

Kingdom Perspective on the Law

October 10, 2021

Matthew 5:17-20

We continue this morning in our study of the Sermon on the Mount. We are in Matthew 5. We are taking on a new subject matter: Jesus' teaching about a proper understanding of Scripture. It is a deep teaching, stretching us as perhaps no other teaching in the whole sermon. It will require the utmost of careful attention, even though it will probably bring up more questions than it solves.

And here I am, attempting to take on this topic in one 30-40 minute sermon, when an adequate treatment of the issue would require months of study to get perhaps the first inkling of what it all means. So bear with me and pay close attention.

This subject matter will consume the rest of chapter 5. Here, we see the introduction and principles laid out, and the rest of the chapter will apply the principles through example. In other words, Jesus tells us in the text before us this morning what a proper understanding should be, and then He goes on to quote various texts and show us how the principles apply. It is VERY good teaching methodology. The problem is that what we have here is a condensation of the topic and must linger over each phrase in order to see the big picture come through.

To begin, we must recognize the issue. When Jesus gave this great sermon, what were the Holy Scriptures? It would have been the Jewish Bible, or what we

call the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi in our English translations. Keep this in mind as you ponder the words of Jesus here. What are we to do with the Old Testament?

Then we must recognize the position Jesus is in. If He were to say, “Throw out your Bibles, (what we call the Old Testament) and follow me, I am introducing a new faith and a new set of holy texts,” the people could and should stone Jesus or reject Him as some man promoting a false faith. But it would be equally wrong if He were to say, “I have come as the latest in the line of prophets. Keep living as you have been!” That would not be adequate at all. As we’ve already noted, Jesus in this great sermon teaches as one having authority, as God Himself. He is NOT just one of the prophets. He is NOT urging a continuation of the past.

Instead, Jesus’ perspective here might surprise us, certainly it will challenge us. He tells us we must see the Jewish Scriptures through Him. They were written to point us to Him. That is radical. We will see that in this text. The purpose of the Old Testament is to point us to Jesus.

Indeed, Jesus said exactly that in John 5:45-47. “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” Jesus’ perspective is that the Old Testament was all about Him.

Let me read today’s text at this point so perhaps you can begin to see what I am talking about. READ Matthew 5:17-20.

Main point: Jesus came to actually accomplish all that the Jewish Scriptures predicted and required.

He came to actually do it. He came to fulfill its message, its requirements. It all points to Him.

But this leads us to a decision point. What do WE do with the requirements of the Jewish Law which are in focus here in our text? Some simply throw them out as being for another people at another time. That would be wrong. We will see that here. But it would be equally wrong for us to see ourselves as having to live them out. We'll never do it! We will see that here as well. The third, the most popular option, is to pick and choose, to decide on the basis of some criteria which ones we will live under. Some divide the Law into categories, like moral, civil, and ceremonial. We throw out the ceremonial, apply in principle the civil and hold to the moral, but not all of them. We don't stone our disobedient children (Deut. 21:18-21). This will not work either. ALL laws are moral. It may feel good, but we cannot pick and choose which laws we will consider as laws. So, what do we do? We see a glimpse here. We allow them all to point us to Jesus as the fulfillment of all of them. He did what we cannot do. They were meant to lead us to Him! (2 parts)

I. Jesus came to fulfill the Scriptures, not do away with them. vv. 17-18

He didn't just affirm them and leave people hoping in vain. He didn't just do away with them as irrelevant to our situation. He affirms here that the role of the Scriptures is to point us away from ourselves and how hopeless we are at meeting God's standards, and point us toward the One who actually lived them out. A proper understanding of the Scriptures, all the Scriptures ought to point us directly to Jesus.

v.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.

I think the point I have been trying to make here is clear. Jesus is not offering something apart, different from the Jewish Scriptures, particularly the Law of Moses. Instead, He came to fulfill them, accomplish them, do with them as God originally designed.

