing I am going to say is that so many people do weird things with this text. For instance, they launch into all sorts of things as to what it means to be the salt of the earth and I think most of the time miss a lot of what is meant.

What does it mean that you are the salt of the earth? What is salt? Better yet, how was salt used and utilized by the people of Jesus’ day? Salt was used as a preservative. This one we grasp because we still pickle and preserve with salts and its brines. So as a Christian you are to be a preservative for the truth of God. Salt was used as a spice and flavor enhancer. Who doesn’t like salt on their food and how salt can just make the meal better. As a Christian, we are salt in this sense because we can make sense of and help to make this world and its problems a little easier to bear because we bring God’s flavoring to all that we do. Salt was used as an antiseptic. As a soldier you would indeed salt your wound because it did help to stave off infections. But note that salt used this way has a serious sting. As a Christian we are salt in the sense that we expose the world’s wounds and apply the medicine of Jesus. Sometimes that medicine of Jesus stings, but in the long run it is needed and important. Better the salt of Jesus than the infection and gangrenous death of Satan! Salt was used as a means to destroy. If you are unaware, there were times when the Romans after conquering a people would take and sprinkle the land with salt, pretty heavy concentrations of salt in order to stunt and cause infertility in the land. It was done either as punishment for your rebellion and it was done to make you totally and absolutely dependent on the Romans in order to survive. Yes, just let the idea of that sink into your mind and maybe the lesson of Hebrews 12 will pop into your brain: **“God disciplines the ones he loves.”**

I am going to guess that was a lot more complicated than you had thought. And then turn your attention to that next little line: **“but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people.”** Salt that has lost its flavor or the very properties of what salt is, is pretty well worthless. I think what is most important here is to contemplate that we can’t restore that saltiness, it is just not within our ability. And please note that what is worthless simply gets thrown out and trampled. So if you are going to claim to be a Christian and a follower of Jesus, be salt otherwise we are indeed being told that it is a worthless kind of faith that you have. And honestly, history has never seen a church which has abandoned God’s truth get back to the truth. A reminder we want to be careful.

Please note that the next lines follow hard on this lesson. They say, **“You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify you Father who is in heaven.”**

Just like the salt, you are light. A light that has gone out is…well, a burned out light. A light not lit is worthless. To emphasize the importance of your being a light, Jesus then directs our attention to the city on a hill. Because of the lights, especially at night, you just can’t hide a city on a hill. It is there for everyone to see. It can be a beacon of safety or it can be a beacon to attract the enemy. That, I don’t think matters to Jesus. What matters is that you are on the hill and you are shining away for all the world to see. Yet recognize as you shine, your enemy will come.

The discussion continues. You don’t light a lamp and put it under a basket. Not only is it a foolish waste of a lamp but please note it is dangerous to do. In those days, all lights were lamps, open flame lamps and to put it under a basket, a woven basket, is to invite a fire and potential disaster. It is not just hiding your faith that is wrong, it is inviting danger to hide your faith. Fact is, you put your lamp on a stand, and from that stand everyone benefits from the light. That is the purpose of the light. To shine away and let all enjoy its marvel and to see what the Lord has made you. You are the light, remember?

So Jesus draws the conclusion: **“In the same way, let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”** You and I have a job as the lights of the world. We are to shine. To shine with the glow and joy of Jesus. To let people see and marvel at the Lord our God and his goodness. What we do and how we do it are some of the most powerful sermons ever preached! So what excuse would you come up with for despising your Father, for failing to be his beacon and glow of salvation to the world? And are you shining when you are doing evil? Don’t be out there being a dead light and pretending you are a child of God. It just isn’t that easy. And by the way, we are not just talking about the fact that you will and do make mistakes. The issue is the fact that you make the same mistake again and again and don’t seem to have a care or desire to correct it. You are to shine to the glory of your Father in heaven and to the wonder of the Savior who has forgiven you.

Now here is where I find that people end up having some sort of disconnect to this teaching of Jesus. They act as if the next words are totally unrelated to what Jesus has just said. And yes, it is true, you could learn lots just by focusing on the next words, but the lesson is even more powerful when you let the words we just discussed salt your thinking and shine it lessons.

