

For all its talk about salt and light, it's ironic how murky understandings of this passage can be. It's so famous that you'd think we would at least have a consensus on who Jesus was talking to. Today's Gospel comes from the Sermon on the Mount, arguably the preeminent discourse of the entire Bible. But Matthew introduces the Sermon by telling us, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them..." We imagine the Sermon being preached to vast crowds, but Matthew's introduction makes it a distinct possibility that Jesus was speaking only to the disciples.

Some say that Jesus expanded the Sermon to include the crowds at some point and among them, deciding when that point is in the text is something of a parlor game. Others say that the Sermon on the Mount wasn't so much a discrete event in Jesus's public ministry but rather his "stump speech" or, God help us, Matthew's idea of his "greatest hits." And those are just some of the most popular ways of thinking about these words in our time.

Medieval clergy thought the demands of the Sermon were intended to set out a higher standard of behavior for the clergy, "especially in monastic orders." Martin Luther thought the Sermon was just as impossible for humans to obey as the Jewish Law on which it is based. Others interpreted the words in an eschatological light, and of course, still others insisted that they be taken literally and applied to everyone.*

So all of these tricky categories threaten to confuse us and put us off balance before we even try to unpack the words of the Sermon. More trouble awaits us there. Jesus uses metaphors and comparisons that depend heavily on the local culture, he makes sweeping statements about righteousness, and he seems to set a nearly impossible standard for entrance into heaven. Well, let's start there.

Jesus has plenty of teachings that are hard to accept, but think again about how he words the last statement in the passage: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." While those people were popularly regarded as righteous in Jesus's day, the Gospel goes on to portray those people as severely lacking in righteousness, despite their religious offices and their prestigious position in society.

So we can read it as saying, if I can forgive jerks like that, you're a shoo-in. If Jesus had said "widows and orphans," we should have panicked. On the other hand, Jesus could be reminding his audience of their need for grace, in the sense that it would take perfect righteousness for a human being to merit God's favor, but fortunately, our salvation depends not on our righteousness but on God's love for us, which is infinite. Nevertheless, our attitude should not be to find the absolute minimum of goodness we must practice, but rather to do our utmost to glorify God, according to the gifts God has given us and the needs set before us.

That brings us to the next tricky passage, about the Law. Then, as now, Jews considered the Law of Israel to apply only to themselves. All the disciples were Jewish,

and the crowds were generally thought to be so too. This does raise the question of what this passage means for Christians, and I think the best answer comes in the language of fulfillment. Jesus said, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Christians understand that fulfillment as accomplishing the purposes of the Law, particularly, restoring a right relationship between God and humanity, and establishing right relationships between human beings, and between humanity and nature. While the Law of Israel and God's covenant with them, applied only to Israel, the New Covenant God offers humanity through Jesus is available to everybody. But just like in human affairs, God's entering into a new contract does not nullify an older contract with a different party.

As we complete our backwards survey of the passage, we come to the language of salt and light. Jesus compares his audience to salt, which might not sound like a compliment, except for when one affectionately refers to a sailor as an "old salt." Some of us have been told by our doctors to cut down on our salt intake. Possibly including some old salts! Today, salt is cheap and abundant, given away free at most restaurants, which would shock an ancient person.

They knew salt as not just a financially precious substance, but understood that salt was necessary for life, that can only give life by immediate physical contact, by effecting change directly. And salt symbolized purity and wisdom. Complementing this image, Jesus also compares his audience to light, also necessary for life, and which can cover a great area across a long distance, swiftly and silently and beautifully. Both were essential in making the best possible use of resources: salt preserved meat, which was also rare and precious in those days, and the light of a lamp made it possible to use indoor spaces at night. Both were also used in the rituals of the Temple, giving them deep symbolism, connected to the relationship between God and humanity.

This relationship is at the heart of the passage. Even if we take Matthew's introduction as narrowly as possible, considering the Sermon on the Mount as being addressed only to the disciples, as Christians, we must consider ourselves as part of that audience. We are here in church because we choose to follow Jesus, to follow him in a community of mutual support, just as he established his first circle of disciples. Jesus calls us to join him in glorifying God by living lives defined by God's grace and love, by surprising the world with our generosity of spirit and by revealing the true nature of God to a deeply confused world. And he reminds us that we do these things in response to God's love for us, not to make God start loving us, and we should do them to glorify God, not ourselves.

In the last week, I have been delighted to see many examples of this recently in our members' responses to our financial crisis. There is still a long way to go, and the outcome for our parish is far from certain, but things are starting to move in the right direction, and that is encouraging. The mission Jesus calls us to is one of salt and light, concrete deeds and inspiring words. And he goes with us, leading by word and by example, lighting the way and giving us all we need. There is nothing to fear in his light,

the one light given for all, that defeats all categories, crosses all boundaries, and leads us home. The same light of the world is the light of heaven, a beacon and a promise and a gift. Shed as much of this light as you can, and know that you will receive the same abundant light as every living thing under the sun.

*From *The Gospel of Matthew* by Craig S. Keener, p. 160. Eerdmans, 2009.