

TEXT: Matthew 5:13-20
THEME: Fulfilling the law and the prophets
SUBJECT: Greatness
TITLE: Recovering the Gospel

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Messiah Moravian
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Much ink has been spilled explaining how salt can lose its taste. You don't need to be a chemist, thankfully, to understand what Matthew means by this metaphor. The Greek manuscripts of the gospels did not contain paragraph divisions, which create separations in our texts that can obscure otherwise obvious connections.

The metaphors of salt and light refer to the preceding Beatitude: Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right. As long as Christians do what is right rather than what is expedient, they are salt and light. When Christians cease to act justly, they rob the world of life and light.

Jesus, like Isaiah, believed that what we do defines who we are. "Whoever breaks one of the least of the commandments and teaches people to do likewise shall be called least in the Kingdom of the heavens; but whoever performs and teaches it, this one shall be called great in the Kingdom of the heavens."

If this sounds strange to us, it is because we rarely pay close attention to what the Bible actually says. "I am firmly convinced," writes David Bentley Hart, "that two millennia of dogmatic tradition have created in the minds of most of us a fundamentally misleading picture of a great many of the claims made in Christian scripture."

In John Calvin's doctrine of election you are either in or out based solely on God's prerogative, sheer absolute power exercising itself for power's sake. The two verses in the NT that explicitly address the notion that God's elect are eternally chosen (Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:2) say precisely the opposite of what Calvin claims.

The God of Calvin, Hart asserts, is simply Domitian made omnipotent. Domitian was a late first century Roman Emperor viewed by historians as a tyrant. It is wise not to approve of divine deeds that, were they reduced to a human scale of action, would immediately be recognizable as expressions of unalloyed spite.

No principle is more deeply embedded in the soil of Protestant belief than the assertion that we are saved not by works but "by faith alone," and yet the only appearance of this phrase in the whole of the NT (James 2:24) expressly contradicts such a claim.

Luther insisted that faith alone justifies because he believed if this doctrine is lost the whole knowledge of truth, life, and salvation is lost. He dismissed the letter of James as an epistle of straw. He declared the Beatitudes unrealizable ideals whose purpose was to reveal our inability to do precisely what Jesus taught us to do. Thus the need for "faith alone."

And how many modern Evangelicals think of salvation as something one receives by “accepting Jesus” as one’s “personal lord and savior,” even though such language is wholly absent from the NT, even though all real scriptural language of salvation is about a corporate condition of sacramental, moral, and spiritual union?

The reading from Isaiah is exhibit A. We are not saved by personal piety but by releasing those unjustly imprisoned, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and giving hospitality to those in need. When these things are done, *then* our wounds will be healed. Healing is a metaphor for salvation.

The only image of the last judgment in the New Testament is found in Matthew 25. It is not a judgment of individuals but of nations. It is not nations who call Jesus “Lord” that are saved, but those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoners.

In the gospel reading for today we hear Jesus say, “I have not 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.”

It is hard to square this claim with John 1:17 which reads, “while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” It is hard to square this teaching with the writings of Paul. Did John and Paul know Matthew’s gospel?

The Bible is not a system of thought, to the bane of theologians whose first loyalty is to the grand systems of belief they have developed or adopted.

The law, Moses declares, manifests what is already written on our hearts. The purpose of the law is to preserve, protect and promote the flourishing of human community. The law protects the interests of the community from the disordered desires of the individual (Deuteronomy 30:11ff).

Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus fulfills the law by intensifying its demands. You have heard it said, “You shall not kill.” But I say to you “Whoever is angry with his neighbor is liable to judgment.”

Until the fourth century the Gospel According to Matthew, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, held the place of honor in the life of the church. They also held the place of honor in the Moravian Church of the 16th and 17th centuries. The Beatitudes were not viewed as impossible demands, too high for us to reach, but the ways in which Christians were salt and light.

Augustine frequently used church funds to purchase the freedom of slaves. On one occasion, some members of his congregation stormed a ship and freed over 100 slaves. His church property served as sanctuary for economic migrants. He stood with debtors protesting economic inequality. He plead for penal reform and constantly argued against the death penalty.

How much easier to believe salvation is God’s prerogative; what we do doesn’t ultimately matter. How much easier to believe we are saved by faith alone. How much easier to accept Jesus as our personal lord and savior. Such easy faith is how salt loses its capacity to preserve life. Such easy faith is how we turn the lights out.