

The Law and Righteousness

Matthew 5:17-20

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Well friends, it's good to be with you. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and I'm glad that we can join together and come to God's Word. And the portion of His Word that we're going to be looking at this morning is Matthew chapter 5. So if you turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5, if you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you. We also project the passage on the screen. You can follow along there. But we're in Matthew 5, and we're just going to look at a few verses this morning, verses 17 through 20. And this is continuing in our series on the Sermon on the Mount that we began just a few weeks ago. And you remember, if you were with us, that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus giving a sermon to His people, to His followers. The crowds are there. They're listening in. They're hearing what Jesus is talking about.

But this is primarily about what it means to be in the kingdom of God. What does it look like for God's people to be kingdom people, surrounded by kingdoms that are different from that of the kingdom of God? How are we to live? How are we to exist in this world? That's what the Sermon on the Mount is about. And so we had the Beatitudes for the first few verses. Last week we heard about being salt and light. And this morning, beginning in verse 17, Jesus is starting a new section in His sermon. So if you think about, you know, the structure of a sermon, right, there's an introduction, there's a main point, maybe a second main point. We're Presbyterians, so there's probably a third main point, right? And then there's a conclusion. There's only two today, by the way, two main points, deviating a little. But anyway, if you think about the structure of a sermon, so the first 16 verses were kind of like the introduction. Now we're getting to the body of the sermon, beginning in verse 17. This is going to go for a little while now. And in verse 17, this body of the sermon, we're being introduced by Jesus to this topic of righteousness.

Okay, so He's going to be concerned with what righteous living looks like for a number of verses after this. In future weeks, beginning next week, we're going to start hearing Jesus talking about things like anger and lust, about marriage and divorce, about retribution and how we engage with our enemies. He's going to be concerned with what righteous living looks like in the Kingdom of God. And He's introducing us to that topic this morning by talking about the law of God, the Old Testament law, and those who were seeking to keep it. So with that in mind, let's read Matthew 5, beginning in verse 17. Jesus says,

“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)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would help us this morning to see clearly what it is that you would have for us from your Word. We ask, Lord, that you would teach us what it means to be a righteous people, to turn away from sin, to cling to Christ. We pray that you would help us, help us to walk with you, not just this morning, but all the days of our lives. And in these next few moments, we ask that you would help my words to be clear and to give you glory and for all of our hearts to meditate upon your Word. So we pray, Father, that you would help us. And by your Spirit, you would be glorified in this time. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, I know that many of you have musical training, formal, informal training. Many of you know how to play various instruments, right? Piano, violin, trumpet, guitar, et cetera. Many of you have had vocal lessons. I have had none of those things, right? I don't know how to play the piano. I don't know how to play the guitar. I can't even read music. I can barely carry a tune. But I really like music. I love music. I have a great appreciation for it, even though I don't fully understand it. But one thing that I do know about music was this piece of music theory. It's really not theory. It's truth. It's musical, I guess, phenomenon, we could call it. This piece that I came across recently that's called sympathetic resonance.

So some of you know what sympathetic resonance is. For those of you who don't, we can define sympathetic resonance like this: "It's a harmonic phenomenon wherein a passive string or vibratory body responds to external vibrations to which it has a harmonic likeness." So that's really clear now, right? Y'all know exactly what it is? Yeah. Dale knows what it is. But, you know, the rest of us are, you know, we need some translation. So basically, what sympathetic resonance is, is when there are two things that are in harmony with one another, and the one, though they have no physical contact, the one vibrates, and because they're in harmony, the other vibrates as well. So think about if I had two tuning forks up here, and they were in the same key, they were tuned in the same way, and I took one tuning fork and I flicked it and it starts to vibrate, it gives off a sound. And the other tuning fork, though it's not touching, because it's in harmony with the first one, it'll start vibrating as well.

Or if we brought another piano into the room, we brought another piano, we put it up on the stage, and we, it's not touching this piano, but we made sure they're in concert. They're in harmony, they're tuned to one another. We could have Rebecca come up here and play middle C, and the string would vibrate in this piano, and the string in the other would as well. That's pretty cool, isn't it? I mean, it's remarkable, actually. It's amazing that these two things, right, these two instruments, these strings, that because they are united in harmony, because these devices are in tune with one another, they resonate. There's harmony between them. They're not touching, and yet they resonate. They're not touching, but they're in harmony. It's amazing. And that's what Jesus is saying about himself with regard to the law.

Harmony

He is saying that there is resonance between him and the law, just as there are two pianos that are tuned to the same key. That there is perfect harmony between him and the Old Testament. Did you see that in verse 17? That's what he said. "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." Like the tuning forks, there is harmony between Jesus and the Old Testament law. There's harmony there between the law and the prophets. Now that phrase, the law and the prophets, this was like shorthand or code word for all of the Old Testament. Okay, so the laws, the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, then we have the prophets. But to say the law and the prophets, all of his hearers would have understood this meant the

entirety of the Old Testament. And what Jesus is saying is that he and his teaching are in perfect harmony with the Old Testament. He is affirming his fidelity.

