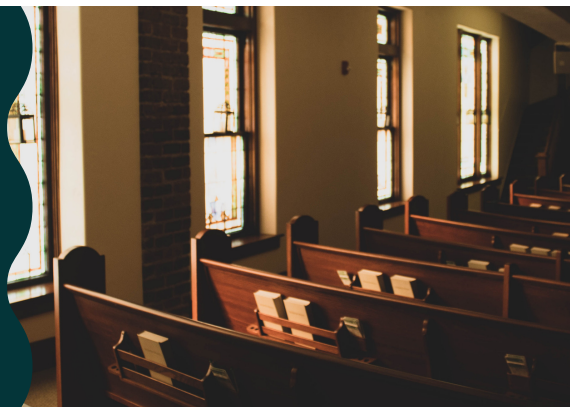


Devotions

The Living Word

for the week ahead.



How to Use this Resource

What you have before you is a resource to help you remember to bring the way of Jesus Christ into everyday life.

Each week—on Monday if time permits—we'll distribute this devotional help I'm calling *The Living Word*. It will contain the Scripture readings from Sunday, a transcript of the week's sermon, questions for reflection, and occasionally some suggestions for practicing our faith. This resource intends to extend our Sunday rejoicing into the rest of our week. You can use this resource however you feel it will give you life. Consider adding it to your devotions in the morning, chatting about the Scriptures over dinner with a friend, or even using this in a covenant group or small group.

One thing I do suggest is that however you use this resource, start off by praying that wonderful *Song of Zachariah*:

The Song of Zachariah (Luke 1:68-79)

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *
he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty savior, *
born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old, that he would save us from our enemies, *
from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers *
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, *
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear, *
holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, *
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give his people knowledge of salvation *
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

5th Sunday after the Epiphany

Week of February 5, 2023

The First Lesson: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 (NRSV)

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.

The Second Lesson: Matthew 5:13-20 (NRSV)

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, 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 in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Questions for Reflection

1. When you read Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount, how do you understand God's Law? How does that understanding make you feel?
2. God's Law is summed up in the double-command to love God and love people. What are three ways this week that you can live into that double commandment?
3. In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, notice how it is the Holy Spirit that gives us mature understanding. How do we recognize this understanding in our lives?
4. What does it mean that we "have the mind of Christ"?
5. How do you think Paul's letter and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount connect?



The Sermon

Let's dive right in this morning. In our reading from Matthew's Gospel, friends, Jesus continues his Sermon on the Mount. He tells us about the Law, God's Law — what we do in response to the covenant God makes with us — and how God's Law relates to our everyday life. Today I want to think about this Law together because it can be easily misunderstood. There are three things I want to say.

First, let's notice how different our understanding of the word Law is from how it's used in our Scriptures. I'm going to assume here that the word Law might not make a lot of sense to us. Jesus here elevates the Law, says it's extremely important; yet Paul, in nearly all his letters, trashes Law left and right. It's okay to be a little confused.

What do you think of when you hear this word, Law? Maybe you think of "legalism" or "moralism"? Those words were tossed around quite a bit when I was growing up, never as a compliment. But legalists sure keep the law. Maybe you think of stiff churches where card games are spooky, and no one would be caught dead in anything less than business casual? Sometimes folks seem to believe that you're only as close to God as your tie is close to your neck. Maybe you think of *commands* and *obedience*? Maybe you think of codes of conduct or contracts? The concept of Law, for us folks, has this cold, official, demanding meaning to it.

In the Scriptures, God's Law is a different sort of thing. The Law that Jesus speaks about is a warm and wonderful word. Jesus summarizes it quite a bit later in our Gospel. Do you know it from chapter twenty-two?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" ... the whole of God's Law (Mt. 22.35-39).

These two great commandments summarize the whole Law of God. The Law was for Israel, as for Jesus, like a recipe for cooking up the good life. The Law was not something that scared people. It was a comfort. The Psalmist says that God's law is "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our paths" (Ps. 119.105). In Proverbs, in a messy world fraught with injustice and misery, the Law

teaches us to “understand righteousness and justice and equity,” it guides us down “every good path” (Prov. 2.9). Again, in Psalm 19, my favorite Psalm, hear how much the poet loves God’s Law:

The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving to the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes.

He goes on, saying that God’s Law is “more to be desired than gold ... sweeter than honey” (Ps. 19.7-8, 10). For the poet, it is better — more beautiful, more rewarding, more lovely — to live according to God’s Law than it is rise to corporate success, climb the economic ladder, and win accolades from the world. The same is true for Jesus, who says, if you live according to God’s Law, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock” (Mt. 7.24).

