

“The End or the Law”  
Broken — Good News for Tough Times: Part 5 of 6

a sermon based on

Romans 10:5-15 & Matthew 14:22-33

and delivered on-  
August 9, 2020

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2020 Rev. Mark A Harkness

We're going to come back to the Gospel reading in few minutes. But as we continue this series Broken – Good News for Tough Times, St. Paul's letter to the Romans really is serving as the main source. Today, as imperfect and inept people we find a word of hope – a word that tells us that Jesus saves us – and not just for heaven after we die – but that Jesus makes us holy!

In the passage we heard, Paul begins with a sentence about the Law – that is he reminds them (those new Christians in the church at Rome) and us that when Moses writes about the law, that he does so as a word of life – that is a word of righteousness. But if we were to turn back a few pages in the Bible we'd find Paul in Romans 7 speaking of the Law as an introduction to sin. Then he confuses us more by saying that he's not trying to say that the Law is sin – or bad.

To understand what he means in that we have to take a closer look at the Law – and what people (including us) expect from it. God meant and means the Law to be a means of safety and guidance. The moral law steering us clear of danger. The “thou shalt not's or don't do that's” aren't about restricting us but keeping us safe – sort of like a sign saying “Watch your step” or “Danger”. The cultic laws – like the kosher laws – were a means for Israel to remember that they were different – that God had chosen them to bring salvation to the world.

Did you catch that part? Israel was chosen not so that they could feel special, but to bring salvation to the world. That's an awesome and holy thing. Where the Law fall short isn't because God's guidance is inadequate – but because of the way people tend to look at it.

Our human tendency is to look at a list and to just check things off. Let's be honest – a lot of times to feel satisfied with doing the minimum. That's what had been going on in the lives of the people back then. Jesus confronted it with the rich young man in Matthew 19:15-22.

{ Summarize }

The young man says, “Good teacher...” “No one is good except God.

“What must I do...” “You know the commandments...”

“I've done it all!...” “One thing more... sell what you have...”

As a preacher I'll confess, I think that every time I've preached on that passage it's been in the context of money – not necessarily stewardship – but how wealth can be a distraction. But there's more to it than that. The young man is saying “I've checked off everything on the list. I should feel holy – I should have this assurance of eternal life... But I don't”

In Matthew 23:23 Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.”

He's saying, you've checked off your list – but you've missed the point.

It's a theme that keeps coming back. What are the things that Christians – or good Christians – shouldn't do? Don't play cards, don't drink (never mind that Jesus made wine for party), don't dance, don't smoke. Let's be honest. We shouldn't smoke – it's bad for our health. We shouldn't drink too much (and for some – not at all), and playing a little gin rummy or “Go Fish” with our friends is a little different than leaving your paycheck on the blackjack table.

I'm sure you can think of other rules you've heard. I remember the Baptist church up the street from my home during high school burning records – Rock-n-Roll is the devil. I suspect that now they probably sing praise songs in that very same musical style.

“But (Paul says) the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down)<sup>7</sup>“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).<sup>8</sup> But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);<sup>9</sup> because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>10</sup> For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. [Ro. 10:6-10]

Let’s think of this a little bigger that being saved in the sense of getting into heaven after we die. Notice that Paul says, “one confesses with the mouth and so IS saved.” It’s in the present tense. It was in the present tense back then. And it’s in the present tense now.

So what if we think about it this way? What sort of people make it into heaven? Holy people, right? So to be saved for eternal life – is in a real sense to be made holy. It goes beyond being forgiven – beyond being justified – but it pulls us to be holy.

Even though most of us will admit that we don’t measure up. And it seems impossible.

But Jesus saves. What Paul is trying to get us to see is that the law while it may have been – and is useful in some ways – that it isn’t set of rules – a checklist of things to do that makes us holy – but that it is Jesus Christ who makes us holy.

What if we go back to that young man from earlier and say “holy teacher...”? The bigger instruction wasn’t to sell all that he had, it was Jesus’ invitation to “follow me”. If you want to know eternal life – if you want to be holy – it’s right here in following Jesus. That’s what it means to “confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord”. It’s not some sort of magic incantation – “abracadabra, now I’m saved.” But it’s a recognition that Jesus makes us holy even in the midst of our imperfection.

In the Gospel reading, today, before he walked on water, what did Peter say? He said, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” [Mt. 14:28] He didn’t say, “Hey dude...” or “Yo, Jesus.” He called him Lord – and the LORD gave him not only the courage to step out of that boat but to walk on water.

Okay – so he didn’t do it for long. But he did it. And when he started to sink – Jesus didn’t let him drown but “reached out his hand and caught him” [Mt. 14:31b] (As an aside: you get that that means Peter got all the way out there so that Jesus was close enough to catch him?) For all of the dumb things that he said, his awkwardness – we call that fisherman Simon – St. Peter and great churches have been built honoring his faith – because his Lord, Jesus Christ makes him holy.

It’s a promise not just for the apostles or the early church – but this same Jesus who makes Peter holy. This same Jesus who catches him when he started to sink – is the same Jesus who makes us holy and who doesn’t abandon us when we stumble but lifts us up for another try.

When infants and young children are presented for baptism, their parents answer those questions of faith on Their behalf. They’re babies. They can’t talk. Babies don’t walk up here to present themselves. Their parents carry them. They’re babies, they can’t walk. And when they start to walk, they’re going to fall down. They’ll keep falling down – through out their lives. Maybe not as frequently. But it will still happen. Will their parents give up on them? Will we? Do you think Jesus will? No.

And he won't give up on you either. Jesus died on the cross to erase your sins, and he rose – he conquered death – so that you can be holy.

Those “holy lists” aren't in themselves bad – they are instructive. But Jesus saves us – Jesus makes us holy – even in the midst of our failures. Sometimes – maybe most of the time – it doesn't happen right away but takes time.

Look at this vase. It's not perfect. It's still broken. But remember what it looked like a few weeks ago? Remember the times when the glue didn't hold and a piece fell off? But look at how it's coming together.

That proclamation that “Jesus is Lord” draws us to holiness – in the midst of our imperfection – because Jesus looks at you not as the broken pieces, but as this beautiful person coming to salvation and holiness. AMEN.