

"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 tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." **(Mat. 5:17-20)**

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

It's very important when studying your Bible to learn to pick up on the context of the Scripture. The immediate context is what we know as the "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus – Lord and Savior and the Word made flesh – God in human skin, is also a Jewish Rabbi. And as such, he is beginning his earthly ministry by teaching his disciples - his students. Rabbis taught and interpreted God's word to their students.

The more immediate context to the verses we just read are what he said just prior. So let's read those verses, 13-16:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

(Mat. 5:13-16)

Salt was very important and extremely valuable in the ancient world, especially in Judaism. Why? Partly because of Leviticus 2:13, which says:

Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings. **(Lev. 2:13)**

One of the chambers of the Temple compound was called the salt chamber. This is where the salt was stored. This salt came from the Dead Sea, and it was a type which normally does not lose its flavor. But, if it did, it was then used to sprinkle on the steps leading up to the altar, and the priests would step on it to keep them from slipping on the blood of the sacrifices.

Also, salt was used in a particular form of covenant, called the salt or friendship covenant. In that day, men carried a pouch of salt on their belts to eat to prevent dehydration and to trade it as a form of currency. When two men desired to finalize

a business transaction or enter into a covenant of friendship with each other, they would go over the conditions of their covenant and then exchange salt from each other's pouch. Once they exchanged salt, they shook grains together symbolizing the sealing of the covenant which became binding, for it was impossible to retrieve their original salt grains from one another.

God is reminding us that as he invites us to draw near to him, he wants to be friends with us! He wants to mingle and trade his salt with ours! He wants that relationship to be binding!

Jesus says to his students, *"You are the salt of the earth."* You are very valuable! Your presence can have a preserving effect on a whole group of people. Remember when God said he would spare Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous people were found there? You are positioned as those who can draw others into covenant with God. Jesus also says, *"You are the light of the world."*

God made a distinction between light and darkness way back in the beginning:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. (Gen. 1:3)

Do you remember that in Egypt one of the plagues was a plague of darkness? Except where God's people lived:

No one could see anyone else or move about for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived. (Ex. 10:23)

The Bible also tells us that God's commands are like light:

The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. (Ps. 19:8)

And Proverbs tells us that God's righteous people are like "light":

The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out. (Pro. 13:9)

When Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," the emphasis is on actions, for he says when others *"see your good deeds,"* they can be drawn to your heavenly Father.

Light dispels darkness. The good things you do can chase away darkness in other people's lives!

Now we come to the core of the text today. There are several idioms in Jesus teaching here that are very important to understand.

IDIOMS

An idiom is a figure of speech or words that are specific to a certain cultural understanding that don't work if you take them literally. For example, here are some idioms we use, followed by the same meaning from other countries: (For a laugh, imagine taking these literally)

We say: "It's raining cats and dogs." (meaning, it's raining hard)
 In Norway, they say: "It's raining female trolls."
 In Africa, they say: "It's raining old women and clubs."

We say: "He's beating around the bush." (meaning he's not getting to the point)
 In Czek, they say: "He's walking around hot porridge."

We say: "He's nuts about that." (meaning, he is really interested in that)
 In Germany, they say: "He's eaten a monkey about that."

Jesus words, "*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*" is a Hebrew idiom used by rabbis of the day! Since a rabbi's main topic was teaching and interpreting God's word or Torah, they would often enter into debate and disagreement with one another over interpretations of passages. A wrong interpretation was "*abolishing*" Torah, whereas a correct interpretation was "*fulfilling*" or "*completing*" Torah.

So if one rabbi thought another rabbi was wrong in their interpretation of a passage, he would say: "*Your interpretation abolishes Torah!*" The other rabbi would answer back, "*No, my interpretation fulfills Torah!*" And on they would go...

Jesus is saying, "*My purpose is to give you the **correct interpretation** of God's word, or Torah!*"

Now let's see what Jesus means by "The Law." This may surprise some of you!

WHAT IS "THE LAW?" (TORAH)

Most English Bible translations say, "Law," which is so unfortunate, because it really means *Torah*. As a matter of fact, most verses in the New Testament where you read the word "law" it means Torah! In Jesus' day, Torah meant:

(1) The first five books of the Bible

(2) The first five books of the Bible plus the rest of what we call the Old Testament or the Law and the Prophets...also called the Tanakh.

(3) It literally meant God's teachings and Instructions in general, which to Jews might include other writings about the Scriptures like Mishnah.

