

Jesus Fulfilled the Law

Mt 5:17-48

Key Verse 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.”

When you hear the word law, what kind of emotion initially arises in you? Is it stress or joy? What about when you hear the word love? As you read our passage today, some of you may feel overwhelmed by the law. In the beatitudes, we learned we are truly blessed when we believe in Jesus. By grace, we have become kingdom people. God is so gracious, isn't he? Now the challenging part comes – the law. People may shrink or draw away in fear when hearing about the law because of its high standard that is impossible for sinners to reach. So, you might ask: Is it really meant for us to obey in our daily lives? When we consider the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount, we find that it is clearly given to obey. The risen Lord taught to **“obey everything I have commanded you”** (Mt 28:20).

Today's passage deals with Jesus' beautiful teaching about the law. It is beautiful because Jesus fulfilled the law. It is beautiful because at the heart of the law, it is all about love. We know that we are sinners who need to repent every day. But by his grace, we are children of our heavenly Father who delight in his law. I pray that all of us may know Jesus more personally and delight in the law of our heavenly Father!

I. Jesus Fulfills the Law and the Prophets (17-20)

Look at verse 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.”** Why might people think that Jesus came to abolish the law? Unlike many Pharisees of the day, Jesus' words and acts baffled many religious people. Think about the beatitudes that turned the established concept of happiness upside down. Jesus blessed the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Many of them were branded as public sinners. People asked if Jesus cares about rules at all because he accepted all kinds of sinners. We live in the era of grace. Some may ask: Does Jesus care about the law at all?

Yes. He does. Jesus has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them. The Law or the Prophets refer to the entire Old Testament. The word “to fulfill” occurred seven times thus far in this Gospel, and all of them relate to the Messiah. This means that Jesus is the Messiah to whom the Old Testament

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points and foreshadows. Now we have to see the entire Scripture through Jesus Christ who fulfilled it. Only through him can we properly understand it.

Jesus said in v18: **“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”** Here, the smallest letter refers to the Greek letter *iota* (i) or Hebrew letter *yod* (י). Even the smallest letter from the Law matters. Everything written will be accomplished. Then, how does Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets? Let me briefly highlight this in three points. First, Jesus fulfilled the Law by living in complete obedience to it. Jesus summarized the whole Scripture with one phrase: **“Love your God and love your neighbor”** (Mt 22:37-40). Jesus the Messiah humbly received John’s baptism, loved God and obeyed him actively and wholeheartedly. He welcomed all kinds of people and loved them sacrificially and fully even to the point of death. In other words, Jesus fulfilled the law with perfect love. Second, through his sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus fulfilled all the sacrificial laws that looked forward to him. He became the ransom sacrifice for our sins. Third, Jesus fulfilled the promises of the OT. With the coming of Jesus, the promises and prophecies have been fulfilled. Through his birth, his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has brought the kingdom of heaven that was prophesied. He is now exalted as King of kings who reigns. His kingdom will be more fully realized at his second coming. In Jesus, all promises God made become yes and amen (2Co 1:20).

In short, Christ is the soul and fulfillment of the law. Without Christ the law is completely misrepresented through a legalistic, performance-oriented mindset. With Jesus who fulfills the law, we relate to it in a new way.

Now what kind of attitude should we have towards the law? Jesus wants his kingdom people to love and live it. Jesus said in verse 19: **“Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”** Even the smallest item in the law matters to us. We have a tendency to take only some words that are comfortable to us, while trivializing others. But whether we are least and great in the kingdom of heaven depends on our attitude toward God’s law. Our eternal destiny is here at stake.

Look at verse 20: **“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Wow! Do you hear that? Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in terms of right living, you will certainly not enter the kingdom. The

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Pharisees and scribes were people of greatest righteousness imaginable during Jesus' time. Yet, Jesus said that Christian discipleship requires a greater righteousness. How can our righteousness possibly surpass that of those who were zealous for the law? Is it by observing the law more meticulously and legalistically? No. While the Pharisees were proud of their observing many regulations, their hearts were not pure. Likewise, Bible-believing people without transformed hearts are lost.

Unlike legalism, kingdom righteousness requires the transformation of our hearts. It works from the inside out. If we want to be great in the kingdom of God, we must have a desire to love and obey his law. How is this possible? It is possible when we surrender to Jesus and our hearts are cleansed by the blood of Jesus. It is possible when we humbly depend on the Holy Spirit who indwells us.

