

## God Moves in His Mysterious Ways

A sermon for the eighth Sunday after Pentecost

We're involved with a series focused on this question: What does it look like to live the Christian life with feet on the ground? How do you walk the walk?

It is important for us to remember the Reformation gospel text: John 8:38: "If the Son has made you free, you will be free indeed." We are talking about the freedom we have in Jesus Christ as we live the Christian life.

Last week we closed with the fact that the Christian life is hidden from us, and that it is only lived by faith alone, discerning what it is. What do we mean it's hidden?

We need to look at the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). It begins with the Beatitudes. In verses 15-16, there is that famous triple image which says: If salt has lost its flavor, it's no good. The city on a hill cannot be hidden. You don't light a lamp to hide it under a bushel. Then comes the kicker: Live so that your good works can be seen, and people will glorify God your Father in heaven.

Obviously your works are supposed to be seen. That's why it's important to take a look at the Sermon on the Mount (5:7-21). We know fragments of it but not the way it works. Immediately following those two verses about good works is this passage 5:17-20:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, before heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

You will recall that the Pharisees tithed everything, even spices (Matt 23:23). What is referred to here when it talks about the law? Not the Ten Commandments. It's referring to all 613 commandments as the Scribes and the Pharisees summarized the laws of the Old Testament; all of them. It is not some small matter. Every jot and tittle, and even more carefully than the Scribes and the Pharisees, is what is required of us.

There are two ways to try to get out of this. People then say: In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we have an account of the Scribes and Pharisees coming to Jesus and asking: "Which is the greatest law?" It was a discussion in the first century that was well known among the rabbis. Jesus answered, quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength" – those "alls" catch you – and you shall love your neighbor as yourself, which is, of course, 100%. In doing this Jesus did

not set aside the 613 laws. This statement simply summarized, and, if you wish, 613 laws became 614. In no way was this saying we get rid of the 613 laws.

The second way people try to use to get around this is to say there is a difference between the moral law and the ceremonial law, the moral law basically referring to the Ten Commandments, and not the other ritual laws. There is simply no basis in the Old and New Testaments for doing this. That distinction is something arbitrarily brought up later in order to deal with this problem. But when the law is referred to by Matthew, Mark, Luke, Paul, James, and the like, it means the 613 or 614 laws.

This creates a problem because we say: "We keep the law but not the ceremonial law." A concrete example from the Ten Commandments: Today is the first day of the week, but the Third Commandment says: "Remember the Sabbath." That's the seventh day. When Jesus talks about the Sabbath, he never changes it. He radicalizes it, makes it much more serious. But Jesus did not change the Third Commandment, nor did Paul. If we pretend that we're keeping the Ten Commandments, we should be in church on Saturdays, because that's what it says.

In the New Testament there are several places that refer to keeping the law. In the second chapter of James, it says: Of course salvation is by the law. All you have to do is keep it 100%. That means all 613 laws. Paul in Romans 10:5 refers to this specifically, where he says: "Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness based on the law shall live by it." Go ahead if you want, keep it.

Paul also writes in Galatians 3:21: "If a law had been given which could make men alive, righteousness would indeed be by the law. But one does not become alive by keeping the law." But people try. A famous example is Tolstoy, who made a fortune from his writings and then established a plantation and said: We will live by the Sermon on the Mount. It was a disaster. It completely collapsed. There were other efforts of this sort in the nineteenth century based on Rousseau and the idea of perfectability through education. Also by Christians who said: "We're going to establish the kingdom. We can get beyond sin." They all collapsed.

Individuals do this, too. It may be difficult, but I've decided I'm going to live by the Ten Commandments, by the Sermon on the Mount, or by the law. What inevitably happens is that we either get caught in spiritual pride or spiritual despair, because we're caught in sin.

What is described in the Sermon on the Mount is similar to the ideal we have at least three times in the Book of Isaiah. It talks about how the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and how the child will play with the snake, because we reach that ideal at the end of time when a new heaven and a new earth will come, and God's kingdom will be established. But not established by us because every time we try to do this, the evil one tempts us. We set it up either individually or as a group with our fantasies so that basically we dominate others, and all of our sin and selfishness comes out.

We thank God for the tent-maker, Paul. Paul made his living as a businessman, making tents. Of course he was also a superb theologian. What does he say? First of all, in Romans 10:4: “Christ is the end of the law.” That end means termination. As in short-wave radio code, 10-4 means: “It’s over.” In Romans 10:4 it says Christ is the end of the law. In Romans 7:1-6 Paul uses an illustration of a couple who is married and they live under the law of marriage, but if one of the spouses dies, then the marriage is over. And so it is, Paul says, with the 613 laws.

