
Law: Excessive Righteousness

Matthew 5:11-20

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How righteous do you have to be to get to heaven? There are lots of answers to that question. All but one answer is wrong. Jesus warns that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the most religious and strict adherence to the Mosaic Law you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. I hope this startles you. I hope this makes you stop and think. What is Jesus talking about?

Something important will happen right at the top of our text and is the reason we are starting here in our exposition. What do you notice happens between verses 1-10 and 11-16? Blessed are those who... now blessed are you... It becomes personal. Jesus looks into the faces of disciples and... Matthew writes to disciples who... will face what he speaks of here.

Just a word. I intended to highlight Jesus' focus on his disciples. I misspoke when I said (yes, more than once) that Jesus is speaking only to the crowd. At the end of the sermon on the mount, the crowd is amazed at Jesus' teaching. So obviously, they were there. The disciples were front and center and the focus of His teaching.

Our Persecution by the World (v.12)

The "blessed are they who" changes to "blessed are you..." Most people do not think of what Jesus is about to say as being blessed. Yet, He says it...

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Our Painful Suffering (v.11)

I don't know if you have gone through what Jesus is talking about here. But being despised and berated when you have done nothing wrong is painful, deeply painful. When it is done with the intent to harm you, to hurt you, to destroy your reputation because you are a Christian, this is very hard to bear.

This kind of verbal persecution often comes upon those who are lowly, meek, sorrowing, and spiritually poor. It seems to invite it in some way. This persecution can happen in a family, between spouses, at work and sadly, even in a church.

But it is qualified. Not all verbal abuse is persecution and comes under the heading of this verse. Only that which is suffered directly as a result of standing for

Christ is in view here. Following Jesus and standing for Jesus has always been costly and often it has been painful.

Our Surprising Response (v.12)

How do we tend to respond to being reviled, disparaged, slandered or lied about?

We tend to attack... Usually, we think the best defense is an elevated attack.

We tend to retreat... By this I mean we act like the victim to draw attention and sympathy to ourselves.

Often, we do both: we attack the attacker and seek the pity of others.

The kingdom of heaven is a down-side-up kingdom. How does Jesus tell you to respond? *Rejoice and be glad*. Now don't try to minimize what Jesus is saying. This is not a "Praise Jesus" kind of response. This is not some fake religious platitude. When we suffer persecution for Jesus, even in and through the pain, there is to be a heart that rejoices and is glad.

Our Biblical Reasons (v.12)

Now, the response of rejoicing and being glad flows up from something we know, believe, and affirm. When this happens to us, we are in good company. The Old Testament prophets often were hated, slandered, reviled, persecuted and some were slaughtered. Further, John the Baptist is in prison. At the moment Jesus is speaking, the final prophet languishes in Herod's dungeon.

True followers of Jesus will rejoice when they are entrusted with and have the privilege of being attacked by others. While this is only beginning to happen to Jesus, Peter, who witnessed so much of it in Jesus' life, wrote these words in 1 Peter 2:21-23:

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus kept on entrusting Himself to the One who would judge justly. That is the ultimate rationale for us.

Our Place in the World (v.13-16)

Believers live in the world. This is what we are in the world. This is not a command to be something. It is a command to conserve what we actually are.

When Jesus is speaking the audience are Jews and Israel. These two paragraphs effectively condemn Israel.

When Jesus sits to say these things, He is the embodiment of what He says. He is true salt and true light. When Matthew writes these things, the church needs to listen and take heed.

To be Distinctive in the World (v.13)

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

God's people are salt in the world.

But Israel had corrupted the Law so that it no longer was distinct and preserving in the world. No wonder then that Israel had been trampled under the foot of many oppressors, including Rome.

Jesus is the salt of the world. He was distinct, pure and not corrupted. So, He will do in the world what God's people, as salt, are supposed to do.

Christians are salt in the world. The question is, have we become so corrupted and contaminated by the world that we have lost our saltiness?

I know that there are eleven possible interpretations of what “being the salt of the earth” means. Jesus probably had only one in mind. Which one is that? Well, of all the properties and uses of salt, Jesus alludes to one that we are most familiar with... using salt to season and flavor food.

