

CHRIST AND THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

Matthew 5:17-20

Intro: Today I am returning to my series on the Sermon on the Mount after turning aside on Easter Sunday to speak about the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Together we have gone through the first sixteen verses of Matthew 5, and Matthew 5 is just the first of three chapters in Matthew devoted to this very important message.

We have seen that in the Beatitudes that they give us the characteristics of a true Christian, such virtues as humility, meekness, mercy, purity of heart, and the like, which together make up holiness. But we have also seen that these make us “salt” and “light” in this world. So that it is a godly character which makes us qualified to serve the Lord, and to have the Lord’s blessing. This all takes us through verse 16 of Matthew 5, and forms the foundation of the whole “sermon.”

Beginning with verse 17 we come to a new section in the Lord’s message to His disciples. It has to do with both the Old Testament, and the life that it teaches. And the Lord said this because He was going to reveal in a deeper way the meaning of some of the commandments that were given in the Old Testament. He wanted His disciples to know that what He was giving them was not something new, something unrelated to what had been revealed before, but it was a deeper look into the meaning of the Word that had already been revealed. And so we turn, first of all, to what the Lord said about,

I. “THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS” (Matt. 5:17-18).

We should recognize that He was speaking of the books of the Law, the first five books of the OT, and also about the prophetic books of the OT. But the expression goes beyond that. *This term, “the law, and the prophets,” was one way the Jews had of referring to all of the Old Testament.*

You will find it again right here in the Sermon on the Mount. See Matt. 7:12. (Read.)

Next we see these two expressions in Matt. 11:13: “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.” Then, when a Pharisee, who was a lawyer, asked the Lord which was the great commandment in the Law, the

Lord responded by giving him two, the first and the second in order of greatness – the first was to love the Lord with all of our hearts ... ; and the second was that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And then the Lord said this: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:40). And so the Lord was saying that in all of the Old Testament there are no commandments that are more important than these, and that they are really the sum and substance of all obedience to the Lord.

In the first chapter of John’s Gospel, when Philip went to tell Nathanael about the Lord, this is what he said to him: “We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45).

There is also a very important passage in the book of Romans which uses both of these terms in referring to the Old Testament. It is Rom. 3:19-22:

19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference.

The Lord did not come to “destroy the law, or the prophets.” That is, He did not come *to do away with it, i.e.*, the Old Testament, but He came *to fulfill it*. You see, we aren’t to throw the OT away just because Christ has come. But the Lord came to show that it was true, and He came *to complete* the message it gave.

Thus, we have here our Lord’s confirmation of the authority of the OT, and we can see that further by the many times in the Gospels our Lord quoted from the OT to support what He was teaching. And so we see that the NT is built upon the foundation of the OT. Although are correctly separated into OT and NT, yet they are actually one revelation. In fact, each helps us in the understanding of the other.

Somewhere I read in the works of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones that he did not like for the NT to be printed by itself. He felt that it gave the idea that the OT was not as important anymore as it used to be, and he probably had a good point for us to consider. *There is a marvelous unity about the OT*

and the NT which adds to the evidence that it is all the Word of God!

The Lord came in fulfillment of much that was predicted of Him, and He will finally fulfill all that is predicted of Him when He comes again. But He did not want His disciples to think that He was doing away with the OT. It is true that some of His teaching even in this chapter marked a change from what was taught in the OT, but the teaching was all consistent with what had been taught before.

At the beginning of verse 18 the Lord used an expression that He used many times during His ministry here on earth. It is, "For verily I say unto you." In this chapter it is reduced to, "But I say unto you," as you see it in verses 22, or as it appears in verse 26. And it is the equivalent of the OT expression, "Thus said the Lord." The Lord Jesus, being the Son of God, absolute Deity, could make such a statement for Himself which no prophet in the OT, nor apostle in the NT could say about himself. Our Lord spoke with the same authority as God the Father would speak, or that the Holy Spirit would exercise.

