

CARPE SODIUM

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Matthew 5:13-20

To understand today's reading, we need to start at the end—at the punchline. And the punchline on this reading is Jesus' words to his disciples, *unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*. Now, to fully comprehend that punchline—what Jesus is saying here—I want to talk about the Super Bowl.

The Super Bowl kicks off this afternoon at 5:30 pm. It is being played in Houston. The two teams going at each other for the NFL Championship are the New England Patriots and the Atlanta Falcons. Who is going to win the game? The Patriots, of course. They are unbeatable. (But just so you know, I will be rooting for Atlanta but only for provincial reasons. We are both on the same side of the Mason-Dixon line.) The Patriots however will win the game today. Why? Because, in the world of football, they are the most righteous.

They also have a better record. Today is only the second time that Atlanta has played in a Super Bowl. They lost the first time. This will be the ninth Super Bowl appearance for the Patriots and they've already won four times. The most recent win was just two years ago.

It also comes down to players. The Falcons have a quarterback¹, but I don't know who he is.

The Patriots have Tom Brady. We all know who he is. He's big, he's fast, he's strong, and he's incredibly good looking. The only person better looking than Tom Brady is his wife, the super-model.

I heard a joke this week in the run-up to the Super Bowl. It goes, Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who's the.... yeah, it's Tom Brady.

Heretics out there might claim that Tom Brady, at age 39, is getting too old to play. I would argue that experience counts for everything (until he pulls a hamstring, and then all bets are off).

Coaches are also important. The Atlanta Falcons have a coach², but the Patriots have Bill Belichick who has coached them for 17 years. This will be his seventh Super Bowl appearance with this team.

¹ Matt Ryan

² Dan Quinn

As far as football perfection goes, it is hard to bet against the gridiron machine that is the New England Patriots.

In Jesus' day, they may not have had football, but they did have religion. If you were to ask any man-on-the-street to identify the national champions of religion, they would say the Pharisees. Everyone knew that the Pharisees set the bar on righteousness. They stringently observed the Laws of Moses—all 613 laws and statutes. When to eat, what to eat, who you could eat with, what to sacrifice, when to work, when to rest, when to worship, how to pray—the Pharisees knew all of this and they made sure that everyone else was well aware that they kept these rules and laws and regulations to the T. They excelled at this. However, keeping the Law simply to meet a requirement is not the same as keeping the Law out of a love for God.

When Jesus informs his followers that unless they out-righteous the Pharisees, they will not experience the kingdom of heaven. This is shocking because no one can out-righteous the Pharisees. They're the best. That's like telling the football team at Lebanon High that unless their skills exceed those of the Patriots, they will never win State. Those boys are going to look at you like you're crazy. There is no way they can be better than the Patriots. It is inconceivable.

But Jesus is telling his followers that it is possible to out-righteous the Pharisees.

Jesus was traveling through Galilee preaching and teaching and healing. He called people to repent; he offered a new life to those who followed him. He up-ended people's understanding of the world when he said, *blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*, and, *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*.

Many may have interpreted his message as a repudiation of the old ways—a rejection of the faith of their fathers. But Jesus clearly explains, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*. He is telling them that as long as the sun crosses the sky and as long as there are stars in the heavens, the Law will not change—not one letter, not even one stroke of a letter. Jesus throws his full weight behind the entirety of the Law saying that whoever breaks the smallest commandments will be kicked out of the game. On the other hand, whoever keeps the Law and teaches the Law to others will be like the player who carries the ball over the goal line. Touchdown!

The Law of God, the Law of Moses, the Torah, the words of the prophets—these are all still in place. Do not kill, worship no Gods but one, do not steal, honor your parents, and so on. As the rich man will tell Jesus later on, *All these things I have kept from my youth*. And he had, but he could not take the next step to embrace God.

The Law is there to guide us, but Jesus wants to know what the the Law means to us? Are these just rules to blindly obey? (Didn't kill anyone today—check.) Or does the Law point to a specific way of living—a way of living that goes beyond commands and embraces justice, compassion, and love. Jesus comes to the people with his words of peace, humility, mercy, and forgiveness, not as an alternative to the Law, but as fulfillment. *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*

In this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is sitting on the side of that hill teaching his disciples what he expects of them. We have to keep in mind that those with Jesus were far from perfect. They were ordinary people—fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, and more. They are like us. They lead tangled and chaotic lives. They weren't angels. They desperately wanted to know God but felt too broken and too inadequate. Jesus didn't go to the Pharisees because they wouldn't listen to him. They weren't hungry for righteousness. He went to those who were aware of their shortcomings, who were poor in spirit, who hungered and thirsted for righteousness. He called them to be peacemakers, to be merciful, to follow him to the kingdom. He tells them they are to be salt. Salt that is not salty is no good and must be thrown out. But Jesus reassures his people telling them, you are salty, he says, you are good. Jesus goes to those who know only darkness and assures them that they are light. A lighted lamp, he says, is useless if it cannot be seen. A lamp covered by a basket it is no good to anyone. Let your light shine brightly so the world may see what you do. May your light *give glory to God*.

If you read anything about Tom Brady, you will know that he lives football. His daily regimen is legendary. He is obsessive about practice, workouts, preparation, and diet. He wakes up each day at 3:30 am to study films. He's at the gym by 5:30. Every day he analyzes plays and players. He is not just a talented athlete, he has internalized this game until it has baked into his DNA. As one associate described, "Football isn't what Tom does—football is Tom."³ In the world of football, he is salty, and on the field he is a bright light. The Law of Football is etched into his heart. He is a disciple for the game.

What if we were as dedicated to being disciples of Jesus? To be a disciple of Jesus we must embrace God's Law with the fullness of our being. Jesus calls us to be his followers. We are far from perfect but we are still called. He calls us to *Love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] mind*.⁴ Our love for God's must become our essence. We must seize the salt and step out of our darkness and be a bright light that shines into the world.

³ <http://www.si.com/nfl/2014/12/10/tom-brady-new-england-patriots-age-fitness>

⁴ Matthew 22:37