

Least or Great  
(Matthew 5:19)  
By Randy Wages  
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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

Be turning in your bibles to Matthew Chapter 5. Several weeks ago I had brought a message, titled "Entrance Requirements to Heaven" taken from verses 17 to 21 of Matthew 5 as one in a series taken from the Sermon on the Mount. In preparation for that message, I found verse 19 intriguing which prompted me to study it at great length. However, given the time constraints, I didn't cover it quite as extensively as I would have liked. So today, I thought we would take a few minutes to examine verse 19 in greater detail. Accordingly, based on this text, I've titled today's message, "Least or Great."

So look with me now in Matthew 5, and to be sure we capture this in context, let's start back at verse 17 and read down through verse 20. Here Christ says:

***"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup>For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. <sup>19</sup>Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."***

It will help us to consider again the background and the context in which Christ makes these statements. Specifically, He is confronting 2 fallacies that were held by the Pharisees:

1. They accused Christ of being a lawbreaker because He did not observe all of their rules and regulations. And so they accused Him of wanting to destroy God's law.

2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> fallacy was their abuse of the law in dividing it up into lesser and greater commandments, and therefore, lesser or greater sins (in their view of things).

And in our text today, Christ is addressing their error. When Christ came on the scene, He asserted that He was the Messiah who had come to bring to an end the Old Covenant (the law given to Moses as recorded in the Old Testament ó the 10 commandments, the moral law and the ceremonial law) but to do so by way of fulfilling it ó not by destroying it or simply declaring it to be void.

So in vs. 17, when He says, “***Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets...***” He is in essence saying, “Your accusations are not so.” And then He goes on to tell them the very reason He had come on the scene ó His mission on earth ó when He tells them, “***...I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.***” Now do not miss this. Let us remember first this important declaration made by the Lord Jesus Christ ó that this is what He came to do ó He came to fulfill the law.

The phrase there, “***...the law and the prophets...***” was a common way of referring to the Old Testament scriptures. And Christ is the thread that runs through the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi. This was the main message of the prophets. They spoke of the promised Messiah and how He would save sinners based upon the very righteousness spoken of here as the requirement for entrance into heaven. You see, the Gospel ó the good news of how God saves sinners ó has always been the same. The Old Testament saints looked forward to what the promised Messiah would accomplish and the New Testament saints look back ó all of history (i.e. ó history that has eternal significance) converging on the cross of Calvary some 2000 years ago.

So when Christ says He came to fulfill the law and the prophets He is saying that He would bring an end to the Old Covenant requirements by satisfying them ó by fulfilling the law and the prophets. Now let us consider what this encompasses. Well, for one, He was the fulfillment of that which the prophets had foretold concerning His coming: (1) who He was as both God and man, and (2) what He would accomplish in His perfect, sinless obedience, all the way to His death on the cross.

So He fulfilled what they, the prophets, taught concerning Him and what the Mosaic law itself (particularly all the ceremonial aspects) ó taught in types and pictures concerning Him.

He also literally fulfilled the law by perfectly obeying it, not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of it. His heart (or the motive behind all He did) was pure as well. He complied completely with all of the revealed will of God. Now today, we know that we are no longer bound by the law as it was given to Moses, for Christ did make an end of that by satisfying it ó by fulfilling it. We've seen in our study of the rest of chapter 5 that Christ reveals the extent to which we too must comply with God's revealed will if we are to meet God's holy requirement for entrance into heaven by our own obedience or by our own efforts. Just how far must our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Well, Christ sums that up ó what is required to fulfill the law, the righteousness needed before God ó in the last verse of this chapter when He says in vs. 48, "***Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.***"

So where does that leave us? I'll tell you where. The price of admission into the kingdom of heaven is far beyond anything we are able to pay. It took the doing and the dying of a God-man to meet this requirement. We need a righteousness that we cannot produce. Only that which Christ alone accomplished will suffice. Christ alone is able and did produce the one righteousness that exceeds ó for He alone was perfect.

