

## **SHINE FORTH THE FULLNESS OF HIS LIGHT!**

SERMON TEXT: Matthew 5:13-20

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*In the name of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Lord, who is among us, now, with His love and His power, as He lives and reigns at the glorious right hand of God, our Heavenly Father. Dearly beloved of God...*

“You are the light of the world,” (Matt. 5:14) said He who from before all time “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16) and, in the fullness of time, said of Himself, “*I AM* the light of the world” (John 8:12). “*You* are the light of the world,” said the One who is the “light of life” (John 8:12), the “true light, which gives light to everyone” (John 1:9), and the One who said of Himself, “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46). “*You are* the light of the world,” said He whose light—which shone among men—the darkness could not overcome (cf. John 1:5), even though, as it is written, “men loved darkness instead of light because their works were evil” (John 3:19). We who follow the Lord Jesus Christ will, in accord with His promise, “not walk in darkness, but *will* have the light of life” (John 8:12)— for by believing in Him we have become “sons of light” (cf. John 12:36)! Indeed, just as John the Baptist, “came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him” (John 1:7), we too are to bear witness to the light as we heed our Lord’s command, wherein He says, “Let your light so shine before others that they may

see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

We are the light of the world.

“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Jerusalem is just such a city set upon a hill— the very mountain of the LORD upon which the Temple was built and to which the Jews made their many religious pilgrimages— and it is precisely the city of Jerusalem which would have readily come to mind to Jesus’ hearers. The prophet Isaiah, concerning this very city, proclaimed that it would be the epicenter from which God’s Word, through His people, would serve as “a light for the nations, that [His] salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).

Furthermore, Isaiah prophesied,

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, *to the house of the God of Jacob*. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths." *The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.* (Isa. 2:2-3)

Again, we read in the book of the prophet, “Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; *for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples*” (Isa. 51:4). Jesus said, “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden... let *your light* so shine before others that they may *see your good works*

and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Yet, what is it that is meant by “[our] good works”? Is our Lord referring to works of the Law (after all, the verses that follow declare that He did not come to abolish the Law, they admonish those who would diminish the Law, and then they continue to expound upon the Decalogue after referencing the Pharisees who were renowned for their observance of the Law)? Is our living a so-called “morally upright” life before others the catalyst which causes men to “give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven”?

Frequently, and most regrettably, the Lord’s words are wrongly construed to connect “good works” to the keeping of the Second Table of the Decalogue (the commandments pertaining to the honouring of authority and the proscriptions against murder, adultery, theft, and so forth). Here the argument put forward is that the amplified proscriptions which soon follow our morning’s text are, in fact, prescriptive for the kind of “shining” that Christians are called and commanded to radiate as righteousness. It becomes about living the moral life. However, if such a stance is fully explored in our exposition of the text, and even our experience as Christians, we will find that this cannot be the case at all. Dr. Martin Luther, with great insight and fidelity to the text, rightly deduces, “What [Jesus] calls ‘good works’ here is the exercise, expression, and confession of the teaching *about* Christ and faith... He is talking about works by which we “shine”; but shining is the real job of believing or teaching, by which we also help others to believe.” Luther continues, “Now you can draw the conclusion for yourself that Matthew does not

have in mind the ordinary works that people should do for one another out of love... rather he is thinking principally about the distinctly Christian work of teaching correctly, of stressing faith, and of showing how to strengthen and preserve it.” Indeed, a superficial observance of the letter of the Law that makes up the Second Table of the Ten Commandments is truly well within the power of people purely on a human level. “But,” writes Luther, “the true teaching and confession of Christ is impossible without faith”; and therefore, “What [Jesus] means... is the highest and best kind of works, works whose necessary consequence it must be, as He says here, ‘that the heavenly Father is honoured and praised’... the works we are talking about now deal with the first three great commandments, which pertain to God’s honour, name, and Word.”

