

February 22, 2026
Pursuing the Kingdom: The Righteousness of the King
Matthew 5:17-20
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction... You don't have to be a Christian very long before certain questions begin to arise. And every serious follower of Jesus eventually faces this important question, "What do we do with God's law?" "Is the Old Testament still relevant?" If we are saved by grace, does obedience to the law still matter? If Christ fulfilled the law, does that mean it no longer applies? And if righteousness is a gift, why does Jesus speak so forcefully about how we live? In fact, there are many influential preachers and teachers who have even gone so far as to say that the law of the Old Testament is not longer necessary, or binding, for the Christian because we have the New.

Now, these questions are not just modern problems, but they were present the moment Jesus began teaching. By the time we reach Matthew 5:17–20, Jesus has already announced the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. He has described the character of the people that make up the kingdom in the beatitudes and their mission of being salt and light in the world. But now he pauses before he gets into the ethic of the kingdom knowing that his teaching could easily be misunderstood.

To many listening that day, Jesus sounded dangerous. He spoke with an authority greater than the religious leaders. He welcomed people the religious system overlooked. He seemed to challenge long-held assumptions about what righteousness actually is. And so the question would naturally arise, is Jesus undoing what God has already said? Is He replacing the law of Moses with something else? And to the Jew, there could hardly be anything worse.

As we turn to Matthew 5:17–20, we are invited to consider not only how Jesus relates to God's law, but how we do as well. This passage calls us to a righteousness deeply rooted not in performance, but in a transformed heart shaped by the King Himself. If you are able, please stand with me as I read from the word of God beginning in vs. 17 of chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel and I'll read through vs. 20. [Read Passage]

When Jesus speaks these words, he stands at a critical turning point in the Sermon on the Mount. Everything before this passage has described the character of kingdom people, again in the Beatitudes and their public witness as salt and light. And everything after this passage will describe the ethic of the kingdom, or how God's people conduct themselves and live in relation to things like anger, lust, truth, retaliation, love and so on. But here, Jesus pauses to address a question that would have been burning in the minds of everyone listening, "What does this "kingdom" that Jesus has announced mean for God's law?"

Jesus knows that his teaching sounds disruptive. He speaks with authority. He pronounces blessing on the poor, the meek and the persecuted. He even begins to redefine righteousness itself. To the religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees, it might sound as though Jesus is dismantling everything Israel has held so sacred. So before anyone can accuse Him of undermining the Scriptures, Jesus addresses the issue directly. 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.”

This sentence is not merely his defense as he makes his case, but it sets the stage for his plan of action as he definitively states who he is and what he has come to do. Make no mistake, Jesus is declaring how he, as God's promised Messiah, relates to the entirety of God's revealed will in the Old Testament. We know this because the phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the whole Hebrew Bible. Jesus is saying that nothing he teaches stands in opposition to God's prior revelation. But He is also saying something far more radical, that all of it finds its meaning and its fulfillment in him.

Now the word “abolish” means “to tear down, to render obsolete or to dismiss as no longer relevant.” Jesus explicitly denies that he has come to do any of this. He did not come to destroy the word of God, but to free it from the way the Pharisees and scribes had wrongly interpreted it. Jesus wanted to make it clear that he had authority apart from the Law of Moses, but not in contradiction to it. Jesus added nothing to the law except one thing that no man had ever added to the law, that is perfect obedience.

And so, the Christian faith is not a rejection of the Old Testament, but Jesus himself, and following him, is its fulfillment. The story God has been telling since Genesis does not end in a moral system or a legal code. But it ends in a person. Jesus does not come to erase the law. He comes to bring it to its intended destination, his perfect life laid down as a perfect sacrifice to satisfy the law's demands on our behalf.

This is where we must slow down, because misunderstanding this verse leads to two equally dangerous errors. One error is legalism which is treating the law as if it were a ladder we climb to earn God's favor. This was the error of the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They viewed rigid obedience to the law as a means to earn righteousness, often elevating their own man-made traditions to the level of divine commands, which led to self-righteousness, judgmental attitudes and a neglect of grace and mercy toward the people they were supposed to be leading toward God. We need to be careful and not fall into the same trap of thinking that the good things we do earn God's favor or our salvation.