Then what did the Lord say? (Read the remainder of verse 18.)

By this statement the Lord was indicating that there were still many things in the OT which had not yet been fulfilled, but He wanted to assure His disciples that they would be. We all can recognize that the Lord had not died as yet when He spoke these words, and so all of that was yet to take place.

There is in this statement that the Lord made about jots and tittles that confirms the verbal inspiration of the Word of God. The word "jot" refers to the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet which is like a comma in English which is lifted above the line. And so it is the smallest of all of the Hebrew letters. A "tittle" is the extension of a line which makes a Hebrew "r" different from a "d." J. A. Alexander said in his commentary on Matthew that it would be like we would say, "Not a word, syllable, or even a letter will be changed from the way that God gave it in the OT." We can be assured that God will not forget a promise, nor is it possible that He has ever made a promise that He will not be able to fulfill. It is like the Apostle Paul said in 2 Cor. 1:20:

For all the promises of God in him [Christ] are yea, and in him [Christ] Amen, unto the glory of God by us.

The disciples had not been used to hearing teaching like this. Notice the two verses following the conclusion of this sermon, Matt. 7:28-29.

(Read.) But what an encouragement this must have been to those who

were listening to the Lord. The traditions of the Jews had been so mixed in with the Word of God that most people, and probably not even the scribes and Pharisees, knew the difference between the Word of God and the additions that had been made to the Scriptures throughout the years before.

However, while the promises were included in what the Lord was saying, the emphasis that He made in these four verses was not on the promises, but on the commandments of Scripture. We have seen in the Beatitudes what the disciples were *to be*; at this point the Lord was about to begin to emphasize what they were *to do*!

And so our second point has to do with:

II. THE COMMANDMENTS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS (Matt. 5:19-20).

I spoke a moment ago about the “great” commandments in the Law. But there were other commandments which were “the least.” This doesn’t mean that they were not important, but that they were not as important as others. Let me give you an illustration.

In Matthew 23 we have a chapter full of the Lord’s denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, whom He called “hypocrites.” And among the woes which He pronounced on them, one was this:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone (Matt. 23:23).

Here the situation is reversed from what the Lord was talking about in our text, but I call your attention to the statement, “the weightier matters of the law.” The Lord commended them for their tithing, but condemned them for their failure in “judgment, mercy, and faith.” Now if it had been just the opposite, and they had been strong on “judgment, mercy, and faith,” but weak on tithing, their offence would not have been nearly as important. But still, even to omit the lesser matters of the law, either through ignorance or just plain disobedience, would have lowered them among the people of God, but would not have been the grounds for putting them out of the kingdom. It would have been something like the Apostle Paul described as being saved, “yet so as by fire” (1 Cor. 3:15b). There will be people who will be saved, but they will be lacking in rewards. And it would be surprising to find any believer who intentionally wanted to be in that category.

The latter category which the Lord mentioned is what we all should strive for: “But whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” You see, even the least of the commandments is important. All that the Lord has told us to do, we must do. We might think that we can find reasons for not telling the truth in certain situations, but lying is always contrary to the Word and will of God. You may have instances in Scripture where people lied, and blessing followed, but that does not prove that they were right. It only proves that God is often gracious to us when we don’t deserve it. Abraham failed to trust the Lord when he went on down from Canaan into Egypt because there was a famine in Canaan, but now we will never know what the Lord would have done to take care of him if he had stayed where he belonged. The same is true when Elimelech took his family into Moab for the same reason.

Where do we find greatness in the kingdom of heaven? We find it with those who “do and teach” the commandments of the Lord.

Did you notice the order there? *Doing* must go before *teaching* if we expect to have the blessing of God upon our lives and upon our teaching. Parents, be sure to notice this. Do you want your children to live in obedience to God’s Word? The key is for you to be living in obedience to His Word. This is true in a church. The blessing of God is upon a ministry when the leaders are being obedient to the Lord.

