

December 28, 2025

TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS: MATT 5:13-20,43-48

Introductory Activity

Explain: In the late 1960s, Walter Cronkite was the anchor of *CBS Evening News*. Millions watched the 30-minute nightly news program. Cronkite was known as “the most trusted man in America.” This moniker was derived from his demeanor and objectivity. For example, he would end his nightly program with the statement, “And that’s the way it is.” However, he would not use those words on nights in which he ended the program with an opinion piece. That is why his trip to Vietnam in February 1968 was so pivotal. After returning from South Asia, the reporter delivered a negative report and opinion of the conflict on his program. Upon hearing Cronkite’s assessment, President Johnson reportedly said, “If I have lost Cronkite, I have lost Middle America.” Regardless of how a person feels about the Vietnam War, Walter Cronkite, or President Johnson, the power of one man’s voice in a media environment populated by so few voices is abundantly clear.

Ask: Who do people listen to today? Who are the Walter Cronkite’s of today?

Explain: In the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, if you wanted to know the news, learn about cultural trends, or catch up on local events, you had to tune in to the nightly news. Today, the landscape has dramatically changed. I will be honest with you; I don’t even know if the nightly news still exists. In our handheld-social-media-obsessed world, there is no Walter Cronkite. Instead, we have social-media influencers, political pundits, and AI-generated “content.” It is hard to know who to trust, what is true, and what images actually represent reality. Where then do we look for truth about the world? Moreover, where do we look for the Truth about the world’s situation? How am I supposed to “live” in the world? For believers, we might honestly ask, “With all the voices out there, how am I supposed to ‘live’ in the Kingdom?”

Summarize Transition: Today, we are going to begin a three-part series on “The Sermon on the Mount.” The sermon “is the longest and most extensive record of Jesus’ teaching in our New Testament.” (ETBC, 42) In it, He will function as the most trustworthy man. In the sermon, we have the Author of the Old Testament expounding on what it truly means to follow the Lord. He is going to tell us how to live.

Last week, we diverted from the chronology of Matthew to celebrate Jesus’ birth. Before that, we were looking at His early ministry. We saw that He had established His base of operation in Capernaum, a city on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. From there, He taught, preached, and healed. Matthew 4:25 tells us that “Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.” Matthew then tells us that seeing the “crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them.” (see Matt. 5:1-2) It is here that we get the Sermon on the Mount, and we should note one thing from the beginning. The “sermon” was delivered to Christ’s disciples. It was overheard by the crowds, but it was given to the disciples. In our study, we are going to skip over the first portion of the sermon called the Beatitudes and pick up with verse 13. We will learn that “Jesus defines what it means to live in His kingdom.” (ETB LG, 51)

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1-13* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

1. INFLUENCE YOUR CULTURE (MATT. 5:13-16)

BEFORE READING THE PASSAGE, ASK THE GROUP TO TAKE NOTE OF THE METAPHORS JESUS USES TO DESCRIBE THE DISCIPLE.

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 5:13-16.

Ask the group to call out the two metaphors Jesus uses to describe the disciple.

Explain: In this passage, Jesus uses two metaphors to describe the disciples. He calls them salt and light. Before we apply these metaphors to the believer's life, we need to take note of one important fact.

Ask the group to call out the first two words in verses 13 and 14. ("You are")

Explain: In these verses, Jesus is not commanding the disciples to be salt or to be light. Instead, He is stating a fact—you are salt. This is a small distinction, but it is important. As a follower of Christ, the disciple *is* salt and light. Jesus is reminding them of who they are already and showing them the importance of acting correctly as salt and light. So, let's discuss salt and light.

You are the Salt of the Earth:

Explain: Scholars explain that salt was used for many things in the ancient world. As an example, the *Explore the Bible Commentary* lists 5 uses: "(1) use in sacrifices, (2) seasoning, (3) preservative, (4) means of purification, and (5) payment." (ETBC, 44) As a result of the many different uses of salt in the ancient world, modern commentators present various application for Jesus' metaphor.

