



## Fulfilling the Law

St. Matthew 5:17-19

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So far in our study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount we've covered his introduction. In the Beatitudes he described the essential characteristics of the people who follow him – of Kingdom people. Then he told us what our role is in the world. If we are characterised by the Beatitudes, if we conform ourselves to his image, acting and behaving like he does, we will have an impact on the world. He warned us: people will persecute you for your righteousness – but don't stop. If you follow me – if you live like me – *you will be salt and light*. You'll be a preserving influence in a rotting world. You will flavour the world with the salt of God's grace, giving people a taste of the Kingdom. You will be a light shining into the darkness, exposing sin for what it is, but also lightening the darkness and pointing the way to the Saviour, to Jesus Christ, who is the true light.

In the Beatitudes and as he tells us that we are salt and light, Jesus gives us the principles of Kingdom life. The rest of his sermon is the practical how-to part: how to really be poor in spirit, how to really be a peacemaker, how to really be salt and light. And to show us the practical side of things Jesus takes right to Scripture – to the Old Testament.

And going to the Old Testament is important. You see, as Jesus talked about people who are poor in spirit and persecuted for righteousness' sake being the ones who make up the Kingdom of Heaven, and many of the people gathered there to listen to him on that day would have been confused and perplexed. Here was a guy who came to them claiming to be the Son of God and the Messiah. He was a great teacher. He spoke with great authority. And yet he wasn't a Sadducee. He wasn't a Pharisee. He hadn't studied under any of the big-name rabbis of the day. And what he taught flew in the face of everything that those religious parties and those big-name rabbis were teaching in their schools. What Jesus was teaching

was, in many ways, all new to those people listening to him. Some of them were no doubt sitting there thinking that Jesus had come to start a new religion – to do away with everything that had gone before. Maybe there were even some Pharisees there in the crowd, fuming in rage over what Jesus was describing as the way into the Kingdom of God – he was doing away with everything they held dear.

And so Jesus stops and makes one of the most significant, one of the most important statements in all of the New Testament. Look at Matthew 5:17-18 with me. Jesus anticipates their questions, or maybe someone actually asked him how what he was saying jibes with the Scriptures they knew. He 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.**

Jesus says definitively: "I'm not here to start a new religion. I'm not here to abolish the Law or the Prophets. In fact, I'm here because of them. I have come as the fullness of the Law and the Prophets. I'm here to teach you what the Law and the Prophets mean and to ensure that they are perpetuated and followed by God's people for all time."

The people were thinking that Jesus was teaching them something new, and Jesus tells them, "No, I'm teaching you something old – something you should and would have already known had your teachers not mucked it up for you!"

Misunderstanding Jesus here isn't a new problem. One of the oldest and most tenacious heresies in the Church has been this idea that Jesus somehow did away with the Old Testament. In the Second Century, the heretic Marcion removed the entire Old Testament from his Bible and edited out any and all references to it in the New. He wasn't the last and people still do it today. We may not be so bold as Marcion in the modern Church, consciously toss the Old Testament out, but the way we ignore and the way we interpret it often speak to the lack of esteem we have for it.

You guys have all seen one of these before [hold up pocket New Testament]. These things really tick me off. No not the New Testament itself, but the fact that in the modern Church we've taken to printing and distributing these little New Testaments as if they're the Bible. Little books like this may come in handy at times, but this is *not* the Bible! In fact, if this is what we're distributing to non-Christians, we're misrepresenting our faith. The Bible contains both the New *and the Old* Testaments. What's ironic is that inside the front cover of this one in particular are printed the words of Joshua 1:8, which begins: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth..."

But there is *no* Law in this abbreviated book! This was driven home to me by my Old Testament and Hebrew professor in seminary. He started work on a doctorate in New Testament studies and quit. He discovered that you can't really understand the New Testament until you understand the Old. So first he did a doctorate in Old Testament and Hebrew, *then* he did another one in New Testament! That's pretty extreme, but it illustrates Jesus' point in verses 17-18: *you cannot divorce his teaching, or the rest of the New Testament from the Old Testament.*

Jesus says, I haven't come to do away with the Law and Prophets, I've come in fulfilment of them – in fact, until the end of time, not one iota, not one dot will pass away. Jesus would have used the Hebrew terms "yod" and "tittle." The first being the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet – barely more than an apostrophe, and the second being a tiny stroke used when writing certain letters – in some cases that little stroke is all that distinguishes similar letters from one another. It would be like Jesus saying, not one cross on a "t" or one dot on an "i" will pass away. He's saying emphatically, "I've come not to do away with it, but to show you how much it all applies *more than you ever imagined!*"

