

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

I hope you always notice when the paraments change colors. The paraments are these beautiful cloths that are draped over the lectern and the pulpit and around the pastor's neck. The paraments are green right now. When you see green, think of plants, reaching up toward the sunlight, turning it into energy through photosynthesis. Green is a great color for the season of Epiphany. In our Gospel lessons during Epiphany Jesus is encouraging his followers to grow spiritually because he's trying to bless us with things like a better understanding of God's Word, or a greater ability to explain God's Word, or a deeper trust in God's promises, or a more cheerful obedience to God's commands.

We know what God expects of us. He wrote his will into our hearts, and then he wrote it down again in the Bible. We call God's expectations his 'law.' God's law works in three ways. First it helps us see sin clearly. Most people admit that there's something wrong with them, but we tend to minimize how bad we are. So if we compare any attitude with what God's law teaches, we can see whether it is sinful or not. The law helps us ¹see sin clearly. Second, the law holds out punishments for those who break the law. Why don't you exceed the speed limit? Either you are afraid to get a ticket, or you have felt the sting of paying a fine. Such consequences keep most people from going on sinning sprees. Such punishments work like a curb that helps us not park on the sidewalk. The law ²curbs gross outbreaks

of sin. The law has a third way of doing its work, but only in those who trust Jesus as Savior. When you know how many sins the Lord has washed you clean of by his death on the cross, you gain an eagerness in your heart to thank and honor God. "How can I show you my love, Jesus?" "Well, obey my commands." "You mean I get to do what is right in your sight? And I get to point others to you as their Savior? Am I doing it right, Jesus? I really want to." God's law helps us believers see when we're too far to the right or too far to the left. It's like trying to draw a straight line and being delighted to use a ruler as a guide.

God's law is so good at doing its work that Satan hates it. He doesn't want people to think about how sinful they are. If they do, they may realize how much they need a Savior like Jesus who can wash them completely clean. Satan has two allies. One is inside us. It's the part of us that hates God's law—the Bible calls it our "sinful flesh." The other ally is a group of people that the Bible calls "the world," meaning everyone who is not walking with Jesus. "The world" even includes us whenever we are following our sinful flesh instead of the Holy Spirit. The world hates God's law, at least whenever anyone tries to point out its sin or remind it about God's punishments for sin. The devil, the world, and our flesh—they love to twist God's law into something other than what God intended.

I'll give you an example from big city life. One day I and other drivers wanted to turn

left at the upcoming intersection. But the traffic moving from left to right was backed up. A young man had stopped his car in the middle of the intersection, rather than at the beginning of the intersection. This made it difficult for those of us who wanted to turn left, but we squeezed in between him and the car in front of him. It was such a nice day that we all had our windows open. As I went past, I said, “You’re not supposed to block an intersection.” He immediately yelled back, “Shut the F up.” He did not want to be shown his sin. Another example: I saw a person at a pro-choice demonstration carrying a sign that read, “Get your laws off my body.” That person did not want to be told where God draws the line on murder. The world and our flesh don’t want God’s law to limit their attitudes or behaviors—not on stealing, not on sex, not on talking nice to each other, and certainly not on setting aside time for God’s Word. Let’s call them Libertines. Libertines twist God’s Law by trying to make it less than it is.

Then there’s the other extreme. Some folks are disgusted by the way people use their freedoms to hurt or tempt others. They want all kinds of extra laws about what you can wear, and when you have to worship, and what you can eat or drink, and how to treat things that are considered holy, and how much you must give for charitable purposes, etc. Because they want to control people’s behaviors with laws and punishments, we call them Legalists. Legalists twist God’s law by trying to make it more than it is. Or they

try to make God’s law do more work than the three ways God uses his law in the Bible.

Holy Scripture points us right between these two extremes and urges us to **APPLY THE LAW PROPERLY TO OUR LIFE.**

With these words Jesus address all Libertines: *17Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* In other words, Jesus did not come to take laws off the books. If he had, then it would now be ok for us to take revenge, or to take things that belong to others, or to tell lies, or to get drunk, or to skip church. But Jesus says, *18“Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.”* Jesus wants everyone to know that we are all still responsible for keeping the law. Those who act like we are free to do anything and everything without regard for God’s law will bring punishment on themselves, sooner or later.

There have always been people who don’t cause trouble. They are good or nice or compassionate or law abiding. In Jesus’ day the group best known for being ‘good people’ were called Pharisees. They not only kept the Ten Commandments, they even made up extra laws, and then kept them too. They were Legalists because they were making God’s law into more than it is. There are still people around today who keep extra laws. They usually make nice neighbors... except when they

pressure you to keep the extra laws too.

