

Matthew 5:17-20, 43-48
(Psalm 119:1-16; 1 John 5:1-5)
“The Righteousness of the Kingdom”

Introduction

“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” But what does it *mean* to be salt and light? What does it look like? What does it taste like? *Isn't it interesting that Jesus turns immediately to a discussion of the law?* This is the last thing that many of us would expect him to do if he is going to describe how his disciples are to be different from the world. I wonder sometimes whether the most misunderstood aspect of the Scripture is not the relationship between law and grace, between faith and good works. We seem intent on building a wall of separation between things that were never meant to be separated. Paul himself states the problem this way:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works (Romans 9:30-32).

In other words, Israel made precisely the same mistake that Christians down through the ages have made: they thought that they could keep the law in such a way that they would contribute to their own salvation and thus would have grounds for being proud of themselves and boasting over others who do not keep the law. This leads inevitably to moralism and legalism, and to other forms of self-salvation.

There is an understandable reaction among many young evangelicals to the legalism and moralism they have experienced within the church, and thus to anything associated with God's law, with a result that many preach grace without understanding the gracious nature of God's law, and without recognizing that the moral law, the Ten Commandments, continues to serve as a picture of the life of love into which we are called through our union with Christ. The implication is that anyone who calls us to biblical holiness is seen as endangering our freedom from the law, and threatening us with moralism.

What, then, is the relationship between law and works on the one hand, and grace and faith on the other? The answer is to be found in differentiating the different kinds of law referred to in the New Testament, and then recognizing the intimate and indivisible relationship between grace and law, between faith and works, summarized best in the biblical expression, “the obedience of faith.” The law was given in a context of grace: “I will be your God and you will be my people. Now, this is how our family lives.” We see it fleshed out in these words of our Lord Jesus, as he describes what it means to be citizens of the kingdom of God, living in the midst of the kingdoms of this world.

Body:

1. How was Jesus the light of the world?

He came, not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. How did he fulfill God's law? Remember that there were three different kinds of law in Israel: civil, ceremonial and moral. The first applied to the nation, the second to the laws of temple worship and sacrifice, and the third to how we are to live, in other words, the Ten Commandments. When the New Testament refers to the law, it refers to the latter two, the ceremonial law and the moral law.

Jesus kept the moral law, the Ten Commandments, as an expression of his love for his Father and his love for humanity. He showed us what it means to love God heart mind and strength and to love each other sacrificially. He touched untouchables and ate with notorious sinners, to show that God's purpose was to seek and save the lost. He made the Sabbath day a delight rather than an obligation to be borne. He treated women with respect in a culture that saw them as property. And when he looked at the teeming crowds, he did not despise them, but was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus kept the moral law perfectly for you and me, and then offered himself as a perfect man in place of our sinful, broken selves. In this way, he fulfilled all of the Temple sacrifices offered by Israel down through the centuries, as well as the heart cry of all those within Israel and without who had cried out to God for grace and forgiveness. We even see him in his hour of agony crying out to his Father to forgive those who nailed him to the cross. Thus, in his sacrifice for sin he satisfied forever the ceremonial law and put an end to it.

2. How are we, who do not keep the moral law perfectly, still to be the light of the world?

Our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. How can that be? They were scrupulous in keeping the rules. Clearly, our model is Jesus. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled for us in Christ. No more sacrifices for sin can be made, because sin has been dealt with once and forever in the sacrifice of God's Son, so we fulfill the ceremonial law by trusting in Christ's sacrifice as the basis of our forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

When Paul warned the Galatian Christians who had been saved by grace through faith not to turn away from the Spirit and back to the flesh and the law, he was referring to the ceremonial law, not the moral law. He was resisting those who were telling Gentile believers that they had to be

circumcised and begin keeping kosher diet in order to be saved. When in chapter six, he turns to the behavior expected of a Christ-follower, he upholds the moral law, the Ten Commandments, not as a ground of salvation, but as a picture of our life in Christ. We are consistently told throughout the New Testament that we are now free from the ceremonial law of circumcision, dietary rules and temple ritual, but that we are to seek through faith in God's power at work within us to keep the moral law, not as a means of salvation, but as an expression of our love for God and for one another.

This is precisely why we spend time talking about God's moral law. The first five commandments tell us what it looks like to love and trust God. They depict the loving obedience of faith. We will not have other gods, whether work or family or success or pleasure. We will have no god but God himself and will speak his name with reverence, awe and gratitude. We will keep his day holy and not waste it on our entertainments. We will learn to love and revere God by loving and revering our parents, who first teach us to love, trust and obey.

And we are to keep the law as an expression of our love for one another. The rest of the commandments are a picture of what it looks like to love other people. They are summarized in the final command: we are not to covet the lives of those around us, wishing that we had what they have. It is covetousness that leads to murder and adultery, to stealing and lying about people. We will seek through the power of Christ within us not to covet what others have, but rather to love them self-sacrificially as Christ has loved us.

It is in this sense that Jesus says that we – who obviously are not perfect in our obedience – nevertheless are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). He says it in the context of calling us to love even our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (5:44). This is the perfection of love: loving our enemies even as God loved us while we were still his enemies,

Conclusion

God has not just done something for us, but also something in us. He not only sent his Son to live and die for us, but he has sent us his Spirit, so that our righteousness is no longer merely a matter of outward religious and moral observance, but rather is an expression of God's love and grace, flowing out of our union with Christ. If we follow just a little way on this path of loving obedience, everything starts to change. People know that something is different, that there is, perhaps, hope for them as well. They begin to taste a little of what it means to be loved by God through the real flesh and blood love of another person. They don't see us as "religious," but as alive, and full of joy and hope and love. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. "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).

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