

## *Fulfilling the Law*

**Matthew 5:17-20 (NRS)** <sup>17</sup> "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks 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. <sup>20</sup> For 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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The Sermon on the Mount is a large portion of the teachings of Jesus that are found in the Gospel according to Matthew. Many of the teachings found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew are also found in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20-49, although some of the teachings are put differently than in Matthew. The disciples weren't following Jesus around with big yellow legal pads and pencils. When the gospels were written in the later part of the first century, the point was to write down the important teachings, not to write a chronological biography of Jesus. It's possible, even probable, that the Sermon on the Mount is a collection of teachings, not a stenographer's recording of a specific event. The teachings are the important thing, nor whether they were taught on a mountain as in Matthew, or on a plain, as in Luke.

**Matthew 5:17** "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; "In this continuing series of studies on the Sermon on the Mount, we come today to a critical passage that affects how we will understand much of the Sermon on the Mount and much of what Jesus taught in other scriptures. In the early centuries of Christianity, a man named Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was a different God than the God of the New Testament and that the Old Testament should be ignored and done away with. It isn't likely that anyone would say that today, but we tend to do it in practice. Some preachers seem to always preach from the gospels. Others also preach from the letters of Paul, but never from an Old Testament passage. I was taught as a child that the old law was wiped out and cancelled by Christ. Perhaps you were taught that, too. In this passage, however, Jesus plainly declares that his purpose was **not** to abolish the law. In another passage (Matthew 22:36-40), when Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment, Jesus quotes passages from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18) from the Old Testament. When we read in 2 Timothy (3:16) that all scripture is useful so that we might be instructed and trained, the scriptures being referred to are the writings we call the Old Testament, because the New Testament had not yet been assembled.

**Verse 18** "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

You may remember this verse as referring to jots and tittles. Jot was a term for a tiny letter. In the alphabet that we use, a jot would be the letter "i" – our smallest letter. A tittle is a tiny stroke or embellishment on a letter. Think of the capital letters O and Q. The only difference is the tiny stroke, the tail, and that makes the Q different from the O. That tail in the letter Q is a tittle. Jesus is not speaking literally here. Instead he's using an expression, an idiom, to make his point. In old manuscripts of the scriptures, there are many places where a word is missing or changed, places where some texts contain whole verses not found in other manuscripts. Jesus is reinforcing his statement that the law stands and will continue to stand. God's work wasn't complete. The people of Israel had not yet been a blessing to the nations as God had intended. Jesus declares that teaching the law and living the law of God will someday bring God's vision for humankind and all of creation to pass, someday the kingdom of God will be whole and complete. It isn't a matter of scripture ceasing to be valid at some point, but instead, that the world will come into complete compliance with God's will – that all will be accomplished.

**Verse 19** “Therefore, whoever breaks 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.” I find great comfort in this teaching of Jesus. We all should find great comfort here. Note what Jesus doesn’t say here. He doesn’t say that whoever breaks one of the least of the commandments will go to Hell. He simply says that those people will be called one of the least in the kingdom of heaven. They’re still in the kingdom, however! Remember that Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was within us, that the kingdom of God was near. The kingdom is inaugurated, but it isn’t complete. Jesus is saying that some people are better citizens of the kingdom than others. Some are living a kingdom life more than others. This makes the next verse even more striking.

**Verse 20** “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Pharisees were meticulous about the law. They worried about obeying the law in the tiniest detail. These were the folks who not only gave a tithe, ten percent, of their income, but they even gave ten percent of the herbs that grew in their garden. These were the people who thought in great detail about what was or wasn’t work, so that they would be sure to abstain from working on the Sabbath. So they got upset about Jesus healing the sick on the Sabbath; they criticized the disciples for picking grain to eat as they walked along on the Sabbath. “The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was concerned with observance of tradition, public displays of piety, and adherence to the letter of the law.”<sup>1</sup>

We can get all caught up in rules and traditions. We can fret over whether the tablecloth on communion Sunday has to be white and whether the bread for communion must be unleavened or not. We can get really wrapped up in deciding if the sermon should be early or late in worship and if the offering must be before or after the sermon. Still, it’s hard to imagine how we could be more careful about obedience to the rules than the Pharisees were. The problem was, the Pharisees had reduced their understanding of righteousness to a list of rules and a set of duties. When you’re completely focused on the rules, you’re focused on “What do I have to do?” You’re focused on yourself more than you are on God or your neighbor. There’s a lack of love for others in that approach - and we know that if we don’t have love, we’re just a noisy gong.

