

“GOD’S WORD: BETTER THAN EVER” MATTHEW 5:17-20

There is a saying in our culture that goes something like this: “If you want to keep from getting heartburn, don’t discuss politics or religion at the dinner table.”

I think you know why. People tend to form strong opinions about those two subjects—opinions that often turn into firm convictions. What is more, those two subjects often arouse deep emotion. Thus, when they are discussed by people who have differing opinions, it can generate a lot of heat.

Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. Passionate debates about politics and religion are as old as civilization, and so is the fallout and the factions that have resulted from them. It was certainly true in Jesus’ day. Jewish politics and religion were so intertwined that they were essentially one subject, and the differences of opinion were so great that it led to the establishment of several distinct schools of thought. The most common sects in Judaism were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.

There were numerous doctrinal and theological distinctions between these sects, but the fundamental difference was in their view and their interpretation of Scripture—what they called “the Law and the Prophets;” what we call the Old Testament. Some, like the Pharisees, believed that every word of Scripture was authored by God and was, therefore, timeless and binding in its application. Others, like the Sadducees, had a much more relaxed view of Scripture. A lot of it, they felt, was not meant to be taken literally. So they spiritualized much of its dogma, and were a lot less rigid in how they applied its imperatives.

When Jesus showed up and began teaching the kingdom of God, people were surprised that He did not identify Himself with any one of these sects. And that led to a lot of questions, one of the biggest of which was, “What is His view of Scripture? What School of Interpretation does He belong to? Is He a strict literalist, like the Pharisees? Or does He take a more relaxed approach, like the Sadducees? And how does His message about the kingdom relate to God’s written Word? Is it new revelation that makes the old obsolete? Or is it compatible?”

Those are very good questions. After all, the Jews’ identity was based entirely *on* the Old Testament. It was their manual for living—and I’m not just referring to their moral and spiritual lives. It was their guide for relationships and family and politics and food preparation and finances and holidays. The law encompassed every aspect of their lives. They didn’t just *want* to know what Jesus thought about the Law, they *needed* to know.

And Jesus responds to those questions in **Matthew 5:17** by saying, ¹⁷ *“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.”*

The Law refers to the first five books of the Old Testament called the Pentateuch, while the Prophets include what we consider the rest of the Old Testament. The expression “the Law and the Prophets” was a common way of referring to the entire Hebrew Scriptures.

When Jesus said I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, He was adamantly declaring that His message and His ministry did not oppose or contradict the Scriptures, nor did it diminish its authority or impact. On the contrary, His message and ministry actually clarify and complete the meaning of the Old Testament.

He says, *“I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* In this statement Jesus is declaring His identity in relation to God’s eternal plans and purposes, which God began

revealing to His people in the writings of Moses. Jesus says, “I have come to complete those writings.”

In making this statement Jesus is implying that the Old Testament is incomplete by itself. That’s not surprising, at least it shouldn’t be to anyone who knows the Old Testament. When you read it you come away with a sense of incompleteness. Because the Old Testament anticipates something more, something better, something permanent.

The Old Testament is like being pregnant. It’s good because there is a living fetus that is growing and developing inside the womb. But the pregnancy is not the end in itself. I’ve never known a pregnant mother, particularly one who is in the last month of her term, who said, “I want to be pregnant forever.” No, she is eagerly, sometimes impatiently anticipating the birth, because the pregnancy is all about the *baby* that is ultimately born.

Paul used this very metaphor when he said to the Galatians, “*But in the fullness of time, God sent his Son, born of a woman, under the law, to redeem those under the law...*” (4:4).

Jesus, in the fullness of time, came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. And how did He fulfill it? In at least four ways. First, He fulfilled over four hundred prophetic predictions about the anticipated Messiah, which are found in almost every book in the Old Testament. Second, He completed the very complex sacrificial system that is detailed in the book of Leviticus by His once-for-all sacrifice for sins when He died on the cross. Third, He clarified God’s intended meaning and goal for the moral and ethical law, which we will begin looking at next week in the Sermon on the Mount. And fourth, He obeyed the law perfectly, something that no one else has ever done, or even come close to doing.

