

Matthew 5:13–20: <sup>13</sup>[Jesus said,] “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.

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>“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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

“Is the Law Good ... or Bad?”

#### TEXT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The text for today’s message is the Gospel reading from St. Matthew, the 5th chapter.

#### INTRODUCTION

We’ve finished our review of the Ten Commandments with the Close of the Commandments. In Exodus, chapter 20, God says about all these commandments: “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.” Ex. 20:5-6

There are three things going on here: 1) God is a jealous God—He doesn’t like to see His children err or follow other gods; 2) God promises to punish those who hate Him—and by hatred

He means by not keeping His commandments, for to disobey God is to hate Him; and 3) God promises to love those who love Him, and you love God by keeping His commandments.

The Close of the Commandments would be good news if you loved God above all things—that is, if you obeyed Him by keeping His Commandments perfectly, then you would know that God loves you. But the thing is, it isn't God's Commandments that we like to keep—it isn't God whom we love and follow. We love ourselves and we keep the commandments of our hearts and follow the world.

In this fallen world, the Law isn't helpful—in fact it's a curse. Instead of helping us get into heaven, it shows us our sin and rebellion against God. So, it sounds like we're all in trouble—even the most righteous among us—for Jesus said, “<sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Since none of us has a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees, if someone would ask you, “Is the Law a good news?” you'd probably say, “No.” Because, according to the Close of the Commandments, that means we deserve God's punishment. Which is probably why we do our best to escape the Law. Like the Scribes and the Pharisees, we try to make the Law easier to keep. Or, we try to diminish or deny its authority. Or, we ignore the Law altogether and announce that God will save everyone.

But that doesn't hold much water with Jesus, who said, “<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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...”

Jesus had a high regard for the Ten Commandments because they are just as much God's good and perfect Word as is the Gospel. However,

GOD’S LAW IS “BAD NEWS” ONLY BECAUSE THIS IS A FALLEN AND REBELLIOUS WORLD; BUT FOR THE REGENERATED PERSON, THE LAW IS “GOOD NEWS” BECAUSE IT TEACHES THE CHRISTIAN HOW TO BE SALT AND LIGHT.

I. The Law is God’s Good Word—that curses sinners.

You should know that the Law is more than God’s Word, it is an extension of God Himself. What do I mean by that? God is perfectly good—that is His nature. His very nature defines what is good. The Law reflects the perfectly good nature of God. God not only sets the standard—He is the standard.

Sin and evil aren’t so much the opposite of good—they are the corruption of good. Take an orange for example. An orange is a marvelous creation. It tastes good and is good for you. But once it becomes moldy, it’s still an orange, but now it’s corrupted and inedible. If you try to eat that orange, your taste buds will quickly tell you that it’s corrupt and unhealthy.

But like fish in water, we’re so immersed in a sinful world, captured by our sinful thinking, we don’t know what sin is. And then along comes God’s Law—like our taste buds, the Law tells us that something’s rotten. Now God’s Law is written on our hearts, what we call the natural law, but it’s pretty easy to ignore this law—just look around at our world. You would think that the protesters in Berkeley would know that rioting and destroying property aren’t the way progressives should behave—but they did so anyway—they ignored the Law written on their hearts.

But God wrote His Law down, and that’s not so easy to ignore.

That Law, written in black and white, reveals God’s perfect goodness and His demand for perfect goodness—and in so doing, it reveals our failure to be and do the good that God demands. So, for sinners, the Law is “bad news;” it’s a curse, for it reveals God’s wrath. Thus,

the apostle Paul writes in Galatians (3:10), “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’”

II. Jesus fulfills the Law—and dies because of the Law.

To fulfill the Law, you must be perfect as God is perfect—you must love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. But that’s not possible for imperfect people, who love self above all things. That means we’re subject to God’s righteous wrath.

Although God is just, He is also merciful—He doesn’t want to see the death of any person He created. So God, in His love and mercy, became a human being in Christ. He became a human being to fulfill the Law for us—and by “for us,” I mean, “in our place.” As Jesus said in our text: “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.”

Jesus did what we could not—He loved His heavenly Father with all His beings and His neighbor as Himself. His righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees because it was a true righteousness—a righteousness of love for God and others. And Jesus did this as your substitute—all that Jesus did on earth, He did for you—as your substitute.

But not only did Jesus live as your substitute—He died as your substitute. Even though He was perfectly good, He became sin in your place. On the cross, Jesus bore God’s righteous punishment for all sin. God laid on Him the iniquity of us all—and the punishment we deserve. He did so willingly and out of great love for His heavenly Father and for all of creation.

This righteousness of Christ—His perfect keeping of the Law and His innocent suffering and death on the cross—are yours as a gift of faith. No longer are you under the wrath of God as lawbreakers, but under the grace of God in Christ Jesus; thus Paul writes in Romans 8: “There is

therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

### III. The Law teaches.

Since believers are no longer under the condemnation of the Law, does that mean you can do whatever you want—live however you want since you’re forgiven all your sins? Remember, Jesus didn’t come to abolish the Law—God’s Commandments are still in force—those Commandments still reveal and condemn sin. And Paul reminds us in Romans that every baptized believer has died to sin. How can we still live in it, knowing that sin is rebellion against the God who saved us?

Paul reminds us that all who have been baptized into Christ are regenerated. No longer are you a rebellious law-breaker, you are now a new creation—a new person in Christ Jesus. As a baptized believer, the love of Christ now dwells in you. Notice I didn’t say the love for Christ dwells in you, but the love of Christ—the love Jesus has for God and His Word and His love for neighbor—now dwells in you.

For the regenerated person, the indwelling love of Christ compels him or her to ask, “How do I love God and how do I love my neighbor? And for the believer, the Law now becomes “good news” for it teaches the believer how God desires that you love Him and your neighbor.

This is known as the Third Use of the Law. The First Use—to curb sin by threat of punishment. The Second Use—a mirror that shows us our sin and our need for a Savior. But in its Third Use, the Law teaches us what a good work is—it teaches us how to love as God loves.

And that takes us to the first part of our Gospel reading where Jesus said, “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. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.”

Far from abolishing the Law, Jesus gives His redeemed and regenerated people the Law to teach you how to be salt and light. Salt adds flavor to foods, and to be salt means that you flavor the world with your good works. And as light, you do more than show your love for Christ and your neighbor in your good works, you are each a beacon of hope in a broken world.

When you keep God’s Law, you show the world that God loves the world, because God loves the world through you. You are the mouth, the arms, the feet, and the grace and mercy of God in a fallen world.

And when you keep God’s Law, you are a beacon of truth in a world filled with Satan’s lies. There are people all around you who have been broken by this world, who have been deceived by Satan’s lies. They need to know the truth—they need to know God’s love and mercy. As salt and light, your good works in keeping with the Commandments give glory to God by teaching both the truth of what God demands in the Law, and what He gives in the Gospel.

#### CONCLUSION

When it comes to being salt and light, the world will hate you as it did Jesus. The world calls good what God calls evil, and evil what God calls good. The world hates the truth and loves sin and rebellion. That’s why the world is dying—and that’s why the world needs Jesus.

But you aren't salt and light alone. Wherever you go and whatever you Christ is with you—He empowers you to be doers of the Law, and He defends you from evil by His mighty power, so you can be boldly, salt and light.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.