This is also my testimony. When I didn't know Jesus, I suffered a lot under the law. I thought God was like a slave master, demanding and merciless. While pretending to be a moral guy, I was rebellious against God and hated his law. But when I received the grace of Jesus, I surrendered to him and my heart was changed. I began to have a holy desire to please my Savior. As everybody knows, I'm not perfect and make many mistakes. But by his grace, I delight in the law of my Savior. When we trust Jesus, his blood covers all our failures and imperfections. Now we relate to the law in a new way, mediated by his grace. So, God's law is never a "things to do" list. Rather, it is about the law that is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus. Our surpassing righteousness is possible when we devote our hearts to the Savior. Praise Jesus who renders us righteous from the inside out!

II. The Surpassing Righteousness of Kingdom People (21-48)

How does our surpassing righteousness practically look like? Now Jesus uses illustrations to teach this. These illustrations are much more than moral lessons. Rather, they demonstrate that the lives of kingdom people are driven by the love of God.

First, kingdom people delight in loving brothers and sisters. Look at verse 21. It was said "**You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.**" I hope none of us here committed murder. It deserves the death penalty. You may think that you kept this commandment because you haven't murdered anyone. But what does Jesus say in verse 22? "**But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of**

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the fire of hell.” This is a challenging teaching. When I get angry at home, I often think that my anger is “righteous” anger. Yet, this passage challenged me to confront this issue and repent. Being angry with another person is as bad as murder. Anger has a desire to damage the other person. A grudge can erupt into angry insults by calling someone “*Raca*” meaning “empty-headed” or fool. This is like calling someone an idiot or a jerk. These offenses damage relationships and are answerable to God’s eternal judgment. Even though we live under grace, as Christians, we must take this sin very seriously.

We must deal with this sin quickly and decisively (23-26). If you are offering your gift to God at the altar and suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, what should you do? You have to abandon your offering there, go to this friend and make things right, then come back and offer your gift. God will not accept our gift at the altar until we reconcile with our neighbor. How can we seek our reconciliation with God, if we are harboring a grudge against our brother or sister? If we take these commands seriously, how would our worship service look like? Have you reconciled with your neighbor before coming to the altar?

Reconciliation is so urgent. It is the first priority. Jesus says in v26: “**Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.**” The last penny refers to the second-smallest Roman coin, only a few minutes’ wages for a day laborer. When we damage our relationships with others, our relationship with God is damaged. Kingdom people must make reconciliation their first priority, because our God takes it first priority. It pleases our God who is merciful to us. May we sincerely examine our hearts every week and make things right with our neighbors.

Second, kingdom people delight in keeping sexual purity and marriage vows. Look at verses 27-28: The Old Testament says, “**You shall not commit adultery.**” During Jesus’ time, adultery was cheating on one’s spouse and deserved the death penalty. Even today, adultery has a narrow definition of unfaithfulness inside marriage. But Jesus says, “**Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**” Adultery begins in one’s heart. A lustful look makes the woman an object of sexual desire and corrupts our hearts. Yet in our society, adultery, not to mention a lustful look, is often not regarded as a big deal. Our consumer culture takes advantage of our lustful looks to sell products through glamorous models, actors or actresses. They say, “Image is everything.” Today’s image culture has perverted the meaning of sex, reducing it to sexual gratification. Most seriously, pornography is ruining many people’s minds, hearts and lives.

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How should we deal with this? Look at verses 29-30: **“If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”**

Wow! What a hard teaching. Is Jesus implying that we should literally lose our sight and our limbs one by one? If that was the case, not one part of our body would remain intact. Rather, Jesus is highlighting the seriousness of our sin problem. The right eye and hand were considered more valuable than the left. But it is better to remove them than to go into fiery hell. Of course, gouging out one’s lustful eye cannot stop lust. People can still lust with their eyes closed. But the point is that we have to decisively act to remove things that cause us to sin. To avoid temptations of sexual sin, we have to do whatever it costs. Is it your computer in your room? Relocate it to the living room, if you don’t want to gouge out your eye. Sexual sin cannot be gradually tapered off; we must cast off this sin completely. We have to restore our sexual purity and genuine Christian love against lust. As kingdom people, let’s please God and delight in keeping sexual purity.

