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Matthew 5:13-20

Introduction

As I mentioned last week, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus asks as a type of a new Moses. He is giving a new law for a new Israel.

And what one finds as they examine Jesus' words in the "Sermon on The Mount" is that there is a tension between continuity and change. On the one hand, Jesus makes it clear in his words that the inbreaking of the kingdom of heaven is perfectly in step with all that God has done before. It was spoken about all throughout the Law and the Prophets.

Yet, on the other hand, there is certainly also the case that the kingdom is new and that even though it is in continuity with all that has come before, the **way** the kingdom arrives is surprising.

So just as Moses delivered the Law to Israel and the Law gave Israel a new identity and a new purpose, Jesus does something similar in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells his followers what they are and how they are to live. That is especially true of our passage this morning.

Our passage can be broken down by asking two different questions:

1. What are Christians for? (vv. 13-16)
2. How should Christians live? (vv. 17-20)

What Are Christians For? (vv. 13-16)

The answer to this question comes in the final verse of this section. In verse 16 we find that Jesus says that the good works of his followers should shine before others so that they might give glory to the Father in heaven. Salvation is never

an end in itself. Salvation is always unto worship and worship is always transformative.

The first thing to notice about these verses is that Jesus begins with an indicative and not an imperative. Jesus begins by telling his disciples what they are objectively. He tells then that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is not an imperative statement telling his disciples what they should be. It is not, go and be the salt of the earth. Rather it is a declaration first of what they are and then instructions based on that reality.

We can begin to grow into our responsibilities as disciples of Christ when we are founded on our identity *in Christ*.

- › This is why we stress the objective nature of baptism. In baptism, God places his name on you and you are united with Christ and his body, the church. This is who you are. Based on this we now speak about what makes sense and what doesn't make sense based on who you are.

But there is more to be said as well based on why Jesus uses salt and light as his examples.

Salt

Salt is closely related to the covenant that God made with Israel after he delivered them from Egypt. In [Leviticus 2:13](#) we find that every sacrifice that is brought to the LORD is to be salted. Remember, the sacrifices often represent the one bringing the offering. You are the sacrifice. You go on the altar. You are burned up and you ascend into God's presence in the glory cloud that hovered over the Tabernacle.

These sacrificial offerings were to be seasoned with salt. The sacrifice, in other words, was to taste good. In [Revelation 3:16](#) Jesus informs the church at Laodicea that they are lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, and that he is going to spit them out of his mouth. Jesus is saying here, "You are salt and salt should accompany the sacrifices of praise that one brings to Yahweh. But if the salt has lost its taste, how will the sacrifice be accepted, you will be spit out."

But salt also served another function in God's covenant with Israel. The presence of salt also represented the enduring and perpetual nature of the

covenant. In [Numbers 18:19](#) we read that the covenant “is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you and for your offspring with you.”

Salt was a preservative in the ancient world and it makes sense that salt would be used in covenants to represent the perpetually binding nature of the covenant. In the ancient near east, when two parties were making a covenant with one another, each member would often take a bite of salt to symbolize the perpetual character of the covenant.

So by saying to his disciples, “you are the salt of the earth” Jesus also has this in view. God’s people are a priestly people, representing the world to God and asking God to be merciful, patient, longsuffering, and gracious to a world in rebellion.

One of the “jobs” of the church is to come to God on behalf of the wicked world around us pleading that God would act in his righteousness to put an end to wickedness and evil and establish righteousness and justice in our time.

Just as Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah so too does the church serve as a preserving salt to the world around us.

- › You should seek to do this in your own lives with those around you who are in need of God’s patience and forgiveness. Pray for them, lift them up before the LORD. Who knows if God will not be merciful and gracious.

Light

When Jesus calls his disciples the “light of the world” and speaks of how a lamp should be put on a stand to give light, he is making an allusion to the lampstands that stood in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle & Temple. Salt was placed on the sacrifices that were to go on the altar in the Temple courtyard and the lampstands gave light to the inside of the Temple’s Holy Place. We are moving further into the heart of the temple in these sayings.