In doing all these things Jesus makes sense of the Old Testament, because everything in the Old Testament somehow in some way anticipates Him and points to Him. It’s as though the Law and the Prophets are a pencil sketch, and Jesus adds color and dimension to it.

But make no mistake. This does not minimize or invalidate any of the Old Testament; it only confirms its timeless quality and makes it even more relevant. Look at what Jesus says in **verse 18**, ***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 statement is extremely important for a couple of reasons. First, Jesus affirms the full authority of the entire Old Testament as Scripture, even down to the smallest components of the written text. The smallest letter in the Greek alphabet is *iota*. The smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet is a *yodh* (translated “dot” in the *ESV*), which is only slightly bigger than an apostrophe.

Jesus is emphatically declaring that every part of Scripture, down to the smallest detail, is God’s inspired Word, and as such is authoritative, reliable, and enduring. Theologians call this “verbal plenary inspiration.” It simply means that Scripture does not merely *contain* the word of God; the words of Scripture *are* the very Word of God. All the words and everything about those words, including the placement of a word in a sentence or the tense or punctuation of a word, is authored by God, and is absolutely true and authoritative.

But there is something else in this statement. Jesus affirms the timelessness of the Old Testament for all ages. The two “until” clauses (“until heaven and earth pass away” and “until all is accomplished”) are essentially synonymous, and emphasizing that the Old Testament endures forever as a revelation of God’s will for humans throughout history until all is “accomplished.”

While some of the details of the Old Testament were accomplished through Jesus' ministry and, as a result, became obsolete or non-binding, everything in the OT remains a valid principle. For example, the Old Testament teaching that death and the shedding of blood to atone for sin is still a valid principle and still needs to be taught as God's will, even though it is no longer expressed through temple sacrifice, but has been fulfilled/accomplished once for all in Jesus' atonement on the cross (Heb. 9:11-14).

So Jesus did not come to do away with the Old Testament, but to fulfill it, complete it, make it more relevant and applicable than ever. Which is why He would go on to say, **verse 19**, ***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 Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day were what we would call "systematic theologians". They organized and prioritized the commandments in the Old Testament by developing some categories and then putting each of the commandments into those categories. For example, two of those categories were "positive" and "negative" commands. There are precisely 248 positive commands, and 365 negative ones—one for each day of the year. Likewise, they had categories for commandments they considered to be of great importance, and some they considered to be of lesser importance, and they ranked all 613 commands in the order of importance, starting from the greatest all the way down to the least.

I suppose it is possible that some might read verse 19 and conclude that Jesus was endorsing this ranking system, since He talks about the *least* of the commandments. But that is not what He is doing. He is simply asserting that all the commandments in the Old Testament, even the ones that are considered minor or incidental, are still valid and binding.

Here is His rationale: If the Old Testament remains the valid expression of God's will, even down to the smallest detail, then the consequences of one's treatment of the Old Testament are enormous. Jesus demands of His own followers a commitment to all the commandments in the Old Testament.

And if Jesus did not abolish the Law and the Prophets but fulfilled them, then it stands to reason that His disciples must practice and teach them. But we are to practice and teach them with regard to how Jesus now fulfills them, and we are going to begin looking at that next week in verses 21f.

But there is something else Jesus is saying in verse 19. A disciple's *status* in the kingdom of heaven is somehow contingent upon one's relationship to the Word of God. Look again at **verse 19**. ***...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.***

Jesus says in effect, "The Scribes and Pharisees have a ranking system for the commandments, but I have a ranking system for my disciples, and it's based on what they do with the commandments, including ones that are considered to be the "least." Those who are careless with God's commandments and who influence others to be careless with them, will be called the "least" in the kingdom of heaven. Those who honor the Word by obeying it and influence others to obey it will be called the "great" in the kingdom.

I want to be clear: The rank of "least" does not exclude someone from admission into the kingdom; it's a reference to what his/her status in the kingdom will be. There will less honor given to that person.