But whether people have extra laws or they compare themselves to laws that they can pretty well keep, such people tend to draw the conclusion that they are good. In so doing, they get caught up by one of the devil's most powerful tricks, the attitude: "I'm good enough that God owes me certain blessings." They may not come right out and say it that way, but when a tragedy visits their life, they spend considerable energy asking God, "Why would you let this happen to me!" Do you see what they are doing? After twisting God's will into more laws than he gave, they then minimize those laws until they can keep them. Whenever we do this, Jesus wants us to hear what he said in Matthew 5: 20 "*Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

"What are you doing to us, Jesus? Are you cutting off all routes of escape? You say I have to obey the whole law. If I obey it only a little, I can't take credit for my goodness, because on my own I don't have enough. If I don't obey God's law to the utmost, God has the right to cast me away from his presence. Is there no relief? Can't we just get rid of the law? Isn't that why you came, Jesus?" No, not set aside the law. Jesus says in our text: 17 "*I have come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.*" "The Law and the Prophets"—that's what they use to call the Old Testament. Jesus came to fill the Old Testament full. The Old Testament had

taught: You must obey God's commands perfectly. Jesus carried out every command to the letter. God now counts Jesus' success as ours, as if we kept the law, as if we are worthy of spending an eternity of happiness with God. Jesus also died on the cross to redeem all sinners, as promised in the Old Testament. He filled God's promises full.

But this does not mean that we are released from keeping the law. Jesus says in our text: 19 "*Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*" Jesus is talking to Christians, to us in whose hearts he rules. People watch us closely. They notice when we drop the F-bomb or the dirty omg-bomb, or when we are selfish or unwelcoming, or when we won't get along with others, or when we treat sex and marriage different from how God teaches about it in the Bible. God sees it too. Please notice that Jesus does not say we lose heaven because we break part of the law and teach others to do so. But if as a Christian you are living inconsistently with God's Word, or if you say things like, "Ach, you don't need to keep that part of the Bible anymore, you 19 "*will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*"

On the other hand, Jesus wants you to know that if you work at living a Christian life, consistently turning back to God when you have sinned and then keeping away from those sins, God is pleased to honor you. 19 "*Whoever practices and*

teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Others in God’s church will look up to you and seek you out when they need encouragement to walk in God’s ways.

Some wonderful things happen when we obey God’s law. Jesus says, ¹³“*You are the salt of the earth.*” It’s not that Christians cause high blood pressure, or rust out cars, or melt ice. In Jesus’ day salt was used to preserve meat. It helped keep the flies and worms away. Like salt Christians have a preserving effect on the world around them. Think of King David. He generally followed after the Lord with all his heart. Centuries later the Lord was still referring to David as his reason for holding off his judgment against his straying people. David was still preserving God’s sinful people from immediate judgment. Now think of today. Our country is ripe for God’s judgment—each Sunday 86% of our nation does not gather to hear God’s Word. But you are like salt: you preserve this country from much of God’s judgment so that there is more time for everyone to hear God’s Word and believe in Jesus.

But when we Christians act like God’s law doesn’t matter anymore, Christianity loses its influence and no longer preserves. Salt in Jesus’ day had enough impurities that the salty part of their salt could be washed out, leaving only the impurities behind. When salt lost its ability to preserve, they threw it out, like

on a path where no one was trying to grow any crops. When Christians aren’t living like Christians anymore, people throw out Christianity, and the whole situation gets worse. Thank you, Jesus, for warning us to be the Christians we call ourselves. We see that you are trying to bless everyone else through your law as we obey it.

Jesus says that we Christians are also the light of the world. Light’s job is to shine. You can’t hide a city built on a hill—its lights can be seen for miles away. In the same way faith, burning in the heart of believers, cannot be hidden. Christians living like Christians, and sharing what they know about Jesus, cannot be hidden. Jesus urges: ¹⁶“*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*” You and I have the same basic problems as everyone else. But when we Christians keep picking ourselves up with the good news about Jesus and God’s other promises, people notice this. When you disagree with others in a **loving** way, people notice this. When you try to reconcile with those you spoke angry words to, people notice this. When you keep steering your life between the two extremes of twisting the law into more than it is or into less than it is, people notice this. Perhaps they will want to know why you keep trying to show love. How marvelous to point them to our loving Father in heaven who sent Jesus to redeem every sinner.