Now I don't think we have a lot of trouble understanding the idea of Jesus coming in fulfilment of the Prophets – the writers who foretold his coming. We can understand the way in which Jesus fulfils God's promise in Genesis 3:15, when he says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." We can understand how Jesus fulfils the words of Psalm 22 where we see a vivid and

accurate portrayal of Roman crucifixion written almost a thousand years before the practice began. We read the words of Isaiah 53 and see their fulfilment in Christ:

**But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

The New Testament writers help us out when it comes to predictive prophecy. We have words like those used throughout St. Matthew's Gospel, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..." No, the "prophets" aren't where we have a problem seeing Christ.

But what about the Law? In some cases it's obvious that we're called to keep it. No one would suggest that Jesus did away with the Ten Commandments: thou shalt not worship other gods, thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, and all that. But when it comes to other aspects of the Law, we sometimes miss what Jesus is saying. There is a sense in which Jesus acts like a prism, but instead of separating light into all its colours, through him we can see the Law in all its component parts. We can see the ceremonial, the judicial, and the moral parts of the Law in a way that the ancient Jews could not. To them it was just "The Law." But we have to be careful. When we make these distinctions between the different aspects of the Law we run the risk of disagreeing with Jesus himself when it comes to this statement about not one iota or dot of the Law passing away. We hear Christians say things like, "Well, the moral commandments are still in effect, but Jesus did away with the others." If that's how we look at it, we're guilty of throwing out way more than an iota or a dot. What's the right answer?

Well, to have the right perspective we need to understand that the Law itself is prophetic. The entire Law – all those rules and regulations in the Old Testament that often seem so boring and irrelevant – all of the Law was given to point the people of God to Christ. No part of that Law has been abolished. It's all still in full

force – the issue is that Christ has fulfilled it all. If we simply say part of the Law was done away with, we miss the very point of the work of Christ on the cross and we miss the very point of the Holy Spirit's work in creating the Church.

Without the Law, all that's left of the cross on which our Saviour died is a sad and pathetic picture of a dead man nailed to a piece of wood. If we don't understand the Law, we can never understand what it is that Christ did for us when he was nailed to the cross and died. We can't understand what he did for us until we first understand that the Law was given to point God's people to Christ. Through the Law God taught his people what true holiness really is. He taught his people the sinfulness of sin. And through the Law God taught them that the wages of sin is death – and by the sacrifices of innocent animals, he conditioned his people for the coming of Jesus Christ, the true and spotless Lamb, who made the once for all sacrifice.

Turn over to Romans 8 and look with me at verses 2-4:

**For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 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, 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.**

St. Paul describes how Christ fulfils the Law in us by his Holy Spirit. The Law was given to shine a spotlight on our sin – to show it up, and in doing so to condemn us. But in Christ the penalty of the Law was paid. Christ, the perfect innocent sacrifice who had obeyed the law in every part, who was perfectly holy, died in our place. And after he rose and ascended he gave us the gift of his Spirit, who lives in us that we may now walk in obedience to the Law. In verse 7 St. Paul describes the carnal man saying, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it *cannot*." But through the death and resurrection of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we have been *changed*. Again, in verse 4, he says that we have

been given new life "that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Through the Holy Spirit, Christ has transformed men and women who were condemned by and hated God's divine standard given in the Law – now we love it. Now we hunger and thirst for the righteousness it sets before us. We can now honestly say with David, as we read in today's Psalm:

**If your law had not been my delight:  
I would have perished in my affliction.  
I will never forget your precepts:  
for by them you have given me life.**  
(Psalm 119:92-93)

Jesus hasn't abolished the ceremonial Law – he *is* the ceremonial Law. As I said before, he is for us the altar, the priest, the sacrifice, and the laver. The ancient Jew fulfilled the Law in part as he made his sacrifices in the knowledge that that whole system would come into its fullness in the person of the Messiah. His salvation was found in exactly the same way ours is: through faith in Jesus Christ. His was a faith that looked forward to Christ's work in the future. Our faith looks back to the work of Christ. But both the Old Testament saints and the New Testament saints are redeemed the same way – by faith in Christ.

