

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XII : THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT — PART 5: THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
5:17-20				

Overview

Jesus had just told the listeners to be salt and light. How? Jesus therefore continues by describing some principles of His kingdom in which His followers were to follow in order to effectively hinder moral decay and to let their light shine so others may glorify the Father in heaven. The works Jesus describes are in complete harmony with the teachings of the Old Covenant yet out-of-step with the teaching of the day. This section of the Sermon on the Mount therefore begins with an affirmation that what Jesus was teaching is biblical, and that He was not trying to undermine the teaching of the OT.

Fulfillment of the Law

v17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. : already Christ's opponents had begun to regard Him as revolutionary and dangerous, perhaps an idealist that wanted to break all ties with the past (Jn 5:18). This did not change as the years passed but rather grew (Matt 26:59-61). The same was said of Paul's teaching (Acts 21:21). "The opponents were wrong. Did the scribes and Pharisees demand good works? So did Jesus (Mat 5:16). Did they hold Moses in high regard? So did He (Matt 8:4; Mk 7:10; Lk 16:31; 24:27,44; Jn 5:46).... Jesus, then, as He begins to set forth 'the righteousness of the kingdom,' immediately dismisses the charge of His enemies that He is a proclaimer of novelties, and shows that His ministry was not in collision with the OT but in harmony with it; in fact, that without Him the OT was incomplete, unfulfilled." [Hendriksen, *Matthew*] Actually the honor bestowed upon the law and the prophets by Jesus was higher than the Pharisees since the had long ago buried the OT teachings under a load of tradition and their own writings; therefore it was *they* who had set aside the OT teachings, not Jesus.

The approach of Jesus is wise. "If we intend to reform affairs which are in a state of disorder, we must always exercise such prudence and moderation, as will convince the people, that we do not oppose the eternal Word of God, or introduce any novelty that is contrary to Scripture.... Following the example of Christ, we ought to clear ourselves from false accusations and at the same time to profess the truth freely, though it may expose us to unjust reproaches." [Calvin, *Commentary*]

Jesus came NOT TO DESTROY THE LAW OR PROPHETS, meaning "literally, to loosen down, dissolve; Wycliffe, *undo*." [Vincent, *Word Studies*] "Do not imagine that I am come to violate the law — I am not come to make the law of none effect — to dissolve the obligation men are under to have their lives regulated by its moral precepts; nor am I come to dissolve the connecting reference it has to the good things promised." [Clarke, *Commentary*]

Jesus is the FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS. It is **fulfilled in His teaching**, setting forth the true meaning of the law and revealing Himself to be the fulfillment of the OT types; it is **fulfilled in His vicarious suffering and death** which through His obedience satisfied the law's demands, allowing Him to become the great High Priest; and it is **fulfilled in His royal rule**, delivering His people to a new kingdom and defeating the spiritual enemy of our souls. "I am come, to complete — to perfect its connection and reference, to accomplish every thing shadowed forth in the Mosaic ritual, to fill up its great design; and to give grace to all My followers, to fill up, or complete, every moral duty. In a word, Christ completed the law: (1) In itself, it was only the shadow, the typical representation, of good things to come; and he added to it that which was necessary to make it perfect, HIS OWN SACRIFICE, without which it could neither satisfy God, nor sanctify men. (2) He completed it in Himself by submitting to its types with an exact obedience, and verifying them by His death upon the cross. (3) He completes this law, and the sayings of His prophets, in His members, by giving them grace to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbor as themselves; for this is all the law and the prophets." [Clarke, *Commentary*]

v18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. : "Till heaven and earth pass, not intended to fix a period after which the law will pass away, but a strong way of saying *never*." [Bruce, *Gk NT*] When taken with the preceding verse the sense is **Jesus had not come to set aside the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, a truth so demanding that not even the universe itself in its present form will disappear until the smallest part of the OT is completely fulfilled.**

Hendriksen gives the literal translation to be "For Amen I say to you (plural), until the heaven and the earth pass away, one iota or one keraia will not at all pass away from the law until all come to be." He translates the verse as follows: "For I solemnly declare to you (plural), Until heaven and earth disappears not even the tiniest letter or the tiniest hook on a letter will in any way disappear from the law until all (it calls for) shall have taken place." Wuest: *Until the heaven and the earth pass away, not one smallest letter nor smallest letter-marking shall pass away from the law until all comes to pass.*

AMEN: in general was used among the Jews to refer to *truth, faithfulness* and occurs in statements which *affirm or confirm a solemn truth*. The KJV translates this as “*verily*” meaning “in very truth”. Some of the newer versions translates it as “*truly*” or equivalent. NIV: “*I tell you the truth, until heaven...*”. It is used not to just express a fact — as, for example, $2 + 3 = 5$ would be a fact — but *an important, solemn truth, one which may be at variance with popular opinion or would at least surprise the people*.

