

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Much And Play So Poorly

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 5:3 ESV)

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”

(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)

Jesus And The Law

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Matthew 5:17-20

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I'd invite you to open it now to Matthew chapter 5:17-20. This morning we are looking at one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament. It is a passage that clarifies for us the relationship between Jesus and the Law – and in a secondary sense, the relationship between the disciples of Jesus and the Law.

Any serious reader of the Bible is likely to understand that something changes when we pass from the Old Testament to the New Testament – just the fact that we use those words, OLD Testament and NEW Testament – clues us into the reality of CHANGE and DEVELOPMENT – but what exactly has changed? And what if anything, has stayed the same?

Those are the sorts of questions that we'll be wrestling with today; hopefully you have your Bibles open by now to Matthew chapter 5; I'll begin reading at verse 17. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

“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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:17–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

In order to understand this passage we will need to ask, and by God’s grace answer 4 important questions.

- 1. How does Jesus “fulfil” the law and the prophets?**
- 2. At what point will “all be accomplished”?**
- 3. In what sense will our righteousness “exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees”?**
- 4. How does the law continue to function within the community of Jesus Christ?**

Let’s begin with the first of those questions:

How does Jesus “fulfil” the law and the prophets?

He says that he does. He says in verse 17:

“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.” (Matthew 5:17 ESV)

So Jesus says that he has NOT come to abolish the law and the prophets – that is not the right way to understand his relationship to the Old Testament - Jesus did not come to contradict the law or overthrow the prophets; rather he came to fulfil them.

Now it is easier for us, of course, to understand how Jesus “fulfils” the Old Testament prophets. He is the answer to the questions they were asking, he is the Savior they said would eventually come, he is the Seed of the Woman, the offspring of Abraham, the Greater Son of David, the Suffering Servant, the Priest in the order of Melchizedek, the Good Shepherd of the Sheep – the Bright and Morning Star – he is all of that, and more, thanks be to God!

But in what sense does Jesus fulfil THE LAW?

Well first of all, we forget sometimes, that it wasn't just the prophets that prophesied in the Old Testament – the law prophesied as well. In Matthew 11:13 Jesus said:

“For all the Prophets **and the Law prophesied** until John” (Matthew 11:13 ESV)

So in what sense does the law prophesy? Well, it tells us that God is holy and people are sinners and that sin separates us from God. It tells us that sin stains, seeps and spreads. Sin gets inside us and it changes us from the inside out and it makes us antagonistic toward God. We learn all of that in the Book of Leviticus. But we also learn in Leviticus that God is not content with the present state of affairs. He wants us to come home, he wants to heal us and he wants to be reconciled to us, so he institutes a system and a series of rituals – all of them involving blood and death – and all of them having to be repeated, year after year after year, which seems to suggest that they are helpful but not finally decisive. They are a patch, but not a permanent fix. They are PROVISIONAL. They point forward to something BETTER and more EFFECTIVE that will have to come from God in the future.

That's exactly how John the Baptist understood the law – which is why when he saw Jesus he pointed at him and said:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

Does that help you understand what Jesus meant when he said:

“For all the Prophets **and the Law prophesied** until John” (Matthew 11:13 ESV)

The prophets AND the law were pointing FORWARD to something bigger and better THAN THEMSELVES! A better prophet was coming, a better sacrifice was coming, a better solution was coming – because GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD!

That's the Gospel! And that's how Jesus FULFILLED the law and the prophets. He was everything they predicted and he did everything they anticipated. Jesus didn't come to overthrow or contradict the law and the prophets, on the contrary, he came to fulfil them – thanks be to God!

Alright so the relationship of Jesus to the law – and to the Old Testament generally – is not about “abolishing”; it's about fulfilling – but that still leaves us with the question of duration. Jesus says:

For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law **until all is accomplished**. (Matthew 5:18 ESV)

So Jesus says that the law is as sacred, immovable and unchangeable as the sun, the moon and the stars – it is a fixed and certain reality – and it will be UNTIL all is accomplished.

So what does that mean?

At what point will “all be accomplished”?

Well, we've already been alerted to some sort of transition here because Jesus says:

“all the Prophets and the Law prophesied **until John**” (Matthew 11:13 ESV)

Once John, standing in line with the Old Testament prophets and the entire Old Testament system, points at Jesus and says:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

At the exact moment, the prophetic function of the law and the prophets has been accomplished. John was like the last man in a very long chain of sentries. He took the flame from men like Isaiah and Micah and Haggai and Zechariah and he used that flame to shine the beacon of promise and hope upon the person and work of Christ.

And now it's up to him. D.A. Carson puts it this way, he says:

“The Law and the Prophets, far from being abolished, find their valid continuity in terms of their outworking in Jesus. The detailed prescriptions of the Old Testament may well be superseded, because whatever is prophetic must be in some sense provisional. But whatever is prophetic likewise discovers its legitimate continuity in the happy arrival of that toward which it has pointed.”¹

So, Jesus says in essence, that the law and the prophets are as fixed and unchangeable as the sun, the moon and the stars – they will remain in place until they have done everything God ordained for them to do. Thus, whatever in the law was there to point toward Jesus, will have been fulfilled when John pointed to Jesus. And whatever in the law has to do with the eternal goodness and character of God will of course carry on in the teaching and Lordship of Jesus.

