

Called to be Salt and Light

Today's gospel reading continues with the gathered teachings of Jesus known as the Sermon on the Mount. Most of the time we associate only the Beatitudes with this title, but in Matthew there is much more to this teaching session given not only to disciples but to the crowd gathered. The "Sermon" begins with the Beatitudes in chapter 5, but continues until the end of chapter 7. All of the teachings which follow them are related to what Jesus was teaching within the blessings he gave. The Beatitudes themselves have a deeper meaning than we often see. The older translations of the opening word in each conveyed the meaning of blessing. Newer translations use "happy", which is also a valid translation, but is confusing in context to the specific description of the named individual—happy is the one who mourns—definitely seems an odd combination. It certainly seems more likely that Jesus would bless those in the crowd who were mourning. But each of the beatitudes had a second clause which seemed to indicate there would be a result following the blessing, a reward for their future which placed the people in a different state—those who mourn will be comforted, for example. The beatitudes end ominously on a word about being reviled and persecuted falsely because of any support for spreading the teachings which Jesus was giving. The reward in heaven will be great, but this following of Jesus on earth might not be. Jesus then pronounces certain characteristics of those who will choose to follow what he teaches. "You are the salt of the earth," he declares. But he also describes a condition where salt loses its "saltiness." This unsalty salt is not deemed to be of value: "it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. This section of the passage is a metaphor which is a reference about the Jewish nation. It seems to have begun as a reference to Jews who were forced into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Those Jews taken into exile were scattered throughout the vast Assyrian Empire and basically were never able to return to their homeland. They were lost to history, but are remembered by Jews as being scattered throughout the world, where they lived among other cultures and on every continent where they live "*incognito*". Living in this way the rituals which identified them as Jews were lost, but they continued to practice the basic moral practices of the Torah even if they did not know why these practices were followed. When Jesus addresses his audience as "the salt of the earth," he is reminding them that Torah observance is not just a "religious thing," not a set of odd Jewish practices involving seafood and pork and other food items that many non-Jews have no trouble eating. Torah observance is good for the world. It calls communities to be gentler and more orderly. It makes human beings kinder and more tolerant. Jesus is reminding them that the world is full of relatives, long-lost though they may be, who live in ways to preserve the world because they just do. Doing Torah makes the world a better place, no matter who does it. This means that strangers, including immigrants and refugees are to be viewed as those relatives who were "lost." Next Jesus tells this same group this: "You are the light of the world." He then describes what this being light to the world means through another metaphor about light. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid." If you are the light of the world, you cannot pretend that you are not and thus hide the light. He then continues: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." Jesus then explains what this metaphor means for the people: 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. This is a call for them to live Torah; the essential

eternal Torah they were given much earlier. The core of the Torah is not about moral rigorism or brittle rigidity conforming to a multitude of regulations. The eternal truths of the Torah are about the simple and absolute applicability of the moral principles which should govern our life together. In the words of Micah: “do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.” Jesus tells us that all of the principles of Torah are eternally relevant, not because they earn us salvation but because they shape the way we live together. Verse 17 of today’s passage: “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.” Jesus reaffirms the importance of the Torah teachings; the basic ones given at Mount Sinai which gave guidance on how people were to live well together in community. This portion of the text is followed by one of the few places in our gospel accounts which indicate that there will be consequences for those who do not follow Torah essentials. “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.” Finally, Jesus warns “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Again the emphasis is that it not the ritual practices which matter, for the scribes and Pharisees were very good at following those guidelines. It was their treatment of others, their hypocrisy which so offended Jesus. It is important to remember that there is a crucial balance found throughout the testimony of Scripture. This is the balance which is needed for our lives—the balance between grace and demand. In the Bible, God’s grace, God’s gift of life and love and mercy, always precede any demands. These are given first. This is true from the Ten Commandments to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount to the teachings of the Apostles’. Grace always precedes demands. The point is consistent in Scripture: Those who have experienced amazing grace in the gifts of love and new life and community are called to reflect that grace in the way we relate to others. After are, we are the light. And this balance is crucial for understanding Scripture because when we downplay one side or the other, it skews our vision, our perceptions. When we overlook the fact that all of the commands of the Bible are grounded in the grace and love and mercy that God has so freely given us all, we turn those commands into rigid rules that are often applied in a strict and severe way. When done in this manner, the commands meant to create community become ways that various communities have used to enforce a ruthless set of demands and expel those who don’t live up to them. That creates an image of God that I don’t think gives a very accurate portrait of the God who has lovingly called the human family into relationship throughout the centuries. The opposite is true when we become unbalance in the opposite direction. It’s all too easy and appealing to focus only on grace and ignore those very real demands that are found not just in the Hebrew Bible, but are also present throughout the New Testament. When we make that mistake, we miss the whole point of God’s outpouring of grace in the first place. God’s grace has the goal to shape us into the people we were meant to be in the beginning—when the world was all good and sin had not yet entered. In the words of one of my favorite theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when we ignore the demand for heartfelt obedience to God’s commands we turn all that God has done for us into “cheap grace.” This path of “cheap grace” expects God to be tolerant of any and all kinds of behavior, regardless of the consequences to others or ourselves. That also does not paint a very accurate portrait of the God whose love has always called the

human family to practice justice, compassion, and mercy toward one another. From the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes an elaborate statement about the grace that God gives to all people who will open their hearts to it. He also makes the point that God's expectations for what the gift of grace and mercy will do in creating the community of people that have received the gift has not changed. God's expectations for human beings have not changed—they have been presented in the Torah and through the prophets. The passage from the Hebrew Scriptures for today is just one example of this continual message from God to us. Isaiah 58 is a critique of the behavior of the returning exiles. They are fasting but then are oppressing their workers. The prophet points out that is not the "fast" which God desires. Our text tells us the fast that God desires beginning in verse 6: "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke and let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" In fact, the end of the passage returns us to the theme of Jesus' sermon concerning the light we are to be. Verse 10: "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." Jesus is confirming what God's expectations are for those who receive the blessing of God's grace and mercy. They are to be salt by remembering the eternal, essential, ethical and moral code of the Torah to be true community to one another. They are to be light to the world because by doing the true Torah they will be a light in the darkness of the world. When we answer the call of Jesus to come and follow, these are the expectations about our grateful response for the gifts being given to us. We are to be salt and light in the darkness of the world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.