(4) In fact, the Hebrew word, torah (תּוֹרָה), comes from a root word that was used in archery, yarah (יָרָה). Yarah means to shoot an arrow in order to hit a mark. The mark or target, of course, was the object at which the archer was aiming. In Torah, the target is the truth about God, ourselves and how we relate to Him and others.

(5) For us, Torah is the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, all of which are God's teachings and instructions for us. As Paul wrote to Timothy:

All scripture is God-breathed (inspired)... **(2 Tim. 3:16)**

How important is God's word? Listen again to Jesus' words:

"For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."
(Mat. 5:18-19)

The smallest letter in Hebrew was called a "jot" or "yude." And some of the letters had little decorations on them called "strokes" or "karias." Jesus says that even these won't disappear till when? When heaven and earth pass away! Jesus, being an expert at Torah, knew Isaiah's words:

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."
(Isa. 40:8)

So, now that we see what Jesus is teaching about God's word, or Torah, or the Law and the Prophets, or God's teachings and instructions...we need to ask, "What is the purpose of Torah?"

THE PURPOSE OF TORAH (GOD'S WORD)

The first purpose of God's word (Torah) is **to teach us about an eternal relationship with God.** Jesus said:

"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (Jn. 17:3)

Notice that the goal is not just to know about God, but to know God. But **if you're going to know God, you also have to know about God!** And what does this knowing, this relationship bring? LIFE! ETERNAL LIFE! And how does one learn about God? Through his word – his Torah!

A lot of people are meeting each other online today. There's e-harmony, Christian Mingle, and lots of other services to meet someone that people hope will be their spouse one day. Do the people read the profiles of their prospective mate? Of course they do!

Did you know that Jesus wants you to be your bride? Do you want to learn everything you can about the Groom and his Father and his family?

Another purpose of God's word is **to show us God's standards and our sin.** Remember that one of the meanings of Torah is hitting the target. How are you going to know your distance from the target if you don't know where the target is?

Check this out:

...through the law we become conscious of our sin. (Rom. 3:20)

That may sound like bad news, but it is really good news! You and I were created to hit the target. If we want to get closer to it, we've got to know where it is! And when we see that we miss it, we find out that we may need some help hitting it, right? Would you like some help from the only person who ever lived who hit the target? **The Torah points us to Jesus the Savior.**

Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Rom. 10:4)

Unfortunately, most English versions, like the KJV for example, translate that verse like this:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. (Rom. 10:4 KJV)

Have you ever heard that – Christ is the end of the law? That kind of sounds like the Torah, or "Law" is done away with doesn't it? The problem is the word "end." In Greek it's the word "telos" which means goal, or end as in...the end of an arrow hitting its target. I love the CJB translation of that verse:

For the goal at which the Torah aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts. (Rom. 10:4 CJB)

So, the Torah points us to the Savior, who offers to give us his righteousness if we will trust in him. Our trust in Jesus is the only way to be made right with God.

Now, here's something really cool: Every Hebrew letter was first a picture that meant something. Those letters are called "pictographs." Here are the Hebrew letters and corresponding pictographs for the word Torah:

(Tav) **Picture:** a sign, a cross. **Meaning:** a covenant, to seal

(Vav) **Picture:** a nail. **Meaning:** to nail, attach, secure

(Reysh) **Picture:** a head. **Meaning:** person, the head, the highest

(Hey) **Picture:** Look! Behold! **Meaning:** to reveal

The original word Torah from the Hebrew pictograph is: **Revealing The Highest nailed to the cross!**

There is yet one more important purpose for Torah. It involves the difference between "righteousness" and "holiness." God makes us righteous through our trust in Jesus. But God wants us to be more than righteous. He also calls us to be holy, or different than all other people on earth. He wants us to hit the mark we were designed to hit. So, he gives us his teachings or Torah **to teach us his ways of living!**

Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. (Ps. 119:165)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Do you remember what it means to be light? It was by our actions wasn't it? What actions? Good works! The Torah helps us know what those good works are! Finally, we need to understand how to use God's word.

HOW TO USE TORAH (GOD'S WORD)

There is a right way and a wrong way to use Torah, or God's Word. God's word. Paul wrote to Timothy:

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. (1 Tim.1:8)

Properly means in love. In the right spirit. Not legalistically, which is a perversion of God's word. It's not meant to beat you over the head, but to bring you life and holiness! To make your salt saltier and you light brighter! So, what's the right way to use Torah?

First of all, Partner with the Holy Spirit.