Can I give you an illustration of how I believe this can be applied today? Sometimes I

have conversations with people who are struggling in their marriages and are wondering whether they can actually remain in the relationship. We're going to find out later in chapter 5 when Jesus addresses the matter of divorce that He says the only valid reason for getting divorced is if one of the spouses has committed adultery. In my conversations with these people I always point that out. But I often hear, "He hasn't committed adultery, but He's done this and this..." or "she hasn't been unfaithful, but she's done this and that...and when I talked to my Christian counselor about it, or when I talked to my Christian friends about it, they said it was okay to get divorced."

I want you to think about the implications of that advice in relation to what Jesus says in verse 19. If a person *relaxes* one of the commandments, even one of the least of the commandments, even one they think is incidental, it affects their status in heaven.

Why? Because the commandments of God reveal and reflect God's righteous and holy character. And God's character never changes. Which means that He still feels the same way about sin now as He did in the Old Testament. He is every bit as opposed to homosexuality as He was when He wrote about it in Exodus. He is every bit as opposed to a man and woman having sex before marriage as He was when it is mentioned in Leviticus. He hates divorce every bit as much as He did when He said so in Malachi. He hates teenage rebellion just as much as He did when He considered it a capital offense in Deuteronomy.

The law reveals His righteousness, and that is why it is eternally binding. So what does that righteousness look like? Jesus tells us what it does *not* look like in **verse 20**. ***20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.***

Since we did not live in Jesus' day we cannot fully appreciate how radical this statement was, but I assure you it was a shock to His audience. You see, the Jews had a saying that went like this: "If only two people could go to heaven, one would be a scribe and the other a Pharisee."

They would have put the scribes and Pharisees into the "great" category in verse 19, because if anyone practiced and taught the commands, it was them. They lived by the letter of the law—and had an ultra-strict application of the law just to be safe.

For example, the Old Testament forbids one to carry a burden on the Sabbath. What is a burden? That is open to interpretation, isn't it? The Pharisees wrote that if a tailor went out on the Sabbath with a needle accidentally stuck in his cloak, he was in violation of the command, and therefore was sinning.

They were fastidious about obeying the law, and the stricter, the better; the more rigid, the more spiritual. And they were praised and honored by the general population of Jews as a result.

So when Jesus said, ***"Your righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees,"*** His audience must have thought there was no hope for them. "If they can't make it, then I'm certainly not going to make it." And it must have caused them to think very hard about the nature of righteousness, and how much righteousness it takes to win God's favor.

Jesus will go on in the next several verses to address both of these issues, but since we won't be looking at them this week you need to know that He was trying to communicate that God has an altogether different standard of righteousness and grading system than what they thought.

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was, in reality, a pseudo-righteousness. Actually, it wasn't righteousness at all; it was cleverly disguised

wickedness. It was sin all decked out in fancy clothes. They performed their “good” deeds and obeyed the commands so that others would applaud them and so they could feel good about themselves. But, they were, in the words of Jesus, like white-washed tombs. Attractive on the outside; rot and decay on the inside.

The Pharisees and Scribes had missed the whole point of the Law. God gave the Law to show us His righteousness. They used the Law to prove how righteous they were. God gave the Law to show us that we don’t measure up to His standards. They twisted the Law to make *themselves* the standards by which everyone else should be measured.

And God wasn’t the least bit impressed. Their so-called “righteousness” was offensive to Him.

Which brings us to the next issue. If a person’s righteousness has to surpass that of the Pharisees and Scribes in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, how in the world is it possible to get in? What kind of righteousness does it take?

The answer: Perfect righteousness. If you want to gain admission into the kingdom of heaven, you must be perfect. And since none of us are perfect, we must go back to what Jesus said in verse 17. There’s only one person that was perfect and that was Jesus Christ. He came to fulfill the Law, and, in part, that means He obeyed it perfectly—not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. Not just in His actions, but in His heart. He never once had an impure thought, a bad attitude, an ulterior motive. He was tempted in every way that we are, yet He never once gave in. He completely measured up to God’s standards of righteousness.

