

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 5 February 2023**  
**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Year A – Lectionary 5**

**1st Reading: *Isaiah 58:1-12***

**Psalm: *112:1-10***

**2nd Reading: *I Corinthians 2:1-16***

**Gospel: *Matthew 5:13-20***

**Sermon** - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says at several points that *he* is the light of the world, the one who reveals God’s truth, who is himself God. But here in Matthew, as he begins to address us, his disciples, in the Sermon on the Mount, he tells us that *we* are the light of the world.

Jesus calls us all to follow him, to believe in him, and also to live lives of love and good works, following his own example, so that our own lights, our own spirits, reflect *his* light. And he tells us here that when we do this, others will see and turn to God and praise him.

And it is interesting that Jesus tells us to let the light of our good works shine out, because later in this same sermon he will warn us against praying where others can see us, making a show of our devotion, but that we should rather go into our room, lock the door, and pray in secret to our Father in heaven. Yet here, Jesus encourages us to let the light of our good works shine forth. So what is the difference?

Well, it seems that Jesus is quite concerned with our motives and our intentions. He is critical of those who perform their religious duties or perform good works for the purpose of making people *think* that they are holy or righteous, even if they bear malice in their hearts. It seems that some of us, myself included, often think that if we follow the rules to the letter that we are doing the right thing, even if our actions do not reflect the spirit of the rules, and our actions end up hurting others. This was Jesus’ main criticism of the Pharisees, as he hints at the end of our reading today, that they followed the letter of the Law, but ignored the fact that the *heart* of the Law, the reason for having the rules in the first place, was to give us a way of loving and helping one another.

In our confession of sins at the beginning of the service, we often acknowledge that we have “sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone”. If we *seem* to be following the rules, but harbour hate in our hearts, we are really breaking the rules after all.

So if we do good deeds, but do them not in order to help others, but in order to show off, then our misguided thoughts will eventually become evident - often through our words - and our deeds will not have the proper effect, but will harm others instead of aiding them.

And so Jesus warns us: “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments [that is, to break the *spirit* of even the least commandments], and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Note that he doesn’t say that if we do so we will be thrown out of the kingdom of heaven. We are saved not by doing good deeds, but by the grace of Jesus’ crucifixion. We are to do good deeds *because* we are saved, not in order to *become* saved.

But also be warned: If we treat God’s commandments with disdain, and expect that because we are saved by grace that we can just go on breaking the commandments and it won’t matter - if that is our attitude, then we may be in serious danger of shutting *ourselves* out of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells us at the end of our reading today that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”. In other words, if we try to get by doing the least we can, following the letter of some of the commandments, but violating what the *intention* of the commandments are, we may be telling God that we don’t want a place in the kingdom of heaven after all.

So let us instead follow Jesus, the light of the world, who gave his life for our salvation, and let our own lights, reflecting his, shine out in true love and giving of life to others, so that they will see Christ’s light in and through us, and give glory to our Father in heaven.

Amen!

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