

MATTHEW 5:13–20. (EHV)

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way let your light shine in people’s presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. So whoever breaks 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Many people today portray God like an easygoing grandfather rocking back and forth on a front porch swing, watching people on earth like a grandfather might watch his grandchildren playing and roughhousing in his front yard. They’re flinging mud at each other, hitting each other, and calling each other names, and he sees that and calls out to them to be nice. But he also chuckles to himself and says, “Kids will be kids.” Similarly, many people today portray God’s Son, Jesus Christ, as someone who accepts everybody just the way they are. What they mean by that is that he is happy with them just the way they are, and is happy to let them remain just the way they are.

Jesus dispels any such notions in these verses of his Sermon on the Mount today. One could argue that these verses are the most important in Jesus’s sermon. He essentially gives the theme of his sermon here. He introduces us to two fulfillments of God’s law.

1. Jesus’s Two Fulfillments

Let’s first talk about *Jesus’s* two fulfillments of the law. “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets,” Jesus says. “I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them.” When Jesus talks about the Law and the Prophets, the Law refers to the first five books of the Bible, written by Moses, and the Prophets refers to the rest of the Old Testament. Here it is clear that Jesus is especially referring to God’s moral law or commands, as given by God through Moses and further explained and applied by the rest of the prophets.

Jesus says that he did not come to destroy or abolish God’s commands. People might have gotten the impression that Jesus was soft on the law from his kindness, patience, gentleness, and forgiving spirit. But he says he came not to destroy them, but to fulfill them. In the immediate context, it is clear that the primary fulfillment Jesus is referring to is a filling up or filling out of the law, that is, showing just how demanding, all-encompassing, and far-reaching it is. That’s why he goes on to say, “So whoever breaks 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Notice how there is

no middle ground. In the eyes of God, you are either disregarded and despised, or you are great and valued. And in order to be great, we must perfectly observe God's commands in our own lives and teach them to others, down to the smallest letter and detail.

Jesus later goes on to fill out the law and show just how demanding, all-encompassing, and far-reaching it is by showing how all of God's commands aren't just aimed at our actions and words, but also at our thoughts and our hearts. We'll see that in the Gospel verses appointed for next week, as Jesus talks about anger and lust, divorce and oath-taking.

Some teachers in the visible Christian church call Jesus's Sermon on the Mount the New Law or the Law of the Gospel, saying that the instruction Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount releases the hidden potential of God's law in the Old Testament and has *new* demands arise from God's law. But Jesus is saying that these expectations were in the Old Testament the whole time. They have always been God's will. It's just that people weren't paying attention and listening carefully to God, and they didn't take God's law seriously—something which continues today.

In fact, Jesus tells us how seriously we should take God's commands: "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus takes the Pharisees and experts in the law to task in many places in the Gospels, but it is never for their outward obedience and observance of God's law. It's that their outward actions gave a false impression of what was in their hearts. Outwardly, the Pharisees and experts in the law were blameless. Very rarely would you have been able to pin any sin on them. But Jesus says our righteousness has to surpass that of the Pharisees and experts in the law. We must conform to God's law not only outwardly, but also inwardly, not just in words and actions, but also in our thoughts and hearts. That is what God's law demands. That is God's law filled out. If we do not meet that standard, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Those who call Jesus's Sermon on the Mount the New Law also say that these new demands proceed to reform our hearts. But you can see, can't you, that these demands do not reform our hearts, but condemn them. Jesus is showing us that God isn't a chuckling-on-the-front-porch-swing God. And Jesus himself is not just fine with who we are by nature.

But while this is the primary fulfillment that Jesus is referring to in the immediate context, in the broader context, there is another fulfillment Jesus is talking about. He hints at it when he says, "Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until it is all accomplished." Well, if that depends on us, then Jesus is lying.

But you see, Jesus didn't just come to fill out God's law, to show us how demanding, all-encompassing, and far-reaching it is. He didn't just come to make sin utterly sinful, as the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 7:13. He also came to fulfill God's law, that is, to carry out all of its demands in our place down to the smallest letter and finest detail. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 4:4–5: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law."

