

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Jesus was a great teacher and preacher, and today's Gospel comes from probably Jesus' best-known sermon. It's called the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is preaching here to disciples, to His followers, to believers, to the Church, to us.

It is a sermon, and a long one. We're going to break it up over the next few weeks. Even today, we're picking up the sermon in progress. Jesus had just taught of the blessedness of being His follower, a blessedness that consists in being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness' sake, reviled and persecuted on account of Jesus, for the promise to these blessed ones is that their "*reward is great in heaven*" (Matt. 5:12).

Jesus goes on, then, to preach to the blessed, "*You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.*" There may be some different nuances in these two figures, but both of them are meant to describe Jesus' followers. They both instruct us about good works. Christ's disciples are to be busy doing things: salting the earth with righteousness, shining your light out in the world. As Luther says, "O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly" (quoted in Formula of Concord (FC), Solid Declaration (SD), IV:10).

Good works are not optional for Christians; there is a Divine "must" to the doing of good works. Our confessions teach, "When it is asserted and taught that good works are free to believers in the sense that they are optional for them to do or not to do, this is false, and must be rejected" (FC, SD, IV:20). Therefore, far from what we Lutherans have been slanderously accused of, namely "forbidding good works" (Augsburg Confession (AC), XX:1), Lutherans urge them. Again, we teach, "Christians should not be frightened away from good works, but should be admonished and urged to do them most diligently" (FC, SD, IV:40), even as Jesus taught, "*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*"

Now, I'm going to focus on the "light" part of this text, and I have five points I want to make from Jesus' proclamation: "*you are the light of the world ... let your light shine.*"

First, this exhortation is being preached to believers; as I said, Jesus is preaching to His followers. It could not be otherwise, for, although Jesus calls us light, we, of ourselves, are not light. Apart from Christ, we are but people who in our wickedness love darkness (John 3:19). Jesus is "*the light of the world*" (John 8:12), and this Light, whom the darkness could not overcome, this Light, "*the true*

*light ... gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). Indeed, St. Paul says, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).*

Of course, before this light shone in us, we were walking in darkness without a light to shine, but in Christ, we have become children of the Light. *“Walk as children of light,”* St. Paul urges us, *“(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph. 5:8-10).*

Second, good works are those *“fruit of light”* things which are pleasing to the Lord, those commanded by Him. They are not self-chosen works or special things invented by monks and priests. They are the works of the tongue: *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). Preach “repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... in [Jesus’] name” (Luke 24:47).* They are the works of the hands and feet: feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked, visiting the sick or imprisoned (Matt. 25:35-36). They are, as Isaiah said, *“to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.”*

Third, good works are done for the benefit of the neighbor and to the glory of God. They are not done for your own pleasure or for the accolades you might receive. You are never commanded to *“love yourself,”* but rather to *“love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).* This we seek to do in obedience to the Lord’s commandment, that we may also show our love to the Lord and give all glory to the *“Father who is in heaven.”*

Fourth, Christian good works are done with the instruction of the law, but not the coercion of the law, for Christ has set us free from the guilt and condemnation of the law. Thus, Jesus says in His sermon, *“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.”*

Christ did, indeed, fulfill the Law by His perfect life, even from an infant as we heard last Sunday: *“they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord” (Luke 2:39),* that *“by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).* But He also took on God’s just sentence for sin: death — dying for us that we might be *“justified by his blood”* and *“saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:8-9),* dying *“that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death” (Heb. 2:14).*

In baptism, now we have been united to Christ and to His death and resurrection, so that, on the one hand, as we “*delight ... in the law of the LORD, and [meditate] on his law ... day and night*” (Ps. 1:2), then we are able to “*discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*” (Rom. 12:2). He instructs us.

On the other hand, “*There is ... now no condemnation for [us] who are in Christ Jesus,*” as St. Paul says. “*The law of the Spirit of life has set [us] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death*” (Rom. 8:1-2). Again, Paul reminds us that “*[we] who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which [we] were committed*” (Rom. 6:17-18). Again, having been “*released from the law, having died to that which held us captive,*” we are now able to “*serve in the new way of the Spirit*” (Rom. 7:6). Indeed, the clean heart and the right spirit that the Lord has created in us, now moves the believer to do good works with a free and willing spirit, instructed along the way by God’s “*holy and righteous and good*” commandment (Rom. 7:12).

Fifth, we don’t try to change God’s commandments or relax them. We seek to follow them, knowing that we have flesh, knowing that we do not measure up to the perfect standard that God sets, knowing that everything we do still reeks of sin, but knowing that in Christ, our good works are pleasing to God.

And so, when even our righteous deeds are soiled with sin (Isa. 64:6), we flee to Christ, holding up not our works but His to our gracious God. “Thy works, not mine, O Christ,” “Thy wounds, not mine, O Christ,” “Thy cross, not mine, O Christ,” “Thy death, not mine, O Christ,” “Thy righteousness, O Christ” .... “To whom save Thee, Who canst alone For sin atone, Lord, shall I flee?” (LSB565)

We flee to Christ, knowing that in Christ, our righteousness does indeed exceed that of the Pharisees. We wretched sinners flee to Christ who has delivered us from this body of death. Yes, “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” According to Your word, O God, work “*in [us], both to will and to work for [Your] good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13).

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