Does that make sense?

That’s why, for example, Jesus can retire now the function of the food laws – as he clearly does in Mark 7. He says:

“There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable.¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him,¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (**Thus he declared all foods clean.**)²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him.²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:14–23 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

The function of the food laws was to TEACH the people of Israel to make DISTINCTIONS between the things that lead to life and the things that lead to death. By means of the food laws they were supposed to learn how to identify categories and boundaries and to live happily and

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 37.

healthily within those boundaries. The Old Testament dietary code was basically teaching DISCERNMENT 101 – but now, Jesus is here and he is teaching DISCERNMENT 401 - he is taking the skills his disciples learned in their spiritual infancy and he is applying them now to the advanced matters of moral, spiritual and ethical discernment. He isn't CONTRADICTING the law, rather in him the law is now realizing the ultimate purpose for which it was originally intended.

So the law and the prophets are in place, until they will have accomplished everything for which God ordained them. Some of those functions have already been fulfilled – they were accomplished the moment John the Baptist pointed at Jesus - other of those functions continue to be carried out IN the person and through the Lordship of Christ. In that sense, they remain as fixed and immovable as the sun and the stars in the heavens.

That leads us to our third question:

In what sense will our righteousness “exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees”?

In verse 20 Jesus says:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20 ESV)

Now, it is easy to imagine that part of the reason for this section in the Sermon on the Mount was the fact that the scribes and Pharisees had begun to criticise Jesus. “He heals on the Sabbath!!” “His disciples don't wash their hands the right way!” “He eats with tax collectors and sinners!!”

They were accusing Jesus of being less than righteous – at least less than “righteous” as they defined “righteous”. So Jesus here says that his way is actually a significantly higher way and the righteousness of his followers will far surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes and Pharisees were practicing a form of righteousness based mostly on boundary markers and external appearances. They had decided how many steps a person could take on the Sabbath and how best to wash a pot that had come in contact with certain types of food – but

none of that has anything to do with REAL RIGHTEOUSNESS!!! That's bottom feeder stuff; that's superficial stuff and Jesus here is talking about something much deeper and much more substantial than that.

The righteousness of Jesus is a DEEPER and a HIGHER righteousness. It was literally "next level". In Matthew 11 where Jesus said that the law and the prophets prophesied until John, he also said:

"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:11 ESV)

So John had reached the highest you could go under the Old Testament system, he was the highest peak in terms of the Mount Rushmore of Old Testament saints – and yet – Jesus says, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Jesus is saying that the righteousness he gives is NEXT LEVEL.

So what does he mean by that? The Apostle Paul is helpful here. In Romans 3:21-22 he says:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.**" (Romans 3:21–22 ESV)

So Paul says that a new righteousness has come in Jesus Christ – it is APART from the law – it is separate from the law – it is literally NEXT LEVEL. Now that isn't to say that the law and the prophets were ignorant of it – on the contrary, this is exactly what they were talking about, this is what they were pointing toward – but they couldn't get you there, they just told you it was coming. And now, in Jesus, IT IS HERE. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

So what is that? How do we get that?

Well, Paul tells us, we get that through faith in Jesus Christ! So this is an IMPUTED righteousness. This is something that God GIVES TO US when we believe in Jesus Christ. It is the righteousness that comes to us as GRACE.

Think of it this way, all the scribes and Pharisees, they are down there washing their pots and counting their steps on the Sabbath and being careful not to touch this person or that person – and they think that they are accumulating righteousness before God. They think they are FILLING their books with the record of the righteous deeds – but all of it comes from pride!! All of it is just so much nonsense! All of it comes from an ignorant misunderstanding of what the law and the prophets were talking about. Paul says that; he says:

“they have a zeal for God, but **not according to knowledge.**” (Romans 10:2 ESV)

But Jesus understands God perfectly. Jesus understands the law perfectly. And Jesus lived a life of righteousness and love perfectly. So his book is FULL. He did it right. He scored a perfect game – and the Bible says, if we claim him as our Lord and Saviour then the full record of his merit will be copied and pasted into our account.

That’s next level righteousness!

That’s what theologians mean by “imputation” – it literally means “to put in our book”. That’s why we call it grace – because you didn’t earn it, Jesus did!

But the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ isn’t JUST about imputation, it is also about TRANSFORMATION. When we are saved Jesus puts his Holy Spirit in us and we begin to think, desire, act and behave again in God-glorifying ways. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

So the Spirit of Jesus is changing you by one degree of glory to the next, into the same image as Jesus, so that you begin to reflect the perfect righteousness of Jesus in your own life and actions over time.

So in those TWO WAYS, our righteousness – the righteousness of all true disciples of Jesus Christ – will and DOES exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees – thanks be to God!

And that leads us to our final question:

How does the law continue to function within the community of Jesus Christ?