You know what that means? Only Jesus is worthy of admission into the kingdom of God. The rest of us fall short. The rest of us don’t have what it takes. We are morally and spiritually bankrupt. If the Law tells us anything it tells us how sinful we really are, and how it is impossible to measure up.

So where does that leave us? In the only position in which it is possible to enter the kingdom of heaven. A position of helplessness and humility.

I take you back to the first beatitude. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3)*. You are on the threshold of the door to the kingdom when you recognize your moral and spiritual inadequacy. In order to cross that threshold into the kingdom you’ve got to trust in the righteousness of Jesus. You see, the righteousness that Jesus talks about in verse 20 is not yours, it’s His.

In Philippians 3 the Apostle Paul described all the credentials that, at one time, he thought qualified him for admission into the kingdom. And one of those credentials was that he kept the law blamelessly.

But then he says, **verses 7-9**. *⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.*

Paul’s point is that righteousness through self-effort is impossible. The only kind of righteousness that will put us in good standing with God is the righteousness of Jesus that is imputed to us by faith. We cannot do anything to earn God’s favor and meet His standards through rule keeping and good behavior. Righteousness is a gift we receive when we place our trust in Him.

Now that is not to say that we should just ignore or disregard His commandments. Obedience to God's commands is always the *result* of being made righteous. After we put our faith in Him we are given the ability to obey His commandments by the power of the Holy Spirit who now lives in us. And, as we will see beginning next week, we are enabled to obey it as God intended, which is an even stricter interpretation of the Law than the Pharisees had.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with four principles about the Old Testament that this passage teaches that have relevance to you and me.

First, the OT reveals a standard of God's perfect righteousness, and since God's character never changes, all the laws and commandments in the Old Testament, including the ones that are no longer binding because of Jesus' sacrifice for sins on the cross, are instructive about who God is. So we ought to read the Old Testament often, because it reveals our Father's character. And that includes the sections that talk about His wrath and His judgment.

Second, the Old Testament is a revelation of God's will for humanity. It is not Plan A that failed. The Old Testament had a very specific purpose until Jesus came in the fullness of time. And since Jesus fulfilled the OT it all points to Him, and magnifies His grace and glory.

Third, the OT was given, in part, to reveal humanity's perilous spiritual predicament, and then lead them to a Savior who is qualified to rescue them because of His perfect obedience. If the Old Testament reveals God's perfect righteousness, then it also magnifies our sinfulness, and shows us just how impossible it is to measure up. And that's important, because it leads us to Jesus.

Finally, Jesus is the Interpreter of the law who determines what commands are binding and what commands and rituals are temporary. And Jesus reveals these interpretations through the writings of His apostles in what we call the New Testament. So, it is a good idea to read the New Testament alongside the Old Testament so we can see how the Old Testament now applies to us in the light of how Jesus fulfilled it.

And for the next several weeks we are going to do just that, as we see how God intended the law to be applied in light of its fulfillment in Christ.

“God’s Word: Better than Ever” Matthew 5:17-20

Main Idea: With the advent of the kingdom and the arrival of the King, the Old Testament, down to the smallest detail, not only remains authoritative and valid, but has a much deeper application

The relationship of Jesus and the OT (17)
He did not come to abolish it

He came to fulfill it

By fulfilling prophetic predictions

By completing the sacrificial system

By clarifying its intended meaning and goal

By obeying it perfectly

The binding validity of the OT (18-19)
Every letter and detail has lasting relevance (18)

Every letter and detail is binding (19)

Those who are careless with God’s commands will be dishonored

Those who are careful with God’s commands will be honored

The righteousness demanded by the OT (20)
It must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees

It is a requirement for kingdom admission

Principles to affirm about the OT

- The OT reveals a standard of God’s perfect righteousness
- The OT is a revelation of God’s will for humanity
- The OT was given, in part, to reveal humanity’s perilous spiritual predicament, and then lead them to a Savior who is qualified to rescue them because of his perfect obedience
- Jesus is the Interpreter of the law who determines what are binding commands and what are temporary rituals