The second error is the opposite, complete lawlessness, treating grace as permission to ignore God's moral will altogether. The thought here is that since Jesus fulfills the law and has paid my debt, his “grace” gives us license to live how we please because everything will be forgiven. Now, none of us would actually say those words out loud. At least, I hope no one would. But, if we were honest with ourselves, we prove this deep-down belief by our own actions far more often than we would like to admit.

Well, Jesus rejects both of these errors. He fulfills the law in a way that exposes our inability to gain our own righteousness and invites us into an obedience based on our faith, not to earn it.

Now the question comes, “How did Jesus fulfill the law?” Well, Jesus fulfills the law in multiple ways, and this is not an exhaustive list, but it covers the most important ways in which he does so. First, He fulfilled the law prophetically. This means every promise, type and shadow of the Old Testament finds its realization in him. Jesus directly fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah's life, death, and resurrection. Rather than abolishing the law, he brought it to its intended end through his life, teaching, and sacrificial death and resurrection. In other words, everything in the law and the

prophets pointed to Jesus. Nancy Guthrie, no not the one who has sadly been in the news lately, but a Christian author who wrote a devotional that highlights this point. The book is called simply, "Jesus in the Old Testament" and it's a one year devotional in which each daily passage goes through the Old Testament and shows the different ways it passage points to Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus fulfilled the law personally which means he obeyed perfectly where every human before him failed. We mentioned this a few weeks ago when we spoke about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. We are meant to think back to Adam and Eve, and the Israelites and their failings and what it has meant for all mankind. And were meant to even look at ourselves and think of how often we fail and give in to temptation. But Jesus never did. He is the only one to have perfectly obeyed all moral requirements of the law, fulfilling the righteousness that it demanded.

And now because of his perfect righteousness, we who trust in his finished work on the cross, have that perfect righteousness imputed, an important theological word that means that Christ's righteousness has been transferred to us when we place our faith and trust in him, and it is the greatest exchange even known to man, our filthy rags of sin exchanged for his spotless garments of righteousness and a right relationship with God.

And third, he fulfilled the law purposefully. He did this by revealing the true intent of the law, which was never meant to be mere external compliance, but wholehearted love for God and for neighbor. Jesus showed that the law's purpose was to govern the heart, not just actions. He emphasized mercy, compassion, and human need over rigid legalistic adherence to ritual laws and by doing this, Jesus "magnified" the law, revealing it as a guide for living in harmony with God's character.

This is why Jesus can say in the next verse, "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." The ESV translates this verse as iota and dot but your translation might say "jot and tittle." They both mean the same thing. These were smallest marks in Hebrew writing, the "jot" referring to what would be the equivalent of the dot over the English letter "i" and the tittle the equivalent of crossing the letter "t." What Jesus is doing is he is affirming the enduring authority of God's Word. The smallest marks in the Hebrew text matter. God's revelation is not temporary or disposable. It stands until its purpose is complete and that purpose is fulfilled in Christ.

And here we are reminded that God is not casual with the truth. His Word is not a suggestion. It is not culturally bound as if its something that can be negotiated. What is being said is that it is more likely for heaven and earth to cease to exist than God's purposes to fail. This should give us confidence in the entirety of God's word, both Old and New Testaments. It is the assurance that Jesus Himself fulfilled the law by His perfect obedience. It is the assurance that Jesus Himself fulfills the law in us by His perfect obedience. (Romans 8:4). And it is the assurance that God's plan will never be set aside until all things are fulfilled at the end of the age when Jesus comes again.

And then Jesus immediately applies this truth when 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." Now, by using the word "least" here Jesus is not ranking commandments based on human preference. He is addressing an attitude toward

God's word. To "relax" a commandment is not necessarily to deny it openly, but to treat it lightly or to explain it away, to soften it, to adjust it for convenience.

This is a temptation in every generation. We rarely reject God's Word outright. Instead, we reinterpret it and water it down until it no longer confronts us. We explain away difficult commands. We selectively emphasize grace in ways that excuse disobedience. Jesus warns that such teaching has consequences, not a loss of salvation for those who are truly saved, but a loss of faithfulness, a loss of integrity and, certainly, a loss of credibility in the kingdom. And going back to last week, what we're talking about here is a loss of saltiness and a dimming of our light.