In many ways, the light was veiled and hidden in the Tabernacle and Temple in the Old Covenant but now, that the true Tabernacle and Temple has arrived, the light is breaking forth. And what Jesus says here is that those who follow him bear his light and should shine this light in the world.

This was ultimately what Israel was called to do in the Old Testament. Even though the light of the lampstands was veiled within the Holy Place of the Temple, Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations in how they lived and worshiped their God. Moses wrote in [Deuteronomy 4:5-8](#):

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 ESV

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

This was supposed to be Israel's story. But Israel was a faithless son and repeatedly failed to worship Yahweh faithfully and keep his statutes. And so now Jesus arrives as Israel, as the faithful Son of God. Jesus arrives as the light of the world and he tells his followers that they are the light of the world in him.

And so as the church, as followers of Christ, this is who we are and this is what we are called to do.

As mentioned before, the light that shines according to verse 16 is the light of good works that should shine before the world so that they might give glory to our Father who is in heaven.

The church is to be a lampstand of light providing light to the world. But lampstands need oil in order to produce light.

The oil is the Spirit of God that Jesus pours out on his church. And we know that the Spirit produces fruit in the life of the church.

- › We should pray that the Spirit of God would be poured into Christ the King in great measure so that we might produce good works for the world around us so that our light would shine before others and they would give glory to God our Father!

How Should Christians Live? (vv. 17-20)

This second point like the first is born out of the final verse of the section. Just like verse 16 tells us how being salt and light is associated with good works, so too does verse 19 help us understand what fulfilling the law is about. Fulfilling the law is about having a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus says that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them.

Thus far in Matthew's gospel, this word "fulfill" has already been used on a number of occasions. Matthew has said that a number of events have "fulfilled" the Old Testament scriptures. But what is interesting about this is that all these "fulfillments" are surprises.

When Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with the newborn Christ, Matthew said that this "fulfilled" [Hosea 11:1](#) "out of Egypt I called my son." Joseph and Mary aren't fleeing "out of Egypt" but rather fleeing into Egypt. What Matthew is saying is that Israel has become Egypt with a pharaoh (Herod) for a king.

Fulfillment, for Matthew means a *surprising* fulfillment.

I've mentioned before that when someone reads the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah it's easy to sympathize with those who believed the Messiah would be a military leader that would lead a global conquest.

What we find in Matthew's gospel is that Jesus fulfills all these prophecies and the law. But he does so in a way that is surprising.

You see, Jesus really does lead a conquest as the Messiah just as the Old Testament prophecies predicted. But the way Jesus leads his conquest is *surprising*. Jesus leads a conquest by taking up a cross, not by taking up a sword. Jesus conquered by being conquered and this is how Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

This in no way negates or abolishes the Law and the Prophets but it shows us what they were always really about. Jesus is what they were always pointing to. The conquest that the prophets predicted is understood by looking at Jesus and his church. The obedience and righteousness of the law is to be understood by looking at Jesus' life of obedience and righteousness.

There is a way to read the Law that might lead one to do what the Pharisees did. Focus on the scruples of the law and on commentary of the law in such a way that one neglects the “weightier matters of the Law”.

The weightier matters of the law do not negate one jot or tittle of the law. *But the law was set up as various case laws.* The actual likelihood of a specific judicial case looking just like one of the scenarios laid out in [Ex. 21-23](#) was extremely unlikely. That is why judges and kings were to meditate on the Law day and night so they might gain wisdom from it and learn how to make wise judgements about cases that came up that didn't fit perfectly with the case laws presented in the Law. The law was a tutor for Israel so that Israel might gain wisdom. Jesus is the wise king who shows us what righteous law keeping looks like.

Ultimately, what righteous law-keeping looks like is *love and sacrifice*. The Law *truly is summed up in loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and loving your neighbor as yourself.*

We should pay attention to all the details of the Law but we should live out obedience to the law like Jesus did, by dining with publicans and sinners and by doing good on the sabbath.

We should never forget that Jesus is the Word made flesh. He is the living Torah and so we follow the law and achieve a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees by following Jesus. And the way we follow Jesus is by following him to the Calvary. At Calvary we see Jesus die for us and we learn how to die for others. So take up your cross and follow Jesus, knowing that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.