Now why would Jesus feel the need to say this right here? Why would Jesus take time in this Sermon on the Mount to talk about the kingdom of God, to make sure that we understood that he is in harmony with the Old Testament? I mean, if we are reading through the book of Matthew, if we are preaching through it and not just the Sermon on the Mount, we would have read in Matthew chapters one through four nothing controversial. There's nothing that would garner the ire of the religious leaders yet. And so why does Jesus feel the need to do this?

Well, I think one reason why Jesus needs to make sure that we understand that he is in harmony with the Old Testament is because he's getting out ahead of the challenges that are going to come. You see, he's preemptively establishing his harmony before it's ever questioned because it's about to be questioned. Very soon, Jesus is going to be questioned about his fidelity to the Old Testament. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, in next week's passage, we're going to hear a refrain that I bet many of you are familiar with because Jesus is going to start to say things like, you have heard it said, and then he's going to quote the Old Testament, or he's going to refer to teaching interpretation of the Old Testament that was common in the day. You have heard it said, but I say to you. Now that sounds like he's deviating, doesn't it? It sounds like he's wiping it away. It sounds like he's putting it aside.

Or later in the Gospels, Jesus is going to be challenged about his fidelity to the Old Testament because of his healings, because of his Sabbath practices, because of his teaching. He'll be accused of ignoring the Old Testament law. And so I think that Jesus, knowing these accusations are going to come, knowing these misunderstandings are going to come, is getting out ahead of it. And he's saying immediately, not only does he affirm the Old Testament, but he actually fulfills it. He's in complete harmony with it. He says it explicitly, "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." But to fulfill it, that verb to fulfill, it's used 16 times in the book of Matthew, and 12 of them, it is clear that is in reference to the fulfilling of prophecy. So think about the different prophecies that Jesus fulfills. I won't go through all of them, but think about some of them, right? Like the virgin birth, or that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, or Isaiah's prophecies that the Messiah, when he comes, he will give sight to the blind, and he will give hearing to the deaf, and he will raise the dead, and he will preach good news to the poor. These were all prophecies that Jesus fulfills.

But he doesn't simply fulfill the prophets, he also fulfills the laws. He keeps all the commandments and all the instructions of the Old Testament. He's kept them all, and he's bringing to completion the law and the prophets, what they were pointing to. Okay, so this has some implication. This means a couple things for us. The first thing it means is that the Bible, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, they are all about Jesus. That's the first thing this means, that it is all about Christ. As Sally Lloyd-Jones puts it in the Jesus Storybook Bible, "every story whispers his name." Because he's in harmony with the Old, it shows that the Old Testament, that Jesus is the center of it. And this idea is made explicit in Luke 24.

So in Luke 24, this is Jesus post-resurrection. And he has some of his followers, they're walking along the road to Emmaus, and you remember Jesus appears to them, but Jesus is incognito, right? He's in disguise. He hasn't revealed to them. He's hidden his identity from

them. And so he's just walking with them, and he's like, "so what's going on, guys? What are y'all talking about?" And they're like, "well, haven't you heard all the stir up, all the dust up, all the disturbances that Jesus has made, that he died, and he rose again, and all these things." And then we're told that Jesus starts to teach them. That beginning with Moses, that is the law, and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. That he is at the very center of the Old Testament. That he is what the Old Testament is moving towards. It's about him. That there is harmony between the old and the new. You know, this is one of the reasons why we added that scripture reading to our service. So if you're new with us, that scripture reading that Mary did this morning from Psalm 119, that part of our liturgy, we only started doing since January. And one of the reasons we started doing it was we realized, you know, when we're in a New Testament book, we could go for months without ever hearing from the Old. And so we wanted to do vice versa, right? We wanted to show the complementarity of the Old and the New Testament. And that's what we do.

So when I'm preaching, whoever's the preacher, we look at the text, the sermon text, and we find a corresponding passage from the other testament, because we want to subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, show us and remind us how the two are moving towards one end. How the Old and New Testament are in complete harmony with one another around Christ. So the first thing that this means is that the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Bible, Jesus is at the center of it. But the second thing that this means is that the Old Testament is still significant to us. Now, it's important for us to say that explicitly, because it's so easy for us to brush aside the Old Testament, right? To think, well, we're New Testament people. We're post-apostolic people. So what do we need the Old Testament for? I mean, the Old Testament, well, it's old, right? I remember that was actually my thing. Before I was a Christian, I remember taking a Bible off my parents' bookshelf, right? There it sat, the Old King James Version. And I didn't know the difference between Old and New Testament, but I thought it's a historical text, I'm going to read it.