Christians are like a plate of food that has just the right amount of salt. When we trust in Christ and become true disciples, the world notices a distinct flavor to our lives. But if we stop being and acting salty, if we lose our distinctiveness, we become worthless. It’s as if there is no salt in the soup. Now strictly speaking, salt is simply salt. It is a stable compound. So how then does it lose its saltiness? It loses its saltiness if it is contaminated by mixture with impurities. In other words, the disciple loses his distinctive characteristic by which people have a taste of who Jesus is and what He is like.

What happens to salt that has been ruined? In the ancient days it was scattered on paths and unpaved roads to keep the weeds from growing. It still had a usefulness. But the usefulness has now become a “trodden under foot” use. You are the salt of the earth. Have you lost your saltiness? Are you living out the characteristics of a true disciple outlined in the beatitudes?

To be Visible in the World (v.14-16)

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

God's people are the light of the world.

But Israel had failed by using the Law as a means to self-glorification. They failed to be a light in the world, often being indistinguishable from the Gentiles around them.

Jesus is the light of the world. His obedience in the world always and only glorified God.

We are the light of the world. We are truly to reflect Jesus in the world. But there is a responsibility that goes with it.

In neither of these texts is there a command to become salt or to become light. In both, a true follower simply is salt and light. The analogy is common sense. A hilltop city's light will be clearly seen. People don't light a lamp just to cover it up. The point of light and a lamp is to be seen. It is to be visible. True followers of Jesus will be visible in the world.

But there is a command here. Note, what light is supposed to represent is simply said. It is your good works. True disciples do good works. They don't work to become disciples; they work because they are disciples. But now comes the command. It is not merely a command to do good works, to let your light shine. It is to do your good works in such a way that others see them and boast in God, not in you.

Why is this important? Because it is very easy to do the right things for all the wrong reasons. We can do good works and practice righteousness... to bring glory to us instead of our heavenly Father. Here is a hint at what constitutes excessive righteousness: *it is being who you in the world in such a way that Jesus is glorified.*

Our Righteousness in the World (v.17-20)

Think about how we got here. We will be reviled by people because we stand for Jesus and what He taught. We are to be salt and light, to conserve who we are and to illuminate the darkness with truth. What Jesus will say next models what it means to be salt and light in the world. Let's hover over the text with that in mind before we walk through the forest of the text itself.

Jesus treats the Scripture with respect.

Jesus fulfills the Old Testament including the Mosaic Law.

Jesus implies that the Mosaic Law will one day, in some way, come to end.

Jesus commends those who properly teach and obey the Mosaic Law *because He is living in that era.*

Jesus declares that the Mosaic Law's righteousness is not sufficient for our ethics, even the strict and exacting demands of the Pharisees and scribes.

To truly be salt and light in the world in a way that is not corrupted by the world and brings glory to God, we must:

Treat the Scriptures with respect.

Affirm that Jesus fulfills the Mosaic Law and thus brings it to an conclusion, it having served its purpose.

Understand the difference between living in the Old Covenant under the Law (we don't) and living in the New Covenant under grace (we do).

Rest in the righteousness imputed to our account while obeying God from the heart.

This section opens with "Do not think..." That is precisely what has begun to happen and will certainly unfold through Jesus' life. We know from history this will take place in the church. Jesus was being misrepresented, slandered, and will be persecuted for what He is about to teach. His disciples were as well. Many who have understood, believed, and taught this text rightly have received the same treatment.

It is easy to get caught up in the theological wrangling that goes on over this paragraph. This text is critical for how we think about the place of the Old Testament (it is important!!!) and the place of the Mosaic Law (it has been fulfilled and has no force on us today!!!). If you are new to the Chapel, I appeal to you to listen carefully to the exposition and then ask questions, particularly at Flock meetings on Wednesday.

The Assertions (v.17-18)

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. 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.

Now we have a problem. Listen to 2 Corinthians 3:3, 7-11:

³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

There are only three possible choices (though many try to introduce other possibilities.)

1. Paul simply contradicts Jesus. Jesus says the Ten Commandments are permanently in force. Paul says they are not.

2. We are misunderstanding what Paul is saying. Except what Paul is saying is very, very clear. What was written on the two stone tablets came to an end. This is clearly what Paul says there and it corresponds to many other texts. Paul speaks of us not being under the Law, the Law was until Christ and Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness.
3. We are misunderstanding what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not saying that the Law is permanently in force. He is saying something different.

