

“GOOD WORKS, THE LAW, AND JESUS”

Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)

February 5, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 13 through 20. It is on page 683 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus commands his disciples to do good works, and he explains to us why. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 5, we begin reading at verse 13.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

I saw a bumper sticker once. I think it was satirical. At least I hope it was. It said, “Jesus loves you, but I’m his favorite.” I really hope it was satirical.

It’s funny, but it’s wrong. We probably shouldn’t get our theology from bumper stickers. Good theology doesn’t fit on a bumper sticker.

So Jesus does love you; that part is true. But I’m not his favorite, and neither are you. In such a narcissistic world, we need to get our brains around this idea that Jesus loves other people. So here’s a really simple exercise for us to do this week: As we interact with people—they could be your family at home, a coworker, or a total stranger like the cashier at the grocery store or a referee at a hockey game. As you interact with these people, ask yourself, “Does Jesus love this person?” And the answer, of course, should be, “Yes.” And then see how that informs your behavior.

Now, this is really simple, right? You don’t have to go to seminary to figure this out. And that’s the way it usually is with God’s Law. It’s not complicated. The reason we don’t obey God’s Law is not because we don’t understand it; it’s because we just don’t want to. God’s Law is really simple.

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So I’m going to say something here, and I don’t know how you’re going to react to it. You might think it is a completely revolutionary idea, or you might think it is totally obvious—to the extent that it doesn’t even need to be said. Here it is: good works are for your neighbor. Your good works are not for God. Neither are your good works for you. Your good works are for your neighbor.

Now, this should be completely obvious to us. When you bring a hot dish to someone who’s sick, or when you help someone change a flat tire, or when you do whatever it is you do that helps someone, the person who is supposed to benefit from it is the person you serve. This is so obvious, I can’t even figure out how to explain it further. When you help someone, you help the person you help. Okay. Thank you Captain Obvious.

But somehow we confuse this incredibly simple concept. Since God is the one who commands us to do good works, we start to think that God will be happy with us if we do enough good works. So we go and do some good works. And then we hold them up to God and say, “Hey, God, look what I did for you.” But God’s not impressed. And God is not the one who needed you to do those good works. When someone has a flat tire on the side of the road, God is not the one who needs help. The person with the flat tire is the one who needs the help. This should be obvious to us.

So we do our good works for the person who needs them. God doesn’t need anything from you. God already has everything, literally. He does not need anything from us. The thought that we have anything we can give to God is the highest form of arrogance. God is happy with you because of Jesus Christ. You don’t have to give him anything.

So the first thing I want to impress upon you about good works is this: *God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does.* And, again, this should be plainly obvious to us. *God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.*

So that’s the simple truth about good works, but, as we see in Jesus’ sermon here, it goes a little bit deeper. Sometimes our good works do more than what we see on the surface. That’s the point Jesus is making with his illustrations of salt and light.

First, Jesus declares that we are salt and light. We don’t make ourselves to be salt and light. God makes us to be salt and light, and then he commands us to act like it.

A little bit of salt goes a long way. Salt has many good functions, like preserving food and helping us not fall down on icy sidewalks. But let’s talk about just one: seasoning food, because we all like food, and that’s the primary function of salt. A little bit of salt goes a long way. Too much salt ruins something, and we’ll talk about that. But the right amount of salt—and it doesn’t take much—really brings out the flavor of a dish. When you put a little salt on your steak, you don’t want to taste the salt when you eat it. You want the salt to help you taste the steak. You want it to bring out all the savory flavors that already exist in the steak. The salt isn’t about the salt. The salt is about the steak.

The same thing is true for light. Good lighting doesn’t draw attention to itself. It draws attention to everything around it. You really only notice light when you either don’t have enough or you have too much.

And our good works in the world are the same way. They are like salt and light. If you don’t have enough salt on your food or light in your living room, you notice. And, in the same way, when Christians don’t have enough good works, the world notices. When we don’t have any

love for our neighbors, our coworkers, the poor, the sick, or whoever, the world notices. They say, “Why would I believe in a God whose children act like this?”

When you know someone’s children, but you don’t know the parents, you make some assumptions based on the behavior of the children. If someone’s kids are absolute tyrants, we usually make assumptions about the parents. It might be right, or it might be wrong. We don’t really know why the kids are the way they are, but we usually assume it’s the parents’ fault. And it works the other way around too. If someone’s kids are respectful and well-behaved, we form a positive image of the parents, even if we don’t know anything about them.

So Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16).

Notice where the glory goes. It doesn’t go to us. It goes to our Father. Our good works in the world are most beneficial when they cause others to give glory to God.

When the glory goes to us, that’s like having too much salt or too much light. The problem isn’t that we might do too many good works. Don’t worry about that; it’s not going to happen. The problem is when we do our good works in a selfish, obnoxious, or vainglory kind of way. That’s like using too much salt. Eventually the world will notice and say, “This salt is disgusting.” Or it’s like getting a new high-powered flashlight, and you want to prove to your friend how powerful it is, so you just shine it in his face. Well that’s a really good way to prove how powerful your flashlight is, but it’s also really mean. So we do good works, not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify God.