And I open it up and I see Old and New, and I'm like, old, I want the new. I thought that as a non-believer. And I think Christians can think that as well. We don't need the Old Testament, that was just shadow. But we now have substance. So why look at the shadow? Or maybe we feel uncomfortable with the stories and the laws in the Old Testament, so we only want to focus on the new. In fact, I was talking to a neighbor recently, one of my neighbors, who's not a Christian, he said it explicitly in our conversation. But we were talking about the Bible, I was talking to him about Jesus and talking about the gospel. And he said this to me, he said, "oh, Jesus, I like Jesus. But the Old Testament, those stories, my stomach just can't handle that." And maybe some of you feel that way. And so maybe we want to just set it aside. And we just want Jesus in the New Testament.

But do you see that Jesus doesn't give us that option? Because in verses 18 through 19, he 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. 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." So you hear what Jesus is saying? He's saying that the Old Testament continues to be significant and authoritative for his people. That the Old Testament is Christian scripture. It has authority over us.

But this introduces another question, doesn't it? It introduces this question about if it's not going to pass away until all has been accomplished, then why don't we abide by all of it today? Maybe I just introduced a question in your minds that y'all weren't thinking about, you know? Maybe that's totally resolved. But that was the very first question I thought of when I read this passage. Like, how can Jesus say it will never pass away until heaven and earth pass away? Like, we will abide by it until all has been accomplished. And yet, I can stand up here and I have no concern about God's judgment because my clothes have multiple fibers. That was Old Testament law. And tomorrow, right? Many of us are probably going to cook out for Labor Day. We're going to make hamburgers or steaks or some sort of meat on the grill. And if we're smart, we're going to make sure to cook it medium rare, right? It's going to taste good and it's going to be bloody. And we're not concerned about God's judgment. Or maybe we're going to have some shrimp. We're not worrying about kosher laws. And we're not stoning anyone at the city gates. So, how can this be? Right? No one showed up here with a goat to slaughter for a sacrifice. And we shouldn't, right? We know we shouldn't.

We're just in the book of Hebrews not too long ago. And the author of Hebrews said, we don't offer any more sacrifices. And we'll never have to offer another sacrifice because the true sacrifice has come. So, how does all this make sense? If the law won't pass away until heaven and earth pass away, until all have been accomplished, how are we to make sense of this? Let me just say, this could warrant a very, very long conversation. And I'd be happy to have that with you. So, you know, send me an email, let's get lunch, we'll get coffee, we'll get a drink, we'll talk, you know, do it to Tobias too, he would love to do that, you know, I'm sure. We would love to have that long conversation. But for now, let me simply say that this all that is accomplished, I believe, has both a near and a distant aspect to it.

So, the clear distant aspect to this all will be accomplished is Jesus' second coming, right? When heaven and earth pass away will be when Jesus comes and He renews the heavens and the earth, right? He brings forth a new heavens and new earth. And so, in that time, that is when all will be accomplished. But there's a nearer aspect to it as well. And this nearer aspect is His death, resurrection, and ascension. And in this nearer fulfillment, Jesus is fulfilling the ceremonial demands of the law. Because He is the final sacrifice. He is the greatest sacrifice. And so, He's fulfilling the ceremonial demands. And in His death and resurrection and ascension, He's also establishing a people that are united not around an earthly theocratic kingdom, but instead around a spiritual kingdom that transcends language and ethnicity and earthly borders. So, we are no longer under a theocratic reign on this earth. That is not how the kingdom of God is defined as it was in the Old Testament.

But now that our King who is in heaven rules over all, we are part of a kingdom that transcends border and ethnicity. And so, because of these things, Jesus has fulfilled the law and the prophets. He's kept the law's demands. He's fulfilled the ceremonial requirements. And the judicial aspects of the law are fulfilled in Christ. And the moral requirements continue. Now, I realize that was maybe a lot. Okay. So, again, if you want to talk more, please reach out. I would love to talk to you about it. It'd be very fun conversation. We'll have a great time. I promise. I'll have a great time. But the point of what we're driving towards and what Jesus is driving towards is that there is harmony. There's harmony.

Disharmony

But also, there's not just harmony that Jesus is pointing out. There's also disharmony. We see the disharmony in verse 20. He says, "for I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." So, you see the disharmony is with the Pharisees and the scribes. The Old Testament Jesus, there's harmony. Pharisees and the scribes in Jesus, disharmony. And that would have been really shocking to the readers, to the first hearers of Jesus. Because when they thought of the scribes and the Pharisees, they thought of them as the professional religious people. They were the ones who had it all together. The scribes were those who were experts in interpreting and applying the law of God. They would actually spend decades of study and memorization and understanding and reading before they ever became a scribe. But then they would take on these cloaks, and they could walk around in these robes throughout the city, and they would be revered because of their understanding.

