Matt. 5:20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Pretty heavy words aren’t they? You realize that this verse is really the point of all the other things that Jesus has said? That’s right, as you look at the whole of this reading, comprised of a few mini lessons, all the lessons are geared to help you contemplate and understand the issue of righteousness and faith. In other words, all the words here are geared to help you think about heaven, about whether or not your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Why is that important? Look at the last phrase in this verse to see. **“You will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** This issue is important because your eternal life and salvation is at stake! Let that sink in! You must be better than, holier than, and more righteous than the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. And I want to tell you that they appeared awesome and good! In terms of piety and religious life, in terms of service and devotion to God, in terms holiness and living right, I don’t think the bar for this world could have looked any higher. Almost an impossible height, as it seemed. And Jesus says, **“You must surpass that or you won’t get into heaven!”**

Clearly then we need to examine our lives as the Children of God! We need to take stock of our righteousness and make sure it is the best. Because heaven is at stake. Your eternal life is at stake! Your soul is at stake! Let’s then examine what it is that Jesus teaches. Our theme will be: **RIGHTEOUSNESS! 1st. Salt and Light. 2nd. The Law! 3rd. Jesus!**

Now I want you to bear in mind that these words are spoken by Jesus early on in his ministry. It is clear that he has gathered his disciples around him and it is clear that Jesus has begun a very public and miracle laden ministry to the Jewish people. For that matter, these words are a part of what has been historically known as “The Sermon on the Mount.” That sermon started with the Beatitudes and will go on for another chapter or two. Jesus, starting his ministry. Jesus, starting to get people to think about faith and the very issues of faith. But most important, Jesus starting to get people to think about sin and how sin will be taken care, thinking about heaven so that you could be assured of and hopeful of eternal life with God

Of course the problem, for many, is reading these words and forgetting how things are and work in God’s Holy Word. The assumption is that Jesus is telling us what to do to get to heaven. But if the Jewish religious leadership is seemingly, as I have stated, some of the most righteous and holy looking people on the planet, how are we going to exceed them? That’s when you know you need to pay attention. Pay attention to the fact that Scripture contains both Law and Gospel. The law is taught to reveal our sins and shortcomings. The Gospel is the good news of life and salvation in Jesus. So ask yourself…is there any gospel here? Has Jesus opened his ministry with gospel or has Jesus opened his ministry with Law? Are the people here ready to hear about salvation from sin or do these people still need to hear about the truth and horror of sin? I believe, without a doubt, that Jesus is here teaching law and everything that law was. He has a point and reason. The point and reason is in the verse we highlighted…can you surpass the Pharisees and teachers of the law in righteousness?

So Jesus says, **“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”** I get a kick out of the many people who read these words and then go into great detail about this and that in regard to salt. In truth, Jesus has simply used the reality of salt to drive home a spiritual lesson. The lesson isn’t about salt, it is about faith. This is a metaphor to direct your thoughts to your faith and what that faith is. I think we can easily and pointedly get the lesson across by restating the lesson with direct language instead of metaphor. How about this. *“You are God’s Child on the earth. But if the child loses God, loses his godliness, how can he be a child of God? That child is no longer God’s child, no longer good for service to God. All that can be expected is that the godless child will end up judged by men and God.”*

Do you remember as we spoke of the religious leaders, that I kept saying things like, “they seemed, they appeared and looked really good? That’s because all it was appearance. As a people of God, they had dismissed the issue of sin and the need of salvation. They had become a people who felt they were so holy and perfect that surely heaven must be theirs! But to do that, they had to ignore God and his truth of sin. They had to twist and pervert the promises of a Messiah from a spiritual salvation to an earthly one. In other words, they were salt without saltiness! They were supposed to be God’s children. They were supposed to know God’s Word and truth, but they were godless! Only the appearance of faith. Lip service to faith. Actions and lives that screamed righteous, but a righteousness without God and that, dear people is not righteousness at all.