On the other hand, Jesus says, "Whoever does them, who keeps these commandments, and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." In other words, the Christian is done with the law as a means of gaining a righteous standing before God. However, the law stands as the perfect expression of God's character and his requirements. And so, the law points us to Jesus because it shows us our inability to please God in ourselves. But after we come to Jesus by faith, we are pointed back to the law, not in regards to salvation, but to learn the heart of God for our conduct and the working out of our salvation. So to live out God's word in obedience and to pass it on accurately is what it means to be great in the kingdom of God.

Now, at this point, Jesus raises the stakes dramatically. He says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

To our ears, this sounds like a call to moral absolutism, which is the viewing of moral rules as universal laws that cannot be broken. But to the original audience, it would have sounded impossible. The scribes and Pharisees were the moral elite. They knew the scriptures. They were entrusted with guarding the law. They ordered their lives with strict observance of the divine law given to Moses, as well as, the 613 other interpretive laws, known as the Talmud, written by rabbis throughout the centuries intended to safeguard that law. If anyone had a chance at being righteous, it was them. So what does Jesus mean? Well, he doesn't mean we need more rules. What Jesus means is we need a different kind of righteousness.

You see, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was external and based on performance. It focused on visible observance of the law and the approval of everyone around them. It was concerned with how things looked rather than what was going on in their hearts. Jesus is calling for a righteousness that flows from heart transformation rather than just going through the motions.

This is the righteousness of the kingdom. A righteousness that begins with poverty of spirit, that mourns sin, that hungers for God, that is formed by mercy and purity of heart. It isn't any less demanding than legalism, it's actually more demanding. But it is also more honest, because it acknowledges that such righteousness cannot be achieved apart from grace.

You see, this legal righteousness of the Pharisees is like putting a coat of paint over rotten wood. It looks solid from a distance, but the wood is still rotten underneath the paint. Jesus will point this out to the scribes and the Pharisees numerous times as we go along in the Book of Matthew using different illustrations. But Jesus' point is that "kingdom"

righteousness is not like simply painting over rotten wood, it is more like replacing the wood entirely.

And here is where the gospel emerges with full force. If righteousness greater than the Pharisees is required to enter the kingdom, then the truth is, no one can enter on their own merits. And that is precisely the point of the law. The law points us to Christ. It exposes our need. It reveals our sin. And then it points us to the only one who fulfills it on our behalf.

Jesus alone possesses the righteousness that is required. And through faith in his finished work, that righteousness is given to us. "He became sin who knew no sin, so that, we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21)

We must resist the temptation to hear them only as a challenge to do more. If we do, we will miss both the warning and the grace found in this passage. Jesus does not call us to a righteousness that is stricter or more disciplined than that of the scribes and Pharisees. He calls us to a righteousness that is of a different kind. Not outward conformity, but inward transformation. Not obedience that tries to earn God's love, but obedience that flows from being loved by God.

And this passage presses us to ask hard questions, not about others, but about ourselves. Are we content with appearances, or do we long for hearts that truly delight in God's word? Have we treated God's Word lightly where it confronts us? Or have we confused grace with permission as an excuse to remain unchanged?

Yet even as these words search us, they also bring us comfort. Because the same Jesus who demands a righteousness greater than we can produce ourselves is the same Jesus who fulfilled that righteousness on our behalf. He did not abolish the law because He could not lower God's holiness. Instead, He fulfilled it because He alone could meet its demands.

That means our hope does not rest in how well we obey, but in whom we trust. And at the same time, our obedience now matters, not as a means of earning the kingdom, but as evidence that the kingdom has taken hold of us.

So we leave this text dependent on God, yet hopeful and grateful for a Savior who fulfilled the law perfectly, committed to live our lives shaped by that fulfillment as we continue to pursue the kingdom. Let us pray.

Benediction: May the grace of Christ, who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, shape your hearts with true righteousness, not of appearance, but of faith. May you walk in humble obedience, trusting not in your own merit, but in the righteousness given to you by the King, Jesus. Go in peace, to live lives shaped by His Word and His grace. Amen.