

¹³You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. ¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶In the same way let your light shine in people's presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

¹⁷Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. ¹⁹So whoever breaks 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

We know every teaching of the Bible can be grouped into one of two categories: the law and the gospel. The law is God's list of dos and don'ts. We often think about the Ten Commandments when it comes to God's law, his moral order that stands for all time. When it comes to the gospel, we find the good news of our Savior Jesus. It is easy to oversimplify law and gospel, saying that the law is the bad news of sin and the gospel is the good news of the Savior, or that the Old Testament is all about law and the New Testament is all about gospel, but it is a bit more complicated than that. The Old Testament is not just God's law. It includes God's promises to rescue the world in Christ. Likewise, the New Testament is not all gospel. Listen to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles and you find plenty of dos and don'ts.

Today I want us to better understand the role of both the law and gospel in our lives, recognizing that that law is not bad news. In fact, the law of God is always good, because God uses it to keep us closer to him. But maybe it doesn't do it in the way we often expect.

God's law was never meant to save us. Romans 3 says: "Now we know that whatever the law says is addressed to those who are under the law, so that every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be subject to God's judgment. For this reason, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law, for through the law we become aware of sin." Just a few verses later, Paul clarifies it even more: "For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law." So, the law does not save. It silences. It condemns. It makes people aware of sin.

How different that is than how we often think of God's law! How many of us have believed at one time or another that the way to heaven runs through our adherence to God's law? You want to earn eternal life? Don't cheat your boss at work. You want to be good enough for God? Don't be a deadbeat parent or an unfaithful spouse. We could even use Jesus' words here as support to our earning heaven through keeping God's law: "Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." But let's understand Jesus' words in their context.

What was the religious position of Jewish society in Jesus' day? Many believed they would only be right with God if they obeyed his commandments. That's what the teachers of the law espoused, these Pharisees that lived their lives with such self-discipline that they became the model to earn God's favor. But what is Jesus saying here? If a person wants to earn heaven for themselves, how good do they have to be? Not just as righteous as the Pharisees. Even more righteous? What terrifying words! If even the people who had dedicated their lives to God's teachings were not good enough for God on their own, what hope did the average Joe have?

We fall into the same trap. We get this idea that we go to church and read God's word to help us live godly lives. Young people who left church soon after confirmation at 14 returns with their children in tow a decade later, expecting the church to tame the savages. But if the church is meant to exterminate sin and if the Bible is meant to make us progressively more perfect as we read it, then there must be something broken here. Talk to any of our seasoned members, men and women who have been coming to church and reading the Bible for ninety plus years. Ask them what the trick is, how they were able to stop sinning. But expect them to laugh at you. Even after a life of dedication to God's word, they are no less sinful than they were when at any other point of life.

God's rules don't save us. The purpose of our church isn't to equip you to live a life that will make you right with God. But that's not to say we don't use the law of God. And that's not to say the law of God is useless. It is useful in showing us reality.

"I'm a good person" is never a phrase that should be spoken in this place. It isn't a way that Christians should describe themselves. Because it's a naive lie. And it's a lie that ignores the reality of our sins. You are a sinner. And you don't have to read about it in the Bible to know it's true. God has placed in you a conscience, which bothers you when you've done wrong and convinces you that there is something broken within you. Guilt and shame hang over your head when you do wrong, and no matter how you try and reframe how you see yourself, no matter how you try to silence that guilt by plying it with alcohol, drugs, or any other distracting pleasure, you will still come back to that reality: "I'm broken."

There is a part of us that hates the conscience. It hates the guilt and shame that hang over our heads and make us feel so worthless. But what if I told you it was good for you to feel that way,

that those feelings were much more goldy than some false sense of self-righteousness? God gives us his law, written in scripture and written on our hearts, to open our eyes to reality. We are sinners, down to our very core. And God doesn't want us to grow comfortable with sin. He wants us to hate sin. He wants us to hate our sinful selves too. But as dark as this sounds, the law presses down on us for our good.

If I know that I am a sinner, then I also know I need a Savior. And I don't just need someone to coach me up when it comes to upright living. My constant failures to live anything resembling a perfect life should tell me that much. No, because I am by nature lost and condemned even on my best days, I need a Savior who would make me right with God.

The law prepares us for the gospel. It shows us our need for Jesus. And not just a little Jesus and a little me, but completely and totally Jesus. This is why Jesus comes and takes flesh. It's why he goes to the cross so willingly. It's not because we just needed a little help with sin. It's because we were drowning in it. We needed a Savior who could set us free from the weight of the law, and that's exactly what Jesus did.

The law of God shows us Jesus' greatness. Listen to what Jesus says here: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled." Jesus does not come to erase God's law. He does not come so that murder and adultery and gossip are no longer sins. Instead, he comes to fulfill the law in our place, to live a life of perfect obedience to God's commands, just to hand that perfection to us in faith.

As we understand just how high the fence of God's law stands and how much it demands from us, we can't help but marvel at how perfectly Jesus scales it. Never does he have one selfish thought. Never does his anger burn in an unjust way. Never does he use his time focused inward instead of outward. Jesus is perfect, just as the law demanded.

And through his perfection, we stand justified, declared "not guilty" before God. All those times you feel guilt and shame for the things you've done and said, Jesus takes them and calls them finished. He calls you something different too. Not "sinner" or "broken" or "lost." He calls you "righteous." No, the law of God does not stand destroyed. Even better, it stands fulfilled, every box checked, every T crossed and I dotted.

You have been made something new in Jesus. And because of that, God's law doesn't weigh on you like a ton of bricks. But does that mean that his law has no use besides showing us our sins? Absolutely not! Because once we have been changed by the gospel, our desire is to serve God. Because he has shown us such kindness, our hearts beat with gratitude and love for him. And how do we know what God desires? He tells us in his law.

How do I live faithfully in God's kingdom as a spouse? God tells me in his word. How do I raise my kids according to God's good design? I don't have to guess. He tells me. And how do I treat strangers, or even those people who have wronged me in the past? God makes it clear. God's law can never motivate us to live the right way, but the gospel of sins forgiven in Christ can and does. And now with this motivation of thankfulness in our hearts, the law can show us what thankfulness looks like.

This is what Jesus is talking about here with his people being salt and light. He's not talking about them living out their faith to prove something to God. He's talking about living out their faith as God uses them to prove his faithfulness to his creation. How does God salt the earth with his preserving force? He does it through his people living in a way that brings not only short-term but eternal blessings to those they share this world with. And how does God shine light on those living in darkness? He does it through his people reflecting the love of Christ to others.

God has called you to be salt and light, not to earn heaven but because heaven was already earned for you. Do not take his gifts for granted. Do not run headlong into sin and make the excuse to yourself that "Jesus has forgiven me." And never start to believe that the name of Jesus is just a delete button that gives you the ability to keep on sinning. Live by the gospel, always inspired by Jesus' cross and the love he showed you on that cross. But live according to God's law, that guide that shows you your Heavenly Father's will for your life. Motivated by the gospel. Guided by the law. This is how you will be salt to the saltless world. This is how you will be light to those living in darkness. Amen.