Now to rightly understand vs. 19, we have to consider it in context of the preceding verse as I've just reviewed. He says in verse 19, ***õWhosoever therefore shall break [literally that means annul, set aside or remove ó like treat as unnecessary] one of these least commandments (that is least in their interpretation for God tells us in James 2:10 that to break even one point of the law is to be guilty of all) ó õWhosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.***"

What Christ is showing is that what the Pharisees called "least" and trivialized, would actually condemn them before God and men because of the strictness of God's law. And Christ isn't saying here that these He calls

the least will actually reside in heaven, i.e. ó get in somehow by the skin of their teeth, but then be held in some lesser esteem than others there. No ó it will help interpret this verse if you recall from the previous messages of this series on the Sermon on the Mount, where we showed the kingdom of God spoken of by Christ in this sermon, (sometimes called the kingdom of heaven as in this case), doesn't refer to merely a geographical place but rather it speaks of a dominion, or rule or reign ó what the scripture calls a reign of grace ó grace reigning (how) ó through righteousness ó the very righteousness we must have to enter heaven. So here, Christ is simply saying that in His government, from the perspective of His kingdom, in His realm, in this reign of grace ó whosoever believes that anything less than perfection will suffice, He (in the realm of His kingdom) looks at as being among the worst ó the least. Let me repeat that: whosoever believes that anything less than perfection will suffice, He looks at as being among the worst ó the least. You see, to think anything less than perfection will suffice is to trivialize the very thing the Lord of glory came to do.

Listen, we all initially approach God that same shameful way, daring to stack up something we do (or that we imagine we're enabled to do) whether it's our faith, our decision to accept Jesus, whatever ó we dare to put it in a place of rivalry with that which Christ alone is able to do, the very thing He came to do, and what in fact He did do in His life and death on the cross. Well, if we persist in that natural way of thinking, it doesn't get any worse in God's eyes, from the perspective of His kingdom.

And I believe when He refers to these who ***"...break one of these least commandments.."*** but adds ***"...and teach men so..."*** ó that we can't assume this lets non-teachers off the hook as if it doesn't apply to us if we're not a preacher or teacher, standing before others in some sort of formal teaching arrangement. Think of it this way: Most all of us identify with a religious doctrine. It may be the doctrine of indifference or we may belong to a particular church or religious denomination ó but we believe something. Well, by identifying with a religious group (just as I identify with what is taught at this church) we are giving testimony that we concur with the message that is taught, with the group's doctrine ó their teachings. Whether we personally stand before a group to formally teach or not, our identification with the group in itself serves as a testimony to others that this is what we believe. Thereby, we promote what is taught and in essence, this too could be considered a form of teaching them what we believe.

Now that's not a problem unless the teachings with which we identify serve as a testimony to others that something less than (or other than, or in addition to) the one righteousness that Christ alone finished and established in perfect satisfaction to God's law will somehow get us into heaven. Like the Pharisees, that teaches that the perfection the scriptures say is required to satisfy a holy God, really isn't. In such a case Christ, looks at that, not with favor, but in His realm, it is considered the "least."

Well, as we consider now the end of verse 19 of Matthew 5, keeping in mind the context where Christ has said that fulfilling this law, every jot and tittle, is what He came to do, then we can properly understand that when He says, ***“but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven”*** He is speaking of Himself ó for He is the only one, in His humanity, being made under the law, to ever render perfect, continual obedience to all of the revealed will of God.

Well, any sinner who becomes truly convinced by God's spirit that nothing but the blood of Jesus (His finished work with no contribution from the sinner), finds that there is nothing he or she can do to "get themselves saved" so to speak. And when (and if) that happens, only then do you come empty handed, left with nothing to plead but mercy.

