

The Law & Jesus

Matthew 5:17-20

9/15/2019

Randy Lovelace

At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years old to 1st grade to be excuse to their time of children's church as we turn in God's word together to Matthew 5:17-20. Hear now God's word to us this morning as we continue in the Sermon on the Mount. It's really a part of Jesus's greatest hits, His teaching to the disciples all that He was bringing about, His agenda of redemption and of bringing the kingdom.

Here, He speaks specifically of how we are to understand and receive Jesus's teaching as it is related to the law of God, specifically, the Old Testament law. Jesus, sensing perhaps those who might object, perhaps also, having already experienced some of these objections, He advances down a bit and tries to help us to understand how we are to understand His relationship to the law. The law and Jesus. And then how are we as the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century to receive this teaching? In light of that, what does it mean for our lives together? Jesus helps us.

So, hear now God's word, Matthew 5:17-20.

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we ask that by the presence and power of your Holy Spirit attending your word wherever it is taught, wherever it is preached, together at work in those who profess belief that the Spirit would take this word and help us to walk and follow Jesus. We thank you, O Lord, that you do not call us to follow Jesus under our own strength, but you give us the Spirit and His power at work within us to walk in new obedience. Help us, Lord, to understand all that Jesus taught and revealed to us, that we might be a people built up, strengthened, and we might see the glory of Christ. And may He always be uplifted in our hearts, in our minds, and in our lives. Help us, Lord Jesus. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, it is the fall. And as we like to fervently say, it is Saturday down south season. So, you might notice that I'm wearing a lapel pin. It's the University of Alabama. It's not there because I'm a proud fan, although I am. It's there because it's a prayer pin, a prayer for my daughter who is there attending university. But it is also a reminder that no matter how great any coach will ever be at the University of Alabama, they will always be, always be, compared to Paul "Bear" Bryant. No matter where you go on the campus, no matter how great Saban may be, he will always work in the shadow of Paul "Bear" Bryant. You can't go anywhere on the campus without seeing the hounds tooth pattern that Paul "Bear" Bryant had with his hat. You may have 17 national championships and you may have won quite a few in the last few years. But do you respect and do you consider yourself to be in the lineage of the great Paul "Bear" Bryant?

Some coaches have thought they could surpass Bryant. Some coaches have thought that they could perhaps change the ways of Alabama. But they were fired. For sale signs would be put in their front yards even though their houses were not yet up for sale. And sadly, football down south carries

such an idolatrous strain that more than one SCC coaches have received death threats when their teams have not done well.

It's a serious thing because growing up in the south, we didn't have professional sports. All that mattered was Friday night lights and Saturday afternoons. And so, as I got to go for the first time in almost 30 years to Tuscaloosa to take my daughter, it was like walking on hallowed ground. And next Saturday, I get to see my first Alabama football game in person. But no matter how great Saban is doing, there will always be the hound's tooth.

In many ways, the situation that Jesus found himself in was a losing coach down south on a Saturday. He found himself in a life and death situation. The question was, how do you relate to the Old Testament? How do you stand up against the law? What are you saying after these beatitudes? Are you telling us that we're not to follow the commands? Are you being faithful to the lineage of the righteousness of God as it has been taught to us to the Pharisees and the scribes? How Jesus understood this, how Jesus taught this, how He lived it out would be a life and death situation.

And so, what we have here in this passage is we have Jesus explaining to them His relationship to the law. But more than that, He is calling them to Himself. And what we'll see in this passage in the outline, we see fulfillment, accomplishment, and commitment.

First, what we hear in the words of Jesus in 17-18 is what Jesus is called to do. And He first addresses the issue of fulfillment when He says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law," or in other words, to annul it, to say that it is no longer valid or no longer holding. Jesus deals with the issue of fulfillment in His relationship to the law by first saying what He's not doing. He's not annulling it. Nothing He is going to say and nothing He's going to do should ever bring the conclusion to anyone's minds that the law is no longer. Quite the opposite.

