

'If Only vs. Only If'

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

*"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe." Amen!
- Ephesians 1:16-19*

Dear Fellow Christians:

One of the harder lessons of the maturing process has to be coming to grips with the fact that certain things just are the way they are, and while we might wish things could be different, many times things just are just plain difficult – if not impossible – and there's not a thing in the world anyone can do about it. Take socialism, for example. What kind-hearted soul would not wish that such a system could work? What human being with a heart wouldn't wish that everyone would work just as hard as he or she could and then share equally with those who have less – thereby virtually eliminating poverty, deprivation, and class envy? But that's the heart's take on things, and the heart often doesn't do a very good job in recognizing reality. At some point "if only" has to yield to "only if." While the heart might dream about mankind selflessly existing in blissful harmony and think "if only," the reality is that such things are possible "only if" sins like greed and selfishness can somehow be eradicated and replaced with contentment and generosity in all. *"Would be nice"* is always trumped by *"never happens."*

Need evidence? Let me give you just one example that proves the point. Have you ever attended a workday at church only to find yourself grumbling about the fact that hardly anyone else showed up, and then find yourself not exactly putting in as much effort as you could? Or, on the other side, did you simply skip a workday at church and just naturally expect that others will go and do the work that you don't want to do? That's sort of the nice idea that is socialism, in action. Even among Christians (who ought to be among any society's very best citizens) there is ample evidence that, in *this* world, good ideas can actually be very bad ideas whenever reality is ignored. While we all might wish things were different, ignoring the stark realities of life will nearly always land the dreamer in a world of hurt.

Keep this simple truth in mind as you read our text for this morning, found in the Gospel of Matthew, the Fifth Chapter:

^{ESV} **Matthew 5:13-20** *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. ¹⁴ ¶ "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. ¹⁷ ¶ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes 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. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

So far the verbally inspired words of our God. Here God himself offers us a wealth of infallible truth and wisdom, and therefore we prepare to give these truths our undivided attention as we pray: ***"Sanctify us through Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."*** Amen.

Young people often have a hard time accepting that some things just are the way they are. This is probably true, in large part, because with such acknowledgement comes the realization that there are no quick and easy solutions to many if not most of life's problems and struggles. The realities of life have been sorely abused by Hollywood to the point that many today – especially young people – grow up imagining that impossible odds can always be overcome by a hero in a two-hour movie (or a trilogy if the problems are extremely intractable or the evil forces unusually wicked and powerful). The lazy, immature side in all of us doesn't want to acknowledge that some problems require the blood, sweat, and tears of many years – just to hold them at bay, and that certain problems really never go away.

Permit another example from history. What do you know about the Revolutionary War? What, for example, are the dates? Even those who can place the War in the 18th Century tend to give the dates as 1775-1776, and tend to think of it as a fairly quick and relatively painless

tussle that gained our freedom. After all, didn't we win our independence on July 4, 1776? How many are aware that the war actually went on for another seven years following the signing of the Declaration (1775-1783)?

What do you know about who won the war and how? A rag-tag army of mismatched volunteers whipped the professional army of the world's great superpower of the day, Great Britain, in a handful of decisive, heroic battles, right? While it is true that the Continental Army, along with various state militias, defeated and forced the surrender of a part of the British army under General John Burgoyne in 1777, this was but a small fraction of Britain's military might. Of far greater importance was the fact that upon hearing the news of the British defeat, France entered the war on the side of the Colonies, as did their allies Spain and the Dutch Republic – both world powers at the time in their own right. Suddenly Britain could not send the troops they had planned to send because they were busy fighting the French, Spanish, and Dutch in Europe and elsewhere. Nor could their mighty fleet operate with impunity against the Colonies because they were at that point opposed by the equally powerful combined navies of our new allies. A long, bitter, arduous struggle ensued.

We also hear nothing these days about the great Revolutionary War battles in Florida, where British forces were planning to gather and open a catastrophic southern front. That's because the armies of Spain fought those battles and expelled the British from Florida and thereby secured our southern flank. Nor do we often hear that the second defeat and capture of a British army in 1781 in Yorktown was only made possible because France won a decisive naval battle in the Chesapeake and thereby broke both the British supply lines and their ability to evacuate their army by sea.

And then we had to do it all over again in the War of 1812, which actually lasted 3½ years and resulted in the burning of Washington DC by the invading British.

What's the point in bringing up such things in this morning's sermon? It illustrates the point that there are certain things in life that simply are the way they are; causes or missions that simply cannot be carried out by means other than prolonged, arduous struggle – and yet we still have this illusion that they can, and were. The point here is that the same hard facts hold true in the spiritual realm.

Jesus alluded to one such example in our text for this morning. Did you catch it? There he said: ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill***

them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

This was one of those profound statements made by Jesus where he spoke both law and gospel. God the Father's message to the world in sending Jesus was *not* that the keeping of the law doesn't matter; it was that the keeping of the law was *absolutely essential* if mankind was to be saved. The problem, of course, was that mankind was utterly incapable of keeping the law. In that we were all born losers. It was in this sense that our sermon theme comes into play, for if that necessary keeping of the law wasn't done *for* mankind, mankind was *done* for. This still represents the very heart of the gospel, and mankind today is still missing it completely. Humankind still today holds out this strange hope that there must be a different and better, easier way – which is really hard to fathom since God's way is that the hard work has already been done for us. By Jesus.