Or the Pharisees, these were a Jewish sect renowned for their meticulous observance of the law. The scribes and Pharisees of anyone in the Jewish people, they were the righteous ones. Charles Quarles, the commentator, he said this. He said, "the righteousness of these two groups would have seemed impossible to imitate, much less excel. And yet that's what Jesus said." I mean, think about the Pharisees. Okay, let's focus on them for a second again. The Pharisees, they didn't just keep the law. That wasn't enough for them, right? That wasn't righteous enough for them. They had to create extra laws. Extra laws that were tighter, that were more strict than God's law, so that they couldn't even come close to breaking God's law. This is who they were. They were the most righteous people in the Jewish community. And yet Jesus says his followers must exceed that righteousness. How is that possible?

Well, first let me say the Pharisees, they actually weren't really concerned with righteousness as God defined it. They weren't concerned with righteousness as God defined it because they kept extra biblical laws and saw those as more righteous. So they weren't really loving God's law. They were loving their adherence to their own law. And I say this because if they were really concerned with God's law and his righteousness, then God's law would have been sufficient. It would have been enough. They wouldn't need extra laws. If they really thought that God's law was enough, if they really loved God's law, then they would have been sufficient with it. Also, their concern was for a righteousness that was only external. And we know this because in Matthew 23, Jesus says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

You look beautiful on the outside. You say the right words. You wear the right clothes. You show up at the right time. In fact, you do more than that. This would be the person who's like, they read the Systematic Theology book. They're here every Sunday. They're not just here on Sunday, but they're here for Sunday school. And not just for Sunday school, but they got here early and made coffee and set up communion and stayed afterwards to clean up after all of us. And then they go to Bible study and they go to small group and they're doing all the things. They look so good. They look so beautiful. They're doing all the right things and saying all the right things and looking in all the right ways. And yet, Jesus said of the Pharisees and scribes, they are dead on the inside, whitewashed tombs.

So what does a righteousness that exceeds theirs look like? Well, that's what Jesus is going to talk about in a couple of weeks. He's going to get very specific with us. Starting next week,

we're going to look at anger, but what he is going to be driving towards is our hearts and our motivations and our inward state. Now, of course, Jesus is concerned with our outward expressions, but he's also concerned with our inward reality. And so therefore, the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees is a righteousness that is both outward as well as inward. So we must look not only at our actions, but we must look at our hearts. That's what Jesus is inviting us to do.

And y'all, when we look at our hearts with honesty, not dismissing our motivations, not justifying our actions, when we look with honesty, y'all, we're going to see some things that we're glad are hidden in our hearts that other people don't see. We're going to see things that are ugly, aren't we? I mean, we can put on clean and smooth and pure veneer, but they just mask the dark and ugly parts of our hearts. Because the reality is that we have greed and lust and a critical spirit and pride and self-righteousness and a whole host of other things that inhabit our hearts. What we're going to see is that our righteousness, it falls short. It falls very short. And so what we're going to see is that what we need is not a righteousness that we drum up on our own, not one that we create by ourselves, but we need a foreign righteousness, one that comes not from within, but comes from outside of us.

What we need is the righteousness of Christ. Sinclair Ferguson put it this way. He says that "when we look into our hearts, we will see that only God's gift of righteousness will do." And he's right. I mean, the apostle Paul put it this way in Philippians 3. He said, "we are found in him, not having a righteousness of our own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." And y'all, that is what we need. That is what we need. We need the righteousness of Christ. And when we look to him in faith, when we are resting in his complete fulfillment of the law and the prophets, that's what he gives us. He gives us his righteousness in the place where our righteousness has failed. That's what Jesus gives. And what's amazing about this is that for those who are trusting in him. For those who are resting in him for those who know his righteousness when we trust in him as Ferguson again puts it, "Jesus not only justifies us by sharing with us his righteousness, but he also sanctifies us and transforms us by making us righteous." That's what he does.

That's why he can say we need a righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees because he gives us that righteousness. And then he calls us to live it out. He transforms us so that by the power of the Spirit, we're able to say no to sin to say no to a false righteousness and to say yes to holiness. And to walk in it He transforms us so that our actions and our desires so that our works and our hearts so that our outward expressions and our inward realities are conformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus. Friends, that is the righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees. That is the righteousness of Christ and that is the righteousness that he has given to us and that we would walk in it. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, We thank you. Thank you that you have given us the righteousness of Christ. That you have called us into something greater than ourselves and that you have called us to turn away from our sin and to walk in your righteousness. And so I pray, Father, that you by your Spirit would equip us to do that. Help us to say no to ungodliness. To say no to unrighteousness. To say no to our sin. And to say yes to you to holiness. To righteousness. To walking with Christ. Conform us more and more into his image. And let us walk with you in harmony with our lord Jesus and it's in his name that we pray and God's people said together, Amen.