Obviously this is where the rubber meets the road. Getting it wrong here will have all kinds of consequences for you as a follower of Jesus Christ. If you make too much of the law – and ask it to do things it wasn't intended to do – that's legalism. That leads to all kinds of frustration, burnout, deceit and hypocrisy. There is nothing good down that road and in the most extreme cases it amounts to nothing less than UNFAITH.

But if you make too little of the law, and you act as though it has no use to you as a Christian and no role to play in the covenant community – then that's antinomianism. That leads to all kinds of foolishness, ignorance, embarrassment and loss of influence and credibility in the culture. There is nothing good down that road either – and in the most extreme cases, that too amounts to nothing less than unfaith.

So we're trying to thread the needle here – we want to acknowledge – and celebrate – that the law has a continuing role to play in the covenant community – obviously! Jesus said in verse 19:

“Therefore whoever **relaxes** one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:19 ESV)

I will tell you this friends, it amazes me how many people in the so called evangelical church, think it is their job to show us how the Bible doesn't mean anymore what it so obviously says.

They think it is their job to show you how what was hateful to God in the Old Testament is now a matter of indifference to him in the New Testament.

I find that sort of arrogance and deceit absolutely jaw dropping.

Jesus literally says – the people who do that are going to be called least in the kingdom of heaven. The people who are doing that are literally tearing down their own house – they are going to be like one of those people Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians 3 who may make it into heaven, but only like a naked man escaping from a fire.

How is that a long-term plan?

That might win you the praise of the masses for a month or two – but you will pay an awful price in eternity for engaging in that kind of dishonesty and stupidity.

No, no. Our job is not to untie things that are supposed to stay tied. Our job is to use the LAW LAWFULLY. The Apostle Paul said:

“Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully” (1 Timothy 1:8 ESV)

So how do we do that? Thankfully we get a little help in the New Testament on that. As we read through the New Testament we can see the law being used in the church of Jesus Christ in at least two ways. First of all we see it being used:

1. To convict the sinner of unrighteousness

The Apostle Paul speaks about this in Romans 7. Having explained that the law doesn't save us and having made it clear that we have died to the law in the death of Jesus Christ – he goes on to say that nevertheless, that doesn't mean that the law is bad. Our relationship to it has changed, but the law is still good. He says:

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”” (Romans 7:7 ESV)

So the law is useful, Paul says, because it applies the character of God to the realm of human behaviour. It establishes boundaries. The law shows us what God likes and doesn't like. God doesn't like adultery, according to the 7th commandment, which suggests that he does like it when we love our spouses and commit to the long-term health and fruitfulness of our marriages. The law shows us that God doesn't like stealing, which suggests that he likes it when we work hard and give generously to others from the overflow of our labours. The law establishes an outline and a series of BOUNDARIES – and that's good, Paul says, because if it were not for those boundaries I would never have known how far I had drifted from the life I was created to live. Those boundaries PREACHED THE GOSPEL TO ME, Paul says. They told me that I had wandered far from home.

So the law is good, because it convicts me of unrighteousness.

And then secondly, we see the law being used in the New Testament:

2. To guide believers in the path of love and justice

We see Jesus doing that most immediately in the subsequent sections in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus points to the outer boundaries of the law, and then he drives his disciples right down the centre of the road. He says:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder ... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment’” (Matthew 5:21–22 ESV)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27–28 ESV)

So the law is helpful – it gets you to the place where you can receive further and deeper instruction from Jesus.

And the law can be helpful when you don't have a specific word or teaching from Jesus. Paul used it that way in 1 Corinthians 5. He was dealing with a very difficult ethical situation having to do with a sin that Jesus never specifically talked about. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 he says:

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:1–2 ESV)

So here we have a situation of INCEST – but Jesus never talked about incest – or at least we don't have a record of him teaching on that in the New Testament – so are Paul's hands tied in this situation? Does he have to let this go? No! Rather Paul applies principles taught in the Old Testament law bringing them forward into this situation. In verse 1 he refers directly to Leviticus 18:8 which says:

“You are not to have sex with your father's wife; it will shame your father.” (Leviticus 18:8 HCSB)

So – guided and informed by the law – Paul says, we aren't going to tolerate that sort of behaviour in the church, it isn't loving, it isn't just, it doesn't accord with God's character, therefore, let him who has done this thing be removed.

Jesus embodied the Spirit of the law – literally – so Paul is confident that under the Lordship of Jesus, if this behaviour was displeasing to God in the Old Testament, it remains displeasing to God in the New and guided by that, he provides situational teaching that moves his congregation further down the path of righteousness, justice and love.

That's the appropriate use of the law in the New Testament church. That's what Paul means when he talks about using the law LAWFULLY.

If you are using the law to try and win your salvation – well that's not good. That's a fool's errand. You will never do it and you don't need to do it, because Jesus has already done it. So that's not the right use of the law.

But if you are using the law to help you discover what pleases and honours the Lord; if you are using the law to help determine how to live lovingly and justly with other people; if you are using the law to help you appreciate, appropriate and adore the person of Jesus Christ – then you are using it correctly. And if you are using it correctly, then the law will be a blessing to you – it will be a teacher, a friend and a guide – thanks be to God! Let's pray together.