Now the mercy that a true believer pleads is not to be confused with the way we normally think of mercy ó like when we speak of someone "throwing themselves at the mercy of the court." No ó mercy does mean unmerited favor (i.e. ó unmerited or unearned by the recipient), but the mercy that the Bible speaks of goes beyond our natural ideas that would have us imagine that there is a forsaking or setting aside of strict justice in order to let the guilty go free. It is more than just an expression or act of great compassion.

No, the penalty for sin must be extracted. The Bible tells us that God is both a just God and a Savior and, as such, His mercy does not come at the expense of His justice else He would stop being the immutable, holy and just God that He is ó He would have to "un-god" himself so to speak. You see, it is unmerited favor toward the one who is shown mercy, but it was merited by another ó by none other than the Person and work of Christ, our mercy-seat, in His perfect satisfaction to the law and justice of God that He finished at the cross of Calvary.

Wow ó to discover that our salvation really is totally outside of ourselves goes against our nature. We don't like the idea of not controlling our own destiny. I am totally at the mercy of a sovereign God and there's nothing about me that would cause God to favor me. Nor is there anything that I can do to be included in that number.

Well, the Bible does tell us some valuable and precious insights that enable us to identify whether we are among the objects of God's mercy for whom Christ lived and died. First, it tells us that He providentially will bring them under the sound of this message, His gospel. As Romans 1:16 -17 tells us, His gospel is distinguished in that therein is the righteousness of God revealed. It, His gospel, is the good news of how God saves sinners based solely upon the imputation of the righteousness which Christ established. As His word tells us, **"How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?"** Well in light of that, I'm encouraged because everyone hearing this message, this good news, is providentially in a good spot for that's the message preached here at our church and we're blessed to have heard it.

And then, if you're brought to the point where God convinces you through His word that there is nowhere else to turn ó that you need pure, unadulterated mercy ó His favor based upon Christ and the righteousness He established in satisfaction to God's holy justice ó and that this alone will save you from the hell that we all deserved (in spite of even our best efforts) ó and that nothing else will suffice ó then fret no longer. Because only those for whom Christ died are given the spiritual life (which He merited for them) that would cause them to continually look to Him alone for all of their salvation.

Like all without exception, we're born into this world as spiritually dead sinners and void of spiritual senses. Consider a corpse. When a person dies, the body is just a shell ó the physical senses no longer operate. They don't see, they don't hear, there's nothing left functioning in that body. There is no life there. Well similarly, until God gives spiritual life, we have no spiritual senses. The bible says He quickens (gives life to) those, who like all men, come into this world dead in their trespasses and sins ó physically walking, but spiritually dead.

Some of you may recall that when Christ was asked by His disciples why He chose to speak in parables, He replied that because, “seeing they don’t see, (They have physical eyes but can’t see spiritually) and hearing they don’t hear, but He went on and told His disciples that you’re blessed because you’ve been given spiritual senses of eyes to see and ears to hear, and hearts and minds to understand. And if and when that takes place of you too will rejoice in seeing how God saves sinners based solely upon the imputation of the righteousness established by Christ at the cross. That’s what it is to trust in Christ alone for all of your salvation.

It is to see that He alone fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law and dotted every i and crossed every t, even “...***the least of these commandments.***” He obeyed them, but not as a private Person, but rather as a Representative and Substitute for a people or a people who, (because of what He merited for them), are given in each successive generation the gift of spiritual life that causes them to see their greatness in the kingdom of heaven all wrapped up in our great and wonderful Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, there is no middle ground in the realm of His kingdom. To persist in relying on anything short of perfection (even if we might think it to be a trivial matter or one of “the least commandments” so to speak) is to be deemed unworthy as the very least or the worst. But all those sinners who enter His kingdom shall be made righteous in Him, having what He accomplished charged or imputed to them. And that is indeed great!

What about you? Seeing this perspective of the kingdom, what does this standard of judgment say about you? Are you among the “least” or are you among the “great”? Well all who are found in Him “...***shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.***”

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself or the Bible.