He doesn't just say "abolish the Law," but He talks about also the Law and the Prophets. So, He's doing something uniquely there. He's signaling to us. He's signaling to His hearers that actually what He's doing is more than just teaching the law, more than just fulfilling it. He's doing something in relationship to what the prophets had prophesied. And so, He says, "I have not come to abolish them," meaning what the prophets prophesied and what the law requires. "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

First, when we understand fulfillment in this passage, Jesus specifically is saying I have not come to abolish or to annul the law. In some sense, in who He is, fulfillment first means He has come to establish it, if you will. You need to hold on to that. So, He's come to establish it and fulfilling it, it definitely means that by what He is going to say, how He is going to live it, and what He's going to do is itself an establishment of all that the law and all that the prophets talked about and prophesied for. That's something important to keep in mind as we continue on. So, fulfillment first means He's in essence saying, I'm establishing it not abolishing it.

Secondly, there's something in this word "fulfill" here that we need to understand. When we hear "fulfill," we tend to think that what He's talking about is Jesus is bringing to fruition that which was predicted. But if you look at the law of God, it doesn't necessarily have a predictive nature in it. It's calling us to how we are to live. So, how is Jesus fulfilling the law? How can you fulfill something which is not exactly coming to us as a prediction? That means that the word "fulfill" has a range of meanings, none of which we can reduce the word "fulfill" to. It has all of its beauty and glory.

First of all, it means establish, to confirm it, right? But it also means this. When He says to fulfill the law, He means, I'm going to teach it. So, that which proceeds from His mouth we need to receive as a way in which He is teaching the law of God from the Old Testament. There's another thing "fulfill" also means, and that is to obey. To fulfill it means to do it. And in this sense, Jesus is also in His life and by the very nature of teaching it, He's obeying it because God established the law and gave it to His people and said, you shall teach this to my people, and you shall teach it to every proceeding generation. So, teaching

it is fulfilling it. So, when Jesus says, I'm coming to fulfill the law, He is definitely saying yes, I've come to teach it.

But there is yet a deeper meaning, if you will, and one which all of that being true about the word "fulfill" that Jesus is pointing to here is this deeper level of the word "fulfill" means that there must be a predictive nature of the law of God. And it would be this. That the law itself had embedded within it that when you fail to do these things, you are to offer sacrifices. So, in some sense, the law is to be understood as God's picture of holiness, of purity and righteousness as it reflects who God is. So, it is calling forth its very obedience. So, it's in some sense ultimately looking for the one who would obey it perfectly.

While the law itself isn't predicting this one, it has within it a forward-looking projection to the one who would. This is what Vern Poythress, a great professor in the 20th century, meant by the title of his book *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. What he means is that the law of Moses teaches and projects such a beautiful image of the holiness and righteousness of God it can't help but project in all of its glory the shadow of one who would come to ultimately obey it, teach it, fulfill it, and establish it. Jesus is God. This is God saying as God about the law of God, no way have I come to annul it. I am the righteousness of God. I will fulfill it.

It is key to understanding what Jesus means by that without a fuller understanding of fulfillment, we might misunderstand the commands just a couple of verses later. This is Jesus talking to His disciples. This is not Jesus talking to those who do not believe in Him. These are those who are following Him. So, this isn't about the way into the kingdom if you don't know Jesus. It's not, you got to obey me to get to know me. This is not law and gospel. Do I believe in grace or do I have to obey, then I get grace? That is not what is being established here. This is Jesus looking at His disciples, those who are following Him, and He's saying, I have come to fulfill it. So, He is the embodiment of the righteousness and holiness of God. And therefore, the ultimate fulfillment of the righteous requirements of the law. So, to follow Him is to be in that way. So, we don't have to obey it to get there. He's before us. Thanks be to God.

And so, in this, He's showing us that what He means to do is not abolish it, but for us to see that the law in all of its glory and holiness, inward holiness and outward purity go hand in hand. He has come to fulfill it.

But then He says in verse 18 something different, something more. "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." So, here, Jesus is beginning to take what He's just said and begin to critique what they had been accustomed to.

You see, within this time by this point in Israel's history, the Pharisees and the scribes had created all kinds of reactions and traditions related to following the law. As one writer said,

"In general, the Pharisees and scribes were trying to reduce the challenge of the laws by relaxing them. In other words, having some laws that were considered to be light and others to be heavy. And then where God allowed permissions, they were trying to extend the permissions."

So, for example, I can't literally murder someone. But it's okay to have anger in my own heart because what matters is the outward act. And so, they found oftentimes, as this writer says, the Torah to be a yolk and a burden. And in fact, in some of the writings, they would actually call it that. And they wanted to make the yolk easier and the burden lighter. How they did it varied according to the form each law took, and particularly whether it was a commandment or a permission. And so, you had this tradition of all these other laws and all these other stipulations and interpretations of the law. And so, instead of releasing the burden and the yolk, it became more so.

