

“Why Are You Doing That?”  
Matthew 5: 13 – 20  
Makemie Presbyterian Church  
December 28, 2008

“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 a bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, 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 & 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 & teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes & Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This ends our reading.

On Christmas Eve I mentioned how in Lk 4 Jesus says that “it is fulfilled in your hearing;” meaning his being God’s kingdom with us.

So notice in our reading this morning, this last paragraph because it is where we’ll focus our attention: “I did not come to destroy the Old Testament, the law & the prophets, I came to bring it to fulfillment.” Jesus continues, “not any word or letter or even accent mark of the law & the prophets will pass away until everything is brought to completion.”

Now the way this is worded, apparently, there were some people in the church that Matthew was talking to that wanted to get rid of the past – who saw no reason why Jesus was doing the things he did. They said, “we don’t need it.” Their past obviously was Jewish. They had belonged to the synagogue. They had followed the Old Testament & the oral traditions & they had kept its regulations. Now they have become members of the Christian community. And so they are apparently saying, “We’re leaving all that behind, we’re Christians now. None of that is for Christians anymore.

And we can understand what they are thinking & what they’re saying. A Christian does have a new beginning. It’s called a new creation. Sometimes it’s called a new birth; like on Thursday.

Christians say, "Christ is enough, we don't need Christ plus other things, that's enough. And to keep the past as part of our religion is like dragging a long chain." We get tired of that don't we? Do you remember that story in the Old Testament about Joseph? When Joseph died down in Egypt he had left a request that his coffin, his body, his corpse be taken with the Israelites when they left Egypt to go to the Promised Land. And for forty years they dragged that poor man's body with them. Reminding them of Egypt & reminding them of the past. There comes a time when you just bury it seems to me.

These people in the church are making good sense. "We don't need that. We're leaving it. We know we grew out of the synagogue. We're all Jewish, Jesus was Jewish, the twelve apostles were Jewish, but we're in a new mode now so drop it.

Now as you probably know there were some people in the history of the church who wanted to exclude the Old Testament from the Bible. Your Bible would be a very very small book without it.

There are sixty-six books in the Bible. Thirty-nine of them from the Old Testament. That would leave us with a very slim volume for the Christian Bible. There were those who said, "We don't need all of that. Those were the Hebrew Scriptures. If we could just get rid of

that. Christian life & understanding & teaching would be so much simpler. It would be easier for us. If we could get rid of some of those troublesome passages in the Old Testament it would help so much! “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” we don’t do that. No. Or the passage in Deuteronomy “If any man finds something unseemly in his wife he can give her a bill of divorce & send her out of the house.” They argued about that for centuries. What is unseemly? Does it mean she has a wart on her face? Or has she been unfaithful? What does it mean if a man finds something unseemly? That’s not any good. We can just get rid of that. Or that passage, strange passage that says “If a man through accident or military wound loses the ability to father children then he doesn’t have any place in the assemble of God’s people.” Now, now, that’s not any good. Not his fault. Now why would you exclude an element of the population based on that? See we’d get rid of that. Or that very troublesome passage that says, “Six days shall you labor & do all your work & rest on the Sabbath.” We’re interested in resting on the Sabbath but work six days, no, no, five’s enough. We’d be rid of that.

It just seems so many passages condone violence. And then those eating laws. “You’re not to eat any seafood that doesn’t have

scales” – there goes those catfish filets. “You’re not to eat anything with a cloven hoof that does not chew cud.” That’s pork. There goes the bar-b-que, the pork chop, the Christmas ham. “You’re not to eat seafood that has the skeleton on the outside.” No crab!

