

SERMON TITLE: "A Good Word Glorifies God"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 5:13-20  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: August 13, 2017, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

The United Methodist denomination isn't a creedal church. By that, I mean, to become a United Methodist member, you don't have to memorize the words of a particular creed or swear that you believe a specific long list of doctrines. Our way of believing is more about using our United Methodist *method*—the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—to determine what we believe by carefully considering the four authorities of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. That isn't to say that doctrines and creeds don't have value. They certainly do! They are part of the religious tradition that informs our United Methodist method.

One of those traditional Christian statements of faith developed by the Church of England in the 1600s is called the Westminster Confession. From that confession developed the Westminster Catechism, versions of which are still taught in Presbyterian and various Reformed churches today. I like how the Westminster Catechism begins. The first of 106 questions asks, "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer given is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." The second question of the Westminster Catechism asks *how* we may glorify and enjoy God. And the catechism's answer proclaims that the word of God is our best guidance on how to glorify God.

I'm telling you this because during this month of August we're dwelling on the subject of "a good word." As we study Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, we're looking for his guidance about what a good word is and does. Last Sunday, we read the Beatitudes and saw that a good word begins with a blessing. Today, as we move on to verses 13-20, I invite you to consider with me how a good word glorifies God.

## 1—SALT

In this section, the first words of Jesus pronounce, “You are the salt of the earth.” Maybe it was because my dad served in the Navy, but I grew up hearing the term “salty sailor” applied to people who used coarse language. I don’t think that’s the kind of good word that Jesus meant would glorify God.

In the biblical times of Jesus, salt was used as a food preservative. Long before refrigeration and canning, food was dried and salted to kill bacteria. Unlike today, when we’re all worried about too much salt giving us high blood pressure—2000 years ago, salt was a necessary additive to keep people from getting sick. Salt was associated with health and wellness. Salt was associated with life. Because salt was so important as a meat preservative, the animal sacrifices brought to the temple had to be accompanied with salt, and salt became associated with religious ritual and spiritual purity.

And, of course, salt has a flavor that’s good for seasoning. It’s neither bland nor distasteful. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul (or one of his followers) wrote that the Christians should “conduct [themselves] wisely toward outsiders” and “let [their] speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.”<sup>1</sup> The idea there is that salted speech is more careful and refined, and therefore would be more attractive to potential believers. The Christians in Colossae would be better witnesses for Christ if their speech were polite and kind, demonstrating the Christian principles of forgiveness, love, harmony, peace, gratitude, and praise.<sup>2</sup>

We might wonder today about Jesus’ reference to salt losing its taste. The chemistry of salt is sodium chloride, which is a very stable compound that won’t disappear. So, probably what Jesus was talking about was the purity of the salt. Maybe some batches of salt were pure salt, and other batches had other minerals or substances mixed in—either because of imprecise mining practices or because the salt merchants were trying to make their precious commodity stretch farther.

In biblical times, salt was so valuable that it was sometimes traded and used like money. That’s why our word *salary* comes from the word *salt*. So it’s not hard to imagine that someone might dilute the

salt somewhere along the distribution line so they could make an extra buck off some unsuspecting customer. Possibly even the worshipers of God thinned out the salt that they took to the temple with their sacrifices. It was that symbol of dishonest cheating and impoverishment of spirit that Jesus was referring to when he spoke of salt losing its flavor and becoming good for nothing except to be trampled under foot.

So, what's that got to do with a good word that glorifies God? Well, I'm guessing that Jesus' analogy to salt would imply that our speech should be made up of words that promote health and well-being. They should be pure and not dishonest. Our speech should not be used to cheat and deceive for our personal gain. What's valuable in our social and economic interactions is a good and salty word that glorifies God.

