

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 15, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12; 2nd Reading: 2 Peter 1:12-21
Scripture for Message: Matthew 5:13-20 – “Righteousness”**

Our scripture reading today continues to follow Jesus as he teaches his disciples and the crowds in his “Sermon on the Mount.” He is teaching them how to live as righteous citizens of God’s Kingdom – the kingdom of heaven. First Jesus lets his disciples know what he expects of their character – the type of people he expects them to be. Salt and light are metaphors Jesus used to describe the character he expects of them – the character of anyone who sincerely follows Jesus’ example.

Salt for the people of Matthew’s time is life-giving, purifying, preserving, and transforming. It adds flavor and as a metaphor for the character of Jesus’ followers, salt signifies a distinctiveness to their character which becomes tasteless when that “salt” is not used or used sparingly – it is no longer good for anything but thrown into a manure heap and trampled underfoot. Jesus is telling his disciples not to lose their first love; the reason they became followers of his. Let the “saltiness” of their first love flavor what they do in the world so it will be noticed by others thus giving glory to God.

Light in the same way speaks to how the character of Jesus’ followers must be seen to be useful. Light as a metaphor is something visible and conspicuous. Jesus tells his followers to stand out, do not hide your light but let it shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. The city on a hill does not describe any one nation or one ethnicity because light is no respecter of persons, it shines on all equally – all are welcome to its benefits. Christ’s followers are to be a light, illuminating the darkness for all of creation, all of humanity. Drawing from God’s words to Isaiah we can bring that metaphor of light into what Jesus is teaching. “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” (Isaiah 58:10).

Jesus’ followers are the ones who preserve and protect as salt preserves and the ones who illuminate the darkness with goodness, mercy, and kindness. The followers of Jesus are to “prepare the earth” to receive the good news of Jesus Christ – so that others will see. But, in what seems like a change of the subject Jesus tells his

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 15, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

disciples “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” This is not a new topic in my mind, but Jesus tells them that they don’t prepare the earth like salt or light the darkness by changing the rules or creating new ones but by following the spirit of the commandments God has given. Righteousness comes from doing the will of God, from hearing the prophets’ message and heeding the words.

Maybe some of those listening to Jesus’ message in the “Sermon” thought that he was bringing them something new so they would not have to follow the laws and teachings from Moses and the Torah or what we call our Old Testament. I wonder if that was the basis of the “problem” Jesus had with the Pharisees and scribes, because those religious elite probably felt he was abolishing their beloved Torah laws. He tells those listening that not one letter, not one stroke of a letter – not one dot or curve of the pen stroke – will pass away until heaven and earth pass away. Jesus did not come to create something new but to fulfill what the Old Testament prophets foretold.

When we talk about the “law” we are including the Old Testament and the words of the prophets. The “law” that Jesus refers to was a comprehensive term for the total divine revelation of the Old Testament. When you read Matthew’s Gospel, his account of Jesus’ life, you can see how Matthew is careful to interpret Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Torah which means “revealed instruction,” instructs us about God, God’s relationship to humanity, and God’s plan for salvation. Jesus brings the teaching of the Old Testament to completion in his person – what the prophets predicted in the Old Testament has come to pass in Jesus.

The Old Testament contains the moral laws or ethical precepts of God. According to bible teacher John Stott, “Jesus fulfilled them in the first instance by obeying them, for he was ‘born under the law’ and was determined to fulfill all righteousness. . . He does more than obey them himself; he explains what obedience will involve for his disciples.” This is what his teaching in this Sermon on the Mount is all about, how to live as righteous citizens of God’s kingdom. Jesus

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 15, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

came to reveal the full depth of meaning that the law was intended to hold.¹

Jesus tells his followers, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” It causes one to pause and wonder how on earth our righteousness can exceed the Pharisees who considered themselves the most righteous people in the whole of Judea. How can we possibly adhere to all the “commandments” as strictly as the Pharisees? The Lord gave an answer to the question of righteousness to Isaiah, in what we read this morning. “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted” He proclaims a transformation and restoration from the Lord that comes through our righteousness.

The Pharisees thought an external conformity to the law would be righteousness enough. They were prideful and it took a lot of effort for them to “appear” righteous. Theirs was a formal obedience and they demanded rigid conformity to the letter of the law. “Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper, being a righteousness of the heart.”² The righteousness which is pleasing to God is an inward righteousness of mind and motive. God looks at the heart. To Jeremiah God said, “I will put my law within them, and write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). That is what the Spirit does in our hearts – writing God’s law there. Jesus knows that it is impossible for righteousness to be enough to enter the kingdom of heaven without the indwelling of the Spirit.

Going back to the Lord’s words to Isaiah, we know that the kingdom of heaven is a way of being – it is loosening the bonds of injustice, housing the homeless and poor, clothing the naked. Through righteous acts we are welcomed into the kingdom but let there be no doubt those righteous acts are only possible as we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Righteousness is evidence of the new birth, and no one enters the kingdom without being born again.

So, that question about a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees does have an answer. Righteousness

¹ John R. W. Stott. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount.* IVP Academic. 1978. Print. p72

² IBID. p75

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 15, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

comes from doing God's will, salvation and entrance into God's eternal kingdom comes from doing God's will and Jesus teaches what God's will is. Jesus teaches, in this Sermon on the Mount, that he expects his followers to be the salt of the earth [very good people] and the light of the world.

A reminder for us comes from Paul's words to the Romans, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). Jesus instructs them and us to be life-giving, transformed, and distinct. Christians, although we must live in the world, should live set apart and become an example for the world as to what living in the kingdom is like. A city on a hill cannot be hidden – Jesus expects his followers to influence the world in a positive fashion.

Our influence depends on our character – be salt preserving the social structures and standards that God has created. Social structures which guarantee justice, freedom and dignity, civil rights, and abolition of social and racial discrimination – for all humankind. Out of love preserving and improving society. Be light – illuminating the truth of the gospel with conspicuous brightness. We live in a world that is dark and needs light, the darkness exists in familiar and unfamiliar places – light arises when the people live as Jesus taught and God intends. May it be so.