

# Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International  
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## Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):  
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

## Matthew 5:13-20

Year A - Epiphany 5, Text: Matthew 5:13-20  
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Matthew's Gospel contains five major blocks of teaching (a new Pentateuch, perhaps?): Chapters 5–7, Chapter 10, Chapter 13, Chapter 18, and Chapters 24–25. Matthew sees in Jesus the New Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15) who proclaims and establishes a New Covenant on a New Sinai, and Who, once and for all, defines and models the will of God.

In the Beatitudes (5:3–12), Jesus dethrones popular values and traditional expectations. He draws strong lines between those who will inherit His Kingdom and all other people. The closing verses point to the hostility His followers will experience and the persecution they can expect to endure.

What are the disciples to do? Should they withdraw from a hostile environment and seek to live in peaceful isolation? No! Jesus now proclaims a Great Commission that reflects His words in 28:19, 20.

**Verse 5:13:** Jewish rabbis praised the Pentateuch and Wisdom as “the salt of the earth.” However, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to be the salt of the earth. Salt was used for seasoning and as a preservative. It was also used in offering sacrifices and for joining parties together in a covenant relationship (see Mark 9:49–50; Exodus 30:35; Leviticus 2:13). Jesus also points out that people, like salt, can become contaminated and useless, fit only to be thrown out to a street and trampled on.

**Verse 5:14:** When Jesus took up residence in Capernaum and launched His ministry in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, He fulfilled the hope of the dawning of “a great light” (4:12–16). Jewish poets and rabbis sang of the Lord God as light (Psalm 27:1; Isaiah 60:1–30), and referred to the Pentateuch and those who taught it as lamps and lights for the path of life (Psalm 119:105, Romans 2:19).

However, in v. 14 Jesus declares the disciples to be the light of the world — disciples who will eventually be seen as insignificant and reviled; see Philippians 2:15.

And light is as difficult to hide as a city located on a hill.

**Verse 5:15:** After people light a lamp, they do not snuff it out by putting it under a basket or bowl of some kind. They place it on a stand so that it might provide light for all in the house. Likewise, Jesus has not created a community of disciples to live in isolation from the world.

**Verse 5:16:** But what “flashes of light” are Jesus’ friends and followers to show forth? The fire and thunder of John the Baptist, or that of the Zealots and political rebels? Neither! Jesus defines the light that He seeks as good works — and He will devote the entire “sermon” (better, teaching session!) that follows to defining those good works.

In this verse, Jesus exhorts the disciples to bear public witness, in word and deed, to their relationship to Him. Later, in 6:1–6, 16–18, Jesus warns the disciples not to display their piety in order to win human applause. Jesus’ desire is that the earth (v. 13), the world (v. 14), all in the house (v. 15), and all people (v. 16) give glory to the Father Who is in heaven.

In Matthew 5:17–20, the focus is on “fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.” In these verses, Jesus expresses the central point of chs. 5–7 and uses the first person “I” when doing so. Each sentence focuses on the will of God revealed in the Law and the Prophets — a common designation for the Hebrew sacred writings. The term “Law” denotes Genesis–Deuteronomy. Although these writings do contain collections of law-codes and commandments, embedded in them is a huge narrative, from the beginning of time and creation to the grand finale to the wilderness wanderings. However, Jesus points out that, through His ministry and teachings, He Himself is bringing the entire Old Testament narrative to its grand finale.

**Verse 5:17:** Some of Jesus’ enemies accused Him of being a destroyer of the Judaism of His day, and

perhaps some of His friends praised Him for being just that. However, Jesus' message is that the Law and the Prophets find their fullest expression in His Person, mission, and teachings, and through His death and resurrection. It is important to understand that Jesus finally defines life within His Kingdom as a call to reflect His servant lifestyle full-time and non-stop in all that His followers think, say, and do.

**Verse 5:18:** In this verse, Jesus speaks only of “the Law,” not the Law and the Prophets. Here the term means God's will as Jesus now interprets it. He interprets it in a way very different from the teachings of the scribes. Jesus goes on to point out that nothing is more solid and enduring than heaven and earth. They abide age after age, generation after generation, as nations rise and fall. So it will be with the will of God as Jesus interprets it.

Note that Jesus says that He came to fulfill the law, not abolish it, and that not even a “jot or tittle” will pass from the law until heaven and earth pass away (Matthew 5:17, 18). Therefore, everything Jesus says in Matthew 5 is consistent with the law and must be seen as extending the law and correcting abuses of the law rather than correcting the law itself. Not the tiniest letter in the entire Hebrew alphabet will pass away or disappear from God's true will for His people — as expounded and demonstrated by Jesus.

**Verse 5:19:** Jesus now focuses specifically on teachers. Any teacher who relaxes or annuls one of the least of God's true commandments and then teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. At the same time, those who teach, do, and observe them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

**Verse 5:20:** A radical verse! But then, Jesus' manner of life is radically different from that promoted by the scribes and Pharisees. He claims the right to forgive sins (v.9:2–9), eats with tax collectors and sinners (9:10–13), does not observe Jewish fasts (v.9:14–17; 11:19), works and heals on the Sabbath and teaches others to do the same (v.12:1–8, 9–14), dines with unwashed hands (v.15:1–20), speaks with a Gentile woman and heals her daughter (v.15:21–28).

After the resurrection, Jesus commands the disciples to teach “all nations” (i.e., including the Gentiles!) to understand, believe in, and live out the will of His Father as He taught and modeled it. However, He does

not utter a word about them teaching “Moses' law” or requiring circumcision (28:19–20).

Those whom Jesus has saved, ransomed, and redeemed are empowered to practice God's true righteousness and are summoned to do so. Those who see discipleship as an escape from day-by-day responsible servanthood into inner spiritual experience are misguided.