And what Jesus is establishing in verse 18 is not the smallest element of the Hebrew language will be removed from the law until the law is completely accomplished. Now, what is He talking about? He tells us in terms of this accomplishment. He gives us a time frame. But that time frame is not just at the

finish of what He has come to do. He's talking about until heaven and earth pass away, until ultimately Christ comes again, that the righteousness and holiness of God as it is reflected in the law stands. So, He's not allowing us to pick which is lighter and which is heavier. Well, I didn't steal, but man, I don't think they deserve to have that car, and I want what they have. But I didn't steal it, but inwardly, I covet.

All of this is established until all has come to fruition, until all of God's purposes and will have been accomplished. Now, we live in the already and the not yet. Christ has been raised from the dead. As we've already sung this morning, Christ, who is God teaching the law of God as the reflection of God's holiness and righteousness, came and was an offering and a sacrifice on the cross. So, He deserved all of our honor and respect. And yet, Christ became sin for us on the cross. And He received that which was for us, God's wrath. And He became a sacrifice on our part fulfilling those requirements of the law. And then He was raised on the third day showing us that the end of the story is not death but resurrection, that Christ is victorious over sin and death and that through Him we are released from bondage to sin.

But the beauty is that Christ has not yet come again. So, not all things have been fulfilled. There's the already and the not yet. So, we still wait for all things to be accomplished. And at such time in the new heavens and the new earth, all that which is sinful and evil will be undone. And God's righteousness and holiness will be throughout the universe and we will be in its presence without shame, without guilt, without a veil.

This is what is for us, and Jesus is saying that no, I've not come to abolish it. I've come to establish it, teach it, obey it. I embody the righteousness and holiness of God. And I will fulfill all of it.

But in some sense, it's also a warning which is why we are to follow Him. Because the righteousness of God and His holiness stands for all time that if we are not in Christ, if we do not believe in His fulfilling of all the righteousness and holiness of God, then we stand accused under that law. And the righteousness and the wrath of God would be upon us. But in Christ who has fulfilled the law, who has established it and taught it, who's gone all the way before us, in Him we are freed from that wrath and that judgement.

And in essence, He's not only critiquing what the Pharisees and scribes have done by trying to reduce the yolk and burden of the law. He's inviting everyone, Pharisees and scribes, disciples, and all those who believe and ultimately all who can hear my voice and do not believe, come unto me all who are weary, and I will give you rest. He has done it all. And He provides us a new way of life, not our righteousness, but His. And the righteousness of God and the glory of God is given to us in the glory of the gospel.

So, you have the fulfillment and you have the accomplishment which is then, by way of application before I go any further, when we celebrate the Lord's supper this morning, we take bread into our mouths and we drink juice from a cup. When we eat of this bread and we drink of this cup, we proclaim Christ's death and sacrifice for our sin. The law points us to our inability. But Christ, which is symbolized in this bread and juice, points us to the feast that is for those who trust in Jesus Christ. We are united to Him. We take Him in. Jesus is ours. Thanks be to God, He obeyed all of it. This is our freedom because now that He's done that and because He's gone before us, now as disciples of Christ and those who profess Jesus now get to follow Him and walk in obedience not because we're trying to earn the grace, not because we think that by doing so that we'll be better before God. No. But because Jesus has done it for us and He gives us the grace to reflect that same righteousness and holiness, but not to our glory but to His as disciples of Christ.

And so, then we have commitment, 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." I will tell you, that is a directive to me. It is a directive to anyone who will ever preach to you and teach you the word of God. That we have, as one of my friends recently said after he was teaching a Sunday school class, she said, "I cannot imagine what you go through each week," which was a reminder to not take teaching God's word for granted which is why I need verse 19.

I need verse 19 in my sermon preparation to take seriously the revelation and the word of God because this is Jesus, the word made flesh, teaching us the word. And so, when He says no one can relax, yes, He's talking about the Pharisees and the scribes who were relaxing the law and extending the permissions. But in so doing, He is calling the teachers to a greater commitment to understanding that this is the law of God and must be handled with great care.

