

Jesus Teaches About Fulfilling the Law

Bible Background • MATTHEW 5:13–20

Printed Text • MATTHEW 5:13–20 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 119:105–112

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: **CONTRAST** the righteousness Jesus taught with that of the Pharisees; **DISCUSS** what it means to be salt and light in our righteousness; and **IDENTIFY** things that keep us from being salt and light in our communities.

In Focus

Mrs. Taylor was always warm and welcoming to new families in her neighborhood. She would go out of her way to bake cookies for them and stop to talk when they would pull up to their houses while she was out in her garden. She was known for her presence at the local middle school volunteering during basketball games, and singing at the park on Sunday afternoons. When she finally reached an age where she was having trouble walking and couldn't do the things she used to do, she was devastated. One day her neighbor Audrey knocked on her door, and Mrs. Taylor brought her cane to answer it.

Audrey had baked cookies for her and asked to come in and enjoy them with her. Mrs. Taylor was thrilled! Audrey asked her how she managed to always be so full of joy and to remember the little details of her neighbors' lives, such as what their kids were doing in school. Mrs. Taylor responded she made each neighbor and their family a point of prayer every night. Audrey was intrigued. She had been to church as a kid, but had stopped going some years ago and was curious to hear more about Mrs. Taylor's faith in Jesus.

How can we preach the Gospel with our actions in ways that invite people to draw nearer to hear our words about Christ?

Keep in Mind

“In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:16, NLT).

Words You Should Know

- A. Jot or Tittle** iota e keraia (Gk.) — Letter i or hook of a letter, smallest pieces of a word.
- B. Fulfill** pleroo (Gk.) — To uphold, keep, bring to conclusion.

Say It Correctly

none

KJV

KJV Matthew 5:13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

14 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

15 Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

NIV

Matthew 5:13 “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

14 “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.

15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house.

16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

17 “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.

18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved.

19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

20 “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

The People, Places, and Times

Salt and Light. Before refrigeration, salt was used to preserve food. Meat would not keep for long unless it was salted. It meant the difference between life and death. Similarly, the followers of Christ should preserve the best traditions and morality of their societies. They are the difference between life and death in their societies. The addition of salt to food turns a bland meal into a delicious feast. Christians demonstrate to the world how a relationship with Christ adds zest to our mundane lives. It encourages unbelievers to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (from Psalm 34:8).

Christ was the original light to the world. When healing the blind man, Jesus explained to His disciples, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). When He went back to heaven, He passed the obligation to illuminate to His disciples: “Ye are the light of the world.” As light, we show the way. Jesus showed the way to the kingdom of heaven; we show the way to Jesus.

How should we react to the call of Jesus to be light as He was light in the world?

Background

This passage is found near the beginning of Christ’s well-known Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the first of five sermons and teachings recorded in Matthew. This beloved sermon begins with the Beatitudes, a list of statements with each beginning “Blessed are,” and describing the well-being and characteristics of one who is actively following God. Christ teaches His followers that there are certain blessings—a state of supernatural bliss and happiness—that can be expected in those who choose to live with a kingdom mindset.

He then continues this sermon by quoting from certain well-known portions of the Law, further elaborating on their meanings and expressions, focusing on the kingdom of God. As Christ preaches, He often addresses the “hypocrites,” emphasizing the importance of being more concerned with the attitudes of their hearts, than their actions.

These “hypocrites” would be familiar to the disciples. They were the religious experts of the day, such as the Pharisees and scribes. These men were highly respected as the protectors of the Law of Moses—the first five books of the Bible—also known as the Torah, and wellversed in the books of the prophets. As the religious and moral authorities, they were the teachers who created additional rules to follow in order to look righteous. Jesus would later call these rules “burdens” in His seven woes to the Pharisees and scribes (Matthew 23). Throughout the Gospels, these experts would constantly challenge His authority and attempt to discourage His followers.

In what ways are some modern-day believers like the Pharisees?

At-A-Glance

1. We Are Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13–16)
2. Christ Fulfilling the Law (vv. 17–20)

In Depth

1. Christians Are Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13–16)

After addressing the personal blessings given to followers of God, Christ then tells them how they are to impact the world around them. He uses two familiar examples, salt and light. There has been some debate about Jesus’ intention in using salt because of its various uses during Christ’s time. It was a preservative, an agent added to fertilizer, a disinfectant, and a seasoning. At any rate, salt was accessible, valuable, and useful. Christ seems to point toward its use as seasoning. Real salt does not lose its saltiness. And if it does, it no longer serves any of its purposes, be it flavoring, disinfecting, or preserving. It is useless.

Jerusalem was considered by Jews to be the light of the world (they also called God and the Law this). Therefore, the city Jesus referenced may be Jerusalem, or simply any elevated city whose light is visible to the surrounding valley. People could know where they were by simply locating the city on the hill. Ancient Jewish homes had few windows and their oil lamps provided little light. In order to get the best coverage, lamps had to be elevated. Going through the effort of positioning the light properly, then covering it with a basket, would have been futile. Light needs to be seen in order to dispel darkness. In both illustrations, Jesus exhorts His followers to be useful, visible and impactful. They should do good works and serve the purpose for which they are on earth—to bring glory to God.

How can you be “salt and light” in your world so that people in your circle know whose you are and give God glory?

2. Christ Fulfilling the Law (vv. 17–20)

The Pharisees accused Jesus of seeking to nullify the Law. He was not opposing the Law, but rejecting their misinterpretation and expression of it, through man-made traditions. Jesus came to fulfill the Law—to complete it. His moral demands were not less than Moses'. He was the only one who could perfectly obey the Law. He fulfills the predictions. He is the Messiah that the prophets were looking for. He is perfect. As such, He is the only one who would completely satisfy the sacrificial system so that all could meet the requirements of the Law and be righteous in God's eyes (as opposed to people's eyes) by faith in Him. Jewish teachers taught that disobeying one law was equivalent to disobeying them all. The smallest infraction was problematic. Jesus reminds them this is true of the Law. The smallest letter in the Greek alphabet is the iota, in Hebrew it is yod (about the size of an apostrophe). Changing the smallest of these letters could change a meaning. God is a stickler for details, and not one thing would “pass away” until everything that He wants to accomplish is fulfilled. To further emphasize God's requirements, Jesus points to the Pharisees. Even their righteousness wasn't enough to enter the kingdom of God. This would have been unsettling to hear, because to common Jews the Pharisees were the epitome of righteousness. But Jesus wanted His followers to realize that God was far more concerned about their hearts and true righteousness than their ability to follow rules.

Is it easier to follow man-made rules rather than to submit one's heart to God? How?

Search the Scriptures

1. Jesus would continue to be a threat to the Jewish leaders. Read Matthew 7:28–29. After His Sermon on the Mount, what was said about Him? Why would this cause problems?
2. Jesus states His case against the Pharisees in Matthew 23. Read Matthew 23:1–7. What is His primary issue, as it influences all of the others?

Discuss the Meaning

1. In what ways can your presence in your family, church, and community make it better as you are salt and light there?
2. What effect does the declaration that Jesus came to fulfill the Law and not abolish it have on the way we should act as His followers?

Liberating Lesson

“This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine...” This familiar childhood song has been hijacked in modern society, even in the church. We have forgotten the purpose of the light. Everyone wants to “shine”—to get the credit we deserve, accolades we've earned, and be acknowledged for our “righteousness,” while expecting others to fall in line. Like the Pharisees, we often want our own glory. It is normal, even understandable. But wrong. We are expected to shine, and to do good things, but in doing so, we must remember that it's not about us. The purpose is “so that they (the world) may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” A lamp shines not for the sake of itself, but the sake of the one who placed it (God) and those around it (the world). How can we be like lights that shine in our communities but point to God and not ourselves? How can we be like salt that flavors and preserves our communities for God's glory?

Application for Activation

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us... (Hebrews 12:1, NLT). When we think about being seen, we think about people in our circles. Not God. Not the “cloud of witnesses” who left a legacy of faith for us. Like Pharisees, we often get entangled trying to impress or please an earthly crowd. How would it look for you to “lay aside every weight” in order to run well in your relationship with God? What sin are you clinging to that needs to be released?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 5:13–20

13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Verses 13–16 are still being addressed directly to Christ’s followers. This is evident from the second person plural pronoun, which was first used in the previous verses (v. 11). Indeed, the subject “ye” in both verses 13 and 14 (Gk. *humeis*, hoo-MACE) is emphatic and can be translated “you yourselves.” The emphasis demonstrates the importance of the subject and the specificity of the sayings to the disciples. Here, Jesus uses two metaphors, salt and light, to describe the disciples’ calling and their responsibilities to the world. Salt and light are two common but very important and useful substances used by humankind in all generations. In what sense does Matthew use “salt” here? There are a number of ways salt was—and is—used as a preservative, as a purifying agent (2 Kings 2:20–21), and as a seasoning for food (Job 6:6). In the ancient Israelite religion, it was used especially for sacrifices (Leviticus 2:13; Ezra 6:9; Ezekiel 43:24). It is not clear in what sense “salt” is being used in this verse.

However, we know that salt plays very important roles in our daily lives, and Jesus expects His disciples to fulfill similar roles in the world. If those roles are not fulfilled, the disciples are like salt that has “lost his savour,” the taste or saltiness, and is therefore worthless. The question “wherewith shall it be salted?” is rhetorical with an obvious answer: nothing! Therefore, Jesus says, it will be thrown out “to be trodden under foot of men.” The phrase “to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men” speaks of judgment for those who do not fulfill their calling (cf. 8:12, 22:13, 25:30), whose lives fail to make a positive Christian impact in the world.

14 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. 15 Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

The second metaphor used to describe the disciples is “light.” They are the “light of the world,” Jesus says. He begins by emphasizing the nature and function of light, which is primarily to illumine large areas and make things visible. Lights are usually visible, and light helps people see where they are going. Jesus qualifies the analogy of light with, “A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.” The idea here is probably taken from the city of Jerusalem, which is built on a hill and can be seen from afar, especially at night when the lights from the oil lamps glow. It is also believed that many ancient cities were built with limestone, which made them gleam in the sun and therefore difficult to conceal.