I think number three is the only real, viable choice. Therefore, we must do a little careful and close observation of what Jesus actually says.

Jesus did not come to abolish the Old Testament (Law and Prophets) but to fulfill them.

Jesus is stressing the continued value of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus is stressing the importance of knowing, understanding, and gleaning from the wisdom of the Old Testament. What we believe about the kingdom of heaven and the New Covenant stresses the importance of the Old Testament as well. We are being misrepresented, as Jesus was. We believe in the Old Testament. We are not in its time. We are not under its law systems. But it is still important for us as Jesus and all the Apostles declare.

Now, it is important to remember our three audiences. Jesus is saying these words while under the Mosaic Law and preaching to Jews who were also under the Law. He is not only upholding the Old Testament but also the Mosaic Law. He is living under it. The disciples and crowds listening are as well. So, what Jesus says is true to them. They must honor and keep the Law. Now, Jesus is not dividing up the Law. The Mosaic Law is all one thing. Yes, there are the Ten Words section, the Levitical section, and the Civil section. But the idea of splitting out the Ten Commandments has very little support in the Scriptures themselves. There are not three Laws. There is the Law, singular, one whole thing made up of three primary components. Therefore, to His first audience, the one in front of Him, Jesus is stressing their responsibility to adhere to the Covenant just as He did.

Matthew is writing this text to the church of His day which was a largely a mix of Jew and Gentile. However, he is writing, not under Law, but under grace. Jesus speaks and Matthew records this in such a way *as to anticipate and not contradict* what was to come. The Old Testament is critical to our understanding of who Jesus is and what He has done as interpreted by the New Testament.

The Old Testament, and the Law in particular, are fulfilled in Christ. What the word *fulfilled* means is clear from how Matthew has used it to this point. It means that the purpose of the Old Testament and the Law to point to Christ has been completed. He is who and what was predicted, promised, and pictured. Paul tells us, as the New Testament interpreter of Old Testament, that in fulfilling, Jesus brought the Old Age to an end and completed the purpose of the Mosaic Law. Therefore, it is no longer authoritative over us; it is not in force for us.

One writer has noted, "For Jesus to claim to be the inerrant expositor of the Word who has come to tell everyone what the Law really teaches is one highly controversial claim. But to also claim to be the absolute embodiment of God's greatest promises is more than a bit blasphemous if it's not true." (MacDonald, p.129).

The Mosaic Law will be preserved until all is accomplished or fulfilled.

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.

This is a difficult sentence. What throws us a little is the two "untils." Is Jesus saying that the Law will remain in force until all is accomplished, that is when time, is ended? The Scriptures certainly will continue. But is that what Jesus is referring to here?

Notice that Jesus refers to "the Law". That is how Matthew writes it. So, on the face of it, Jesus seems to be saying that the Mosaic Law will be in force until the end of the world. If that is what He is saying, then Paul is contradicting Jesus in several places in His writing.

Over my years of growing in understanding of New Covenant Theology, it has been tempting to twist and turn this sentence to say something different than what those who believe we are still under the Ten Commandments assert this says. But *their* twisting it does not justify *my* twisting it. I may have the truth, but I can't twist Scripture to get there.

This is introduced with one of Jesus' "Truly I say to you..." This is said to get our attention that what He is about to say is important. It is also highlighting that what He is about to say is true. It has the force of, "Now you listen to me..."

What is an iota and a dot? These are smallest markings in the Hebrew text. They were a part of the written language so that it could be pronounced correctly and so that it would be understood. Jesus then is speaking of the text of the Old Testament and the words even down to the smallest minutiae of the words themselves will be... what?

The words of the Old Testament and the Law "will not pass away." The phrase is the same as "heaven and earth pass away." So, what is Jesus saying? First, heaven and earth passing away" was an idiom. It sounds like this: "When the heaven and the earth vanish, then the Law will vanish." So, until the end of time, the Old Testament, and the Law in particular, will continue to exist. Nothing will be taken from their words or truths.

