

The main message of the Bible centers on Jesus and the good news that our sins can be forgiven and we can receive eternal life through believing in him. There is much more, of course, but Jesus and salvation in him are at the heart of the message of the Bible. And one of the main ways that the message of Jesus is explained is by explaining how the OT anticipates and lays the foundation for understanding Jesus and his mission. And further, one of the main ways that that is done is by explaining how the prevailing understanding of the OT in the time of Jesus and the early church by the Jewish people was wrong and by explaining the true meaning of the OT as pointing to Jesus.

One of the main ways that the NT explains the good news of Jesus is over-against the misunderstanding of the OT Scriptures by the Jews in the time of Jesus and the apostles. And that means that we can only grow in our understanding and appreciation of our salvation in Jesus by following the teaching of Jesus and the NT authors which explains our salvation in the light of the OT and the Jewish misunderstanding of it. And that is what we are going to do in this sermon as we take a second look at Acts 7 which is a summary of Stephen's defense against accusations from Jewish leaders that by his teaching about Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures he was speaking against the temple and the law.

In the last part of chapter 6 we read of Stephen disputing with certain Jews in a synagogue. And they accused Stephen of "speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." They hauled him up before the Jewish council on the charge that he "never ceases to speak words against his holy place for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy his place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:13-14).

The conflict had to do with the proper understanding of the OT Scriptures particularly the significance of the temple and the law given through Moses. Jesus and his followers taught that the OT leads to Jesus and their Jewish opponents taught that Jesus was a false prophet and a blasphemer. That is why they killed him.

Last time we looked at how Stephen showed from the OT story that God did not restrict himself to the temple in meeting with his people which meant that the temple was a temporary institution which was fulfilled in Jesus. Today we will look at the other main theme in Stephen's speech and this is by rejecting Jesus, the Jews were following in the footsteps of their ancestors who consistently rejected those whom God had sent to them. This point is that the Jews had consistently misunderstood and rejected the teaching of Moses and the contemporary Jews had continued that tradition by rejecting Jesus.

So in 7:9-10 says, "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions...." The patriarch's rejected Joseph and the rest of Stephen's account of the Joseph story shows how God used Joseph to save the patriarch's and their families from a famine in spite of how they had treated him. Stephen's point is the Jew's rejection of Jesus followed this same pattern.

Stephen then goes on to summarize Moses' history. He shows how God was with Moses, but the people of Israel consistently rejected him. He tells the story of how Moses defended an Israelite who was being mistreated by an Egyptian, killing the Egyptian. And in verse 25 Stephen says, "He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand." In the verses that follow Stephen describes how God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and sent him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

So again we have the theme of the Israelites rejecting the one whom God had sent to deliver them, but God delivering them in spite of their rejection of God's deliverer.

Then he mentions Moses' prophecy that God would raise up a prophet after him. Verse 37, "This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'" He continues in verses 38ff, "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers. He received the living oracles of God to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts returned to Egypt." He tells the story of the golden calf and how they turned from God to an idol.

Then comes his application of this theme, verses 51-53, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

These Jewish leaders who were accusing Stephen of speaking against the law of Moses, obviously had a different interpretation of their history than Stephen did. They felt they were keeping the laws of Moses. They felt that their understanding of Moses was the right one and that Stephen's understanding was blasphemous. But Stephen accuses them of being stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart, always resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets and in keeping with that tradition, killing Jesus, and not keeping the law of Moses.

Now this focus on Moses has to do with the law. Moses is the one to whom God had given his law on Mount Sinai. The OT prophets had accused the Jews of their time of breaking the laws of Moses. And they were persecuted for that. And this is exactly what happened to Jesus. The Jews who were disputing with Stephen were accusing him of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God and speaking against the law and Stephen accuses them of not keeping the law and persecuting the prophets who preached the law to them.

Now, to understand this point more fully, it will be helpful to consider how Jesus assessed the Jews of his time and their relationship to the law of Moses. Two verses in John's gospel express this explicitly. In John 5:45 Jesus says of the Jews, "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses,

on whom you have set your hope.” In John 7:19 Jesus says to the Jews, “Has not Moses given you the law? yet none of you keeps the law.”

So we see that the Jews thought they were keeping the law of Moses and Jesus accused them of not keeping the law. Jesus even said that the Jews had set their hope on keeping the law of Moses while in fact they were not doing so.

What is going on here? To understand what is going on in the dispute between Jesus and the Jews concerning what it meant to keep the law of Moses we need to consider how Jesus assessed the religion of the Jews. And the heart of Jesus’ criticism of the religion of the Jews was that they focused on the externals of keeping the law while Jesus focused on the internal aspects of law keeping.

