Text: Matthew 5:13-20, Isaiah 58:3-9

**Introduction**

What is the point of the law?

Before we get to the more correct answers to that I think we need to address a couple of false answers, but false answers that are the ditches on either side of the way.

**Two False Answers**

The first false answer is the one easiest to discuss from a Lutheran pulpit. It would typically be called works righteousness. A great example is the question that starts off Isaiah. A personified Israel is asking God, “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” Hey God, we did what you said to do, why am I getting no credit?

Now there are a lot of potential answers to the question. The one the God responds to Israel with in this passage of Isaiah is simply, “your heart wasn’t in it.” “In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.” We’ve all done things because they are required, but done them according to the letter without the spirit. There is even an art to such things. Call it an anti-spirit. 8th grade boys are typically geniuses at it. They can do exactly what you tell them with a smile on their face, all the while making sure you know just how much they despise you. So Israel is keeping the fasts. They are completing the required sacrifices, but they are doing them to cover over with sackcloth and ashes their continued disregard for their fellow man.

Now this is the big problem with the law. It is good and wise, but knowing the right, desiring the right, and doing the right are different things. The law tells us what the right is. It gives us information. But it does not create in us new hearts that desire the right. The law, depending upon the power structure, might be able to demand that we do something, but it can’t force love. Likewise, absent an external power, the law in itself can’t force us to follow it. We’ll come back to this.

Jesus in this part of the Sermon on the Mount addresses the problem of works righteousness from a different perspective. It is not that Jesus denied that the scribes or the Pharisees hearts were not into the law. The Sadducees and the chief priests Jesus might go after for bad desire, but the Pharisees were zealous. And Jesus uses their very zealousness as an example. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Good luck with that. The only way that could possibly have been heard would have been, “the law ain’t saving you.”

Yet as Jesus says, “not a joy or a tittle will pass away from the law until all is accomplished. I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.” And unless our internal lawyer who is always looking for the way to comply without the heart being in it, accomplished is defined as “until heaven and earth pass away.”

And that leads to the second bad answer. As necessary as preaching against works righteousness is, I don’t think that is our primary worry. We more often are in the other ditch. The big fancy would is antinomian, which is just against the law. The nursery school rhyme would be “state of grace, o happy condition, sin as I please and still have remission.” Behavior flagrantly breaking the 10 commandments in my grand-parents prime would have caused scandal in the church. And if a friend didn’t attempt to correct you before it grew, the elders or the pastor certain had no fear of addressing blatant sin. But today, doing so would not be winsome. If you have a friend who would address you such, you truly have a friend. Jesus also addresses this problem, “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven.” If you have a pulpit that will warn you, you have a good thing.

So, if we are asking the question, what is the purpose of the law? Neither “this is your way to salvation” nor “a historical curiosity that no longer has a claim on us” are good answers.

**Three Uses + One**

In catechism you might remember being taught that there are three uses of the law. And that is roughly what we are going to say today. But there is something that I think our day and age brings up that is a pre-cursor. I’ve taken to calling it the zero use of the law. C.S. Lewis called it the Tao. Aquinas and Aristotle would simply call it the natural law. There are things that just are because that is the way that God made them. God made them and so the world has a way of making sense. One can investigate things and find things out and they stay the same, because God doesn’t change and upholds all of creation. You can throw gravity and the rules of physics in here. You can also throw things like “male and female he created them” or “according to their kinds he made them.” I know it is a joke that common sense isn’t so common, but I still think that is part of our rebellion against God. Because there are some things that are just plain clear. The fact that we are so confused about stuff taken for granted in all the rest of history is a gauge of our decadence and distance from God.

Now I suppose that zero use Luther would have simply included in the first use which is often called the civil use and pictured as a curb. What is the point of the law? The first point is that it acts as a curb against the worst that fallen humans might do. And the state – simply referred to as Caesar in the New Testament – is the officer of the law with not just the right but also the God given duty to uphold the law. If one of us should murder another, Caesar is the authorized person to punish the wrong-doer. When a society has descended to vigilante justice, it is because Caesar has abandoned his post. That doesn’t excuse the vigilante of any crime he or she would commit in vengeance, but the greater trespass is Caesar’s. The law and the officer of the law is first useful to maintain a civil society. “If the salt has lost it's saltiness, what good is it?” If Caesar won’t enforce basic laws, why is he?

The second use of the law is often called the religious use and pictured as a mirror. This is what Jesus is trying to do when he points at the scribes and pharisees. This is what God is doing in much of our Isaiah passage today. God asks Israel, “Is not his the fast that I choose? To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke…to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house.” We are meant to examine ourselves. To make a good inventory next to a plumb line of all the ways that we have grown crooked. The law is that plumb line. The law is the mirror that tells us where we have trespassed God. Not every sin is against the civil law. The Civil law, that curb, just protects us from the worst of sinful man. But there are many others. And if we didn’t know about them, how can we repent of them? And maybe more importantly, when we read how Jesus turns all the commandments to 11 following our text, looking in that mirror we can know that we need a savior.

The Law can tell us we need the savior. It also tells us that this savior must come from outside of us. We need a new heart that might desire to keep the law. We need a new will that would move us to live them. And being aware of our need because of the law, we can then look at the cross and know. Here is the love that has been given to us freely. We can remember the waters that have buried us with Christ. Where the old adam daily dies and the new man daily rises by the power of the Spirit. And looking at the love of God for us on the cross we might be moved to action. The law can’t do any of these things. It can only tell us we need them. It is the love of God in Christ that cleanses what that mirror shows and then moves us.

Which is what the third use of the law is about. And this to me is what Jesus is primarily talking about. “You are the light of the world.” Nobody can look in the mirror. Caesar can’t build the hedges in the right place, if it is pitch black out. You are the light of the world. We can be antinomians, we can say there is no third use of the law. And when we do that, all we do is put the lamp under the basket. It might help us, but it doesn’t help our neighbor. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Living the Christian life – meaning out of faith that Christ has saved us allowing that to change our hearts toward his service – is not about earning salvation, although no one will lose their reward. No, living that Christian life is about being light, it is about allowing others to see a yet more perfect way.

Now you have to be willing to look in the mirror first. You don’t get to this third use without going through the second. And we most likely are always going back and forth through the door of repentance. We need the light of other Christians to help us see at times.

**Conclusion**

Peter writes that the judgement begins with the household of God. The necessary revival starts with a church that is willing to look in the mirror of the law with whatever light is present. And in faith repent and live. The church is a city on a hill. It can’t be hidden. The question is do you look up and see the Spires of a great city, or is it a dingy hamlet. Is it a place people will give glory to the Father over, or something walked by.

The purpose of the law is to give us eyes to see rightly.