

THE KISS AND THE COMMANDMENTS

MATTHEW 5:13-20

“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.

Now that the groundhog has seen his shadow and the Super Bowl is over, it is time to get on to something much more important: America's favorite pastime, baseball! Believe it or not Spring training is upon us and before you know it, opening day. You may remember that just a few months ago the Boston Red Sox won the Fall Classic, but did you know that the year before that in 2012 the Red Sox finished in last place? Ironically, attendance to Red Sox games actually dropped last year even on their way to winning the World Series. It seems as if lots of fans had jumped off the bandwagon after their dismal season. I suppose many of those fans will jump back on this year. True fans are fans, win or lose,

Jesus frequently had people jumping on and off the bandwagon, depending on what he was teaching or where he was going. For those who stay on the wagon, even when times are difficult, even when down and out and in last place, they are the ones who are truly his disciples. To them Jesus says "You are the salt of the earth", and "You are the light of the world."

Salt. We are all salt. If you think about it, salt really is an amazing mineral. It enhances the flavor of our favorite foods, acts as a preservative, melts the ice on frozen steps and frozen roads, and it was of such great value in the ancient world that it was sometimes used as currency. In fact, the word "salary" comes from the practice of paying a worker with salt. Salt is a pretty amazing thing when it is used; but when it isn't used, when it's just salt, or when it has somehow lost its taste, it isn't much good for anything. In fact, salt by itself can be quite terrible, even corrosive. Being the "salt of the earth" implies that we have some function to perform, some responsibility in this kingdom of which Jesus speaks. Being the salt of the earth isn't about being something great and wonderful on our own; no, it's about being the ones who bring out the great and wonderful things of God's kingdom to others.

Light. We are light, and light, like salt, is pretty amazing, so long as it's illuminating something else. Light by itself can be pointless, even destructive. That's why Jesus says we are to let our light shine before *others*, not ourselves, so that those others may see our good works and give glory--not to us--but to God. Did you catch that? It's subtle, but it's so very important. We shine as the light of the world not for our own sake, but for the sake of others. We give light so that

others may see the way of God. In the end, it isn't really even our light that shine forth after all: it is God's light.

Salt and light are only useful when they enhance something else. We, as followers of Jesus, fulfill our roles as disciples when we flavor the earth and illuminate the world with our actions and words that ultimately point to Christ.

With these words about salt, light, and the fulfillment of the law and prophets, Jesus is revealing some very deep truths about what it means to be his disciples. When we feel that grace is just a ticket on the bus out of Hell, when we feel that our religion is just one of the defining characteristics of all of who we are, when we convince ourselves that our faith is really about how much better we can be than someone else by following more rules or abstaining from more vices, then we begin to lose our flavor. Then we begin to hide our light under the basket.

The kiss that God gives us, whether we call it grace, forgiveness, wholeness, or unmerited favor, is always followed by commandments. Many of us don't like the commandment part because they put requirements on us that we don't always like. To be followers of Jesus means that we have to hold the kiss of God in one hand, and the commandments of God in the other. We hold them together in tension, but together nonetheless.

Growing up all I was told about was God's commandments, and thus I lived feeling spiritually inadequate. No matter how hard I tried I never felt that I could be good enough, yet I also felt morally superior to most people I knew. But I was burdened with a tremendous amount of guilt. That kind of Christianity is intolerant, divisive, dogmatic, and closed-minded, and it views God as one who punishes us when we do wrong.

We all know people who like their religion to be concrete, black and white, sinners on the outside of the church and the saints on the inside. They follow God's laws out of a sense of duty, obligation or out of fear of going to hell. They are judgmental of people whom they see as rule breakers, and they build walls to exclude those whom they label "sinners".

Some have said that Jesus never broke any biblical commandments, but I think I would disagree with that. The law said not to touch people with leprosy, but Jesus

both touched them and healed them. The law said not to eat or drink with sinners, but Jesus was always eating and drinking with them. The law said not to work on the Sabbath, but when Jesus saw someone in need, he worked to help them.

A healthy and well balanced Christianity always begins with the kiss of grace. That God loves us unconditionally cannot be questioned, and because of that indisputable love and forgiveness we are set free to follow God and become both salt and light. We are salt and light not because we keep all of God's commandments, but because we have received the kiss of God's grace.

We need both the kiss and the commandments. Jesus said "Blessed are you! You are salt. You are light. I have commandments for you to keep." When we couldn't keep the commandments, Jesus climbed up a cross and kissed us again. Ever since, we are under obligation to keep all the commandments. And when we can't keep the commandments, he kisses us again, and says, "I forgive you." Then he requires us to keep his commandments.

On and on it goes, day in and day out. We are continually loved, yet never off the hook. That's what it means to belong to God. We know the kiss, and we are called upon to do the commandments. The true child of God is the person who holds both together.