This was the great failure of the scribes and Pharisees. Much of their teaching was good, but it was in their lives that you would find the problems. In that same 23rd chapter of Matthew from which I read a verse a moment ago, the chapter where the Lord denounced the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, this is the way the chapter begins:

- 1 Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples,
- 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:
- 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.
- 4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.
- 5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men ... (Matt. 23:1-5a).

What a sad condition Israel was in during the days of our Lord upon the earth! What was the righteousness of the Pharisees? The Lord indicated here that if the people lived like the Pharisees did, they would not be saved! What an indictment that was! The Lord accused them of robbing

widows. Cf. Matt. 23:14). And in the same verse said that their prayers were only a public display, and so they were not true prayers. He called them *children of hell* in Matt. 23:15. He said they were “blind guides” (Matt. 23:16). And He called them *fools*, meaning that they didn’t know what they were talking about. But this is what the Lord said about their righteousness:

27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Matt. 23:27-28).

Their righteousness was all on the outside, but there was no reality on the inside, in their hearts.

I think we all know how easy it is to act the part, to pretend outwardly that things are right between us and the Lord, when we know that our hearts are not right.

What does it mean to be righteous? Well, it means, as I have explained before, that we are seeking to live according to the standard set before us in the Word of God. A righteous person is a holy person, but it is impossible for us to be holy without being obedient, and it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can be obedient to the Word of God. The Word tells us what we are to do and what we are *not* to do, and the Word is powerful as the Holy Spirit uses it in our lives to make us obedient to God. Obedience is the key to righteousness and holiness. And as we grow in our obedience to the Word of God, we are growing in our likeness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The righteousness of the Pharisees was a righteousness of which they were seeking to produce by their own works, which never is true righteousness.

The Apostle Paul had been a Pharisee, and he had fallen into the same trap as other Pharisees, thinking he was making himself acceptable to God. He boasted that he was a Pharisee. But after he came to know the Lord, this is what he had to say about himself:

7 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.

8 Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,

9 And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith (Phil. 3:7-9).

You see, it was not religion that he needed; it was Christ! And it is not religion that people need today. There is and always has been too much religion. The One we need is Christ. He died for the forgiveness of our sins. And He alone can make us new in our hearts, a new creation. And with Christ in us, and through obedience to the Word, we then can become what God wants us to be – holy in character and holy in life.

Concl: This leads me to ask two questions as I close.

First, Does your righteousness “exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? I mean by that, Is your righteousness something that you put on each Sunday, and when you are with certain people, or do your family and friends, your neighbors and the people you work with, know that there is something very different about you because your life is different? If not, then there is no better time for you to seek the Lord than right here today. The Lord said that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees would never get them into the kingdom of heaven. May you look to the Lord to meet your need today. The Law cannot save you, and the Law cannot make you holy. Only God as your faith is in Christ can save you.

My second question applies to most of us here today: How careful are you about your obedience to the Word of God? Do you know that there can be no real fellowship with the Lord if you are not obedient to the Lord? And you will never be a truly holy person until your life is lived in obedience to the Word of God.

I was reading 1 Thessalonians this past week and I was struck with an expression that the Apostle Paul used twice in chapter 4. The first time, in verse 1b, he exhorted the believers in Thessalonica “to walk and to please God, so that ye would abound more and more.” And then in verse 10 after he had mentioned that they should love one another, then he followed with this: “And we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more.” The NASB used the word “excel” in both places. “That ye excel still more.” What did he mean? He meant that as much as you have been seeking to walk with God, and to please Him, seek every day to walk more closely with Him and to please him more today than you did yesterday. And the same applies to our love for each other. Let us never be satisfied that we are as obedient as we can be, because we aren’t! We can always

be more obedience, more faithful, more pleasing to God, and more loving toward each other. So let our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and then keep on excelling in righteousness until the Lord comes, or until He calls us home.