

Matthew 5:13-20
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 8, 2026

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

You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, we said that part of Epiphany is Jesus' *teaching* being made known to the nations, for his teaching reflects His person. If He been manifested *in* the world, then so has the Truth of God's divine will been manifested *to* the world. As that Truth was *once* known when the Triune God spoke into existence a perfect world, so is that Truth *again* known when the incarnate God reveals Himself in and to the broken world.

So, to learn of Jesus' teaching is not to learn his rules, blueprints, and laws; it's to learn of Him. But, as He is the incarnate God-Man who is both holy and merciful, then His teaching will include both holiness and mercy, both Law and Gospel.

Last week, in the Beatitudes, we heard him begin his teaching by *comforting* his disciples...interestingly, through both *Law and Gospel* ("Thy Rod and thy Staff, they *comfort* me" of Law and Gospel used together) – *Law* in that the beatitudes highlighted the brokenness of the world, and *Gospel* in that Jesus proclaimed that those who trust *Him* – "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" – and that,

would they endure the world with faith in His promise – they *shall* be fully vindicated when He comes again in His glory.

All of that teaching, that comfort, is needed to hear rightly what He proclaims next. Today's verses are the very next in His same sermon on the mount: "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..." In other words, if – under the duress of the broken world, you *join fellowship with* the world – you at the same time forsake fellowship with Christ and His Church and lose all your salt! What good is that? How does that show any confidence in Christ and the promises of His beatitudes and the gospel of His cross? What good are you and your confession for anything – no salt left! Nothing for the world to taste, to preserve the truth – what good if you say to the world, "Yes, I trust Christ, but I trust the world more. Yes, I love Christ, but I love the world more"?

Again, He says, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden (the Church on the mountain tops of darkness). Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket... Let your light shine before others." Is this not also an extension of the Beatitudes. *Because* you are blessed with the kingdom of heaven, why would you live ashamed of the confession that you are blessed with the kingdom of heaven? Why would you pretend before the world that the Gospel is not your certain inheritance? And, if you *would* confess the Gospel before men, doesn't the God of that Gospel equally have

a holy Law, a holy will, for His creation?... a holiness and goodness that, when loved by the blessed, results in them bearing the fruit of faith... or, as Jesus calls it here, results in “good works” to give glory to your Father.

Indeed, good works are not good because they reflect *your* holiness; they are good because they reflect God’s holiness. They do not shine the light on *your* goodness in the creation, but *God’s* goodness in and for and over His creation.

And, as Jesus says in the subsequent verses, that goodness, that holiness of God is not some *philosophical* truth made known in the teaching of Christ Jesus; that goodness and holiness of God is a *divine* truth made known in the flesh and blood of Christ Jesus.

But what is true for Jesus in *his* own body is also true for those who in *their* own body follow Him and wait for His reappearing. Notice how what he says regarding himself and His *fulfillment* of God’s holiness and goodness, he also expects (in a sense) regarding His followers and their *love* of God’s holiness and goodness: “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” (Would Jesus ever relax the commandments of God and be ashamed of them and teach other than the holy will of God? Then the same is true for his followers)...in other words, “Downplaying the holy Law, teaching others to explain it away... that’s not the mark of a true follower; My sheep *love* My

Word” or, as he says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” Instead, “Whoever does them” (whoever lives dependent on My Word) “and teaches these commandments” (urges others to live by My Word) “will be called *great* in the kingdom of heaven.”

Yes, the goodness and holiness of God is flesh-and-blood in Jesus Christ, that that same goodness and holiness may be poured out upon and confessed in the flesh-and-blood lives of you who are baptized into and wear the name of and even partake of the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.

This is our joy, our *daily* life, until taken up into *eternal* life. Or, as Jesus says it in our text, “until heaven and earth pass away” ... and again, “until *all* is accomplished.” Certainly, our *justification* is already accomplished – “It is finished/ accomplished” Jesus cried on the cross. But the full revealing of your salvation is yet to come... not until heaven and earth pass away and the resurrection brings us into the dawn of the new creation.

Thus, *until* Christ comes again, God’s holy will for the first creation is still in force; it’s still good, still wisdom. But that can only be rightly seen (in this fallen world) through the lens of Christ crucified: because *justification* is accomplished in Him, *all* will be accomplished through Him, and *nothing* will be accomplished apart from Him: “Apart from Me, you can do nothing,” He tells us plainly. Apart from Him, our seeking after wisdom turns into sophistry and

self-serving legalism. We study the holy Law for our own merit, not the well-being of our neighbor; we love it for *our* supposed justification and therefore measure ourselves according to it, and therefore lead ourselves unto our condemnation.

