

Sermon Notes – February 8, 2026
The Holy Gospel of St. Matthew 5: 13-20
Peace Lutheran Church
“The Light Breaks Forth”

Today's readings call for reevaluation through the lens of the cross, a piety that serves the true needs of others, and constructive witness to the world as believers.

Isaiah's oracle contrasts conventional religion with what God truly desires for us and His world. The people's practices, such as lying in sackcloth (traditional acts of mourning), ring hollow amid their quarreling, selfishness, and violence. In response, the Father proposes a new “fast” - one of saving others from their needs. The response in Isaiah 58: 6-9 parallels subsequent responses (vv. 9-12, 13-14), each concluding with a promise of God's redemptive activity (vv. 8-9, 10-12, 14).

In Corinthians, Paul offers his own example for consideration (2: 5). Several remarks in 1 and 2 Corinthians imply that some at Corinth found his bodily presence and rhetorical skill unimpressive compared to his letters (1 Cor. 1: 17; 2: 3-5; 2 Cor. 10: 10). Throughout his letters, Paul assumes personal experience with the Holy Spirit in ways the recipients evidently would have affirmed. In 1 Corinthians 2: 6 Paul uses the word “mature” (Greek *teleioi*) to highlight the spiritual immaturity of some at Corinth (3: 1-2). Throughout this passage, he characterizes God's wisdom and the message of the cross as mysterious, hidden, and foolish according to society's values. We are invited to consider how this is still the case today.

Matthew 5: 13-20 follows the Beatitudes (vv. 1-12) to round out a fulsome introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7). As such, Jesus' words about salt and light (5: 13-16) serve as a prelude to the ethical teachings that follow. That is, the entire Sermon on the Mount shows how disciples may be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.” These opening metaphors draw from everyday life experiences, associating the ethics of Jesus' followers with essential ingredients for life and livelihood. The goal of such living is to direct attention to God the Father (v. 16).

The second half of the reading characterizes Jesus as fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, which were cornerstones of Jewish scripture. Matthew is the only gospel that characterizes Jesus this way, as the fulfillment of Jewish scripture and teaching (see also 22: 40). In Matthew, exceeding the “righteousness” of the Pharisees (5: 20) involves integrity of word and deed (see 22: 1-12). This call for a superior righteousness is issued to disciples already following Jesus, not

newcomers wondering if they are welcome. Matthew's characterizations of the Pharisees are a narrative construct of inadequate leadership, not an objective historical portrayal. Throughout Matthew, "righteousness" is redefined, not as scrupulous adherence to the Law, but as faithfulness to God that involves compassion, grace, and love. AND most importantly, it involves following the words and deeds of Christ. In our readings God in Christ expands conventional piety to invite a "fasting" that serves others and a righteousness that involves integrity of this same word and deed. In these ways, we embrace a deeper spiritual maturity that becomes a greater witness in a hurting world.