This is a sermon for someone who has never made a profession of faith, never been active in church, never invited Jesus into their heart, is likely for some reason “just passing through” The Church of the Covenant today. If Jesus is alive in your heart today you may turn me off, tune this out, not listen and go to sleep. Long time members, take a nap today. A 20 minute nap on Sunday is not a bad thing after all...But this sermon is for someone who has toyed with religion, believes vaguely in God, has never committed their life to following Jesus, is not and has not committed to being a church member and actively following Jesus Christ in their daily walk.

There is a particular way, revealed in scripture spiritually to unite with Jesus. Its very clear and God is very precise in what HE lays out in scripture. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” “While we were yet sinners Christ died for the ungodly.” “All we like sheep have gone astray.” “There is not one good, not one.” Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ begins with BAD NEWS. It begins with a stark assessment of the human condition. We would never choose good on our own; we are hopelessly self-centered and directed by our inner-most wants and desires to the exclusion of all else; the darkest sin we see outside ourselves in the world is also somewhere lodged in our own human heart; we have enmity with God and as human beings we are very clever at keeping Him at a distance and not letting Him in. We are “idol making machines”; we truly worship our possessions, our views of ourselves, our successes, our own abilities, our own goals for our own lives –to the exclusion of inviting God to dwell in our heart through the presence of His Son, Jesus Christ, brought by the Holy Spirit. We are fallen and we cannot get up on our own. It requires God to do something for us that we could never hope to do for ourselves. At one time we were all sinners, all hell-bent and destined for an eternity apart from the Lord. The wages of self-centered sin are death; death of our corporeal bodies to be sure, but the great second death of our souls. And we don’t want to hear about it; we don’t want to be confronted by the truth; we want to go skipping down the garden path believing somehow we are okay when we are not okay. I have just summarized much of Paul’s teaching in the book of Romans...

According to John Calvin, our theological forebear as Presbyterians, there are three uses of the law now that Christ has come. And the first use of the law is the conviction of sin. The law reveals to people that they are not saved, they are not okay with God, they have fallen short and there is a day coming when if they do not repent there is a consequence. Apart from God in this life; apart from God in the life to come. The law is useful for repentance –to turn someone’s heart from their own path to God’s path. You hold up the law to your life and you see there two things which do not fit and either I must endeavor to amend the law (we cannot) or I must endeavor to amend my life. The first use of the law is that it convicts people who do not know of Jesus. The first use of the law is as it invites them to repent and to turn their lives around and to follow HIM, follow Jesus, as one’s chosen Lord and Savior. Our scripture from Romans states: “Yet if it had not been for the law, I should have not known sin.” (Romans 7:7) When someone is convicted by the law and repents and turns their life over to Jesus it is then that the new spiritual reality occurs. You are a new creation. Behold the old person is gone; the new person has come! You are alive in Christ and Christ is alive in you! This new spiritual entity; the fusion of Christ in the heart of the believer is what makes a Christian a Christian. The conviction of the law leads to repentance and repentance leads to spiritual union with Christ, and spiritual union with Christ leads to life, new life, abundant life and eternal life in him.
Now most people don’t want to hear the bad news, they want only the good news. They want to hear that Christ has already paid it all; they are fine just as they are; God loves you just as you are; there is no need for the law to convict and the person to repent and there to be spiritual union with the Lord. We want Easter without Good Friday. We want a cross-less Christianity. We want the resurrection without the cross. We want a happy-clappy religion without any need for personal accountability. We want the joy of the Spirit apart from the holiness of God. We don’t understand that Christ has not come to leave you CONFORMED TO THE WORLD; He has come to have you be TRANSFORMED OUT OF THE WORLD. Spiritual transformation, a new heart and a new life and a new spirit, is why Jesus has come.

People try to recruit new people to Christianity apart from this spiritual transformation. If we’re just nice enough then they will want to be a church member. If we are just welcoming enough then they will want to come. If we’re not off-putting, they will come. If we’re friendly enough, they will want to come. If we don’t talk about unpleasant stuff like sin, they will come. If we’re seeker friendly they will come. While of course we want to be welcoming and friendly, nevertheless the way in which people are included is by spiritual transformation, by a turning away from the sin of the world and a turning toward God in Jesus Christ. Spiritual transformation is what will keep people coming back after the friendliness of their warm welcome has worn off. Wanting to be in God’s presence because of a transformed heart is what causes people to want to come to worship and will fill the pews. Just being nice alone won’t cut it. Inviting someone to have a living relationship with a living Savior will.

Parents, you will know what I mean when I speak of the ways you raise your children in relation to the law. So its Sunday morning and first your child says, “I’m too tired to go to church.” (That’s the sin of sloth) The parent says, “We go to church because we’re Christians and we keep the Sabbath holy because that’s what God says.” You’ve just laid down the law to your child. Your child says, “I don’t want to go to church; its boring.” (That’s the sin of thinking God is there to entertain you; of course its boring because you don’t know Jesus yet). The parent says, “Get up and get ready, the car is leaving in ten minutes.” That’s the law. Your child doesn’t like the law, but nevertheless it’s the law. Your child says, “I don’t want to go.” (That’s sin. That’s saying you don’t want to be in the presence of God and is a measure of the heart). “Why do I have to listen to you?” My Mother would say, “Because I’m the parent and you’re the child and you have to listen to me.” “But why?” Because God has appointed me over you to make sure one day you are a Christian and to fulfill the vows your Father and I took when you were baptized!” Then my dear sweet Mother at this point would say to me –“Well dear, if you’re too tired to go to church then you’ll have to come home bright and early on Friday and Saturday and go to bed at 8pm. So you have plenty of rest. Because church is the most important thing you’re going to do all week.” Game. Set. And match. The parent was the parent. Did not give in to every bit of whining from a self-centered adolescent called Stu-bi-do. First there is the law. And then one day someone is old enough, having experienced the law enough in their life, having tried to do it enough on their own apart from God, and having failed miserably, then they can hear about the Gospel.

Don’t rush to the Gospel. First, the law; then, the Gospel. First, the BAD NEWS; then, the GOOD NEWS. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!