Our Savior wrestled with this same question during the height of his suffering here on earth, didn't he? Remember in the Garden of Gethsemane how he prayed so fervently: ***"Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."*** In other words, Jesus, as true man, was asking if there was any other way for mankind to be saved, any other way for him to accomplish his mission and carry out his Father's will. The hard, cold answer was that there just was no other way. None whatsoever. The work of man's salvation had to be done for us, or mankind was just plain done for – doomed to eternal destruction in hell for all eternity. That's exactly why Jesus walked the tortured path to the cross, and why his Father allowed him to suffer that which mankind cannot fully comprehend to carry out that work. Our Savior recognized that "if only" didn't get things done in the real world.

Man is still today bent on trying to find a different path, a different way. Human beings still today want to imagine that they should pretty much be able to do just about anything they want to do, but that God will somehow, in the end, accept them into heaven for who and what they are. Or that man can pretty much believe whatever he feels is right, and that such belief or conviction will have to be accepted by God, and therefore qualifies as an alternate path to eternal life.

The reality, as laid out in God's Word, is that there is no way around God's immutable truth: either we trust that Jesus fulfilled the law's demands in our place, or every individual man must keep the law perfectly and earn his own passage. If you cannot provide the latter

(your own perfect keeping of the law), your only hope is the former (trusting that Jesus kept it for you).

You know that. I know that. But the world still doesn't get it. The single most profound tragedy in the history of mankind is that so many souls have heard and rejected that simple, saving truth. There is not a whole lot that can be done for them. But what of the others? There are countless millions out there – even in our own country, our own neighborhoods – who have never really *heard* the truth. The "Christianity" they have been taught is pure work-righteousness. It is the same lie that the devil has been peddling since the Fall into sin. It's the old "good enough" and "can't we just..."

So how can those souls be rescued? How can the precious human beings who have never truly heard the truth be turned from death to life? Here again "if only" doesn't cut it. Here again it is "only if." In other words, it's up to Christians to carry out Christ's Great Commission, or those souls too are will spend an eternity in that place of unspeakable agony and horror. Wishing that things might be different, doesn't make it so. Nor can we wish people into heaven. It takes work.

Our text put it this way: ***"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.***

¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Do you understand the full import of those words? God's own arrangement requires that the saving message of the gospel – God's forgiveness by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – that message has to be carried by Christians to those who do not yet know, who have not yet been brought to faith. Paul asks in Romans: ***"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?"***

Will this work of spreading the message be easy? Not in the least. It is and always will be one of those difficult things in life where there are no shortcuts, no quick and simple gimmicks. In this life's work there is and will be nothing but the day in and day out struggle that will go on until Christ returns to call this world to a close. So you and I have a choice here. We can waste our time of grace pining for "if only," or we can face up to "only if" – and then get busy with our life's most critical work and calling.

Let God's Word remind you then this morning, and each morning, that there is absolutely nothing at all on earth that is more important and more consequential and lasting than the rescue of even one human soul. Let then every thought, word, and action in the time you and I have left be directed to that great goal: the glory of our God and the rescue of our neighbors. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **Isaiah 58:3-9a** 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

ESV **1 Corinthians 2:1-12** And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. ⁶ ¶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"-- ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

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The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 5, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 344 (Red Hymnal)

"Come Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 58:3-9a) Isaiah here addresses a problem that was also later addressed by James in his New Testament Epistle – "head faith" vs. "heart faith." In Isaiah's day the problem became evident when those who followed human traditions (like fasting) went through the motions but never changed their hearts or their behavior. True Christianity is a matter of the heart. Only when the heart is right can a child of God rightly thank his Lord through his God-pleasing actions.

Psalm of the Day – Psalm 66 (Supplement page 37) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (1 Corinthians 2:1-12) This reading is well paired with the previous Scripture reading from Isaiah, for both Paul and Isaiah essentially address the same issues. Christianity is not about the show, or the outward appearance. It is about what truly resides in the heart. Here also Paul reminds us how blessed we are to have been included in the family of those to whom the mystery of salvation has been revealed.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 324 (Verses 1-5) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Sinners Doth Receive"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 5:13-20 (Printed on the back page)

"If Only vs. Only If"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 324 (Verses 6-8) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Sinners Doth Receive"

The Offering

The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Closing Hymn - 50 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (36) Ave (44)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – St. Luke's of Lemmon has called Pastor Ed Starkey. Pastor Starkey has announced that his wife has Stage 4 cancer. Please remember Ed and Janice in your prayers. Pastor Paul Nolting is considering the call to the tri-parish of Grace of Valentine. Pastor Mark Weiss has returned the call to Rock of Ages of Grand Rapids. Brandon Heinze has accepted the call to teach mathematics at Immanuel of Mankato. Messiah of Eau Claire has called 2016 Graduate Heidi Radtke to teach 3-4 in its school. St Stephen of Mt. View has called Heidi Radtke to be the second teacher in its school.

Church Council Notes – The Church Council is scheduled to meet after the fellowship time next Sunday.

Care Packages – The Women of St. Paul are again gathering supplies for care packages for the members of our congregation who are attending school and not living at home. Please see Women's Fellowship President Cindy Ollenburger if you have any questions.

Easter Lilies – It's time to order Easter Lilies. Please see the sign-up sheet on the mailbox table or for more information see Sandy Roehl.

-This space is for rent-