

Palindrome Scripture  
February 5, 2023  
Matthew 5:13-20

As a writer, I've experimented with many different forms of poetry. Sonnets, haikus, couplets; I even wrote a love poem dedicated to Katie with the same rhythmic structure and rhyme pattern as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." I think that one was one of my favorites to write and to read to Katie, but I may be a bit biased. However, one kind of poem that I've never been able to do is what's called a palindrome poem, which is a poem that can be read both top to bottom *and* bottom to top. A great example of this is a poem titled *Pretty Ugly*, if you're curious about what I mean. When read top to bottom, this poem evokes the emotions of a person who has the worst self-image and hates him- or herself with every ounce of their being. It's a poem about a person who views themselves as ugly. However, read the other way, it tells of a person fighting back against those messages, whether they come from peers or the media; a person who, despite what others may say or think, views him- or herself as pretty. I bring this poem up because, I believe, today's passage is best read not the way we just read it, but rather in reverse.

I say this because the last section tells us what we must do. The last verse says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Well, that's a pretty powerful threat, is it not? You must be more righteous than those who are idolized for their faith and practices, whom people would kill to be like. It sets the bar fairly high, right? Actually, no. Jesus, rather, is taking a very powerful and poignant shot against the religious elite of his day. If ever there is a passage that really "stirs the pot," it's this one, but why does Jesus say this? He says this because the scribes and Pharisees do not uphold Scripture or the Law for the sake of righteousness. They do what they do to gain and maintain power in society. They are greedy for attention and power, and so they abuse the Law to gain the attention and affections of the common folk. However, they do not realize that they are potentially leading the commoners astray, teaching them that the Law is in place for power dynamics and status in society rather than actually treating one another with any level of decency. However, to have righteousness greater than them, to uphold the Law and to teach others to do the same that all might know justice, peace, kindness, there are great treasures in heaven for those who do so for selfless reasons. So, there are two possible paths: self-righteousness, like that of the scribes, that leads to losing one's entry into Heaven, or selfless righteousness that leads not just to getting into Heaven, but having great treasures built up therein. If given the choice, every one of us would pick "selfless righteousness," but this raises a more powerful question: How do we do this? What are we to do, think, and say so that every letter, every stroke of a letter, in the Law is upheld and fulfilled?

Jesus explains that we have this "greater righteousness" by being "the light of the world." Now, we've heard this image of "light in a darkened world" used multiple times over the course of Advent and now Epiphany, but why "light?" Well, consider the Sun: whether or not we see it over the course of a day, we know that it has risen simply based on the fact that we are able to walk around without a flashlight. What's more, it always rises in the East and sets in the West. On top of that, its light hits everywhere. Every atom of land, air, and water is warmed by its light each and every day, and its warming light spreads outward, hitting all planets in our solar system, spreading to distant galaxies and appearing to them like any star in the night sky appears

to us. Lastly, “light” is something that, the stronger it is, the harder it is to hide and the farther reaching its effect. Consider what it would take to hide the light from the Sun as opposed to the light from a single candle, or what it would take to put out the Sun as opposed to putting out that same candle. So, it is indiscriminate and it is reliable. Like God’s love, and therein the love we are to show one another, it is unconditional. The stronger it is, the harder it is to combat or to hide. So, our righteousness must be unconditional, reliable, unquenchable, and unable to be censored. It must be something that everyone can see and know. This then leads to the final question, that of the first section: why do we do it? In other words, why is righteousness shown through being “the light of the world” what gets us into Heaven and not something else?

The answer comes through Jesus’ opening statements for us to be “salt of the earth,” an image that would have not been unfamiliar to the crowd. The crowd would have known the story of Elisha throwing salt into a dry spring, causing it to gush forth water and to have life again. Comparably, Jesus here speaks of salt as something that enriches the soil, as a fertilizer and nourisher of the earth. Where once the ground might have been dry and lifeless, the salt gives new life to it. Where once there was no hope of anything bearing fruits, now there is hope again. So too must this be our cause: we must seek not only to flourish ourselves, but to help others flourish. We must seek not only for the enrichment of our own lives, but the lives of others. Where there is hopelessness, hatred, we must be as Jesus and Elisha, planting and fertilizing those seeds of love and hope that fruits might be born for all to share. In other words, we must be a light to the world and have righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees not for our benefit, but for the benefit of those around us, those less fortunate than us.

In the end, this is Jesus’ call to us in this section of his Sermon on the Mount. We must be righteous, not for our benefit, but so that others might know our righteousness, learn from it, and follow in our footsteps. We must be righteous not that we might reap the harvest, but that others might reap the fruits of our labors, that all persons might unconditionally thrive. The light of Christ has shone on all of us that we might see his righteousness and be “salt of the earth” as he has been. Now we are charged to be “salt of the earth” and “light in the darkness” for all persons, that all might wish to live this life of righteousness. So, as you go forth today, I invite you all to consider: How is the light of Christ you’re shining forth enriching the lives of those around you today?