Think of the Sermon on the Mount. For instance, think of Jesus’ teaching on adultery in Matthew 5:27, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The Jews felt that they had kept the law forbidding adultery if they kept it outwardly – if there was no sex outside of marriage. But Jesus told them they were guilty of adultery if they looked at a woman with lustful intent. Jesus’ taught that the law regulates our hearts as well as our actions. And that means that no one is free of adultery.

Listen to how Jesus speaks of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:27-28, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Jesus’ preaching of the law did not neglect outward obedience to the law, but it went much further showing that the law addressed our hearts as well as our actions. The Jews felt that they were keeping the laws of Moses if they kept them outwardly, but Jesus’ taught that the inclinations of our hearts matter even more than external obedience.

And because of that Jesus did not consider even the most pious Jews to be right with God. The Jewish leaders were confident that God was pleased with them. That is why Jesus said that they set their hope on Moses. They thought that they were righteous before God on the basis of their external law-keeping. Think of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector which is recorded in Luke 18:9-14. ⁹“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’”

The Jews who took their law-keeping seriously “trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” But Jesus addressed them as law-breakers who needed to repent. Everyone was addressed as a law-breaker who needed to repent. He confronted everyone as lost sinners who needed to be saved. The message to everyone

from the Pharisees to the outwardly immoral and dishonest was “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Indeed Jesus warned the Jewish people that outside of salvation in him they would all perish in hell. In the story of the Gentile centurion, Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Stephen was reflecting Jesus’ perspective on the significance of the law of Moses in his disputes with the Jews. Listen again to how he addresses them in the conclusion to his speech. “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your father’s did so do you.” “You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

And because of this they persecuted the prophets who confronted them with their sins and did not understand their announcements concerning the coming Righteous one. They killed those who confronted them with their sins and they did not recognize the Saviour when he came and when he confronted them with their law-breaking they killed him too. Jesus in John 7:7 makes the connection between the world hating him because he confronted the world with their sins. And by the term “world” here Jesus is speaking about the Jews who rejected him. John 7:7, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.”

Now as I said in the beginning of this sermon, it is over-against the Jewish misunderstanding of the significance of the law of Moses that the writers of the NT unfold and explain the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul summarizes this point in Romans 10:2-3. Speaking of his fellow Jews he says, “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” The Jews were seeking to establish their own righteousness before God through keeping the law of Moses. Because they thought only of external obedience, they thought that they could be righteous before God by their external law-keeping and because of that they did not submit to God’s righteousness. There he is speaking about the righteousness that God would provide for them in Jesus.

What the Jews did not understand was that there is no way for anyone to be righteous before God through keeping the law. The purpose of the law is not to provide a way of salvation. It is rather to teach us that we cannot save ourselves. It is rather to teach us how sinful we really are. The purpose of the law is to show us that there is no way that we can save ourselves. The Jews thought that they could be right with God through keeping the law. Jesus and the apostles taught that one of the great purposes of the law is to show us that our condition is hopeless apart from the grace of God.

Paul spells this out in Galatians 3:10, “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the Book of the Law, and do

them. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law....” He makes the same point in Romans 3:20, “For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

This is the background for understanding the good news of salvation in Jesus. Stephen’s controversy with the Jews was partly about the significance of the law of Moses. The Jews thought that they were doing a pretty good job of keeping it. Stephen was showing that the Jews, past and present had never kept it and had killed those who preached the law to them and called them to repentance.

And all of this is necessary background for our understanding of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Seeing ourselves as sinners who are under the curse of the law is a necessary step to our resting in what Jesus has accomplished for our salvation. If we do not see ourselves as we truly are in the light of God’s law, we will trust in our own goodness instead of trusting in Jesus alone.

The way that the Jews thought of their relationship with God is the way we all are prone to think of our relationship with God. We are all prone to think that our relationship with God is based on our own obedience. It is very common for us to think of law-keeping the way that the Jews did – that if we are keeping the law externally – if we are nice and decent and church going people – God will be pleased with us. And this way of thinking is so deeply ingrained in us that we fall into it even when we know better intellectually. We know that we are saved by grace alone and not by works, and yet it is still easy for us to feel that God must be pleased with us if we are keeping the law outwardly.