IOTA / KERAIA: The verse speaks of not even a “jot” (iōta) or a “tittle” (keraia) will disappear from the OT until it’s mission has been accomplished. Adam Clarke in his commentary states: “That this saying, one jot or one tittle, is a proverbial mode of expression among the Jews ... is amply proved by the extracts in Lightfoot and Schoettgen.” He continues to list about ten examples from ancient rabbinical writings, one of which is as follows: “In Shir Hashirim Rabba, are these words: ‘Should all the inhabitants of the earth gather together, in order to whiten one feather of a crow, they could not succeed: so, if all the inhabitants of the earth should unite to abolish one ך yod, which is the smallest letter in the whole law, they should not be able to effect it.’ “ [Clarke, *Commentary*] “The OT was originally written in Hebrew letters, the smallest of which was the *yodh*, sounded ‘y’ as in ‘young’. In Greek it was represented by the similarly tiniest letter in that tongue, the *iota*. The *keraia* is a very small projection, a little hook that distinguishes one Hebrew letter from another. Thus the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the one called *beth*, in English corresponding to ‘b’ or ‘bh’, has a slight extension at the lower right hand corner, to distinguish it from the letter *kaph*, corresponding to English ‘k’ or ‘kh’.

Beth is written ב *kaph* is כ

The meaning, then, is this, that not even in the slightest respect will the Old Testament remain unfulfilled. It is as if we were to say that with respect to its fulfilment ‘not a t will remain uncrossed and not an i undotted’.” [Hendriksen, *Matthew*] An example of the Hebrew letter *yodh* may be found in the name of the Lord:

יהוה = Yehovah, “self-Existent or Eternal” (the yod is the small letter on the right).

At the time Jesus was speaking some of the OT had already been fulfilled, e.g. the incarnation and the coming of John the Baptist. But much was still to be fulfilled: the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Even at this time there are future events which were predicted in the OT as well; e.g. the time of Jacob’s trouble and the second coming of Christ with His millennial kingdom. *These events are as sure to transpire as the events which occurred at Jesus’ first coming!*

TILL ALL BE FULFILLED: “Or, accomplished. Though all earth and hell should join together to hinder the accomplishment of the great designs of the Most High, yet it shall all be in vain — even the sense of a single letter shall not be lost. The words of God, which point out His designs, are as unchangeable as His nature itself. Every sinner, who perseveres in his iniquity, shall surely be punished with separation from God and the glory of His power; and every soul that turns to God, through Christ, shall as surely be saved, as that Jesus Himself hath died.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

v19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. : obviously Jesus had high regard for the OT scriptures, not only that all will be fulfilled but that it must be obeyed. Therefore Jesus continues by revealing that **THERE ARE DEGREES OF BLESSINGS IN HEAVEN**. Although all that is accomplished on earth is by grace and nothing is merited, there will be relative blessings and loss of blessings in heaven according to one’s dealings with God’s holy law: those that obey and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of God, those that disobey and teach others to do likewise will be called the least in God’s kingdom. *Earthly faithfulness will be rewarded!*

One could divide mankind into three general divisions if what is stated here is considered with what follows: “Class 1 set aside the least commandments for the sake of the great; class 2 conscientiously did all, great and small; class 3 set aside the great for the sake of the little, the ethical for the sake of the ritual, the divine for the sake of the traditional. That threw them outside of the kingdom, where only the moral has value.... These valuations of Jesus are of great importance as a contribution towards defining the nature of the Kingdom as He conceived it.” [Bruce, *GK NT*]

