

Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets

February 8, 2026

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

In her blog, preaching Professor Alyce M. McKenzie tells a story about a skit she and some students presented one year, which featured her giving feedback to Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount as if he were a member of her preaching class. In the skit, she said, "You remember we learned earlier in the semester that every sermon needs to have one single focus and you are all over the map with this one -- salt, light, not coming to abolish the prophets, breaking and keeping commandments. It seems almost like you put a bunch of short sayings together in a row. And one more thing -- your final sentence: 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' Where is the good news in this sermon ending? It sets out an impossible goal and then tells listeners they'll be in trouble if they can't do the impossible."

The punchline, she wrote, is that while she was marking things on the blackboard with her back to the class, "Jesus" beckoned the other students to follow and they left her alone in the room.

There is some truth, however, to her critique. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wasn't making things easy for anyone. To a people whose Scriptures told them about their ancestors repeated failures to live up to the standards of the Law and the Prophets, Jesus said, "Fulfill them." That's where the light came from. It's the source of the salt. And, oh yes, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now, we've been taught for years that the Pharisees and the scribes were the villains of the New Testament, and certainly by the time the Gospels were written there was a lot of dissension between the emerging Christians and the senior theologians of Judaism. To Jesus' hearers, though, the Pharisees and the scribes weren't bad guys, they were the tip top examples of what goodness meant. These were the people who seriously contemplated God's law, who worked through the implications of the things the prophets had said. To exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees set the bar incredibly high. Dr. McKenzie properly called it an "impossible goal."

"'No!' we might say, 'Jesus didn't really mean that,'" writes Karoline Lewis at Working Preacher. She continues, "But what if Jesus did? What if Jesus' intention was for us as disciples to imagine and live into a righteousness that makes the kingdom of heaven possible? If this is true, no wonder Jesus tells this to his disciples from the beginning. They will need the rest of the Gospel to make sense of and embrace such a request."

Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets. Jesus first – his followers next. Jesus first – and then you and me.

The usual complaint is that the Law and the Prophets are hard to understand. Are they? Really? “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers,” wrote Isaiah hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Is it hard to understand that self-interest is a problem? Is it hard to understand that exploiting people, whether they’re your employees or your family or your neighbor is a problem?

Quarreling and fighting. Clearly problems. And then there are the behaviors that aren’t problems, that are precisely what God was calling for in the Law and repeating through the prophets: Loose the bonds of injustice. Don’t burden people. Don’t enslave them. Share your bread. House the homeless. Clothe the naked. Care for your family. “Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

Or as Jesus put it, “You are the light of the world.”

A light not to be hidden.

Eric Barreto writes at Working Preacher, “Jesus gives the central insight that lights don’t magically end up underneath bushels. The only way for our light to be covered is if we put a bushel over it. We can hear the incredulous tone in Jesus’ voice, ‘No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel’ (verse 15). Ridiculous! Jesus is clear: we are not victims inevitably doomed to being distracted and drained by the bushels of inferiority or self-absorption or fantasy. Bushels can only block out the light when we put them there.”

There’s a lot of truth to that. You and I are more than capable of hiding our light, not by being humble, but by seeing something to do and leaving it undone. Somebody else will do it, we might think. Or there just isn’t time (which might be true). Worst of all, I’m too important to do this simple thing.

I can also think of more than one way in which others drop baskets over our light. Plenty of people have suffered being discounted by others. It is, in fact, an all-too-common experience. You sometimes hear of it being done by family members, who’ll tell one of the ‘ohana that their work is bad, that their opinions are unwelcome, that they themselves are worthless. We’re also familiar with broader prejudices within societies, which usually qualify certain groups as worth less or even worthless: children, foreigners, people with a different hue of skin, women.

In the January 31st edition of “Letters from an American,” historian Heather Cox Richardson quoted 19th century US Senator from South Carolina James Henry Hammond, who in 1858 told his colleagues that all societies need a “mudsill” class to do the work and to benefit their betters. African Americans served that purpose in the pre-Civil War South, but the North, he said, had “the man who lives by daily labor...in short, your whole hireling class of manual laborers and ‘operatives,’ as you call them, are essentially slaves.”

Senator Hammond's words were literally a bushel basket meant to extinguish the light of the world. They have their echoes today. Do not mistake them. They will do what's chemically impossible: cause salt to lose its taste. They will do what breaks hearts, families, and societies: hide the light.

When Jesus told us to let our light shine, he didn't just mean, "Do nice things." He meant, "See that the hungry are fed and the homeless housed. See that the oppressed are freed and the burdened relieved. Do not let the powerful say, 'Sorry,' and do nothing as if that took care of it. Do what John the Baptist did. Tell the powerful to repent for their sins."

Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org:

If our fasting does not enable us to discern God's will more clearly,
If our prayers do not stir us to address unmet needs around us,
If our blessings do not compel us to bless our neighbor,
If our sacramental rites do not move us to solidarity with the marginalized,
If our praise of the abiding of Creator does not lead to care and respect of all creation,
If our confession does not spur us beyond absolution to repair,
If our assurance of God's grace does not lead us to extend mercy,
Then why would the Holy and Just God even participate in it?

Yet, if we remove the yoke among us...
If we seek justice, speak truth, and love abundantly,
If we embrace the immigrant among us,
If we make space and consideration for the ignored and isolated,
If we lend our voice for the persecuted, defamed, and disenfranchised,
If we stand up to corruption and bear witness to wrongdoing,
If we raise our voice and move beyond our discomfort,
Then we too may receive the promise of the covenant and the Holy One's declaration of
"Here I am."

Remove the yoke.

Remove the yoke.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson