
The Grace of Good Works

Matthew 5:13-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel
on February 9, 2014 by the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor

Jesus was a Jew. I know you know that, but I wish it were in the creed somewhere—“I believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who was a born of a Jewish mother, lived his short life a Jew, was crucified and died a Jew. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Jewish Scriptures...” I wish we had to say it out loud every Sunday. I wish we sang it in some hymns, so that we had a prayer of hearing him when he teaches us something from *his* religion instead of ours—the religion that grew up *about* him.

Jesus was Jewish. He dressed like a Jew. He argued with other Jews about the right way to observe Torah, which was very Jewish of him. All of his first disciples were Jewish. With all the religions in the world to choose from, God decided on a Jewish mother to bear a Jewish son.

If I’m sounding a little insistent, it’s because I’m teaching Introduction to the New Testament this semester, blessed with fifteen students devoted to Jesus who have never read a gospel all the way through. Or at least most of them haven’t—and even those who *have* are so used to thinking of Jesus as the founder of Christianity, the savior who put the Christ in Christian—that it can come as a real shock to hear him talking like a Jew.

I wish you could have been there last Tuesday when we were working our way through Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount—not Luke’s Short Talk on the Plain, but Matthew’s unabridged version--all 2384 words of it. Matthew’s sermon is three times as long as Luke’s. It includes 37 verses that don’t show up anywhere else—not only “You are the salt of the earth” and “you are the light of the world,” but also “Beware of practicing your piety before others” and “when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”

But those weren’t the verses that rose up off the page and smacked us in class. The ones that did that were the ones in which Jesus upholds the letter of the Law—every last jot and tittle of it—reminding everyone within sound of his voice that whoever breaks even *one* of the *least* of the commandments God gave to Moses—like the one about not gathering firewood on the Sabbath, maybe, or the one about not eating bacon—whoever breaks even *one* of those and teaches others to do the same will be called “squirt” in the kingdom of heaven. Squirt, Gnat, Junior, Rookie, take your pick—those who think it’s all right to break *any* of God’s laws will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, while those who keep them and teach them will be called great.

“*What?*” Heather said, while Kat banged her head on her desk. “Oh no,” she said, while Elijah just smiled—because he’s a Seventh Day Adventist who observes the Sabbath and doesn’t eat pork. “I thought Christians didn’t have to follow the Law,” someone else said. “Yeah,” the person next to her said, “Didn’t Jesus break it all the time?” But there it was, right on the page: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

I guess you could read that as meaning that it wouldn’t take much to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, but that would be a stretch. Pharisees *defined*

righteousness in those days, taking the word of God so seriously that they held themselves to the same standards as priests in the temple. They washed their hands before every meal as if they were offering food at an altar. They were careful about not working on the Sabbath. They went above and beyond what was asked of them, knowing that it was not enough simply to *believe* in God, for God had not asked to be *believed* but to be *obeyed*. Yes, Jesus argued with the scribes and Pharisees about how best to obey the Law, the same way the Pharisees argued with the Sadducees and the Sadducees argued with the Zealots. A rabbi I know says that's a very Jewish thing to do. Once, when he was at a café in Jerusalem, he watched one man approach another at a table right beside him.

"So, are you Jewish?" The first man said.

"I am," the seated man said.

"Good!" the first man said, pulling up a chair. "You want to argue?"

Jesus was a Jew. While there are lively discussions to be had with present-day Jews about just how Jewish he was, Matthew's gospel is unambiguous: Jesus was a son of Israel, a descendant of the royal house of David, the messiah come in fulfillment of ancient prophecy, to uphold the divine law that set his people apart and gave them fullness of life.

One of the students in my class was raised in a messianic Jewish congregation, so this makes all kinds of sense to her. The Seventh Day Adventist has an oar in the water too, but for the rest of the Protestants and Catholics in the class, Jesus' teaching about the Law in the Sermon on the Mount raises huge questions about the teaching they have received in their churches. Aren't Christians supposed to rely on God's grace instead of their own good works? Isn't "works righteousness" something they are supposed to avoid? Most importantly, isn't the Law a thing of the past for Christians? Didn't the coming of Jesus put an end to all that?

Of course the subtle, invasive danger of that teaching is the logical next step, even (and especially) when it is not made at a conscious level. If the Law is a thing of the past for Christians, then isn't Judaism too? If Jesus came to put an end to all that, then isn't the whole Jewish thing *over*?