Isn't that what's described by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, distinguishing *self-righteous* fasts from the *true* fast? Man's self-righteous fasts are those by which man hopes God notices him: "Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?" (Have you really humbled yourself if you expect God to be impressed by it?) The Lord replies, "In the day of *your* fast you seek *your own pleasure*" ... meaning, 'You make a *show* of godliness so that you can self-justify your secret sins.' Isn't that so often the way of man's fasts, man's self-discipline, reasoning to himself, "Let's do this in a way we can easily accomplish and feel justified by that, so that the secret sins can remain without a guilty conscience or without love of neighbor."

But, the Lord calls for a different type of fast... a fast from holding onto wickedness, a fast from thinking of self as greater than neighbor. The Lord says,

"Is not this the fast that I choose (choose, not for God to do, but for *man* to live in): to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him."

In other words, is not the fast the Lord would have for you that which, dependent on Christ, fasts from *Self* and loves *neighbor*... dependent on Christ's light shining upon you, you reflect light upon your neighbor. In this way, "you are the light of the world," Jesus says of you, because you live in His love for you and thus reflect His love upon others.

To use another analogy: When Christ grants you His light and life by granting His Holy Spirit to baptismally take up residence in your heart, it's like the ripples of a pebble tossed into water. Where such goodness of God immediately benefits *you* ("makes a splash with you"), the ripple effect spreads far and wide. It may not be received *well* by all... some ripples bump up against hard rocks and bounce back off the stone-hearted. But other ripples meet no resistance and continue on far and wide beyond what we ever thought little pebbles could do... or, more truly, beyond what we ever thought the waters of Baptism and the Holy Spirit taking up residence in your heart could do.

Even in the brokenness of the fallen world, the love of God can pour forth in daily life whereby *you* are named the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is the holy will of God for His *entire* creation, for *all* mankind. But only *in Christ Jesus*, only through the *lens* of Christ Jesus, do we see the holy will of God as true *wisdom*...

Consider carefully what I just said there: to know the wisdom that is the Word of God is to know the wisdom that is the Word made flesh. Or, said differently, to know wisdom in the Word of God is not to introduce some nuanced reading of the Scriptural text that no one's ever read that way before, nor to interpret it in some novel way; indeed, the Scriptures themselves say exactly what it means to truly know wisdom. Paul says to the Corinthians, "You are in Christ Jesus, who *became* to us wisdom from God..."

So, by baptizing our children into Christ Jesus and raising them up in Him and delighting to have them partake of His body and blood (and for us to live dependent on the same gifts), we *do* impart wisdom... "not a wisdom of this age," Paul explains in this morning's epistle reading, because this age does not see the world through the lens of Christ but only through the lens of do's and don't's, and self-justification and self-preservation and self-glorification... always just self, self, self! Rather, we impart and confess "a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages", hidden was that Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world... hidden until finally revealed in the incarnate God-Man, Christ Jesus.

Our liturgy confesses this, as you'll hear again this morning in the seasonal Proper Preface for Epiphany: "for what had been *hidden* from before the foundation of the world, you have made known to the nations in Your Son." There it is, the secret wisdom made known in the flesh and blood of Christ Jesus... not primarily by his teaching

(which the Creeds never even mention Jesus' teaching), but by his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death. There, on the cross, Jesus fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets that pointed to the Christ. There, from the cross, God's wisdom shineth (the hymn says)... God's wisdom in overcoming sin, death, the power of the devil and giving renewed meaning and purpose to life in this broken world in anticipation of the full unveiling of our salvation at the dawn of the resurrection and the life of the world to come.

The lens of Christ crucified – the Law and Gospel enfleshed – is how you interpret the Scriptures (“these are they that speak of Me,” he says)... this is how you see in love your Christian spouse, your Christian children, your Christian parents, your Christian siblings... how you see the entire world through the lens of the holy will and compassionate mercy of God enfleshed in the person of Christ Jesus.

And thus, *only* in Christ are we true light for the world and salt of the earth. And yet, *truly* in Christ Jesus are we light for the world and salt of the earth. For the darkness of the world and the bland tastelessness and the rot of its wickedness needs the salt and light of Christ, needs your confession!, which is confessed in our daily lives and conduct and Christian love... daily lives of righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees... for we confess and reflect and ‘epiphany’ the light not of our own righteousness, but of Christ our righteousness... he who is our wisdom, our righteousness,

sanctification and redemption... so that, even surrounded by all the world's boasting of Self, we may boast in the Lord.

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

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