See if we just get rid of the Old Testament, get rid of the past. Just so much of that we don’t even have to discuss anymore. And so many voices were raised & some them very important voices in the church that said “why are we doing that. It is enough just to be Christian.” We could get a lot of votes for that. There are days I think when just about any one of us would vote for that. And Jesus said, “No. No. No. No. I have not come to destroy the law & the prophets I have come to bring them to fulfillment. To completion.” You don’t handle this matter by simply throwing away the past. None of that’s to be destroyed until it is all understood & brought to completion. So don’t think you can just break one of these laws and say, “Well that was in the Old Testament.” Or toss out another law & say “well that was just for the Jews.” What you’re to do is to build on it. You’re righteousness, your justice, your ethical & moral lifestyle. Is to build on it. Not throw it away. Don’t use getting rid of the past as an excuse for doing less than what people did in the past. Because your

righteousness is too exceed even the most careful observers of the law. The scribes & the Pharisees were so careful to observe the law, you are to exceed even that. It's not a matter of throwing it away. It's a matter of building on it. But when Jesus says, "breaking one of these or throwing it out is not what we're about, you begin to see why it is that some people in that church wanted to get rid of the past. They wanted to get rid of some of the commands of God that required moral & ethical seriousness.

"You shall not kill." That's in there.

"You shall not steal." Any form or fashion, any way – white collar, blue collar, no collar, no stealing.

"You shall not commit adultery." You shall be faithful to your spouse.

"Honor your parents."

"You shall worship the one God & that one God you shall serve."

"Do not covet what your neighbor has." Work to gain your own. Don't just covet which leads of course to stealing.

And "Do not lie. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Should we throw these away? And Jesus said, "No, you don't throw these away!" You build on those & even develop a lifestyle of maturity that moves pass them. So that it is no longer a matter of behavior it's

just the way one thinks. An attitude of life. An orientation of life. A way you relate to other people; that doesn't come close to violating one of these fundamental regulations.

You know there were some people in that church that had a wrong understanding of the Christian religion. "Oh we just follow Jesus & do what we feel like. And we're free & we don't have to keep those old laws anymore." Now I don't know where they got those ideas. My suspicious is, I can't prove this, but I'm not alone in the thought; that there were some people moving among the churches and stirring them up & saying, "Why are you doing this & why are you doing that? You're free; you don't have to keep any rules & regulations. Everybody just kind of thinks their own thoughts & does their own thing. And that's enough."

Because in the gospel of Matthew there are some teachings that give me the indication that there were people like that. Jesus talks about wolves in sheep's clothing & they would brag & say, "Did we not in the Lord's name cast out demons, did we not in the Lord's name do wonderful works." And Jesus said, "Depart from me you who work lawlessness." It is sometimes translated "iniquity." "You who work lawlessness." What is that about? You, who have decided

to get rid of the Ten Commandments. We don't have to do that anymore because we're Christians.

Well not according to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. The ethical seriousness about which we approach life & our relationships is still in place. The Ten Commandments, which affect our relationship to God & to our neighbor, & to our families, to ourselves. Are in place. And if you want to move beyond those to even having a different frame of mind & heart. Good. But you don't toss them out and say, "well that's in the Old Testament and we don't have to pay any attention to that anymore."

I am amazed, well I'm not really, I started to say I'm amazed at the number of people who want to reduce the Christian religion to either just a feeling in the heart or kind of just a simple slogan, as one man said to me, "Oh, I don't know, I kind of think I'm a Christian, I don't ever go to church, I don't belong to any church or anything like that. I don't study the Bible or anything like that. But I think I'm a Christian." "Well, what makes you think you're a Christian?" He said, "Well, my viewpoint is, I don't bother anybody and I don't want anybody bothering me isn't that what it's basically all about?" And I said, "Not really."

I don't bother anybody and I don't want anybody bothering me. That's not quite enough. There's more initiative in it. You know in that Old Testament in some of those commands for the people of God. There are some things that just strike me as very very much in place today. For example, now this won't happen downtown on Green Street but think about it. "If your neighbor's cow gets out and you see it, you are responsible until the cow is put back in the pasture." You can't just look out the window and say, "There goes the neighbor's cow. According to law you are responsible because you saw it and you were responsible to the neighbor. It was a crime, a punishable crime to neglect the poor. For they're to be poor in your midst and you did not take care of it and see that they had food and shelter, was a punishable crime. Not just a matter of "well we should try and help out." And certainly not like this fellow, "I don't bother anybody and I don't want anybody to bother me." You were required by that law to take care of the poor that lived in your community.