God has done something extraordinary. He spoke through Ezekiel the Prophet about something new he would do when Jesus came:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ez. 36:26-27)

Did you get that? He said God will give us his Spirit which will move us or cause us to follow his ways!

Jesus himself said to his students:

"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 14:15-17)

Who is that advocate or helper? The Holy Spirit within you! And Paul wrote this about the relationship between Torah and the Holy Spirit:

...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:4)

Next, we need to **Read and study ALL of God's Word.**

All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal. (Ps. 119:160)

It's also good to **Memorize God's Word.**

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. (Ps. 119:11)

Most importantly, if we're really going to benefit from Torah, we need to **begin doing what God's word teaches.**

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (Jas. 1:22)

Finally, we need to **remember the most important commands**. Jesus was asked one time what was the most important command in the Torah. This was his answer:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
(Mat. 22:37-40)

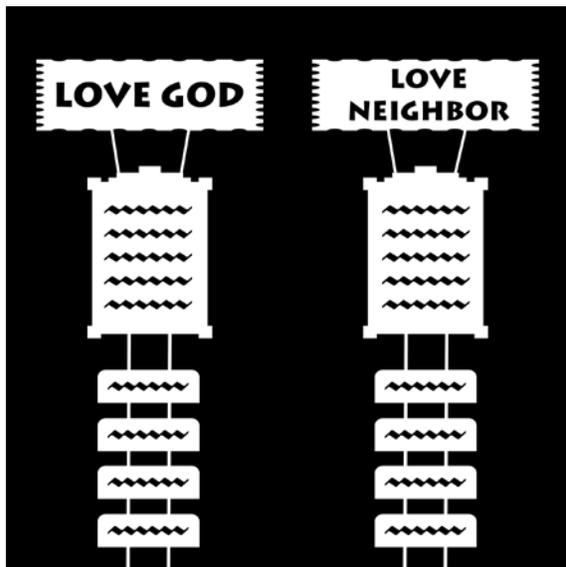
Jesus did not mean, "just do these two things and ignore the rest of God's word. That should be clear by now! Let me show you how this works in Judaism and what I believe Jesus meant:

Two Most Important Commands:

Love God with all your heart. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

The Ten Commandments "hang" perfectly on those two. They are written in stone!

All other commands in the Bible, of which there are at least 613 on the Old Testament and well over 1,000 in the New Testament branch off or hang on those ten. They are the practical ways that God gave to follow his commands. We must partner with the Holy Spirit to find what those practical commands "look like" in our day and in our culture. But we must never discount them! The picture Jesus was painting looks something like this:



So you see, if we're going to know and love God and ourselves and our neighbors, we need to read and study all of God's word. We need to dig in! The more we put into it the more we will get out of it!

Now let's look at a couple of practical examples, one from the Old Testament Torah or Law, and one from the very words of Jesus.

Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin. (Deut. 24:14-15)

Can you think of which of the ten commandments this teaching hangs upon? How about "You shall not steal?"

A "legalistic" interpretation of this command would say that an employer must give an employee a paycheck every day at the end of the day. But that misses the true meaning! The goal of these words is that we will become generous people who care for the needy. We don't take advantage of people, but we go the extra distance, even to our own inconvenience to make sure that those who work for us are cared for. If you are an employer, God's law says you are to treat your employees with dignity and respect. To follow Torah, or God's word, is to be that kind of employer or person by paying people what they earn, in a timely way!

Second example:

"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mk. 11:25)

What is God's Torah teaching? Forgive! Can you think of which of the ten commandments this teaching hangs upon? How about "You shall not murder?" Murder begins with unforgiveness and bitterness in the heart!

May I demonstrate that right now? Is there anyone whom you are holding anything against...even yourself? May I lead you in a prayer to forgive that person?

Dear Heavenly Father, I choose to forgive _____. I choose to let go of what I am holding against _____. In Jesus' name, I cancel satan's authority and I command bitterness to leave me now. Holy Spirit, please heal my heart and tell me your truth.

As you **do** these things...as you get in and dig into your Bibles and do what God is teaching with the help of the Holy Spirit, you are practicing holiness! And your salt will have flavor, and your light will shine bright! And your righteousness will surpass the scribes and Pharisees, because you will actually be **doing** God's word. Jesus was referring to those Scribes and Pharisees that taught God's law, but did not practice it. As Jesus said in another place about those Scribes and Pharisees:

"So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (Mat. 23:3)

May your light shine bright as you hear and do!

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.