

What Then Should We Preach? by Pastor Marty

I recently had some discussions with a friend about the purpose of preaching, teaching, and Christian education. The person expressed what some might consider a radical perspective: the main goal of pastors and ministers should be preaching the gospel and teaching people about Jesus. There is little doubt that the identity, teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus form the foundation and core of Christianity. Though we see evidence in the Bible that some people can have knowledge of the Father without a relationship with the Son, it is always limited and incomplete. I have discussed in prior newsletters that Christians need to learn more about the gospel because it is much more than just the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Paul said he was eager to preach the gospel to the saints in Rome, for they needed to hear it. They had a relationship with Jesus, but that was not enough. In the Bible, the good news is more than the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus; it encompasses the entire plan of God. In other words, what Jesus did is not the whole gospel—it is how it was accomplished.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus describe how the gospel was accomplished.

In order to define what Christian preaching and teaching should entail, we need to consider our primary source: the Bible. Even in the New Testament, we read about much more than just the history of Jesus and the need to have a relationship with Him. Starting with the gospels, we see both sides of the coin: on the one hand, a large part of the gospel of John involves Jesus telling us who He is and how we must focus on Him; on the other hand, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke often reveal Jesus pointing people to the Father, the Spirit, and a life of faith more than to Himself. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, almost entirely focuses on how people should live instead of on their relationship with Him. Throughout Church history, there has been discussion of both orthodoxy (right beliefs) and orthopraxy (right actions). As James says, Christian beliefs that do not lead to a Christian lifestyle is a sign we do not really understand what we believe; faith has to be put in practice in a way that changes our daily actions. However, Hebrews tells us that the best actions do no good if they are not combined with faith, for faith is necessary to please God; we cannot enter the Kingdom of God through the law.

Christian living requires a living faith, and authentic faith is defined by how we live.

In the Old Testament, God gave Israel the law through Moses. Many Christians declare that we do not have to live according to the law. To a large extent that is true, but there is also an aspect of this that is dangerously false. For example, the tablet of the law lists some very useful commands: do not worship other gods, do not murder, do not commit adultery, etc. These are not just ancient versions of the fortune cookie; they are commands for all time. It is not possible for people to be Christian and to worship other gods without something clearly being wrong with their orthodoxy and their orthopraxy. Their actions show they do not actually understand what they profess. However, refusing to worship other gods does not make someone inherently a child of God, either. Faith without works is dead, but so is works without faith. Of course, there are times when we find ourselves between these two states: we find ourselves having faith in God before our lives have lined up, or we do the right thing because it is right before we realize how it connects with our faith. An example of this can be seen in Matthew 23 when Jesus confronts the Scribes and Pharisees over their meticulous tithing while overlooking justice and mercy. He states that they should have done the one without neglecting the other. He does not tell them that carefully keeping the law was wrong; He says they needed to combine that with a heart aligned to God's will. In effect, Jesus showed that works are good but are incomplete without faith.

The works of the law are good, but they lead to death if we try to do them without faith.

Jesus was very clear when He said that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Many believers think this means that we can simply disregard what the law says; however, this is misreading His words. A careful look at what He said should make it obvious that whatever way we may interpret “fulfill” cannot be correct if replacing it with “abolish” would work just as well. He fulfilled the law in a way that did not negate it. One clear possibility is that He was affirming Himself as the fulfillment of all the prophecies and signs of the old covenant: the sin offering, the scapegoat, the Passover lamb, etc. It is undeniable that this is true and accurate. However, this cannot be the only way He meant it because He immediately follows this verse by stating that not a single dot or dash of the law will disappear until heaven and earth pass away—and He even included one of His “truly I tell you” introductions, which is His way of saying, “Now listen carefully because I really mean what I am about to say.” If God’s law is as perfect as Psalm 119 says, then we should not be foolish enough to think we do not actually need it.

If God’s law is as perfect as He tells us in Psalm 119, then we are foolish to ignore it.

On the one hand, Jesus tells us He did not come to abolish the law, and it would remain until He comes again; on the other hand, Paul and others express very clearly that living by the law not only is impossible to do but also leads to death and judgment. These statements almost seem contradictory, but they really are not. We have to look at more than just one or two books in the Bible to understand what God has given to us in the law. First, Paul explains that sin takes advantage of the law to put us under bondage and bring forth death; we cannot live with the law being our master because attaining righteousness by it is impossible, and it gets our eyes off the Author and Finisher of our faith. In the book of Hebrews, the author warns us that no matter how good the law may be, trying to be righteous on our own cannot be done; we not only reject Christ but put ourselves under a curse. However, we do not find righteousness by completely ignoring the law, either, for John tells us that if we sin, we are not His children; as we remember, it is the law that helps us to recognize sin. In addition, James explains to us that if our faith is not reflected in our actions, it is worthless; the works he describes are repeatedly mentioned in the law and the prophets. Although we cannot live by the law, we cannot live without it.

