

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

As we heard last Sunday, Jesus began His famous Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes, the proclamation of the life and blessings of being believers, disciples of Jesus: poverty of spirit leads to membership in the kingdom of heaven; mourning results in being comforted; meekness leads to a blessed inheritance, and so forth.

The description continues in today's portion of that sermon. "*You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.*" These are not commands to do; they are descriptions of being. They describe who Jesus' disciples are; that is, they describe Jesus' blessed disciples, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. We are those who season everything around us and make this sinful world palatable to live in. By word and deed, we influence those around us, proclaiming Christ and demonstrating to them how to live righteous and sanctified lives.

One can see now in the world what happens to it when the Christian influence wanes. Peace is replaced with violence; love with hate; civility with rudeness; kindness with cruelty; concern with apathy; praise with scorn; ultimately, faith is replaced with unbelief. Lord, have mercy on us, and grant us true faith, that is, a faith that is salty.

You know that this faith is not our own doing; it's a gift of God; it's a work of God Himself in us. Luther says it like this: "Faith ... is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit." "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith."

Luther continues by describing how this God-given faith is salty: "O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. ...

"Because of [this God-given faith], without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire. Beware, therefore, of your own false notions and of the idle talkers who imagine themselves wise enough to make decisions about faith and good works, and yet are

the greatest fools. Pray God that he may work faith in you. Otherwise you will surely remain forever without faith, regardless of what you may think or do” (*Luther’s Works*, 35:370-1).

Using the figure of light, similarly, Jesus urges our preaching and teaching and bearing witness to Christ — not hiding the precious good news of our Savior as a lamp put under a basket, but letting the Gospel light of ours shine forth as on a stand. And He urges our good works: “*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*”

Let no one tell you that Lutherans teach that good works are optional in a believer’s life. They’re not (FC, SD, IV:20), any more than it’s optional for a fruit tree to bear fruit; as Jesus taught in the parable about a fig tree that produced no figs. The fruitless tree was worthless and should be cut down (Luke 13:6-9). A fruitless Christian is no Christian. As James teaches: a faith without works is dead (James 2:17).

Even worse is the accusation that Lutherans forbid good works (AC, XX:1). That’s not true, either. Lutherans urge them as Jesus does here. We teach that “Christians should not be frightened away from good works, but should be admonished and urged to do them most diligently” (FC, SD, IV:40).

Of course, our salvation is not dependent on our good works. They contribute nothing to salvation, for our good works fall far short of the Law’s demands. Our “*righteousness*” falls short of God’s exacting standard: perfection. “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matt. 5:48). Not even the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees — who were scrupulous about keeping the law — not even their righteousness was sufficient, Jesus taught.

What is needed is a righteousness far superior to theirs, too — the righteousness granted to us through faith in Christ, for that’s what Christ came to do ... “*to fulfill all righteousness*” (Matt. 3:15). And this He accomplished, not by abolishing the Law and the Prophets, but by fulfilling them ... perfectly ... for us. This righteousness Jesus accomplished by His perfect sacrifice of atonement on the cross. As St. Paul taught: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Yes, “*Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*” has won our righteousness, and now by the Spirit’s working in our lives, we have heard and understood and received these “*things of the Spirit of God.*” We have been called to faith in Christ Jesus. We have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We now “*have the mind of Christ.*”

What is good and right and salutary, then, does not germinate in our own sinful thoughts. It come from the mind of Christ; it is taught in His word. For even

though Christ came to fulfill the Law on our behalf, and the Law no longer condemns us who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), nevertheless, the Law remains an instructor for us, teaching us Godly ways. As we prayed with the Psalmist today: *“With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! ... I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.”*

We shine brightly as a light in the world, when we let God’s word guide us as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105), and not as unbelievers in the world, who think they “are the center of all things.” They devise “their own system of values, which is very different from the values of those [of us] who begin with the premise that ‘the fear of the [LORD] is the beginning of knowledge’” (Timothy E. Saleska, *Concordia Commentary: Psalms 1–50*,” p. 575). For them, there is no “God who is going to hold them accountable for their actions” “[T]heir morals, values, truths, and standards are not imposed on them from above. Instead, they [each one] create their own” (Saleska, p. 575). They are darkness, not light; there is no saltiness in them.

On the other hand, surely, we have let some of this moral decay happen by being less salty than we should have been, by hiding our light under a basket, when we should have proclaimed the truth of God’s salvation, the truth of God’s word. Let us repent of our timidity; let us repent of our lack of saltiness. Let us look to Jesus for our salvation; let us look to Him, hung on a tree and raised from the dead, as our Leader. Let us look to God’s word as the standard for our actions.

Jesus did not shirk His duty. God grant us the saltiness to go forth and do our duty and shine the Light of Christ *“before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven.”*

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