In Galatians 3:24 he uses another illustration: “The law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith.” This verse deals with something we don’t have anymore. In antiquity well-to-do families kept a slave called a *paidagōgos* (pedagogue). This slave had authority over the heir of the house in daily life until he was in his late teens. Once he reached maturity and was the heir, the slave’s job was over, terminated. The law was over.<sup>1</sup> So it is with us.

Paul was a tentmaker, a very practical man, concerned with the obvious question of what next? How do you live? Is it chaos? What does Christian freedom mean in practical terms?

In a remarkable set of three verses in Romans 13:8-10, Paul writes: “What does the law say? The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are all summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” And then comes the kicker: “Love does no harm to the neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

The task we’re given is not to say: “There are many laws, and we better think about them and try to keep them.”

Rather, something more difficult than following a given law code is required of us. Because Christ is Lord, we are free. Free here and now to use our heads in the battles of life. Down-to-earth freedom now. “For freedom Christ **has set us free**; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Faith frees us to think and ask: What does harm?

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<sup>1</sup> This text settles the question about whether Christ is the end or the goal of the law, in addition to Romans 7:6, and 10:4-6, among others. The term *paidagōgos* is variously translated today as: task master, disciplinarian, tutor, guardian, custodian, but these terms are prone to misunderstanding in the modern world which has a different, more positive view of pedagogy. The *paidagōgos* was a slave who had authority over the heir only until the heir reached maturity. Then the slave’s job was terminated; he had no more authority. He was dismissed and could even be banished or killed. See also Gerhard Ebeling, *The Truth of the Gospel. An Exposition of Galatians*. Translated by David Green. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 195:

“Exegetical tradition has been misled by the catchword *παιδαγωγός* (*paidagōgos*, pedagogue) into finding here a statement that the law has a positive educational function with respect to Christ. More recent exegesis, however, is unanimous in emphasizing that the preposition *εἰς* (*eis*, until) serves here only to specify the terminus, not the inner goal, and that the occupation of a pedagogue in antiquity, which seems so ideal to us, was inferior, almost disreputable. Well-too-do families kept a slave who was usually incompetent for anything else as an attendant and companion for the children. The most popular pedagogical tool was the rod.”

How can we minimize harm? In doing that we'll be caught in the life we live and the sin we have.

Even good intentions are not enough and no guarantee of anything. To illustrate our predicament, consider the following:

- In 1859 someone had the “bright idea” of importing rabbits into Australia because it would be good to hunt them on his ranch. So he did, but there were no natural predators, and the rabbits multiplied into the millions, destroying crops and land, leading to soil erosion and other massive problems. Today there are 200 million feral rabbits in Australia. They are a curse.
- Back in the nineteenth century someone had the “bright idea” of bringing into this country all the birds that appeared in Shakespeare’s works. So he did. Included in that group was the black bird, a bird that every year destroys millions of dollars of crops in upper midwestern states. Bertrand Russell wrote about “the evil that good men do.” He made the point that good people do as much, if not more, damage in the world today than those who are conspicuously bad.
- The great British historian, Herbert Butterfield, gives this illustration to show the problem we have as we say: “We’re going to do good, and we’re not going to do evil.” In 1815, after the Battle of Waterloo, the winners got together in the Congress of Vienna to settle Napoleon’s hash. They said: “We need to restore the balance of power. For a hundred years we’ve had this problem that France was trying to take over, and then Russia was trying to take over. We’ve got to do something about this. Let’s build up a barrier in between.” So they did; it is what we know as Germany. And that brought about the War of 1870, and the War of 1914, and the War of 1939.

They had good intentions, and they used what reason they could. But life is caught in which the Greeks called “nemesis.” What we call “sin.” There is no way that we can get around it or past it.

What actually happens is that we work at what life is about. We are free and called to use our heads in the battles of life.

But ultimately we live by forgiveness. We live by the cross. Sin takes over no matter where or what. We do one thing, but there are unintended consequences, and it ends up being something entirely different and sometimes very damaging. It is God who sorts it out.

That’s what it means to live by faith alone, by the way that the Christian life is hidden. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 Paul speaks to this problem. Here he is under attack by those who say: “You’re not an apostle. You don’t count.” Paul writes:

“With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God” (1 Cor 4:3-4).

We live in this hiddenness. That’s what living “by faith alone” means. As Paul writes in Col 3:3-4: “For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Amen