Jesus next says, **“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. 18Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. 19So 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

First, let’s make sure we understand what is plainly said here. Jesus makes it clear that his presence and his work does not nullify or put to an end the Law of God or the preaching and teaching of the Prophets of God. In other words, it all stands! Nothing gets thrown out. In truth, it is all teaching the very same thing, the salvation of God. But pay attention to how it is taught because it can be taught falsely. So nothing of the Law, nothing of the Old Testament is to be ignored or thrown out. Mind you, much of it needs to be grasped properly for what it is teaching. That was the problem of the Jewish religious establishment. To put it bluntly, they were all wrapped up in the religion and forgot that the religion wasn’t about them but about God and his plan of salvation. So when Jesus comes to “fulfill” the law and the prophets, the Jews don’t get it because they had thrown God out of their lives! That is no longer salty salt. It is no longer a lit lamp. Listen to these words again, **“18Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled.”** You cannot alter and corrupt God and his Word. You can’t subtract or add your own ideas and teachings. It needs to be the whole of God’s Word or you might just have a problem. Ask seriously, can you name a law that Jesus dismissed?

Here is what happens when salt us un-salty or the light is unlit or hidden: **“19So 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”** I can’t tell you how many people I have run across who seem to think that God’s Christian faith can be whatever they want it to be! Isn’t that the whole reason there are so many different “Christian denominations” out there. Because somewhere along the line one group or another determined they wanted it this way or that way, they wanted to teach this or that, in other words do things, teach things, practice things contrary to God’s Word and get others to go along with them. Please pay attention to what God’s Word says about this! And if you are wondering what I think the phrase **“least in the kingdom of heaven”** means I personally think it is a reference to hell. Both heaven and hell are a part of the domain and authority of the Lord God. The lowest place is hell. The highest place is heaven. Deliberately compromise the clear and plain truth of God and you will be in trouble. I especially think these words apply to those who take the task and office of public ministry in the name of Jesus. It is a reminder to us that we had better get it right, for we are answerable to the Lord God if we destroy souls by our foolish and false teaching.

All of this is laid out for one purpose, the verse we highlighted for ourselves: **“Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

Understand. The Pharisees and experts in the Law considered themselves the end of all discussion. They should have known better. Among themselves there were divisions and sects, which should have already warned them that somewhere they were getting it wrong. And when you have Jesus show up, clearly fulfilling God’s Word, doing wonders, miracles and signs galore and you can only come up with “He must be doing this by the power of Satan,” wouldn’t that be a sign you have a problem? They are really a good example of false righteousness because that righteousness relied on them!

Our righteousness must surpass that of these men. We humans are not the judge of God. We are not the ones who determine, “This is the way it is and thus it will be!” God and his Word is the foundation and judge of all. So first step to greater righteousness is let God be God. The only thing you can do is learn from God’s Word, learn, being guided by those God has appointed to help you grasp the fullness, the fulfillment of Jesus.

The second step is to grasp the depth of sin. You are a sinner. I am a sinner. I don’t know anyone who isn’t, except Jesus. Sin hurts us and destroys us. Sin clouds our thinking and blinds us to the absolute wonder and marvel of God. We are sinners. We are inclined to evil. We desperately need help and guidance and SAVING!

Finally, know that Jesus is your salvation. Jesus came to live the perfect life we could not. He endured every temptation we have but was without sin all so He could become the atoning sacrifice for our sins, yes, the Lamb of God sent to take away our sins.

That is what Jesus has done. He has taken our hell and damnation. Paid completely and utterly for our evils and wrongs. We know this is true because of the resurrection of Jesus. He who was dead is alive again. He lives, lives and rules eternally for our sake. There is no doubt, Jesus is our salvation.

Which means that Jesus is our righteousness. In Jesus we are counted before God as holy and pure because we are declared “righteous” before God in Jesus. The simple way to think of this is to grasp that when we stand before God he does not see us, but rather sees Jesus and always, heartily, joyfully and quickly brings us into the kingdom of Heaven he has prepared for us. All of this in Jesus.

You see, all of this is about our righteousness. Put it together. You can’t be righteous without being salt. You can’t be righteous without being light, light shining to the glory of God. That’s what faith does for us and in us. We shine with the righteousness of Jesus because in Jesus heaven is our home! God grant you this blessing of faith. Faith in Jesus and what He has done and says. Amen.