I don't know many people who would say that out loud—I don't even know many people who think they *think* it—but they still say a lot of things that come out that way. They talk about "the burden of the Law," and "the legalism of the Pharisees." They say "Jewish law" as if Jews wrote it, when the book of Exodus is quite clear that the law comes from God. That would pack a different punch, wouldn't it? What if—when we come to those stories where Jesus seems to be pushing the envelope of the Law—we stopped saying, "Jesus challenged Jewish law" and said, "Jesus challenged God's law" instead?

Most of us come by our latent anti-Judaism honestly. Later in Matthew's gospel Jesus calls one group of scribes and Pharisees "children of hell" (23:15). In John's gospel he tells some Jews that their father is the devil (8:44). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul—the former five star Pharisee—speaks of the Jews who "oppose God and displease everyone," noting with some satisfaction that "God's wrath has overtaken them at last" (2:15-16).

As A. J. Levine points out in her book *The Misunderstood Jew*, it only takes a little bit of this kind of rhetoric for Christians to decide that Jesus wasn't really Jewish. "Whatever Jesus stands for," she writes, "Judaism isn't it; whatever Jesus is against, Judaism epitomizes the category. No wonder even today Jesus somehow looks 'different' from 'the Jews,'" she

goes on: “in the movies and artistic renderings, he’s blond and they are swarthy; he is cute and buff and they need rhinoplasty and Pilates.”¹

But here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus won’t let any of us forget just how Jewish he is. “You are the light of the world,” he says to those who have come to hear him—mostly Jews, presumably—mostly familiar with God’s law in Torah. It’s not only a lovely thing for him to say; it is also a traditional thing for him to say. According to the prophet Isaiah, God gave *Israel* as a light to the nations (42.6). In rabbinic literature, *Torah* is the prime mediator of divine light. In John’s gospel, *Jesus* is the light of the world (8:12), but not here.

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says to those sitting right in front of him, though they have done absolutely nothing to deserve that accolade. Even if he is speaking only to the disciples and not to the crowd behind them, the disciples have not done anything to distinguish themselves at this point. They left what they were doing to go with him, was all. They attached themselves to him and followed him around, listening to what he said and watching what he did, all the while doing their best to believe that they were half as important as he seemed to think they were.

“You are the light of the world,” he says, giving them the t-shirts before they have even run the race. Then he shows them where the start line is. “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others,” he says, only how are they supposed to do that, exactly? By walking around looking all sunny and saved? By telling other people how they can become shiny too? Maybe so, but that’s not where Jesus puts the emphasis.

“Let your light shine before others so that *they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*,” he says. You have the t-shirt, which is yours no matter what. That’s the grace part. And it’s true, too: you *are* the light of the world. But the wattage is up to you. If you decide that fifteen watts is all you can manage, well, then, the world around you just won’t be very well lit. You’ll still be the light of it—that part is non-negotiable—but don’t expect it to be much brighter than a closet in there.

If, on the other hand, you decide to go all out, then happy are they who live near you. Happy are they who share the world with you, because their visibility will be so much better when you’re around that they may be able to see beyond your good works. They may be able to see all the way to God, giving glory to your Father in heaven.

I am so sorry to tell you this, but Jesus was just not a very good Protestant. He was a Jew, for whom good works were not optional. He was the loving son of the Light-Giver who gave the law, and he expected those who followed him to follow it too, right down to the last jot and tittle. Later Paul would mount some good arguments about how the law was God’s grace for Jews, while God had something different in mind for Gentiles. But however our view of the law has changed through the years, our spiritual ancestors had the good sense to preserve this core teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: God expects us to step up. Righteousness is a good thing. Exceeding righteousness is even better. *Knowing* God’s word is no substitute for *doing* it. Good works count.

Meanwhile, you already have your t-shirts. That’s the grace part. You are—we are—the light of the world. We are the waves and particles that bring the lamp of the

¹ *The Misunderstood Jew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 19.

gospel to life. We are the solar panels, the lighthouse keepers, the searchlight crew. We are the citizens of the city on the hill. According to the shining Son of the Light-Giver, God is happy to supply all the current we need, but producing the bulbs and plugging them in? That's the human part. That part's up to us.

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