1. Disciples should act as positive seasoning and season the world with goodness.
 2. Disciples should act as a preserving agent and protect society from putrefying. (ETB LG, 54, NAC)
 3. Disciples should act as purifying agents (or at least stem the tide of further corruption)
- Early church theologians did not agree either (Origen [2nd/3rd c.]: purification; Hilary [4th c.]: seasoning and, interestingly, the perseverance of the saints; Cyril of Alexandria [4th/5th c.]: seasoning)

I personally do not think we have to be strict on our views here and say Jesus was pointing to one specific spiritual application of the chemical compound. I think the idea here is to be agents that make "the earth" (meaning humans on the earth) useful to the Kingdom. I do not think the *effects*, or outcomes, of being salt are as important for us to consider since the believer is not the one who effects any change. It is God who brings about any positive result from our saltiness. Instead, we should focus on the instruction to be properly salty. In other words, what is important is that the believer is to be salty. Jesus tells us what it means to do salty things in verse 16 when He sums up these two metaphors. There, He said salty behavior is "good works." We will talk more about that below. But first, we should consider Jesus' words at the end of verse 13:

Reread verse 13. (See Notes Box.)

Explain: According to Osborn, Jesus' words concerning salt losing its taste literally means to "become foolish." Gleaves says the Greek word used here (*mōrainō*) means "to make foolish. Making or showing something or

Notes:

"This is not an imperative (a command—'be salt') but an indicative (a statement of fact—'You are salt')." (Preaching, 118)

The Explore the Bible Leader Guide explains that "To be the salt of the earth involves protecting society from putrefying." (ETBLG, 54)

"Whether Jesus was referring to salt's purifying or preservative uses [is unclear]. Possible Jesus had both of these in mind." (ETBC, 44)

someone to be foolish or to be revealed as foolish.”¹ The same word is used by Paul in Romans 1:22, where he “uses it to describe those who rejected the knowledge of God made available to them through the revelation of creation itself.”² This fits well with Cyril of Alexandria’s thoughts: “[Jesus] calls ‘salt’ the frame of mind that is filled with the apostolic word which is full of understanding.” (ACC, 92) So, a believer who loses his salty taste is one who has rejected the truth, at least in his actions, that he once accepted. In the 5th century, Chromatius explained what this means. He writes:

[Jesus] shows that those who have been educated for the faith and in heavenly wisdom ought to remain faithful and steadfast and not “lose their taste.” If they forsake the faith and divine wisdom, they either plunge headlong into heresy or return to the folly of unbelievers...For people of this sort, made tasteless by the devil’s treachery...are good for nothing. Though they once might have seasoned nonbelievers still foreign to the faith with the word of divine preaching, they instead show themselves useless. (ACC, 92-93)

In summation: You are salt. Act like salt by doing good works. Don’t stop acting like the salt you are. What about being the light?

You are the Light of the World

Reread verses 14-16. (See Notes Box.)

The purpose of light, unlike salt, is not in dispute. Light illuminates. In Jesus’ metaphor, we first see that a properly lit city cannot be hidden. We experience this today if we are driving on the interstate at night towards a city. We can see the glow of the city many miles before reaching it. If we apply this to the spiritual life of the believer, we understand that a properly lit disciple, illuminated by the Truth of the gospel and practicing good works, will be seen by many, from far away. In verse 15, Jesus provides a parallel caution to the foolishness of unsalty salt. He says it is foolish to light a lamp meant for illumination and then cover it up. This defeats the purpose of lighting the lamp in the first place. The application here is similar to that of salt. Just as a person who **is** salt but chooses not to act like salt is useless, a person who **is** light but chooses not to shine forth is useless. Both people have become spiritually foolish.

So what does the person with a salted heart and an enlightened mind do? Verse 16 tells us he does “good works.” And he does them for a reason: to be seen **so that** others will glorify God. The disciple does not do good works to be seen and glorified. Instead, he does them so that others will see, come to faith, and glorify God. The true spiritual purpose of salt and light is evangelism.

Matthew 5:13

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. ¹⁶ 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.”

¹ G. Scott Gleaves, “Foolishness,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

² Ibid.

