

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 5:13-20**

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“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.

“You are the light of the world.  
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on  
the lampstand,  
and it gives light to all in the house.  
In 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.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;  
I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.  
For 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.

Therefore, 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.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes  
and Pharisees,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This section follows the beatitudes. The first three episodes, "You are salt and light," form the first part of this section. The theme of the second section is the fulfillment of the law.

There are three verbal threads in the first section, “You are the salt of the earth/the light of the world. Salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste . . .” There are three components of the light: light of the world, gives light to all, let your light shine.

In the second section there are two verbal threads: "come to abolish/come not to abolish." The second verbal thread is: “whoever breaks one . . .and teaches others . . .will be called . . .in the kingdom of heaven.” "Whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

If you notice the episodic structure—salt, light, lamp and the law: not abolish/fulfill, until all is accomplished and the verbal threads, it is easy to internalize. The sermon is

composed to be memorable. The key to remembering and reciting the sermon is to focus on the structure and the emotional dynamics.

The first part is an affirmation of the great value of Jesus' listeners. The probability is that Jesus' audiences were discouraged and depressed and thought that they could do nothing that would make any difference in the world. They were after all, subject to the Roman Empire and the Romans operated on the theory that the way to run an Empire is to dominate people and to keep them from rebelling by convincing them that they had little value and no power. It was very hard to resist this. So Jesus is actively resisting that mentality. The Romans thought peace comes through power and domination. Jesus taught that peace comes through the values and ways of life identified in the Beatitudes. True happiness comes from doing these ways of life happily and openly. So the emotional spirit of the first part is a spirit of encouragement and affirmation. Be aware when telling this story that Jesus is lifting the spirits of your listeners through his words and your delivery of those words. The words are addressed to listeners then and now, "You, you're the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth."

The second part is an affirmation of the law and its importance. This is rabbinic discourse in response to folks who were hoping and/or teaching that Jesus was antinomian (against the law). Matthew, composing his gospel in the 80's, may have announced this to his audiences in reaction to Pauline emphasis on the transcendence of the law by the power of grace. Paul was often understood as being opposed to the Law: "you have died to the law" "now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive..." (Romans 7, Gal. 2.19-21, 3,21-22) And in John "the law came through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ."

There were also strong antinomian groups within rabbinic Judaism: Jewish gnostics, merkabah mysticism, etc. Furthermore, the Hillel school of rabbis was modifying and often reinterpreting the law in less demanding ways. For example, the Hillel school taught that it was justified for a man to divorce his wife if she insulted him or habitually burned the food. In Jesus' context, his emphasis on the complete fulfillment of the law was heard as a highly conservative interpretation of the law.

The audience is addressed as the disciples who came to him and whom he taught along with the crowds. It is especially important to hear this statement within the context of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism because the concluding statement in this section of the sermon has often been heard as anti-Jewish: "unless your righteousness as Christians exceeds that of the Jews and the scribes and Pharisees." This has often been heard as Jesus talking to Christians and affirming that Christians are more righteous than Jews. But, of course, Jesus was speaking to Jews and Matthew clearly intended that his audiences were addressed as Jews. When he presented Jesus' speeches, he always addressed his audiences as various Jewish groups, as is the case here. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to the disciples and all the people, that is the Jewish people of Galilee who would gather around Jesus.

For us today, Jesus calls us to a righteousness of spirit. The overall impact of Jesus' teaching was to reinforce a spiritual righteousness that originates in the heart and is expressed in righteous deeds. Jesus is steadily emphasizing the power of righteousness to transform the world. This righteousness comes from a full bodied assent to God's will and purpose for the world.