The shorthand term for that is works righteousness. We can get to feeling pretty righteous if we show up for worship, make a tax deductible donation, don’t beat our children, and abstain from using socially offensive language. However, Jesus is calling us to move beyond counting how many rules we obey, to look at our motivation and our feeling. We’re to go beyond quantitative righteousness, beyond scorecard faith, to let our actions be driven by compassion and love, rather than blindly complying with regulations. The Kingdom of God exists when and where God’s grace, love, and mercy live in us. That will guide us to do the right thing for the right reasons – for ourselves and for others. Focusing on teeny-weeny rules like the Pharisees is about “what do I have to do” instead of “how can I help and server?” “What must I do” will never bring the fulfillment that one experiences when they lead a kingdom life. We’re to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees qualitatively, not quantitatively. “The followers of Jesus are called to a different *kind* of righteousness, a righteousness that seeks to be ever expressive of the merciful, forgiving, reconciling will of God that lies at the center of the law.”<sup>2</sup>

**Verse 17b** Jesus said, “I have come not to abolish [the law] but to fulfill [it]. We began by asking, “Does the Old Testament law remain in full effect for Christians, or is it done away with?” Neither. The law is fulfilled and transformed in Jesus Christ. What does it mean, to fulfill the law? Fulfill doesn’t mean to complete and then set aside. Jesus wasn’t saying, “I’m here to satisfy some predictions about the messiah and then close the book on the law and the prophets.” He makes that clear when he says precisely that abolishing the law and the prophets isn’t the agenda. Fulfilling the law means to live the law, to bring out the full expression and deepest meaning of the law. When someone says that they find their work fulfilling, they’re saying that it makes them feel useful, that it satisfies an inner hunger, that it makes their life full and complete, that somehow, their life transcends mundane everyday existence.

Jesus said that he was going to lead us from the shallowness of minute and petty rules into the depth of the law. Love God and love your neighbor, Jesus said, quoting the law. Everything else flows from that. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans, (13:8 & 10, NRS) “<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

In essence, Jesus said, “Do not suppose that my mission is to repeal or set aside the law or the prophets’ interpretation of the law; my mission is not to repeal,” but rather to confirm the law and the prophets by interpreting Scripture in terms of God’s ultimate will.”<sup>3</sup> We are to discern the intent of the commandments. We’re to “pass through the literal requirements of the law into the heart of the law.”<sup>4</sup> We need to ask ourselves, “What is the will of God that stands behind [each] commandment, and how may we be obedient to that will?”<sup>5</sup>

It isn’t so much that we come to church on Sunday morning. The important thing is, do we come seeking transformation in our lives and to give God thanks and praise for the blessings we’ve received? It isn’t a matter of getting a tax deduction, but a desire to relieve suffering and make the world a better place. It isn’t a matter of singing the right hymns, but of singing our praise and gratitude. It isn’t a matter of what you wear to church, but of what is in your heart, mind, and soul.

Today’s passage was an introduction to the verses that follow. In them, Jesus will challenge us to be transformed by the will of God. Amen.

<sup>NRS</sup> **2 Timothy 3:16** All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (2Ti 3:16 NRS)

**Mat 22:36-40 NRS** <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" <sup>37</sup> He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

<sup>NRS</sup> **Revelation 21:1-2** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

**Matthew 23:23-25 NRS** <sup>23</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. <sup>24</sup> You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! <sup>25</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

<sup>1</sup> Marcia Y. Riggs, *Feasting on the Word, Vol. 1, Year A* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p336

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 54

<sup>3</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) p 47

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 53

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 53