Although we cannot live by the law, we find that we cannot live a Godly life without it.

A key passage for us is found in Romans. Paul explains that we would not know sin if it were not for the law. We need to remember that the enemy of our souls is always trying to take holy things and turn them into profane things: sex becomes lust, medicines become addictions, and the list goes on. It is the nature of evil to pollute and twist everything that God has given to us. However, he can never be entirely successful in removing every trace of the original intention of those things. The same is true of the law. Paul clearly states that the law is holy and righteous and good; it was sin that used it to harm us. Sin is a parasite, using the law to steal life from us, but this is only true because the law was given specifically to shine a light on our actions and reveal sin for what it was. The very first law ever given was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was not given for the purpose of putting the man and woman under bondage but was designed to protect them. God set the fruit of that tree off limits because eating it would result in their death. He even told them the reason for the command so they would understand its importance. Nevertheless, they chose to listen to the serpent instead. While we cannot obey the law, they could have, for they did not have a fallen nature; they had the ability to keep that one command. The serpent used the law as the basis for his temptation, but they had a choice. Likewise, Paul tells us that God gave the law to Moses so we could know how to live, but sin again used the law to put us under bondage. Sin preys on the law in order to steal life from us.

Sin is a parasite that preys on the law that gives life in order to steal that life from us.

A common tactic of our enemy is to convince us that we have to choose between extremes. He does not want us to learn how to balance between faith and works, grace and truth, love and holiness. If he can get us to view these as either-or propositions, he can keep us bound in one way or another. It is vital that we realize that we need everything that God has given to us; none of His gifts are useless to us. Every heresy or failure that has taken root in the Church (or in the history of His people) has a basis in extremes that reject something we need: Gnosticism rejects matter for spirit, Universalism rejects holiness for love, Legalism rejects faith for law, and the list continues. We have to recognize that some of our beliefs might be based more in our reaction to certain false theologies than in response to true ones. On the one hand, we may want to focus entirely on grace because our background has been one of legalism and judgment, and for Christians who have come out from under that teaching, there is a need to focus on grace; however, there comes a time when we can go to the opposite extreme, losing the ability to discern between sinfulness and holiness and forsaking our prophetic call to condemn sin and call people to righteousness. If we focus on God's grace to the point that we entirely exclude the law, we eventually allow everything and reject nothing. On the other hand, we may be tempted to set our eyes on the law because we are grieved with the sin and destruction we see around us, and it is the law that reveals our hearts; however, there is a huge difference between looking to the law to reveal sin and living by it. If we tell people they have to live by the law, we are only putting them in bondage.

If we focus on any one extreme, we will miss some important truth of God in the other.

Over and over again, Scripture tells us that we live by grace, but it specifies that this grace is a grace that is through faith, and that faith has to be reflected in how we live. James is clear that it does not matter how much faith we think we have; if we are not doing the things that are repeatedly told to do, we do not have real faith. For the Christians in Rome who did not understand this, Paul gave them (and us) some clear instruction. He tells us that we can only resist sin by focusing not on the law but on the Spirit, for if we focus on the law, we give sin power. However, we have to remember that it was the same Spirit who gave us the law that now leads us and works through us. When we look at ourselves in the mirror of the law, we see where we are like Him and where we are not. There is a profound reason for this: the law is not an arbitrary list of rules and regulations; it is a description of the lifestyle that is a reflection of God's nature. He did not say, "Do not commit adultery" just because He wanted to get to a round number on the tablets of the law; He said it because His nature is faithfulness, and we cannot be like Him if we are unfaithful. The laws were given to us to reveal His nature or protect us from harm. Granted, some dangers may no longer exist—such as health risks that led to regulations on cleanliness and diet—but they were not arbitrary. The law was given for our benefit, and it still reflects His nature.

The law was given to us to protect us, to reveal our hearts, and to reflect God's nature.

I began by describing conversations I had with a friend about the gospel. Our discussion largely reflected the tensions that often arise between evangelists and pastors: the former focuses on getting people into the kingdom while the latter stresses the growth of those who are saved. As described in prior newsletters, the gospel is not just the story of Jesus, for Paul is clear that the Christians at Rome needed to hear the gospel. When Jesus spoke to those who knew their sin, He told them about grace, but when He spoke to those who rejected His message, He pointed out their sins and failure to follow the law. Similarly, preaching and teaching today has to recognize that some know their sin and need to hear primarily about grace and forgiveness while some do not see their sin and need to hear about the holiness and truth revealed in God's law. Often the latter precedes the former, such as John the Baptist preaching repentance before Jesus arrived, but the message is ultimately the same: it is all good news.