As I stated earlier, a superficial observance of the letter of the Law is indeed possible. This is the particular issue that many assert Jesus seeks to address. They argue that this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is meant to criticize and expose the mere external observance of the Law that characterized the scribes and Pharisees so as to present Christians with the true character of the Law’s call to an internal obedience that expresses itself by external observance. For those who approach the text in this way, Jesus is seen primarily as a lawgiver and exemplar, rather than as the Saviour. For them, Jesus does not do away with the Law, which is the expression of God’s eternal will, but sets a more exacting standard through His teaching and example, wherein and whereby He insists that the will of God be

done from the heart and upheld internally as well as externally (as for example when Jesus, in the verses following our text, speaks of hatred towards another as being akin to murder or harbouring lustful thoughts as being adultery). For those who exposit the meaning of the text to be a command to “good works” of internal and external obedience to the Law (which is then followed by a series of warnings), the Gospel demands what the Law demands, but also supplies what is needful through the Spirit so as to meet its dictates. Thus, *their* refrain:

To run and work the law commands,  
 Yet gives me neither feet nor hands;  
 But better news the gospel brings:  
 It bids me fly, and gives me wings.

However, such an interpretation of the text, along with just such a blurring of the distinct qualities and functions of both Law and Gospel, threatens the very crux of the Christian message: the Gospel of God’s Christ.

For the Christian who heeds such an interpretation, there are two dark and perilous paths put before him: the first leads to despair and ruin as he falters and fails to keep the Law (where are the Gospel’s “wings”?); and the second leads to a strong delusion as he fools himself into believing he keeps the Law in this fuller sense, internally and externally. The latter runs the risk of becoming a self-righteous prig, while the former falls away from the faith or adopts the attitude of the latter. So, what then of our Lord’s words? Listen, yet again:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

How is this then to be rightly understood? What did Jesus mean by “fulfill”? How can we obtain a righteousness concomitant with the requirements for entry into the kingdom of heaven?

First, when Jesus spoke of the Law or the Prophets, He was not referring to the moral code and other imperatives contained in what we call the Old Testament; rather, He was using terminology that was commonly used to refer to the Torah—that is, the five books of Moses—and the rest of what now constitutes the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. Of these writings Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). St. Luke records that Jesus, subsequent to His death upon the cross and His bodily resurrection from the grave on the third day (for what dark tomb could long contain the Lord of Light and Life?), appeared to two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus and, “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures”

(Luke 24:27). St. Matthew, who utilized the word “fulfill” (πληρωω in Greek) a dozen times in the passive voice as part of a formula expressing the realization of various Messianic prophecies, also concurs that Christ is the content of God’s promise presented in Holy Writ. St. Paul too speaks of Christ as the “substance” behind the “shadows” of the Sabbath and Old Testament feasts (cf. Col. 2:16-17). Hence, the testimony of the Scriptures points to Jesus as its primary point, or, to quote St. Paul, “Christ is the end (or goal, scope, objective) of the law (or the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures) for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4).

Secondly, when our Lord said that He had come to “fulfill” the Scriptures, He meant that He was *actively* fulfilling all the prophecies pertaining to His work of meeting the requirements of God’s Holy Law in our stead and for our sake-- as it is written, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:13-14). The righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, and secures for us the promise of God’s paradise is none other than Christ’s own righteousness. This is why in the Sermon on the Mount we are directed to “seek first the kingdom of God and *His* righteousness...” (Matt. 6:33). We cannot obtain such righteousness by our own moral efforts. The Scripture is clear in this regard, for it is written, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all

of it” (James 2:10). Surely, we’ve all failed to uphold God’s Law at more than one point and on more than one occasion. Remember, it is written, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all,” (1 John 1:5) and, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Indeed, the Gospel does not give us “wings” with which to meet stricter moral demands, as some have suggested; rather, it gives us a Saviour who is able to carry us safely and securely along the long and narrow road to Mt. Zion.

When we consider the matter soberly, we come to realize that we dare not diminish the Law that in its full potency prepares people for this message of good news concerning our Messiah, the Son of Him who “wraps Himself in light as with a garment,” (Ps. 104:2) and who now looks upon us as clothed in His Son’s own resplendent righteousness. We are the light of the world, bearing witness in the world, to the true light that can never be overcome by the darkness, whether worldly or otherworldly. Beloved of the Lord, let us then shine His light to all so that they may see such good works— *His* works for our salvation— and praise our Father in heaven. Shine! Shine as a bright beacon that bears His light before the world so as to bring all those who believe to His holy house, into His very presence, where His Word and Sacraments are found amidst His people— a people arrayed in the righteousness of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord of Light and Life! Shine, for as Christians, to quote an early Christian, “We do not merely speak of great things— we live them!” AMEN.