You're to worship regular and to study the scriptures. *An hour of study is in the sight of the Holy One blessed be he as an hour of prayer.* You are to love the Lord your God with all your mind. We're going to throw all that away? Basically it is this said Jesus, "You shall

love the Lord your God with all your mind, your heart, your soul, your strength and your neighbor as yourself.” Where did that come from? The Old Testament. Jesus is just quoting from two passages in the Old Testament.

There is in the Old Testament a striking teaching, “you shall not curse anyone who’s deaf.” Seems kind of quaint and strange at first not to curse anyone who’s deaf. I mean they can’t hear it, what’s the problem? After they pass by you could yell anything. They didn’t hear it. Didn’t hurt them. What’s the problem? Doesn’t hurt them. What they don’t know doesn’t hurt them, and all that. But listen to it carefully, “You are not to curse someone who is deaf because I am the Lord your God.” That is you don’t treat other people, based on how they are. If they’re deaf or crippled or poor. Or can’t read or write. That has nothing to do with it. You are to behave as God behaves. You know where that is found? That’s in the Old Testament.

Now I say again, I really don’t know, why some people in the church were getting in a stir about this. But some of them were saying, “Why are we doing that? Let’s start all over.”

And I must admit when I was first studying the Bible I would have felt great relief if we could have removed thirty-nine books out of

there. Some of them with a lot of difficult things in them. Boy, I could have done all right if I didn't have to deal with all of that material. If somebody said to me, "I want you to read your Bible all the way through." If I could just start with Matthew through Revelation, you could do that rather quickly. You can read through the gospel of Mark in about two hours. It wouldn't take long to go all the way through it.

But it was more serious than that. People like that wealthy Christian man from up in Pontis named Marchius he said, "Let's get rid of all that. We're Christians. We don't care for that. It's an entirely different religion."

Well of course there are differences between Jews and Christians between Judaism and the church. There is a difference between the synagogue and the Christian community, of course. But Jesus is talking about some fundamental continuity here. That the foundation for moral and ethical living is given in the 10 Commandments.

The 10 Commandments were given according to the Old Testament when the Jewish people were in Arabia at Mt. Sinai. Years later they discussed the question: "Why was the law given to us when we were in the wilderness in Arabia? Why wasn't it given to us after

we got into our own land, in Israel? When we had our own place. Why was it given to us out there in another country?" And the Rabbi said, "It was given to you outside your own country to help you understand that these teachings are not just for you, they are for the world."

But I know, just as well as you do, that some of the instructions about the priests, and the tabernacle and some of the food laws and all, have passed from the scene. We don't observe them anymore. Some Jewish people don't observe them either. It's up to them about how they interpret the law. What Jesus is talking about here is that the moral and ethical center of the Jewish religion is the foundation for the Christian religion. And the 10 Commandments are in place, not to be tossed out, not to be treated lightly.

Jesus said, "You're free now. But not to do less. You're free now to do more. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of even the most careful observer of the law and the prophets, you will never see the kingdom of God.

Now I can understand, I repeat, when people say this, "Why do we do that? Let's start over." It has a good ring to it. Every new group like the church, wants to prove that it's different from the old group.

Like adolescents when they get to a certain age want to slam the door and say, "I'm not like my mother, I'm not like my father." And want to do things to prove to the world that I'm not under their thumb any more.

So some Christians wanted to prove that they weren't following that stuff anymore. But they went a little too far. And Jesus said, "No, remember it." It is important that the church have a long memory that goes back to the 10 commandments. In a real sense living the Christian life is an act of memory & we are not to forget until everything has been brought to completion. That's why we do that. Amen.