In verses 31-32, Jesus teaches about marriage vows. People thought that legal divorce meant freedom to remarry. Today, many suffer from divorces and broken families. Is it ok to marry and divorce according to our own feelings? Jesus says no. Marriage is sacred. Jesus opposed divorce to protect marriage and family. We should love and faithfully serve our spouse. I pray that the new couple who established their family yesterday may love and serve each other. May we set a godly example by embracing each other’s weaknesses and showing grace in our families!

Third, kingdom people delight in integrity. In verses 33-37, Jesus is addressing dishonesty and abuse of the oaths. Many people in Jesus’ time thought it was harmless to deceive others if they swore oaths by something other than God’s name. But in reality, all oaths equally invoke God’s witness. We cannot make even one hair on our head white or black. Some of us may dye our hair, but we don’t have control over its aging. Jesus teaches that oaths can never replace integrity. We should be people of integrity because we are kingdom citizens. Our words should be trustworthy so that there is no need for formal oaths for others to trust us.

Fourth, kingdom people do not revenge, but delight in loving even their enemies. In the Old Testament, **“Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”** meant that one

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should take the offender to court. But what does Jesus say? Look at 39-42. **“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”** Jesus challenges his kingdom citizens to go beyond legal justice. A backhanded blow to the right cheek was the most severe public insult to a person’s honor. As humans, it is part of our nature to desire revenge and fight back. But by offering our other cheek, we show that we trust God and let him deal with it. In verse 40, Jesus commands us to leave the outer garment as well as the inner one in the legal process. If we do this literally, what would happen? We would stand naked at the court, which would be an unbearable dishonor in those days. By going the extra mile in verse 41, we show that we love even our oppressors.

These commands do not mean that we should submit to injustice in our society. Of course, we have to resist injustice and refuse to compromise justice, but we must do so in love, not repaying evil with evil. How can we not take revenge into our own hands? It is possible when we depend on God. Kingdom people trust the promise that vengeance belongs to God who is perfect in his justice (Ro 12:19).

Look at verse 43. Actually, the Old Testament teaches to **“love your neighbor,”** but never says, “Hate your enemy.” So, this was a misinterpretation of the Old Testament by some religious leaders. What does Jesus say about this? Look at v44. **“But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** Naturally, we hate our enemies. Why do we have to love our enemies and pray for those who give us a hard time? (1) It’s because we are children of our Father in heaven (45a). Our Father in heaven cares about enemies. Actually, we were all once enemies of God. But God still loved us and took us back. (2) Even now God is gracious to sinners. If God caused his sun to rise on the good only, how many of you think will receive sunshine today? (Many including me would be in darkness.) But God gives daily blessings — the sun and the rain — to everyone, regardless of whether we are good or bad, nice or nasty. (3) Therefore, God’s children should be different. Even the worst of people such as tax collectors love those they like (46-47). But we refuse to be controlled by the behaviors of our enemies. We are driven by God’s love. Loving our enemies distinguishes us as kingdom citizens. Who is your enemy? Are you dealing with them as Jesus would?

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in a South African prison for trying to end the racism of the apartheid. When he was set free and became the president of

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South Africa, VIPs around the world came to his inauguration, wanting to have the front seats. Guess what? Who do you think Nelson Mandela invited to sit in those seats of honor? He invited his former prison guard Gregory as a sign of forgiveness to those who persecuted him.

Jesus' teaching about the law concludes with his words in verse 48: **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** “Perfect” here means “whole,” that is, loving without limits. Love as your heavenly Father loves without limits! Is Jesus challenging you with this? I believe so. Is Jesus frustrating you with an impossible ideal? Is Jesus making you cry out “Have mercy”? Actually, this command is very challenging to all of us. But we have to remember the phrase **“as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** In the perfect love of our heavenly Father, all of the Law is fulfilled. When we were still sinners, God demonstrated his love for us in Christ. Now the law is never without Christ. All the laws are now soaked in his grace. Now by grace, we are called to be like him who dwells in us, growing in his heart for the world.

How can we be perfect as our heavenly Father? We make mistakes and are far from being perfect every day. However, our failure is not the real problem. The real problem is when we don't depend on the grace of Jesus. When I study this passage, its beauty shakes my mind, but my heart wants to cry out, “God, have mercy!” Yet when I surrender to Jesus, he makes me whole every day. Let's remember that we are children of our heavenly Father. Because of his love, we want to please him and love without limits. Praise Jesus!