

Fulfilling the Law

Matthew 5:17-20

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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Worship: The Source of Our Righteousness

Key Sentence: Christ completes the law for us and then raises the ante

Outline:

I. Christ completes the law (Matthew 5:17-18)

II. We uphold the law through the Spirit (Matthew 5:19-20)

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. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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Have you ever watched a concrete slab being built, the foundation for a house or a building or an industrial facility? A lot of preparation has to be done before the concrete is finally poured. First the site has to be cleared and leveled. Then the forms, the wooden moldings for the concrete have to be put in place. The soil has to be stabilized, usually with gravel or sand. Finally the rebar, the reinforcing and stabilizing steel has to be laid out and tied together. Only then, after days or even months of preparation, is the concrete poured to complete the foundation and make it useful. During all this time of preparation the foundation is in process but incomplete. On any given day if you tried to live on that foundation you would fail. You would trip over the forms or find your feet tangled and stuck in the rebar. Your furniture would fall through. Your appliances would have no place to stand. Each part of the foundation is critical, but it's not useful until it is complete.

The same thing is true of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In today's text, Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus talks about the relationship he has with the law and the prophets of the Old Testament, and about the relationship his disciples will have. I believe that Christ is the concrete that completes the law and the prophets, and on the foundation he has laid, we can live out the law and the prophets with more success than even the most religious people of Jesus's day – or ours. The first two verses explain how Jesus completed the foundation that was built by the Old Testament Law and Prophets, how he became the concrete that held it together. The last two verses show the way in which his disciples can stand on the foundation he built. Christ completes the law for us and then raises the ante.

Let's begin by reading this short text. **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. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law.” It’s not clear, this early in Matthew or in the ministry of Jesus, that anybody had yet accused him of this heresy. They certainly would, though, as they watched him heal on the Sabbath and touch the unclean and the lepers. Furthermore, Jesus spoke on his own authority, whereas it was the habit of the teachers of that day to always cite and quote those who had come before. So the question would be raised, did he stand against the law or the prophets? And it seems clear enough from Jesus’ words that he came to fulfill the Law, not to annul it.

However, some have taught that Christ came to destroy the Law. For example, the second-century heretic Marcion rewrote the New Testament by eliminating its Old Testament references. He simply removed this passage. Some of his followers went further, exchanging the verbs, so it read, “I have come not to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, but to abolish them!” Two centuries later Augustine replied to this by teaching that Jesus was not abolishing the Law but correcting the perversions the scribes and Pharisees had made of it. But that’s only part of the answer. No, he doesn’t abolish the Law. What he does instead is not merely correct it but fulfill it. He has come to fulfill the Law not in the narrow sense of the individual Old Testament laws, but by the addition of the phrase “the prophets,” he reveals that he has come to fulfill or bring to completion all of the Old Testament. He has come to fill it up, just as concrete is poured in to fill up the prepared foundation.

I’ve been using three main commentaries to inform my understanding of the Sermon on the Mount: Don Carson, John Stott and R. Kent Hughes. All three agree on this point, but the one who puts it most plainly is R. Kent Hughes, who for 27 years was pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. I’m going to follow his outline of what it means for Jesus to fulfill the law. “First and foremost,” Hughes says, Jesus “fulfilled their messianic predictions.” Both the Prophets and the Law, that is, the entire Old Testament, pointed to Jesus. Some parts of it were clearly predictive, for example, the predictions of Jesus’ place of birth and the nature of his crucifixion. Other prophecies had secondary fulfillments in his life and ministry. But whether primary or secondary, Jesus fulfilled all the messianic predictions of the Old Testament.

A few years ago I preached a sermon on this verse at Christmas, part of a series on the places in the Gospels where Jesus himself says why he has come. Here he says “I have come” to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. In that sermon I calculated some of the odds against someone fulfilling all of these direct prophecies of the Messiah. The odds against Jesus’ birth happening by chance to fulfill all these prophecies are huge.

For example, I said, “Maybe the easiest prophecy to calculate is the prediction of Micah 5:2 that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Let’s say that any given person had an equal chance of being born in any town of Israel. I looked at a map of Palestine in Jesus’ day and counted the towns. There were about 100, maybe more since these are only the ones we know of. So the odds are one in a hundred that the prophecy of Micah 5:2 will be true of any given person. But let’s take a second prophecy. What are the odds this Messiah would be from Galilee, as promised in Isaiah 9:2. They’re the same: Nazareth is one town out of a hundred. But you have to add another factor. What are the odds that both things will be true, that someone born in one town will be from another a hundred miles away. This kind of movement wasn’t common in that day. Maybe there was one chance in a hundred that you’d move while growing up. So the way statistics work we’ve got a hundred times a hundred times a hundred, or odds of one in a million that Jesus fulfills both prophecies.”

Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is encouraging to our faith. If you take even a few more of these prophecies into account the odds against of Jesus’ birth circumstances being mere coincidence rise to astronomical levels. In that sermon I said “At the moment, having looked at only five [prophecies] to which we were willing to assign values, the odds are 1 in ten to the fifteenth. These are the same odds as you would get if you the calculated chances of winning the Texas lotto 30 billion weeks in a row. So Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament because the Old Testament pointed to Jesus in miraculous detail.

But Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament in several other significant ways. An important one was that he perfectly kept the law’s commands and demands. Hughes says “He was born under law (Galatians 4:4) to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He kept the Law perfectly, never falling short.” The book of Hebrews tells us “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Peter tells us that he committed no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth. James says, that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” Jesus never failed at even one point, one iota, one dot of the law. The Pharisees thought he did, but they were thinking of their extension of the law. Jesus perfectly conformed to the Father’s will.

This is important because, third, he fulfilled the Law by his sacrifice which fulfilled the Law for those who would believe on him. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament pointed to him. Hughes says “In his famous experiment, Ivan Pavlov would ring a bell whenever he fed his dogs. Eventually the dogs would salivate whenever they heard the bell. They knew the bell meant food.”

In the same way the death of unblemished animals conditioned the people of Israel to recognize that the law required a payment for sin in the form of a sacrifice. The good news in this was that there could be a substitute. The sacrifice of the animals was a picture of the gracious truth that the person who sinned did not have to be the person who suffered and died. Jesus fulfilled that picture. Peter says “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” Jesus suffered and died for our sins, bringing to us the forgiveness the Old Testament law pointed to.

The fourth way of fulfillment that Hughes mentions is that Jesus fulfills the Law in believers in the sanctification of believers by his Holy Spirit. Romans 8 says “the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” We are able to fulfill the righteousness of the Law by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what Ezekiel prophesied: “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,²⁰ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.” We stand on the foundation of righteousness Christ built not by our own strength but in the power and presence of God the Holy Spirit.

Hughes summarizes: “The only possible conclusion is that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets in a multifaceted, dynamic way and in no way destroyed the Law but rather completely fulfilled it. His claim is the most stupendous ever made. He is the Author of the Law, and he is its Fulfiler. Nothing compares with the superb and mysterious authority with which he puts forth the truth.”

Given all this, it is no surprise at all to hear Jesus say that no part of the Law will be lost. Verse 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 the first time in Matthew that Jesus has used his emphasis phrase “Truly I say to you,” or “Truly, truly.” Every time he uses it it points to something he doesn’t want his disciples, or us, to forget. His point is that not even the smallest of the law will ever be abolished. “The iota is the Hebrew letter yod, which looks something like an apostrophe. There are approximately 66,420 yods in the Old Testament. The dot is probably the Hebrew serif, a tiny extension on some letters that distinguishes them from similar letters.

Not one of the yods or innumerable little serifs will pass from the Law.. Hughes says “Our Lord is here teaching the inspiration and immutability of the Old Testament. He is not only saying that the Old Testament contains the truth or that it becomes the truth, but that the Scripture cannot be broken. Scripture and its teaching will not change. Time and time again when our Lord quotes the Old Testament, he used the perfect tense, gegraptai, “It is written,” which means “it was written, it is written, and it always will be written.”

Jesus begins this statement with a comparison that adds even more weight to this truth. The Law is as enduring as the heavens and the earth. Think of that. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will say that heaven is God’s throne and the earth is his footstool. Near the end of Matthew he will say “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Scripture teaches that heaven and earth are enduring and unshakeable until God himself shakes them in the last day to create a new heavens and a new earth. So also the Law of the Lord, the whole of the Old Testament, and by extension the words of Jesus and the New Testament. These words endure, they remain, they do not change and the force of them never diminishes, though all else wears down to dust.

If we are honest we have to admit that all of this raises a question in our minds. If Jesus did not see himself abolishing the Law and the Prophets, but fulfilling them, why for example is there good evidence that he abolished the food laws? Why, after the resurrection, do New Testament writers insist the sacrificial system of the Old Testament is no longer necessary? Why don’t Christians today try to follow the detailed Old Testament law? The answer is that he did fulfill them. He completed the purpose for which the law was given. Food laws and purity laws which pointed to the holiness of God are caught up in the holiness and purity of Christ. Sacrifices which pointed to Christ are eclipsed by the sacrifice of Christ. The Old Testament law is completed in him and he doesn’t require of us other grounds of confidence.

But the next question is what should our relationship with the Law be? That’s what Jesus addresses next 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.” The word ‘therefore’ introduces the deduction which Jesus now draws for his disciples. As kingdom subjects we are to take the law seriously. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven will be measured by conformity to it. Nor is personal obedience enough; Christian disciples must also teach others the wisdom and use of the law’s commands.

He implies that while all the commands are important, some are greater than others. He'll soon be asked what the greatest one is, and he'll say "love God" and "love others." But even commands he has completed, such as the food laws and the details of the sacrificial system are still useful because they show us the holiness of God, and his plan of salvation. We are to take them seriously, even as we look to Jesus for their fulfillment, and we are to teach others to do the same. And while Jesus is the source of our righteousness, many of the commands of the law, such as the ten commandments and the greatest commandments continue to be the expression of our righteousness. So we take both the understanding and the application of those commands seriously, not as works which earn salvation but as heart response which lives out our salvation. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are faithful in doing and teaching the whole law, as fulfilled by Christ.