In theological terms, we call this Jesus's active obedience. His passive obedience was his taking of our guilt and sins and their punishment on Good Friday. But his active obedience was his living his life in perfect obedience to and conformity with God's law on our behalf, his

weaving of our robe of righteousness with his perfect life, not just in his words and actions, but also in his thoughts and in his heart. He never had an inappropriate thought about a woman. He never had an intrinsic hatred for anyone, even when he was sharply rebuking them. He was never discontent with what God gave him, even when he had no place to lay his head. Jesus himself once asked the crowd if any of them could prove him guilty of sin, and he was only met with silence (John 8:46). But he didn't do this just to shame us. He did this for us, on our behalf, as our substitute, to redeem us. He did it so that he could not only take away the sin that was ours, but so that he could also give us the righteousness that was his.

This is the righteousness that Jesus gives us through his word and through baptism, which work saving faith in us and strengthen faith in us. This is the righteousness that he confirms for us in the Lord's Supper. When God gives us faith in Jesus, that faith takes hold of Jesus and his merit in such a way that we are clothed with Jesus. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ."

2. Our Two Fulfillments

This second fulfillment of God's law on Jesus's part leads nicely into *our* two fulfillments of God's law. Our first fulfillment of God's law takes place through faith in Christ. Whenever anyone puts his or her faith in Christ, God sees them as people whose righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, as people whose righteousness extends throughout his entire law, down to the smallest letter and finest detail, as people whose righteousness is perfect. Not because we are perfect in ourselves, but because through faith in Christ we are clothed and covered in the righteousness of another, namely Christ our Savior.

This is why Jesus can say earlier, "You are the salt of the earth," and, "You are the light of the world." You could argue that there is nothing more valuable for life on earth than salt and light. From ancient times, salt has been used for just about everything. Look in your refrigerator and in your cupboards at home, and not just your food cupboards. Look in your cleaning closets and medicine cabinets. There's some form of salt in nearly everything. If your doctor tells you you need to cut back on salt, it's not because salt is bad for you. It's just because you're already getting so much of it. And we all know the value of light, for health, for sight, for growth, for energy, for good moods, and any number of other things. Jesus doesn't say that you *should* be salt and light. He says you *are*, and not just the salt and light of Winner or of South Dakota, but of the world. That's because through faith in Christ, you are fulfillers of the law, like he was. You are those who have fulfilled the purpose for which God made human beings in the first place.

But that doesn't mean that we can just take the entire Sermon on the Mount and ignore it. That doesn't turn God into the chuckling-on-the-front-porch-swing God, nor does it turn Jesus into an indulgent, mollicoddling brother who is fine with us just the way we are. No, salt and light are no good if they simply exist. Salt needs to salt things, and light needs to shine on things. "If salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? Then it is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket. No, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way let your light shine in people's presence, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in

heaven.” By giving us faith, God has enabled us to begin to keep his law in our thoughts, words, and actions as he wants it to be kept. By clothing us in the perfect righteousness of another, he has enabled us to begin to live righteously ourselves and to want to do so. By clothing us in Christ’s fulfillment of the law, he has enabled us to begin to fulfill his law ourselves, our second fulfillment. The first fulfillment, our righteous status, goes hand in hand with our second fulfillment, righteous living.

If we don’t want to or try to live according to God’s law, if we just dismissively wave our hands at God’s law, if we don’t teach and share his word with others, that’s a sign that we don’t treasure Christ’s fulfillment of the law and the righteousness he has won for us, a sign that we don’t believe in his saving work. It shows that we don’t understand just what he has rescued us from in fulfilling for us what we could never have fulfilled ourselves in a million lifetimes.

And the amazing thing is that, through faith in Christ, this second fulfillment is also perfect. Since God forgives the sin that clings to and stains our good works and washes away our evil in the blood of Christ, that means that God accepts our lives imperfectly lived to his glory as a perfect and pleasing sacrifice to him. He sees only the good, and none of the bad.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has not abolished the law. He has fulfilled it. He has shown us just how demanding it is, and he has satisfied its demands in our place. He has shown us how surely doomed to eternal damnation in hell we were, and he has shown us how sure we may be of eternal life in heaven through faith in him. That in turn means that we too fulfill God’s law. Through faith in Christ, it already stands fulfilled by each one of us, and through faith in Christ, we receive the desire and ability to begin to fulfill it in our thoughts, words, and actions.

In other words, God isn’t our chuckling, indulgent grandfather. He is our serious, yet loving heavenly Father and Savior, through Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord. Amen.