Notice that He begins by dealing with an objection, “Do not think...” In other words, you might be tempted to hear what I am saying here and come to a wrong conclusion. A wrong conclusion would be to focus on Jesus and throw away the Jewish Scriptures. Even today, there are many who think that way. Just look at your Bibles. Which texts do you find yourselves in most often? How well do you know the book of Lamentations as compared to Romans? That is as true of me as it is of you. And yet, without the Old Testament, we would lack a proper understanding of Jesus. Certainly this is true with the prophets. We must have the message of the prophets so we can know when the Savior has come. But it is just as true with the Law. We have to have the Law so we can know of our need for a Savior. As Paul put it in Romans, I would not have known that I was such a sinner except for the Law. The Law makes me aware of how badly I need a Savior. If I don't read and give weight to the Law, I will end up thinking I don't really need a Savior. No the Law is necessary, essential to our faith.

Instead, Jesus says here He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Again, fulfilling the Prophets is easy for us to understand. The prophets told us the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. Jesus fulfilled that. That one makes sense. But what about the Law. How did Jesus fulfill the Law of Moses? Does it mean simply live out? No, it means more than that. In Jesus' day, there were whole bunches of people who were quite prideful at how well they were living out the

Law: the Pharisees. They not only kept the Law, but they made special rules to keep them far away from breaking the Law. If the Law said you must not work on the Sabbath, they would develop a whole list of rules to make sure they didn't. They were really, really good (in their own minds at least) at law keeping. And yet, Jesus had no time for them. Again, we will see that in a moment. But in their approach to law keeping, they showed themselves to not understand AT ALL the purpose of the Law.

So, "fulfill" here means more than simply keep. Fulfill has the sense of completion, of completing the purpose for which it was designed. The Law was written for a purpose and Jesus fulfilled that purpose, completely, totally, without exception. In other words, the Law was not written so that everyone could strive to fulfill it and reward those who did so. No, it was written so we would all give up at trying to fulfill it and instead put our trust in the One who DID fulfill it. It was designed to point us to Him.

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.

"For truly, I say to you," phrase designed to give added emphasis. This also points to Jesus teaching with authority. With Jesus, it is like saying, "this might strike you as odd, but this comes to you from God's own lips." All of His words are God's word, but these might just cause you to pause and think. And yet they are true.

Until the end of time as we know it, every Law, every letter of those Laws, every smallest stroke of the pen forming those letters will remain in full affect... until their purpose has been accomplished. They remain fully in affect even this day, but their purpose is to point us to the One who has accomplished all of them without fail. Their purpose is to point us to our need for someone to accomplish them for us because we can't.

And, this is what we naturally do. We simply strike out the parts that we don't like. We like the part about not murdering (although much more on that one next week, you might not want to point to that one as your example!), but what about the one where we are not to combine the corners of our fields, or leave some in the field for the poor to glean? What about that one? Or the one about not harvesting your fruit trees for the first 3 years and then give the 4th year's harvest as an offering to God? Must we give up bacon? But I've already had bacon and loved it! What now for me??? Am I done? Yes, the purpose of the Law in each and every one, and word of one, and stroke of each letter, remains fully in force until they are accomplished totally...either by you or by someone you entrust to do it for you. Which is it?

I think of Joshua, at the end of Joshua's book, gathering the people of God together so they can disperse to their new homeland, the Promised Land. He recounts their history and how God delivered them and brought them to this place of peace and plenty. He challenges them to choose for themselves whom they will serve, whether the gods of the people of the land, the people they conquered along the way, or the God of Scripture.

They respond with gusto, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods..." (Josh. 24:16) We will serve the LORD. That's the correct response, right? And yet, how did Joshua respond? "You are not able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive

your transgressions or your sins...” (24:19) You can’t do it! What do you mean we can’t do it? Of course we can! No you can’t. That was the whole purpose of the Law, to make clear to you that you cannot do it. You need someone who will do it for you. You will need a “Joshua” a Yahweh saves. That’s the purpose of the Law, to point you to Jesus, the only One who could and has fulfilled it.

II. It helps no one to lower the requirements of the Law to something we can accomplish. vv. 19-20

In fact, it does the opposite of what was intended. If you think you can actually live out the Law, you will never come to the place where you admit you need a Savior. You will never be poor in spirit, mourning over that fact, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. You will never get there unless you see that you can never meet God’s standards. In fact, those who are the poster children for law keeping don’t have enough righteousness to even get in to the Kingdom. If they can’t get in, what hope do you have? You (and they) need a Savior. The purpose of the Law is to point us to Jesus!