Summarize Transition: In this passage, Jesus tells the disciples and all believers **what they are**. Then He reminds them of the importance of acting in tune with what He has made them to be. Do the work of salt and light—that work is “fruit consistent with repentance.” (Matt 3:8) Jesus is simply teaching us that “Kingdom people make a positive impact on the world for God’s glory.” (ETB LG, 55)

2. OBEY YOUR FATHER (MATT. 5:17-20)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 5:17-20.

Explain: In this passage, Jesus begins to explain what it means to live as a disciple of Christ. He does so by first explaining His relationship to the Law (The Torah and the rest of the OT). “Some of Jesus’s listeners believed that He opposed the Mosaic law.” (ETB LG, 56) He counters their misunderstanding. “Jesus teaches: ‘I am not against the Bible. I am absolutely for it!’ But that’s not all he says. He also adds, ‘And the Bible is for me.’” (Preaching, 128) The first thing Jesus teaches us about the Law is that in Him, **The Law is Fulfilled**. The entire OT points to Jesus. The Law was meant to *spiritually preserve* the nation of Israel while it waited for the Messiah. The Law was also meant to *spiritually prepare* the nation to receive the Messiah. The moral precepts of the OT helped the nation remain holy (preservation). The religious instructions related to properly worshipping God pictured for the people what the Messiah would do for them (preparation). In Christ, the people could now be holy and righteous (the preservation component fulfilled). In Christ, they could look back and understand that actions related to temple worship pointed them to the actions of Jesus (the preparation component fulfilled). Moreover, many of those actions dictated by the Law were now unnecessary because Jesus completed them perfectly. Blomberg writes, “With the coming of Christ, many aspects of the law are brought to complete fruition (e.g., the need for sacrifices, on which we see Hebrews). In other instances, certain requirements of the law endure until Christ’s second coming (e.g., classically, love of neighbor and God).” (ETBC, 47)

The Law as Spiritual Preserver	The Law as Spiritual Preparation
Moral precepts of the Law helped the nation remain holy	Instructions on worship helped prepare the nation for Messiah
In Christ holiness obtained	In Christ Temple regulations are illuminated and fulfilled

Object Lesson: Consider a toy tractor you might have given to a child for Christmas. The tractor comes wrapped in packaging: cardboard to hold it, plastic around the cardboard, little ties to hold the tractor to the cardboard, etc. The packaging also has printed information about the tractor, directions for how to use it, and warnings for how not to use it. All of that packaging is necessary for you to get the gift to your home and communicate how to use the contents. However, in order for your child or grandchild to play with the tractor, you have to remove all of the packaging. In our home on Christmas day, one of the most often uttered words is “Who has the knife” because we use the knife to free our gifts from the packaging. The packaging is necessary, but removing the packaging is also necessary. That is the case with some OT laws. They were necessary to get the people ready for the gift of the Messiah, tell them what to expect about the Messiah, and warn them about things related to the Messiah. Once the Messiah arrives, some of that packaging, like the sacrificial system, is no longer necessary. The packaging of the Law was not bad, but it was fulfilled in Christ. However, Jesus also shows us that the **Law is Eternal**.

Reread verse 18. (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Here, “Jesus strongly validated the authority of the Scriptures.” (ETB LG, 56) How is it that the Law is eternal and remains authoritative if the Law is fulfilled in Christ? We have to remember the purpose of the Law. The Law was not about the *rules* of the Law. Instead, the entire Bible and the “rules” contained in it are about Jesus and the way to salvation. While they are not eternally practiced, even the OT rules concerning

things like the sacrificial system are eternally applicable because they help humanity understand the need for Christ and His sacrifice. Just as God is eternal, His law is eternal. As a result, the **Law is Paramount**.

Reread verses 19-20. (See Notes Box.)

There is debate over what Jesus meant when He spoke about the least and greatest in the Kingdom. But it seems that He is talking about the present age, not the age to come. Least and greatest probably refer to honor and obscurity in the Kingdom as it is now on this earth. To “break” the law “is better rendered ‘sets aside’ (as no longer applicable).” (NAC, 105) Since the law is fulfilled in Christ, it points us to Christ, and is eternal, the Law is not to be set aside or declared no longer applicable. The entirety of Scripture is applicable and should be taught because, without the entirety of Scripture, we would have a limited understanding of Christ and the reason for His coming. That is why Jesus makes the statement about the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

When He says, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven,” the people would have been shocked. The scribes and Pharisees were the “most holy” people they knew. These men were very strict about keeping the Law. If a person’s holiness must exceed theirs, no one would be able to enter the Kingdom. However, what Jesus said was accurate. A person’s holiness must exceed even the most diligent Law keeper because a person must be sinless to enter the Kingdom. The Law (Bible) shows us that. Therefore, we must teach the entirety of Scripture so that people will see that and turn to Christ for forgiveness of Sin.

