

February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2026

## Matthew 5:13–20 “A Promise of Guidance”

I want to start this morning by talking about two different ways Christians tend to understand how God works—and how those understandings shape the way we practice our faith. You could almost imagine two different pools.

In one pool there are people who read the Bible and are drawn to the God who reaches out first. The God of grace and mercy. The God who loves without conditions, who lifts up those who are pushed down, and who meets people where they are no matter what. This is the God we see most clearly in Jesus—especially in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

In another pool are Christians who *also* take the Bible seriously, but who are especially drawn to an image of God as lawgiver. This is the God who orders the universe, who establishes patterns for human life, who gives direction for how we should live. What’s God’s design for families? For society? For how we use our resources? There are also consequences for not following this design. And like the folks in the first pool, those who are drawn to this understanding of God find comfort in the image they trust most.

And these two ways of reading Scripture don’t just live on the page—they live in us too. And a lot of the time they feel like they’re pulling us in opposite directions. So then who is swimming in the right pool? Which one has priority? Law-and-order God or grace-and-mercy God? You might be thinking, “*Oh come on, pastor—why does it have to be either/or?*” Fair question. Maybe pools aren’t the best image. Maybe it’s more like one of those old balance scales you see on the Lady Justice statues outside of courthouses. Law on one side. Grace on the other. But even then, it rarely feels evenly balanced. For most of us, one side seems to weigh a whole lot more than the other. Grace-and-mercy. Law-and-order.

Which is why it's good news – no, *great* news that we're still studying the Sermon on the Mount this week. Because in today's passage, Jesus addresses this question head-on. He says, "*I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*"

Well—there it is. That clears everything up, right? Now we know exactly which pool to jump into. Like we said last week, Jesus speaks with divine authority. The buck stops with him. Surely this one clear sentence settles the whole debate. I wish.

For the last two thousand years, Christians have been living with this tension. You see it very early on in the first writings of the church especially in the writings of James and Paul. James will say things like, "we're justified by faith, not works." Then there's Paul who isn't always very helpful. He'll say, "We *uphold* the law." Then he'll say, "A person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law." And then almost in the same breath, he'll say, "I'm not free from God's law, but *under Christ's law.*" Make up your mind Paul!

This tug-of-war between law and grace has always been there. And people on every side have their favorite verses ready to prove their point. But let's be honest—setting Scripture aside for a moment—we all, deep in our heart of hearts, lean one way or the other. Right? Even people who've never read the Bible or heard about Jesus tend to gravitate toward either rules or mercy, order or freedom, grace or law. And that pull only gets stronger in times when issues concerning justice, behavior, and responsibility feel especially heated and polarized. But here we are in this sanctuary, gathered in Jesus' name, trying to figure out how to follow Jesus more faithfully. And Jesus says he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

So here's the heart of the matter: We are saved by grace. Full stop. *That* part is clear. But the *real* question is what comes next. How do we live in *response* to a gift like that? The key word here is *response*. Our actions don't save us—God's action does. But once grace has met us, the

ball really is back in our court. We can choose to live in a way that honors the gift we've been given—a way that reflects the love and justice we see in Jesus—or we can choose to ignore it.

When Jesus talks about fulfilling the law and the prophets, he's representing long-standing traditions in the Jewish faith. You've got the cries for justice from Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah. And you've got the calls to faithfulness and community from the Law of Moses. The prophets *and* law are now embodied and lived out in Jesus himself. And then, in teachings like the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows us what a life shaped by grace actually looks like.

And since this series is about God's promises, here's what I want you to reflect on this week: **God does not leave us without direction.** Grace doesn't drop us into the world only to say, "Good luck buddy!" We're given a path forward. We're *not* left to figure it out alone. And that guidance doesn't *take away* our freedom—it actually *supports* it. Back in the early 500s, Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine monastic tradition, developed what he called the *rule of life*. Not a *law* to *earn* holiness, but a *way of living* that helped people stay connected with God. At its heart, the Rule focused on things like **balance**—prayer, work, and rest. It focused on **stability**—commitment to a real community. And it focused on **obedience**—not as blind submission, but as deep listening; and humility and mutual care. Benedict summed it up with a simple phrase: *Ora et labora*—pray and work. He wasn't trying to start a movement, although that's what it became. And that movement happened because this approach *worked*. These Benedictine communities were humane rather than extreme, structured without being rigid, disciplined but also deeply pastoral. For centuries they preserved learning, practiced hospitality, and shaped Christian faith across Europe. Plus they gave us those cool "Chant" albums that were so popular back in the 1990s!

Benedict *understood* the tension between freedom and obedience. The rule didn't *save* anyone. The law doesn't "save" us either. But the rule—

the way—the pattern itself was a gift. A *form* of grace. Because we humans need direction. We need a map. We need markers along the road reminding us to stay connected with God and to live in community with each other. To seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

There's a promise within a promise here. We heard it in the Psalm this morning: "*Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments.*" In plain terms: we are better off when our response to God's grace is to let that grace shape how we live. We're happier—truly happier—when we live as the salt and light God has already redeemed us to be. And yes, there's real loss when we lose our saltiness. But God's grace saves us.

And then—mercifully—God doesn't abandon us to figure life out on our own. The law fulfilled in Christ, the teachings of Jesus, the wisdom of saints like Benedict—these aren't burdens meant to weigh us down. They're guideposts. Handrails. A path forward. That's the promise: God's grace meets us where we are, and God's guidance walks with us as we go.

So as you head into this week, don't ask yourself, "*What rules do I need to follow to get this right?*" Instead, ask, "*Where is grace inviting me to show up?*" Pay attention to the places where light is needed, where justice is overdue, where kindness and empathy would make a difference. You don't have to earn God's love—but you do get to live it out. And when you do, you may discover that God's guidance shows up one faithful step at a time.