So are we to understand that there are gradations and rankings in the kingdom of heaven? Much as our modern spirit would rebel, I believe the answer is yes. It is possible, even as a believer to live and teach in a way that will receive no 'well done' at our entrance into the kingdom. Study the parable of the talents for an example. Hughes says "Believers who by the power of the indwelling Spirit engage the Law will be the big ones in heaven! . . . Why? Because following Christ is not simply following subjective inner impulses. It involves knowing what he desires. We need to be in touch with the teaching of God's Word." We need the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words point us to the upside-down kingdom where true belief necessitates radical personal righteousness.

Jesus now goes further. Verse 20: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." But surely, you'll say, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was famous. Obedience to God's law was the master-passion of their lives. They calculated that the law contains 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions and aspired to keeping them all? How then can our righteousness actually exceed Pharisaic righteousness? And how can righteousness be made a requirement of entering God's kingdom? Isn't this a doctrine of salvation by good works?

Demanding though this teaching is and should be, the context does answer our questions. First, is this works righteousness? No. We can never forget how Jesus started the sermon, with the Beatitudes. He said that the poor in spirit are blessed and receive the kingdom of heaven. Only those who recognize their spiritual bankruptcy are eligible. He also said that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be satisfied. To hunger and thirst for something is to recognize that you don't have it. To be satisfied is to receive it, as a gift.

We know this to be true because Jesus and Paul don't contradict each other in inspired Scripture. Paul says "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it. ²²The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are declared righteous by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." There is no works righteousness that earns salvation. My favorite proof from Jesus is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee wanted to be righteous because of his works. "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you," Jesus says, "this man went down to his house righteous, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." Notice how perfectly that fits with the Beatitudes.

So in one sense the purpose of verse 20 is to bring us to the end of ourselves, to bring us back to the Beatitudes and to bring us low before a king who delights to give us what we don't deserve – righteousness. We receive this gift at the foot of the cross where he was sacrificed and suffered for our sake, to redeem us from under the weight of the law by fulfilling the law for us.

But we can't stop there. Verses 19 and 20 are a legitimate challenge to us, not to earn righteousness but to live out the righteousness we've been given by the Holy Spirit. The study of the law, of the commandments and of the whole Old Testament is crucial because it leads us to deeper righteousness and a deeper walk with the God these things reveal. Stott says "Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper, being a righteousness of the heart. Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the law; Jesus teaches us that God's demands are far more radical. The righteousness which is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive, for "The Lord looks on the heart."

It was a new heart-righteousness which the prophets foresaw as one of the blessings of the Messianic age. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts," God promised through Jeremiah. How would he do it? We've already quoted the parallel passage in Ezekiel: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes." God's two promises to put his law within us and to put his Spirit within us coincide. We must not imagine," Stott says, "that when we have the Spirit we can dispense with the law, for what the Spirit does in our hearts is, precisely, to write God's law there. So 'Spirit', 'law', 'righteousness' and 'heart' all belong together."

At the time of Christ there was a sect, a religious group that we now call the Essenes. They retired to the shores of the Dead Sea and collected the writings that we know as the Dead Sea scrolls. Their leader was called ‘the teacher of righteousness, and he ‘defined the demands of the Law more exhaustively and more stringently than did even the Pharisees, and urged radical obedience to them all’. Yet Jesus was more radical still, for if the Essenes and many who have followed in their steps asked for more and more obedience, Jesus asked for ‘deeper and deeper obedience’. This deep obedience, a righteousness of the heart is possible only in those whom the Holy Spirit indwells. This is why entry into God’s kingdom is impossible without a righteousness deeper than the Pharisees. It is because the gift of such righteousness is evidence of the new birth, and no-one enters the kingdom without being born again.

The rest of Matthew 5 contains examples of this greater, or deeper, righteousness. It consists of six parallel paragraphs which illustrate the principle Jesus has just propounded of the permanence of the moral law, of his coming to fulfill it and of his disciples’ responsibility to obey it more completely than the scribes and Pharisees. Each paragraph contains a contrast by which Jesus ups the ante on the law, challenges us to heart level obedience. We’ll begin to look at these and be challenged by these next week. Verse 21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” Jesus raises the bar: the commandment is not just about physical murder, it’s about heart anger. We will spend the next the next four weeks applying today’s text by looking at these contrasts and the heart religion, the counter-intuitive, counter-cultural faith they foster.

So what have we said? The law prepared the way for Jesus. It laid out the forms and rebar of righteousness. But Jesus poured the foundation, by his death and resurrection. And on that foundation we can now stand, not having a righteousness of our own that comes from our obedience to the law, but a righteousness that comes from God and is by faith, a deeper righteousness that can be lived out in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.