

Sunday, February 9, 2020 – Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
“What’s the Point?”

Matthew 5: 17-20

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Question Answered Structure

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

“Nobody’s perfect,” you say. Well listen to this: Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (a euphemism referring to the Scriptures); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 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. 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.”

There is a name for that perfect standard. We call that standard the Law, with a capital “L.” The Law is very good – it is nothing less than God’s design and will for how everything works.

If you’ve heard enough sermons here, done enough Bible study, sung enough songs, then you might think, “Wait a second, Pastor! What you’re saying sounds heavy-handed! Sure, I want to live how God wants me to, but didn’t Jesus die to spare me that punishment? Are you saying... and is Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount... that we’re saved by doing good things, that we work for our salvation?”

No doubt, Jesus’ words for us today are challenging. Let’s explore an important question together today: If Jesus has already died for me, if I am already saved, **“What’s the point of God’s Law?”**

There are many responses given to that question... let’s explore some. These answers are not exhaustive, but they are common.

One very common response to the question, “What’s the point of the Law?” is to dodge it. Just redefine terms of what God’s Law is. Sure, He doesn’t want you to go out of your way to

make life hard on other people, but at the end of the day all God is really concerned about is that you are honest in your spiritual walk. That's His Law. Simply be authentic in your walk, try your best and stop worrying so much about this sin or that sin, or whose beliefs are right or wrong – God is love and He will sort it all out. All human beings have the same longings, and each of our spiritual paths lead to the same god, just as many routes may be taken up the same mountain to the top. The end destination is the same, and then, once we arrive together, all the divisions that separate us will be gone.

That's a popular idea today, that God isn't so much interested in what you believe so long as you believe in something with all your heart. It's on those Coexist bumper stickers, each letter of the word "Coexist" represented by a religious symbol of some sort. You see it decorated around the stage at House of Blues, too. If you're a fan of the show Lost, it's in the final episode, and not so subtly I might add, in the chapel where the religious symbols of various world religions are in the same stained glass frame.

Problem: if we trust God's Word in this text this redefinition doesn't work. Jesus did not come to abolish that standard but to fulfill it. It is a continuation of the ageless truth, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. It is trumpeted by the Son as He tells us that HE is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him.

OK, fair enough. But what if we're not saying we don't need Jesus, and we agree He is the way, the truth, and the life, we're only saying maybe God's Law isn't so clear-cut as it appears. After all, our Scriptures were written over the course of many centuries, ending nearly 2,000 years ago. Surely with our advancements in terms of our knowledge of the natural world and with our superior, enlightened views on human life and society it's up to us to determine what He actually said and what is cultural baggage, or what is legend and myth. On the one hand, you have to dismiss the wild claims about the creation of the world and fanciful tales such as Jonah, and on the other hand you have to approach obviously prejudiced texts with

enlightened, Western 21st century sensitivities in mind. What's the point of God's Law?

Perhaps... not much.

This approach of course opens the door to a wide variety of ideas and practices which, if those parts of the Bible we dismissed on scientific or cultural grounds were actually true would put us in hot water but, since we believe them not to be relevant, we can go forward in a clear conscience. So God isn't so interested in what we do according to His Law, as long as we believe in Jesus.

Now I will not deny that many people holding this view are Christians. I realize some of you hearing me even right now might not like what I have to say. And if I were told that everyone approaches the Bible with presuppositions, everyone interprets what is there from a biased perspective, the person telling me that would be right. Fair enough.

The issue here is a question of authority. What I mean is, do I approach God's Word in a humble manner letting Him inform and mold my reason in service to His Word, or does my human reason cast its own judgment upon what God's Word says? In other words, are we willing to let God's Law have its way, or will we attempt to massage and mold His will to suit our purposes? If we are to take Jesus' admonition seriously, to not relax His Word, the answer must be somewhere else.

Let's try another tact: Perhaps the answer is to why God requires us to live righteous lives according to His Law is that without our best efforts joining with what Jesus did, we cannot be saved. Keep ever stricter standards. Forbid anything that could lead to temptation. Disown the world and its corruption. What's the point of God's Law? Holiness that makes you righteous.

This answer is especially appealing to many Christians who sincerely want to live as God instructs. The answer given here is that God is more concerned with how we live than anything else. It has been seen throughout history. It was a driving force for many of the first Europeans that came to North America, to form religious colonies that could enforce pure Christian living. It's seen in a wide spectrum of Christianity today who trace their heritage to

these groups – from folks on the extreme, like the Amish leading lives almost separate from the world, to the Shakers, once popular in the 1800's, who literally died off because they forbade sexual relations for fear of people succumbing to lust. And it's still seen in groups that focus intense energy on forbidding alcohol consumption or dancing. It can even be seen in how we read our Bible, or having an attitude of "Over my dead body" about making a change to something physically in the sanctuary, or opposition to a type of music instrument or very particular ways we word the liturgy. It's called legalism, and it's nothing new. Legalism begins as an attempt to stave off temptations and errors – worthy goals in and of themselves – but leads to temptation of its own – pride in holier than thou living and trust in our code of rules, our works, instead of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. It's what Jesus references in an almost sarcastic remark in our text about the Pharisees trying to win out their salvation by their righteous deeds. Piety – love for God's Law, is beautiful. Pietism – making your religion out of how you live – that's an dead end.

So what's the point of the Law?

Our answer is different than any of the first three – we don't get off the hook by taking the teeth out of God's Law and saying as long as we believe in Jesus, God wants nothing else from us. Nor is the answer to say that we're saved by following His rules. There is only one way any sinner like you or me is saved – Jesus' death taking the punishment our sin deserves. Yes, God does require that we keep His Law – but not so that we can be forgiven. Not so we have eternal life. His Law stands even as we are forgiven for our trespasses against it.

But Jesus does more than that. He has made us new! He drowns our old, sinful nature in baptism. Our hearts are reconstructed to live for Him – to want to do His Law better! His Holy Spirit now takes up residence in us, as His temple, and moves us to follow God's will. Jesus did not come to make the requirements go away, or even to make them easier. Nor did He come to hand down a new Law. Jesus came to *fulfill* the Law. He came to meet the standard perfectly and then, after He has filled God's requirements, He dies in our place and His righteousness

overflows through us – to forgive us and send us on His mission to love and disciple others. We do God's will not because we must (even though we must) – but because it's who we are! God enables us to be righteous through Jesus – and gives us the best possible life with Him here and now, for the sake of the people around us. God's mission , the people around us meeting Jesus – THAT'S the whole point! In Jesus' name, Amen.