And He says to them, "but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." In this sense, Jesus is calling out in verse 19 not only to the Pharisees and scribes but to all who hear His voice. Jesus does not see a distinction between outward and inward. If you get the inward attitude right, it's okay to slide on the outward. Or being outwardly pure, but inwardly, you hate. Both of these are brought together. The law of God is always meant to hold these two together for God has said I want to take from you your heart of stone and to give you a heart of flesh that I will be your God and you will be my people. Not just on the outside, but that He would be the Lord of our hearts, our motivations, our desires, all of it from the inside out and from the outside in.

In essence, we can't say we believe Jesus for His salvation. Thanks be to God I'm forgiven, so therefore, Jesus is not going to care about how I lead my outward life. I'll ask for forgiveness. No. We can ask for forgiveness but must understand if we follow Jesus, He means for us to understand that what He teaches us is for the inside and for the outside, too.

This is important for Israel to hear at this time because do you remember as we ended last week, Jesus was teaching about salt and light? Not only was it a call to be a light to the world as those who would be disciples of Jesus, but it was also a critique on Israel itself. As one commentator said,

"It was a sound challenge to Israel. She is to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. That always was her job to be a nation of priest, to be Yahweh's servant so that his glory might reach the ends of the earth. But the salt had now forgotten its purpose. The light has turned in on itself. The city set on a hill, Jerusalem, was meant to be a place which the nations would flock like moths to a lamp. But she has done her best to make herself and the God to whom her very existence bears witness as unattractive as possible."

There is rebuke in this challenge to Israel because they had kept the light in, heightening their own sense of purity, their own sense of obedience. Now, He is calling them to follow Him and to put His agenda into practice to become the true Israel.

This is the commitment which He's calling us to. It's not just meant to be for me, myself, and Jesus. It is meant to be lived out so that the disciples of Christ who live out the ways of Jesus are to be an attractive aroma to the world attracting others to the glory of Christ not because of our purity and our righteousness, but because of His. That we live out love and forgiveness and mercy not because we're good people, but because of His grace and mercy.

What Jesus is calling us to, here, is a commitment to a deeper obedience. And that deeper obedience is prophesied for us in the prophets when Jeremiah would announce that, as God reestablished the covenant but then announced the new covenant,

"I will be your God and you will be my people. Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day which I took them out of the hand and to bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,' declares the Lord. 'But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"

How would God do this? He would do it because of the prophecy of Ezekiel. "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh."

And so, as those who are followers of Jesus, He has poured out His Spirit on all those who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And by that Spirit, He has written the law upon our hearts not because we obey it to earn grace, but because Jesus who has gone before us, who has fulfilled it in every way, now gives us a call to a new commitment. "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." It's not just the outward, folks. It's the inward. It's together. And He's calling us into this discipleship by His grace, by His strength, by His fulfillment as the word of God, teaching the word of God, and as the one who would give the promised Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit comes, new life is brought about.

So, in the next few weeks, we're going to unpack what this means, then, in much more practical inward and outward ways. In the coming weeks, we're not going to go immediately to the next verse. Typically, we are accustomed to this sermon by going from the inside out. We're going to go from the outside in just to do it a little differently than we have before.

With that said, I want to be clear that everything Jesus calls us to in regard to our anger, our lust, our love for our enemies, coveting, all of these things are not meant to be a yolk and a burden. For those who are in Christ Jesus who are called by His name who have received the Holy Spirit have been given the power to live a new life in Christ, identified by Him who has gone before us. It's not our righteousness but His so that the aroma of Christ and the gospel might be lived out in and through the church of Jesus Christ here at CPC and around the world. It is a serious call to a new life of obedience. But thanks be to God, not in our strength. And thanks be to God that He means to make us new now, today, and not just when He returns. He means to take us as a people who are sinners in the sight of a holy God and make us His children and make us a people who are to be the salt and the light as the church of Jesus Christ to the watching world. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this, your word. Father, we need your grace. We need your grace to enable us to receive this word, although it is a mighty call, it is one which you give us the grace to follow. Yes, O Lord, we do so imperfectly, and we are in need of your forgiveness. But in Christ, that forgiveness is offered. And O Lord, we need your Spirit that what would characterize our fellowship, what would characterize our witness is not us but your glory. Do this, O Lord, that your name might be renowned in our hearts and in the world. It is in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.