So how do we get to this point, where in our popular understanding God’s Law is a cold exacting set of requirements that suck the fun out of our lives and in the Scriptures God’s Law is the very pathway to the good life, the roadmap to joy and well-being and security and comfort? Where’s the disconnect?

Second, Jesus, our Lord and our teacher, shows us what the real meaning of the Law is. But its meaning will surprise us. To the Pharisees, this Jesus doesn’t seem to care much for these directions on how to live the good life from God. Yet, he says that we, if we are to be holy, our holiness has to *exceed* that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees being the same folks who became so frustrated with Jesus that he kept failing to keep the Law to which they had dedicated their whole lives. I can just imagine one of the Pharisees overhearing Jesus’s speech about *fulfilling* the Law and boiling with anger — This guy!?! Seriously!?! Who is *he* to say he fulfills the Law?

Nevertheless, Jesus Christ, our Lord, does not claim to abolish the Law — “Not one stroke of a letter,” he says — but claims to *fulfill*. This still smells a little fishy. What does it mean that this carpenter turned pop-rabbi followed by fishermen who runs around hanging out with the “unclean,” who fails to ritually clean himself according to the Law, who doesn’t observe Sabbath, who is accused of being a drunk and a glutton, who strikes up a conversation with the unwanted and undesirable, and even changes his mind towards mercy when a Canaanite woman — an *enemy* of Israel — pleads for healing (Mt. 15)?

The contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees is not that the Pharisees were wicked or perverse or charlatans. No, the contrast is a tragic one. It is that the Pharisees couldn’t see that in Jesus, the true meaning of the Law, the same one Moses championed, the Psalmist loved, and the Proverbs of Solomon praised, had been revealed. What went wrong with the Pharisees was not their reverence of the Law, it was the misplacement of the heart of the Law. The Pharisees, in a bid to cling to their hope, doubled down on outward observances, appearances, duties, and obligations (snug ties and appropriate dresses). They concentrated all their understanding of the Law on the appearance of holiness. And we should understand why they did so. They were trying as best they could to keep their faith, their culture, everything that was precious to them, alive amidst a cruel oppressive Roman regime and the tireless change of history. The courage they had to protect and pass on their tradition through keeping the Law is itself good, but it turned sour.

Jesus makes clear that the Law of God is a matter of the heart. To love God and neighbor is a matter of *motive, character,* and *virtue* and *not* in keeping up with appearances. A little later in Matthew’s Gospel, Christ clashes again with the Pharisees. They ask him why he and his disciples “break the tradition of the elders.” Jesus replies, and listen friends, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (Mt. 15.11).

Well-meaning people may think themselves holy because they’ve never touched a drop of alcohol, all the while they live with intense prejudice and hatred towards their siblings and neighbors. Well-meaning people may judge themselves holy because they *look* well-kept, clean, and tidy, all the while they harbor deep resentment towards their so-called friends, and that bitter spirit leaps out with every sarcastic jab. Jesus makes clear for us that to love God and to love our neighbor, we’ve got to let this Law sink right into the very depths of our soul. So deep, in fact, that whatever we do, however we lead our lives, wherever we wander in this world, the Law of God overflows from a heart attuned with the heart of God.

Third, so what does it look like to keep the Law? The Scriptures have led us a long way from this view of God’s Law as a binding code of conduct obligating every believer to look the right way and talk the right way. We are, I pray, where the Law becomes for us “a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our paths.” We are led to where Law becomes grace.

In closing, consider the following example. One of my dearest friends in Aberdeen struggled with addiction and poverty. He was quiet. He would shift and scratch at his sores. He spoke with this abrupt, gruff speech that made even his good stories feel a bit like tragedies. His clothes were worn threadbare. His hair always a mess. He was someone most of us would think unholy,

unclean. Perhaps we would pity him. We sat together over dinner at our church week after week. One day, while we sat eating a sausage casserole, he slid a small plastic case no bigger than an Altoids tin across the table to me. In it were a set of hand tied flies. He said, "I remember hearing that you fished. I tied these for you." He was the salt of the earth to me in that moment. He was the light, shining on a hill. *That gift, my friends, that precious gift and the even more precious heart it revealed*, embodied what it means to keep the Law of God: for our hearts to be moved by grace in love to one another, to love God and love our neighbor.

My prayer for us, friends, is that we would on hearing our Lord's gracious words, let this holy Law of God, more precious than gold, sink into our bones.

Amen.

Pastor Marty
Newaygo United Methodist Church
5th Sunday after Epiphany