## **2—LIGHT**

In this section of his Sermon on the Mount, the second image Jesus uses is light. In verse 14, Jesus says to his listeners, "You are the light of the world." Jesus admonishes his hearers not to hide their good works, but to let them shine like a lamp on a stand or like a city on a hill, so that others may see and glorify God. Since we're talking about "a good word," I would nudge us to realize that our good works are not just our silent actions. Our good works also include the words we say. So, in this context, a good word is a light that shines brightly enough that it can be seen as an effective witness to God's goodness.

Wow. Does anyone else feel convicted by this? I have to confess that even as I preached last Sunday about the importance of speaking words of blessing, I caught myself several times this week making a wisecrack that could have been understood as a putdown to someone. I spoke too quickly before I thought about the implications of what I was saying or how my words could cause someone else to feel. I know I need to work on this, and probably you do too.

I'm not saying that we can't ever offer constructive criticism or complain about injustices or things that need to be changed. Of course, we must speak up about those things sometimes. But let's think

about why we have lamplight or city lights. They're not so people will get hurt. They're for safety, right? We have lights so we won't stumble around in the dark. We use a flashlight to shine ahead of us so we can see where we're going. We have headlights, street lights, and parking lot lights to keep us from danger and so we won't be afraid. So, the type of words that would shine like lamps and cities on a hill would be words that create safety, not harm. They would be words that encourage salvation and healing, not destruction.

For a number of years, I've had a book on my shelf called *More Light, Less Heat*. It's a book about managing conflict in churches and society. The author's idea is that we can cool down some of the heat when we shine a better light on what's really going on in tense and quarrelsome situations. The subtitle of the book is "How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth." It's the author's contention that a certain kind of dialog, a certain way of speaking with each other, is what will bring about the best solutions.<sup>3</sup> A good word is the good light that will glorify God.

### **3—LAW**

In this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the third image Jesus uses is the law. Just as salt and light are useful symbols for the good word that can glorify God, so is the law. In verse 17, Jesus says, "Don't think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets; I haven't come to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus then goes on to say to his followers gathered on the mountainside that they also must keep and teach the commandments—even so much that their righteousness would exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees whose lives were devoted to promoting that very law.

Hmmmm. "How is that possible?" they and we might ask. How can average people be that precise in our spiritual life that we would exceed the dedication of those who are most dedicated? And, hey, wasn't even Jesus himself accused of breaking the Sabbath laws multiple times? So what does Jesus mean that lawbreakers won't be able to enter the kingdom of heaven?

Most of you know that I'm going to Mexico in a couple weeks, so that I can learn Spanish better. I've been working on my Spanish ever since I was in high school. One of the ways I practice and learn is by reading a Spanish Bible. So, sometimes when I'm preaching on a particular passage, I'll look it up in Spanish to see if that gives me any additional insights. And this week, that's exactly what happened. As I read verse 17 in Spanish, I saw that *to fulfill* was translated as *cumplir*, which means *to complete*. Some of you may know that when you wish someone "Happy Birthday" in Spanish, you say, "*Feliz Cumpleanos*," which means *happy annual completion* or *happy fulfillment of years*. And that got me to thinking that none of us is ever completely fulfilled on our birthday. To be sure, we've aged another 12 months and reached a particular milestone. But there's always more growth, more change, more understanding, more refinement, more correction, and more transition to be done.

Maybe that's the kind of fulfillment of the law that Jesus meant. Our understanding of the law and our ability to act upon it and teach it will continue to evolve over time, as our life circumstances and our spiritual understanding develops. But, for sure, our practice and teaching of the law is a good word that can glorify God.

### **CONCLUSION**

We began the service today with a call to worship from Psalm 119. That long chapter which meditates on the blessing of God's word also contains these two verses of praise to God: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" and "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."<sup>4</sup> God's words are good for us. May our words be good also. Like the purity of salt, the safety of light, and the fulfillment of law, may we speak a good word that glorifies God.

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<sup>1</sup>Col. 4:5-6.    <sup>2</sup>Col. 3:12-17.    <sup>3</sup>Joseph Phelps (Jossey Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1999).    <sup>4</sup>Ps. 119:103 & 105.