What is the conclusion? Jesus is not talking about the Old Testament nor the Law being permanently in force. It was in force and people were under it when Jesus was talking. But when Matthew is writing, no one is under it and it is not in force. Paul makes that clear and Matthew would have known it. What Jesus is talking about is the continued existence and value of the Old Testament. For His

immediate hearers, the Law was in force but radically misused, misinterpreted and misapplied.

It is important to correct a misunderstanding by many and a misrepresentation by many others. We do not believe that the Law came to an end because the Law was wrong. We do not teach that the ethics of the Old Covenant were incorrect or not a God-given morality. The reason the Law came to an end is because of its limited purpose, its natural weakness, and its completed fulfillment. The Law is holy, just, and good IF it is used for the purpose for which God intended it. It was the code of ethics for the nation of Israel. It pointed to and still points us to Christ. It was weak and powerless in that it never could cause what it called for. But it still exists as Old Testament scripture. It is still important and valuable to us as New Covenant believers. Otherwise, the book of Hebrews is simply a weird aberration. The book of Hebrews clearly teaches what we believe but makes extensive use of the Old Testament.

Therefore, Jesus says:

Regarding abolishing the Law and Prophets, that is, the Old Testament, He does not abolish them. They are still the Word of God.

Regarding fulfilling the Law, that is, the Mosaic Law, it was in force in His day, but no longer is in force. Its purpose has been fulfilled.

Regarding the longevity of the Law, that is, to its continued existence, it will exist as Scripture until all is accomplished when the heaven and earth pass away.

The Entailments (v.19)

If this is so, then how the Old Testament is treated is important.

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.

Notice that the “therefore” is a conclusion drawn from His assertions. Since the Old Testament will continue to exist, since Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and the Law, and since the Jews listening to Jesus are under the Law...

Do not lower the standards of the Law...

The Pharisees often relaxed the demands of the Law by adding their own interpretations and applications. But the real problem was with the Jewish people themselves. The law was very strict. The Law could describe obedience but could not compel it. So, people just lived in a way that did not keep the Law. They had a long history of open disobedience and negating the Law.

But there is more to this than just that. Jesus said that they were not to think that He came to abolish the Law. But now He is saying do not think that what

He is going to command in the rest of His sermon is relaxing the Law. He was upholding it for those who were under it, for those for whom it was in force.

Do keep and teach the Law...

The Pharisees were notorious for making rules and strictures of the Law that they themselves did not do. Jesus makes a point that doing precedes teaching. He will model that in all His life. What He teaches is what He has been doing.

The New Covenant trajectory...

But what about this least in the kingdom and greatest in the kingdom? The kingdom is near, it is at hand. The king is here. Jesus is living in and under the Old Testament and the Law. Yet, He Himself is the New. He is inaugurating, beginning the new. He is the *new* in all that will come in the New Covenant, in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus will never be least in the kingdom for He will, while it is in force, never relax these commandments. He will be greatest in the kingdom, for while it is in force, He will do and teach these commandments.

The Reason (v.20)

Here is the thesis statement, the theme of the sermon on the mount.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

To enter the kingdom of heaven, a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees is required. An excessive righteousness is the standard of the kingdom. Is this legalism? Does this mean that to enter the kingdom, you must be perfect? You must totally and completely obey the Law? Or you must perfectly keep the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount or the rest of the New Testament?

The answer is, "Yes". Perfect, total, without fail righteousness is required.

You and I are in real trouble. We cannot do it. We have not done it. Even if you started now without fail the rest of your life, it is too late.

And that is exactly the problem with the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law. All it can do is condemn you. All you can do is fail. And failure puts you under the wrath of God, sends you to hell. What are you going to do?

Reflect and Respond

You need the gospel. You need the good news that Jesus met the requirements, died to pay your penalty, and was raised so that you might be justified and be regenerated. The excessive righteousness needed to enter to kingdom has been provided you. It comes to you, not in the Law, but in the gospel. Believe it. Bow to king Jesus. Be saved today.

Have you thought about what it means for you to salt and light in your corner of the world? In your home? With your relatives? With your neighbors? At work or school? And sometimes salt and light are needed when church and ministry are struggling.

Are you a true disciple, a real follower? Have you rejected self-salvation projects? Have you embraced the gospel? This is your day...