When Christ cried out, "It is finished" and the veil in the Temple was torn in two he might as well have said, "It is fulfilled," because that was precisely what happened. At that point Jesus took over the role of the Law's types and shadows. He didn't do away with them but they have been *fulfilled in him*. The tearing of the veil and the opening of the Holy of Holies was God's not-so-subtle sign that Jesus had fulfilled the Law, but most of the Jews didn't get it. God was patient with them. He gave them another generation in which they continued to ignore Christ's fulfilment of the Law and continued to take make their imperfect sacrifices at the Temple. As the final sign God wiped it all out in AD 70 – not just the Temple but he dispersed the people from Israel itself, making Christ's fulfilment of the Law emphatic. It was God's way of saying, "You didn't get it when I tore the veil in the Temple, so I'm going to take the Temple away and even more so I'm going to disperse you so far from the land of the

Temple that you wont even be able to think of returning to the types and shadows. No more imperfect sacrifices people! Christ has done it. It has all been fulfilled in him. Turn to him! *He has finished it!*” We are no longer to bring our imperfect sacrifices to an imperfect earthly temple where we come before God only through the imperfect mediation of imperfect human priests. No. Through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ we have a perfect high priest who acts as the perfect mediator between man and God, and by making him our sacrifice we ourselves are made the perfect Temple in which God dwells. Many Jews have since turned to see the fulfilment of the Law in Christ, but many more still await the rebuilding of the Temple so that they can crawl back to the types and shadows and continue to deny the fulfilment of them in Christ, to continue to live in darkness. Even more sad are all the Christians looking for and even working to rebuild the Temple and its order of priests for a future restoration. Now how blasphemous is that?!? They’re denying the very work of Christ on the cross that fulfils the Law!

Now what about the judicial or civil parts of the Law – the parts that lay out punishments for crimes or laws for a civil society? In the same way Christ has fulfilled the ceremonial, he fulfils the civil aspects of the Law too. Jesus condemned the chief priest and the Pharisees when he said, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (Matt. 21:43). The civil Law applied to the theocratic nation of Israel, which ceased to exist at the same time that the Temple did. The nation of Israel was to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, but in fulfilling the Law Christ opened the Old Testament church to the Gentiles. He came as the light that Israel had failed to be. No longer was the church simply an ethnic and earthly kingdom, but found its fullness in a spiritual kingdom made up of all peoples and tongues as symbolised at Pentecost, and which was to be no longer just a Jewish light to the Gentiles, but a fuller, brighter, and multi-ethnic light to the entire world. St. Peter tells us:

**But you [that’s us, the Church] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness**

**into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.** (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Just like the imperfect types and shadows of the ceremonial Law are fulfilled in Christ, so are the civil laws of the imperfect and earthly nation of Israel. No longer is God talking merely about a place on a map or a single ethnic group when he says, “My people,” now he’s talking about his people – he’s talking about those who are part of what Jesus in St. Matthew’s Gospel calls the “kingdom of heaven.” In creating a spiritual kingdom Christ has given his Holy Spirit to his people and in the power of the Spirit *we* are the fullness of the Kingdom. The nation Israel was the shadow. We, the Body of Christ, are the real thing – the fulfilment through Jesus Christ.

So if Jesus hasn’t fulfilled the entire Law rather than abolishing it, then naturally we still have some kind of obligation to it. Look at 5:19 where he says:

**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.**

You see, the man or woman who has been redeemed by Christ and who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, will have a desire to live his or her life in accordance with the Law. This is the kind of righteousness that the prophet Jeremiah foretold when he wrote: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). That’s the work of the Holy Spirit – the same work that Ezekiel foretold would take place when he wrote: “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:27). This is the work of the Spirit in us that conforms us to the image of Jesus Christ. This is the great work of grace, the fruit of which is a growth in holiness on our part. You see, you can’t separate Law and grace. They go together. Without the Law, grace can’t be comprehended.

The venerable Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes this very good point that I can’t express any better:

“[Grace] is that marvellous gift of God which, having delivered a man from the curse of the law, enables him to keep it and to be righteous as Christ was righteous, for he kept the law perfectly. Grace is that which brings me to love God; and if I love God, I long to keep his commandments. ‘He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them,’ Christ said, ‘he it is that loveth me.’”

Jesus warns us in Matthew 7:21 saying, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” What is the will of the Father? To do the Law. St. Paul wrote to St. Titus saying that we await the coming of Jesus Christ, “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” If we love our Saviour, let us show it by doing our Father’s will, by being zealous for good works in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Please pray with me: Our Father, these are hard principles for us to grasp, but they are so important to a right understanding of what your Son has done for us. You have promised us your Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. Father, remind us that the evidence of your truth in our minds is the presence of that truth in our hearts, motivating us to good works. That is the perfect fulfilment of your Law. And so we pray through your Son, that we would be moved to true faith, and that your love for us would be reflected back to you in our own loving service to your Kingdom. Amen.