Summarize and Transition: The OT Law is fulfilled in Christ. The entirety of Scripture is Eternal because it teaches about Jesus. The Bible is paramount and must be taught and kept because it points the way to Jesus. Believers should be “people of the book.” We do not pick and choose what we teach or what we keep. We can be reminded as well that “Kingdom people find genuine satisfaction and purpose by keeping God’s commands.” (ETB LG, 57)

In the next passage, we will see that some have misinterpreted and misused the Bible. Misinterpretation and misuse tainted the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. We should not do likewise.

3. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES (MATT. 5:43-48)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 5:43-48.

Explain: Verses 21-48 are what scholars call the Antithesis. In these verses, Jesus instructs His disciples on how to be salt and light by highlighting some ways in which the OT law had been misinterpreted. Our lesson provides us with one example from the larger passage. We will quickly dissect this passage and bring it back to the main point of our lesson related to living in God’s Kingdom.

Notes:

Matthew 5:18

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished.

Matthew 5:19-20

¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”

I have broken the passage down into 6 parts:

The Misinterpretation (v. 43): “Love your neighbor” is a proper command given in the Law (Lev. 19:18), but over the years, the people had added the *worldly* corollary of “hate your enemy.” This is a natural (i.e., sinful) addition to the Law.

The Proper Interpretation (v. 44): Jesus correctly identifies that the godly corollary to “love your neighbor” is to “love your enemy.” In both cases, the word love is *agape*, the self-sacrificial love demonstrated by Christ on the cross. Jesus goes on to command that love be shown by praying for one’s enemies.

The Ensuing Result (v. 45a): In obeying Christ’s proper interpretation of the Law, one will “be children of your Father.” This does not imply that obedience to the law “saves” someone. Instead, it utilizes the understanding of the people that a child resembles their father/Father in appearance and action. Plummer writes, “To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine.” (ETBC, 50)

The Godly Example (v. 45b): In the general order of things, God does not withhold the good (sun and rain) from the evil. This is an act of love for both His “neighbors” and His “enemies.”

The Worldly Example (vv. 46-47): Jesus highlights the actions of two groups commonly despised by the Jews of His day: tax collectors and Gentiles, to point out the hypocrisy of loving one’s neighbor and hating one’s enemies. He says that to practice love and hate in such a way is to act in a way that is no better than the sinful tax collector and the faithless Gentile.

The Summary Command (v. 48): Highlighting again the godly example of the Father, Jesus instructs His disciples to be perfect. To be perfect does mean to practice godly ethics and morality. It also means to be complete or mature. In other words, put away the childish ways of the world and put on the godly ways of the Father.

Summarize and Transition: In this one example from the longer group of Antitheses, we can see what it means to be salt and light. We also see how sinful man wants to bend God’s true intent of the Law to meet our sinful desires and feelings. Jesus shows us that “Kingdom people reflect their heavenly Father by loving their enemies.” (ETB LG, 59) We also do so by avoiding sinful anger (vv. 21-26), lust (vv. 27-30), illegitimate divorce (vv. 31-32), lying (vv. 33-37), and retaliation (vv. 38-42).

CONCLUDE

In a world where truth is often “up for debate” at best and maligned more commonly, believers need a reliable source to guide them in living properly in this world. That source is Scripture. Those redeemed by Christ *are* salt and light. They should act accordingly. They can only do so if they truly understand that the Bible is applicable to their life in Christ, the author and fulfillment of all that the Bible teaches. Moreover, believers should be careful to interpret Scripture in light of God’s intent. To do otherwise is to live as the hypocritical Pharisees who kept the letter of the law but ignored the spirit of the Law. Let us be a people of the Book who honor the Author of the Book by living by the Book.