Then Jesus continues: **“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** Jerusalem had a festival called “The Festival of Lights”. The city of Jerusalem and its Temple, on a hill, was lit up for the world to see. But over the centuries as the world came to see what it was all about, the world was turned away. The world stopped coming and thus the world did not get to hear the wonder of God. Not only did the Jews do this as a nation, they did it as individuals too. That’s the reference to the candle under a bowl. When the world saw the lights of Jerusalem they were turned away by hypocrisy and self-importance, turned away as dirty “gentiles” not worthy to be like the godly Jews. That was done despite the fact that from the very beginning it was clear that God’s promise of a Savior, God’s promise of life and salvation was for all people. God’s Jewish people were to share God’s truth, declare his marvel, teach the world about sin and forgiveness in God and bring praise to God. Every Jew who heard Jesus knew they had failed to be the light of the world!

To be blunt. What is the point of hidden faith? What is the point of declaring yourself a Christian and then living like the world rejoicing in sin and evil? The candle is to be light, but that candle under the bowl is one that goes out and is in darkness! Do not fool yourself. Be a candle, a light for God or be darkness! And when it is put that way, every one of us here is going to have to confess that as lights we are usually smoldering wicks, struggling flames or burned out altogether. We have failed as lights! And in many cases, many Christian Churches today are busy hiding the Light of Jesus, hiding his truth and wonder or just plain failing to teach the truth and reason for Jesus. We, just like the Jewish world have failed to be lights on a stand!

And more. **“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will be any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”**

I think I can say clearly why Jesus then gives us these words. Not only do I believe it was an attitude of the world he was in at the time but it is still a part of the world and it is a deadly and a dangerous falsehood to souls. As a child of God, you cannot ignore, dismiss, turn away from or excuse what the Law of God says. It is not going to pass away. It is not going to stop being the very standard by which every single soul of this world will be judged! So for you people out there, who think you can cast aside God’s Law, I am telling you point blank it will not be so! You can either follow and believe God, hold his Word, yes, even his Law, as His truth or you will end up in hell! Remember, Jesus understood pretend faith. Jesus understood how the self-righteous and hypocrites twisted and contorted the law, or dismissed the Law to suit their purposes. But Jesus is making it clear here, as He is preaching Law, that the Law will never and should never be considered abolished!

I do cringe at this section. It is sometimes so easy to think that since I am a Christian, why the Law just no longer applies. But it does. It is there to condemn. It is there to show you your sins and your desperate need of the Savior. The law, by its very nature, reveals what horrid salt, light, children and servants of God we are. By the law, our righteous acts are but filthy rags, worthless before God. When we think that by the Law or by ignoring the Law we can still declare ourselves God’s children and heirs of salvation you will be and are sorely and eternally wrong! In other words, self-righteousness, thinking you are saved by the Law or hypocrisy, thinking you can ignore or excuse the Law will only get you to hell!

Has Jesus got you thinking? Since what I have said is true, then how, how is it possible for anyone to be saved, to be heirs of eternal life with a free and sure pass to heaven?

The secret, is in that little section that says, **“I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** Jesus came to live the perfect life for us. Jesus came to offer himself on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins, yes, to suffer the punishment we deserve for our sins and make absolute and perfect atonement before God for us. Although not spoken of directly in this text, I believe Jesus is preparing hearts for the grasp and knowledge by this text that the only way to surpass the righteousness of the hypocritical Jews was by faith in and through the righteousness of Jesus.

Before God Jesus makes us perfect. Before God our sins are forgiven and we are declared completely righteous because of Jesus. Before God we can be made salt again. Before God, the bowls of this world are lifted from our candle and our flame fanned to burning anew. Before God the Law is fulfilled and righteousness is ours. This is what Jesus is about!

Here is the reason to know only Christ. Here is the reason to have hope and confidence in the gift of heaven. It is Jesus. He has fulfilled the Law for us and He has clothed us with His righteousness. But be careful, the same truth still applies to us today. We cannot be unsalty salt! We cannot be hidden lights or snuffed out candles. We cannot make up our own rules and dismiss what God has said and declared in anything. You cannot be a “TIAN!” If you dismiss Christ, ignore him, downplay him, forget Him and his word or you have a problem. A Christian without Christ is just a “tian.” And dear people even as a word such a thing is worthless, just like salt without saltiness or light that doesn’t shine.

Let Christ be your righteousness. Then it is surpassing righteousness. Then you are saved and have the gift of heaven. Then you are a light that shines and salt that seasons. Then you are a child of God and an heir of eternal life, because the righteousness of Jesus is yours. It is the truth of our faith. It is about Jesus. He and His Word is everything in every way. Amen.