And pay attention to who really benefits from all this. It’s not us. We don’t get the glory. God gets the glory. But it’s really not even God who benefits from that. God doesn’t need more glory. He doesn’t need humans to praise him. God has all the glory in the universe. Nobody can add to it. It’s not like God is up there in heaven feeling sad because he doesn’t get enough glory. That’s absurd. God desires for humans to glorify him, not because it’s good for God, but because it’s good for us. It is good for human beings to realize that God is powerful, good, and gracious. It is good for us to believe that he is merciful to us through Jesus Christ, because this is how we are saved.

So our good works are beneficial to our neighbors in two ways: First, for whatever obvious benefit they provide, like having a working tire on a car. And, second, because they can reflect the goodness of God, with the end result that our neighbors will give glory to God.

Now, we should also note that this doesn’t just happen through helping someone change their tire. In order for a person to give glory to God, they have to know who God is. So we’re really talking about good works *and* good words—that is, the Gospel of *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins*. No one becomes a Christian without the Gospel.

There’s an old saying that goes like this: *Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words*. It sounds kind of nice, and it might kind of fit with what Jesus is saying here, but it’s wrong. There is no Gospel without words. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ. Sharing that good news requires the use of words. Good works simply reflect the nature of this God we are talking about.

So Jesus commands his disciples to do good works because, not only does he love us, but because he also loves your neighbor. And he wants our neighbors to know how he has loved them. That is, by shedding his blood for them.

And so we see what Jesus’ attitude is toward good works. He is very much in favor of them. And this is the link to the second half of the gospel lesson, where we see the relationship between Jesus and the Law. Now, it’s the Law, of course, that tells us what a good work is. God’s Law says, “Thou shalt do this. Thou shalt not do that.” It reveals God’s will for how we should live.

And we shouldn’t be surprised to learn that Jesus is also in favor of the Law. In fact, he’s a really big fan of it. After all, it is *God’s* Law. He is the one who gave us the commandments. So, of course, Jesus is going to be in favor of it. But for various reasons, he needs to clarify for his disciples that he did not come to abolish the Law.

Now, why would anyone get the impression that Jesus came to abolish the Law? Two things come to mind.

First, because Jesus teaches with authority. Sometimes he seems to speak as if he were above the Law, and he is. Jesus is God. He is the giver of the Law. So, of course, he is above the Law. But he never contradicts the Law. The Law is his will, and his will does not change. So he does not abolish the Law.

The second reason we might think Jesus has abolished the Law is because he goes around forgiving sins and hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. From his associations, it might seem like Jesus doesn’t care that much about obedience to the Law. But, again, that could not be further from the truth. Even though he hangs out with tax collectors and prostitutes, it is still his will for them to stop extorting people and to stop committing prostitution. Jesus wants sinners to stop sinning, and he tells them so (John 8:11).

So Jesus did not come to abolish the Law. He upholds the Law.

But there’s more to it than just that.

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law. But he also did not come simply to remind us of it. If all we needed was another teacher of the Law, God could have sent another prophet. He didn’t have to take on human flesh for himself.

So Jesus came to do something else. There’s a third option besides abolishing the Law or simply holding it up for us to see. And Jesus took this third option. He came to *fulfill* the Law and the prophets.

What this means is that even though he is the Lawgiver—even though he is *above* the Law—he placed himself *under* the Law. Then he kept the Law. He was obedient to it. He followed it perfectly. He fulfilled it. He satisfied the demands of the Law. And he did this for us—in our place.

And then he acted like he hadn’t. When the time came for him to be judged, he accepted the condemnation of the Law. He willingly took the punishment for breaking the Law, even though he never did. So the punishment he endured was not his own. It was yours, and mine, and our neighbors’.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, “**I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill them**” (5:17). He came to fulfill the Law in our place.

This is how Jesus can hang out with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners like us without excusing our sin. Instead of excusing our sin, Jesus forgives it. And there is a huge difference.

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Excusing sin is acting like it doesn't matter, when it really does. That would be abolishing the Law. But forgiveness means accepting the consequences as your own. That is what Jesus did.

Suppose someone owes you a hundred dollars, and you forgive that debt. What does that mean? Does it mean you simply decide to not be angry with them? No. It means you accept the consequences of that debt. You take the loss, and you're out a hundred dollars. Forgiveness means accepting the consequences of someone else's actions. And that is what Jesus did. That is what he did by fulfilling the Law and still suffering the condemnation of it. Since he kept the Law perfectly, when he suffers the punishment, it is not his own punishment, but yours and mine and our neighbors'. He accepts our condemnation, so that he can give us his righteousness.

That's what this is all about—Jesus, fulfilling the Law for you, me, and our neighbors, and letting the entire world hear about it. Because Jesus loves you, and he loves your neighbor too. “You are the salt of the earth” (5:13). “You are the light of the world” (5:14). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.