The good news of the gospel begins with the bad-news that the law of God condemns everyone of us. Certainly the law deals with our actions, but it goes much deeper than that as Jesus taught us. God’s law is not only concerned about our outward actions. It is also concerned with our hearts. It deals with lustful thoughts. It deals with sinful desires. It deals with desires for good things that are too strong. It deals with unthankfulness. It deals with a lack of contentment. It requires that we love God with all our hearts. It requires that we love our neighbors as ourselves. It requires that we seek first the kingdom of heaven – that the strongest desire in our lives is for the glory of God. And it requires these things and, so much more, perfectly every moment of our lives. We already heard from the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:10, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

All things. Unless we keep the law perfectly we are cursed. James makes the same point in James 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this clearly when it teaches that the Tenth Commandment requires, “That not even the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God’s commandments should ever arise in our hearts. Rather, with all our hearts, we should always hate sin and take pleasure in whatever is right.” (Q/A 113)

This is not the good news of the gospel but it is necessary to understand this to understand the good news. The good news is that Jesus came to save people who are so sinful that everything that we say and think and do is tainted by sin. We never love God with all our hearts. We never free of any sinful desire. We never love others perfectly without a taint of selfishness. Even after conversion when the Holy Spirit is working in us and transforming us towards Christ-likeness, we never have a sinless moment and the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God's commandments is enough to condemn us to hell forever.

And then think of the mountains upon mountains of sinful words and deeds and thoughts and inclinations and desires. How utterly foolish it is for us think that somehow we could make up for that! For one sin, we are liable to an eternity of punishment and the reality is that we sin with every breath. The truth is that any good that we do is mixed with sin and there is no way any of it can even begin to make us right with God. To quote the Heidelberg Catechism again, in answer to the question of whether we can pay for our sins by our good deeds, it says, "Certainly not. Actually, we increase our debt every day."

This is what the Jews in the time of Jesus and Stephen did not understand about the law. And that is why they were so vehement in their rejection of Jesus and his followers. They had set their hope on their keeping of the law of Moses externally and the teaching of Jesus and the apostles concerning the law of Moses was designed to demolish that hope as a necessary step in seeking the need for Jesus and the righteousness that he would provide for all who put their hope in him.

I belabor this point because it is a necessary step to see both the necessity and the glory of the salvation that Jesus gives to those who believe in him. Salvation in Jesus is designed for those who are completely and totally and absolutely helpless as far as making up for their sin is concerned. That means that salvation in Jesus is absolutely necessary if we are going to escape the wrath to come. But it also means that it is completely sufficient. When we believe in Jesus, his perfect righteousness is placed on our account before God. You see Jesus kept the law of Moses perfectly. He never sinned. Not once. And then he suffered and died to pay the penalty for our sins and the fact that God raised him from the dead shows that God was satisfied with the penalty that Jesus paid. And the record of Jesus' perfect law-keeping and atoning death is called righteousness. And that perfect righteousness is given to those who believe in him so that we are declared perfectly righteous before God.

This is what Paul expresses in Romans 10:4. After mourning the fact that most of the Jews were seeking to establish their own righteousness through keeping the law, writes, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." There is much more in these words that I can lay out in this sermon, but at the very least it means that Christ did everything that the law requires of us so that through believing in him we might be righteous before God. Christ kept the law perfectly. Christ endured the curse of the law for our sins. And on that basis we who believe in Jesus are declared perfectly righteous before God. Christ fulfilled all of our obligations before the law.

So when it comes to our standing before God apart from Christ, the laws condemn us utterly and any attempts to appease God through our obedience is laughable – totally and utterly useless. But that total helplessness to contribute one iota to our salvation, highlights the complete sufficiency of salvation in Christ because the righteousness that Christ has earned and gives to us through faith perfectly covers all our sins and fulfills all our obligations before the law of God as far as being right with him is concerned. Law-keeping is important in the Christian life, but it does not contribute one bit to our salvation. It is the result of our salvation and motivated by thanksgiving.

The Jews who disputed with Stephen were not willing to accept the true interpretation of the law of Moses – that it condemned them. They thought that they could earn their salvation through the works of the law. And so they did not respond well when Stephen pointed out that they had never kept the law. Like their ancestors before them, they killed the Prophet who taught them how sinful they really were. They did not want to hear that they were sinners before the law of God. They did not want to hear that the only way to be right before the law of Moses was to receive the righteousness of Christ through faith in his name.

But Stephen and the early Church understood that that message was worth dying for – because it is the only way of salvation and it is the most glorious message possible. It is humbling because it declares that we can't save ourselves. We can't even contribute to our salvation. But being humbled opens the way for us to see the glory of what Christ has done for us because it perfectly provides everything we need to be righteous before God.