Continuing with this theme, Jesus says in effect that for lamps to be useful, they must be on lampstands so that they can illumine large areas, rather than “under a bushel.” A bushel refers to a basket or bowl used for measuring out a bushel of produce (e.g., wheat). People would normally light their candles and put them on lampstands so that they might give light to the whole house, not cover them with a bowl. If the flame is covered, it will die and the people will be in the dark. Therefore, the disciples have the same function as light into the world. Light is a common symbol in the Bible: The Jews saw themselves as the light of the world (Romans 2:19), and the true light is the suffering Servant (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), who ultimately was Christ (Matthew 4:16; John 8:12; 1 John 1:7).

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Jesus then spells out the obvious as He drives home His point and the meaning of the metaphor. The disciples as the light of the world must show forth their “light” as it were by letting it shine. They would do this through good works, by living out their lives as set forth in verses 3–10. Although they would face all types of persecutions (vv. 10–12), that should not make them hide their light, which was for others to see so that they might give glory to their Father in heaven. This is the main objective and purpose of discipleship (1 Peter 2:12, 4:11; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6) as exemplified by Christ Himself (John 17:4; cf. 13:31, 14:13).

17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

“The law and the prophets” is a shorthand expression for what we know as the Old Testament. Jesus prepares His listeners for what He is about to say by explaining that His teaching does not destroy, but rather fulfills the Old Testament. The Greek word translated “destroy” is *kataluo* (kah-tah-LOO-oh). In other contexts, it means “dissolve, disunite, subvert, demolish.” Here it means “do away with, annul, make invalid.” To “fulfill” (Gk. *pleroo*, play-ROH-oh) the law and prophets, then, would be to uphold the laws of the Old Testament, and to bring to fulfillment their Messianic and kingdom of God prophecies. The Law and the prophets are the Word of God, and God has made it clear that His Word will never fail (Isaiah 40:8; 55:10–11). Jesus is in full agreement with the Scriptures and goes to the extent of saying that not even a “jot” or “tittle” will pass away. The Greek word translated “jot” is *iota* (ee-OH-tah), the name of the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet. The Greek word translated “tittle” is *keraia* (keh-RYE-ah), and it refers to a projection or hook of a letter. Jesus was saying that not even the smallest letter—or even a small part of a letter—will ever be removed from God’s Law (see also Luke 16:17; 21:33). In fact, God’s Word will endure until heaven and earth pass away—an event that Jesus Himself asserts is a certainty (Matthew 24:35), but not until everything that is written comes to pass.

19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Since Jesus’ kingdom does not destroy the Old Testament Law, neither should we. The Greek word translated “break” is *luo* (LOO-oh) and can also mean loosen or untie. Violations of God’s Law are an attack on that Law; they attempt to weaken and destroy it. Jesus uses a play on the word “least” to make a memorable point: If you break the least commandment, you will be the least. The Greek word translated “least” is *elachistos* (eh-LA-kheese-toce) and refers to the thing that is smallest in importance. The rabbis of Jesus’ time classified the laws of the Old Testament according to their importance. Jesus uses their terminology to make a point that contradicts their practice: It is a grave error to minimize any of God’s commandments. The consequence for living in deliberate violation of God’s Law is being called “least” in the kingdom of heaven. What God wants is not a display of religious behavior that impresses others, but our wholehearted submission to His will. It is impossible to rise to greatness in God’s eyes without a firm commitment to total obedience.

20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The scribes and Pharisees were some of the spiritual elite in Jesus' day. The scribes were the expert teachers and interpreters of the Law. The Pharisees were a Jewish religious party whose name comes from the Aramaic word *pherisha'* (feh-REE-shaw), meaning "separated." Among other things, they attempted to distinguish themselves through fastidious obedience to the Law (cf. Philippians 3:4–6). However, they also added human traditions to the laws of God and modified God's laws through their interpretations and traditions. Because their lives were so dominated by conformity to their religious rules, the Jewish people highly regarded them for their outward appearance of righteousness.

Jesus' statement that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees would have shocked His audience. Most of His hearers would have assumed that if anyone could make it to heaven on the basis of their good works, it would be the Pharisees. Doubtless they would have thought, "If even the Pharisees fail to be good enough, is there any hope for the rest of us?" But Jesus' point is not that we must do more than the Pharisees, but that their righteousness is not true righteousness. True righteousness would be gained only through faith in Jesus, and it is through Him that we enter and live in the kingdom of God.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Living Wisely
(Colossians 4:1–6)

TUESDAY

A Light to the Nations
(Isaiah 42:1–9)

WEDNESDAY

Christ's Sacrifice for All
(Hebrews 10:1–10)

THURSDAY

Living Humbly
(Matthew 23:1–12)

FRIDAY

Applying the Law in New Ways
(Luke 6:1–11)

SATURDAY

Deliverance from the Law
(Romans 7:24–8:4)

SUNDAY

Interplay of Salt, Light, and Righteousness
(Matthew 5:13–20)