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.

The one who lowers the standards of the least of one of these laws shows that he didn’t understand the Law’s purpose at all. “Oh, God did not really say you should stone your rebellious children!” Oh yes He did! He didn’t really

mean you should never eat pork. Yes He did! There's some latitude for the type, amount, and frequency of your offerings, right? No there's not! That's the whole point. The bar is so ridiculously high that none of us ought ever think we can do it. I'm not willing to submit to the Law that says we must stone our rebellious children. Then what for me? Where is my hope? Will God overlook this in me? No, it looks like I'm going to need to depend on my Savior to save me!

Now, this is where the passage gets difficult. Is this verse saying that we will be better off if we teach and keep all of the OT laws? It seems to say that on the surface. But it cannot say that. Scripture is clear that any attempt to live by the Law will ultimately fail, and put us at risk of having to keep the entire Law, for as it says in James 2:10 if you break one, then you are guilty of them all. So, Jesus cannot be saying that His followers must still keep all of the Laws.

So, what was He saying then? Pick and choose? Find the ones we like, or ones that make sense to us, or ones we are already doing and do them? No! As I've already suggested, that is the common route, but He cannot be saying that either. We know that from v.18, that not one law, letter, or stroke is to be ignored.

Then what? The point He is making is to view that Law through Him. In fact, I am convinced that one of the primary things I should get as I read through the Law is how hopeless and helpless I am to actually carry it out. In fact, I think that is how it is intended to be read. We will see that most clearly in the weeks to come as we look at sample laws and how they are to be understood. To read the Law properly, I must recognize on every line that I have failed miserably in living it out and will fail on my next attempt. I need a better way.

The book of Galatians contains an expanded teaching on this subject. I would like you to hear just a sample of it in this context: Galatians 3:22-26.

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. 24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

Did you see the point? The Law is intended first to imprison me and then to point me to faith in Christ. I am to read it that way. I am to apply it that way. I use the Law as a tutor to point me to Christ. To lessen the Law is to lessen my need for Jesus. To highlight the Law is to highlight my need for Jesus. It is all designed to point me to Him.

It is the same way now. I must not read the Law and think to myself that I have go out tomorrow and live that way. Instead, I am to read the Law and thank Jesus that my standing before God is based on Him and His righteousness rather than me and my righteousness. Now, there are other uses of the Law, but I will leave them to another sermon on another text. Here, I am focused on the primary way we ought to read the Law, and that is to point us directly to Jesus as our only hope.

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

He then makes sure we have gotten His point by shocking us with a declarative statement: the Pharisees do not have enough righteousness to get into the Kingdom of heaven. Now, I'm not sure we can adequately understand how offensive this statement would have been. Think of the most meticulous religious person you know, the one who makes sure he stays way away from evil and goes way beyond in doing good. It is who they are and everyone knows it. They make sure everyone knows it. That person does not have enough of what it takes to be right with God to be let into heaven! (Notice again the emphasis on Jesus' authority to make such a statement.) The best is not enough. The ones who go way beyond are not good enough. If you want to make it into heaven out of obedience to the Law, you will have to do better than the ones who have been the most meticulous about law keeping for their whole lives. They are not getting in on their own merits. If they cannot make it in on their own merits, what hope do I have????

Again, I think we can say that, but I doubt we fully comprehend it. We just don't think that way. We naturally think that the good are good enough. The best are our example on how to do it. We think that trying will show sincerity. We think that God will overlook or put into context our failures. We think that God grades on a curve! But He does not. Entrance into the Kingdom is strictly enforced. There has to be total purity, the person has to be righteous, he or she has to have righteousness. The purpose of the Law is to point us to that righteousness, in Jesus. He is our only hope. He is our Savior. Welcome to Jesus' perspective on the Law and obedience to the Scriptures!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will read ALL Scripture allowing its full weight to fall on us.
- 2) We will resist the urge to lower its standards.
- 3) We will seek not to do the best we can and hope, but to rely on the fact that Jesus fulfilled God's standards for us.
- 4) We will cling to our Savior, Jesus, as our only hope.