

Bible Study Guide: Week of 1-30-2023

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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The “you” here is, of course, plural: “*Y’all* are the salt of the earth.” Jesus is addressing his first disciples and the crowds that also followed him around. While Matthew 5:1-12 focused on characteristics of the community of faith (meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, etc.) here the focus turns to the mission of the community Jesus has come to form. This group of followers are the ones who bring God’s essence and “flavor” to an otherwise bland and bitter world. Jesus warns them against blending so much with the world at large that they become diluted and useless.

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Just as foolish as it would be to dilute salt to the point that it is flavorless, so would it be foolish to light a lamp and then put a solid basket on top of it. In the same way Christ’s followers are to give their light to the whole world so that God’s actions might be clear for all to see.

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Here Jesus sets the tone for his later sayings to come in this sermon which typically begin with, “You have heard it said....but I say to you....” He insists that he has not come to abolish the “law and prophets.” The term “law and prophets” here is an expression meaning “the whole of scripture”—what we would call the Old Testament. It is important to note that Jesus did not come to abolish or cast aside the old teachings of the Jewish faith. At the same time, however, it is equally important to note that he didn’t merely endorse the status quo or toe the party line. Rather, he reinterpreted the law and prophets in a way that insists on greater righteousness—righteousness not based on individual achievement, but rather on the love and mercy of God.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

1. What uses does salt have? How do these different uses inform what it might mean for us to be “the salt of the earth?”
2. In v. 16, what does Jesus mean by “letting our light shine before others?” How does this idea of our “good works” differ from “works righteousness”—the idea that we are to earn our own way into God’s grace?
3. What do you think it means for our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Who can hope to attain such righteousness?