“Peer Pressure”

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Matthew 5:13-20

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**Matthew 5:13-20**

13 ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. 14 ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In 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. 17 ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 18For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19Therefore, whoever 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

When it comes to righteousness, the Pharisees are hard to beat. These Jewish leaders are passionate about the law of God. They pay attention to every jot and tittle of the law.

The Pharisees are the spiritual superstars of their day, exerting an enormous amount of peer pressure on the people around them. Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. Not just match it…surpass it. That is going to be a tall order!

Peer pressure, though often subtle, is a powerful force in our lives...and it can either help us *or* hurt us.

David Greene, one of the co-hosts of NPR’s *Morning Edition,* explains that peer pressure can help us by inspiring us to do the right thing. You don’t want to be the one house in the neighborhood whose grass is a foot tall. Sit next to a good student in class and their study habits may rub off on you.

But peer pressure doesn’t always inspire us to do better. Peer pressure can also have a negative effect on us as when we “give in” to peer pressure by simply going along with the crowd when we know that what the crowd is doing is wrong or not good for us. Peer pressure can also hurt us when we are exposed to our very best peers and we become discouraged because we aren’t as good as they are.

A 104-year-old was once asked by a reporter, “What do you think is the best thing about being 104?” The reply? “No peer pressure.”

A professor of public policy at the Kennedy School at Harvard University has studied the peer pressure that comes from people whose performance is *a little better* than most and the peer pressure that comes from people who are *way better than most*. In today’s scripture, those *way better than most* are the Pharisees, who are better at keeping the Law than anyone.

Professor Rogers says, “When you are compared to people who are doing a little better than you, it can be really motivating.” Your neighbor who keeps their grass mowed might inspire you to keep yours mowed also. Someone who votes might motivate you to vote.

However, Professor Rogers points out that peer pressure turns negative when we are compared to people who are *unattainably* better than we are. Who wants to train for a 5K race with an Olympic runner?

Years ago, I had a conversation with someone about how much I enjoy watching golf,

but I would never attempt to play because I could never play like the people I watch on TV. The person kindly, but with a chuckle, pointed out to me the people I watched playing golf on TV were called professional golfers for a reason and no one would play golf if everyone expected to play like Cristie Kerr or our own Billy Andrade.

Professor Rogers studied more than 5,000 students in a massive online course. As part of the course, the students graded each other’s work and learned from each other. What Rogers discovered was that average students became far more likely to quit the course when they were paired with the best students. The average students who graded top-quality papers assumed that everyone in the group was brilliant making the average students feel inferior.

That is exactly the effect the Pharisees had upon the people around them.

Add to that Jesus’ comment that individual righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, we might as well throw in the towel before we even begin.

However, this is Jesus talking, and remember, Jesus always turns things upside down and inside out. The Pharisees might be better than anyone else in terms of following religious rules and regulations, but Jesus has a *new* approach to righteousness… an approach that is not based on rigorous law-keeping.

**What are righteous people like?**

*They are like salt.*

In the world of Jesus’ time, salt was a valuable commodity. Salt as a valuable commodity is hard for us to grasp because of our present-day use of salt…Salt is so common in our food that it is a struggle to find low-sodium or sodium-free food for those who need to restrict their intake of salt. Salt is everywhere, in everything.

Not so in Jesus’ day. In the first century world, salt was a precious commodity that served a variety of crucial purposes including sacrifice, purification, and seasoning. Sometimes it was even used as payment for wages instead of coins; however, salt was best known as a preservative. Before refrigeration came along, salted foods were the lifeline to survival when fresh foods became scarce. Salt’s ability to act as a preservative…giving life to **all** it permeated…led the Old Testament prophets to use salt as a symbol of the eternal covenant God made with the Hebrew people. In everyone’s second favorite book of the Old Testament, Leviticus…Numbers being the most favorite… is written: “You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. Lev. 2:13

Just as salt brings life to all it permeates… Christians are to remain salty by staying true to their mission of sharing the love of God – shown to us by God’s son, Jesus Christ - to the world.

Note that Jesus doesn’t say, “*Try* to be the salt of the earth.” Jesus says, “You *are* the salt of the earth.” A straight-forward statement. This is what and who you are. Don’t forget it. His statement isn’t a command, but a description. “You are the salt of the earth.”

Too often, we’re afraid we aren’t “salty” enough…or as “salty” as someone else…not gifted enough or not as gifted as someone else. When we do that, we’re essentially focusing on ourselves and not on Jesus. Salt as an element has no value to itself. It isn’t about making salt better salt. Salt is salt. Its value is in its application to other things. Jesus calls us “salt” because we exist for others.

**What are righteous people like?**

*They are like light…*

lighthouses, spotlights, lamps, candles in the darkness.

Once again, Jesus’ statement is a description, not a command.

Like salt, light does not exist for its own benefit, but for the benefit of everything it illuminates. Light provides warmth and energy and encourages life and growth. We do the same thing when we are the light of the world…when in the living of our lives we reflect the light of Christ to others.

We are—

to be open and honest instead of hiding in the dark who we are…those who have been named and claimed by God as God’s own.

We are—

to offer other people warmth and encouragement instead of being cold and discouraging.

to be an energy source for others,

so that together we can advance the mission of Christ’s compassion in the world.

As a Christian community we are shine the light of Christ’s love so that others will see what a life of love and faithfulness looks like. In a world of self-righteousness, we are called instead to be Christ-righteous — in right relationship with God and with neighbor.

Earlier I mentioned we let ourselves off the hook…give in to peer pressure…when we think we can’t make a difference…so we don’t do anything.

It’s an old story, but one that bears repeating.

A young boy was walking on the beach and saw up ahead hundreds of starfish lying on the beach, dying. He ran to the starfish and began throwing them back out into the ocean. A man was standing nearby observing the dying starfish and the young boy. He yelled out, “Give up, son, there’s too many to save.”

The young boy looked back while throwing yet another starfish back into the ocean, “I saved that one.”

The Pharisees may have been the spiritual superstars of their day, but their righteousness was rooted in rules and regulations. Jesus respected their passion for the law, but criticized their failure to put it into action. Later in Matthew 23:3 Jesus encourages his followers to do what the Pharisees “teach you and follow it; but *do not do as they do*, for they do not practice what they teach.” Today Jesus may have put it this way: “If you're going to **talk** the **talk**, you've got to **walk** the **walk.**”

The Pharisees were trying to be good for the wrong reasons and Jesus couldn’t and wouldn’t point to them up as the norm for righteousness.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Matthew 23:23

The Pharisees of the Bible cannot be our role models for righteousness because they neglected the justice and mercy and faith that are a part of being in right relationship with God **and** with neighbor. Nor can the 21st century Pharisees who are alive and well in the church today be our role models…people who, through their excessive focus on religious rules and regulations, make other beloved children of God, feel unworthy of God’s love.

We have only one role model for righteousness: Jesus Christ, the one who tells us we are salt and light to the world.

Self-righteousness or Christ-righteousness?

The Apostle Paul, before his encounter with the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, was Saul the Pharisee.

In Philippians 3, Paul writes about himself…

“…circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

That was the peer pressure that Saul, the Pharisee, exerted before his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. But Paul, who had set aside the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and embraced the righteousness of Christ, added:

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things,

and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes *from the law*, but one that comes *through faith in Christ*, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Self-righteousness or Christ-righteousness…

Self-righteousness that says…“I am better than you.”

 OR

Christ-righteousness that says…“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

Amen.