This verse forth a principle which could use clarification: **THERE ARE DEGREES OF IMPORTANCE IN THE COMMANDS OF GOD**. Wuest: “*Whoever therefore shall deprive of authority one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*” What is often heard is that all sin is of equal importance to the Lord and in one sense I agree with that statement. No sin, regardless of how minor it may be, is overlooked by God and even the smallest sin is enough to condemn us in His eyes. In that respect all sin is the same regardless of its magnitude. Yet there is another sense in which some sins are greater than other sins. The Jews of Jesus’ day divided the law into 613 commandments, 248 positive and 365 negative. Debates were held concerning which was the least important and which was the most important (some Rabbis considered Deut 22:6 “you shall not carry off the mother-bird together with her young” to be the “lightest” commandment). As to which was the most important was answered by a scribe to be “love the Lord thy God with all your heart, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Jesus Himself agreed that was the most important (Lk 10:28; see also Matt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34). Catholicism likewise divides sin into two categories, venial sins which are “small and pardonable offences against God or our neighbor”, and mortal sins which are so-called because it is deadly, killing the soul and subjecting it to eternal

punishment. Perhaps it is in reaction to their “works-based” salvation that some have over-reacted with the statement that all sins are the same. Obviously Jesus’ teaching of the law was far removed from the hair-splitting legalism of the Pharisees, but He too considered some commands more important than others. In this passage He considers some of the commands in the OT to be “least” and when He was asked what commandment was the greatest, He did not correct the question but rather had an immediate answer (see above; also Matt 23:23). Therefore we should agree upon the following principles:

- *in one sense there is no difference between sins: even the smallest of sins is enough to keep a person out of heaven and demand the need of a Saviour*
- *in our practical everyday living however there is another sense in which some sins are greater than others and we should strive to remain focused on the things which God places as important: loving Him with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves*
- *regardless of the importance, Jesus states here that even the smallest commandment in the moral law of God is to be obeyed; therefore sins cannot be overlooked because they are “small sins”*
- *to enter into discussions as to how to rank sins is to return to the Pharisaical mindset Jesus fought to dispel*

v20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. : while connected with what Jesus had been saying concerning the importance of the OT scriptures, obeying its precepts and teaching other, Jesus now makes a transition (in v20) to show that this righteousness He is about to expound is not in accordance with the traditional and current teachings of the Pharisees. What follows (from Matt 5:21 to the end of the chapter) is a series of six examples Jesus sets forth to illustrate how the rabbis of the day interpreted and applied the commands and what they *really* meant. Points to consider:

- while the main contrasts between His teachings and the common Pharisaical interpretation immediately follows, the rest of the entire Sermon on the Mount contains the contrasts as well
- these six contrasts are set forth by “ye have heard that it was said...” and Jesus’ contrast “but I say unto you...”. The items chosen by our Lord is murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and loving our neighbors.
- what Jesus is about to point out is the original intention of the commands and their proper application, that is, that **the righteous demands of Jesus is nothing less than complete conformity with God’s holy law in all a person is and does. Such a righteousness means that the heart and not only the outward deed is right before the Lord.**
- the contrasted righteousness may be illustrated as follows:

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES	THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD
Fails to satisfy the heart: it is formal, external, shallow	Satisfies the heart: genuine, internal, deeply rooted
Fails to satisfy the mind: it is based upon deceptive reasoning, misleading, and proceeds from a mind not at rest	Satisfies the mind: founded on reasoning which is sound, honest, reliable, and comes from a mind at peace with God
Self-made righteousness: self-righteous, “holier-than-thou”	God-given righteousness: that of the humble broken spirit
Glorifies self: the righteousness of the proud	Glorifies God: the righteousness which puts God on the throne of glory

{ adapted from Hendriksen, Matthew }

- we must remember the impact these words must have been to the original listeners. We look at the Pharisees as the hypocrites Christ exposed them to be, but this was a shocking statement to the ones first hearing these words. The Pharisees paraded among the people as sanctified, better than the commoners, and at one with God. For most of those that saw the Pharisees they agreed with the impression the Pharisees gave. They considered the Pharisees the elite group, something they could only hope to be like one day. For the Jews listening to Jesus therefore, when Jesus said their righteousness must exceed (“*be more abundant, if your righteousness does not go beyond*”) that of the Pharisees, they must have immediately thought, “*who can meet those standards?*” Yet this is the demands of the kingdom of God and clearly shows our need for the new birth. “We cannot even “*enter the kingdom*” and begin to be the Lord’s, without going beyond the foremost of the world’s religionists. Believers are not to be worse in conduct, but far better than the most precise legalists. In heart, and even in act, we are to be superior to the law-writers, and the law-boasters. The kingdom is not for rebels, but for the exactly obedient. It not only requires of us holiness, reverence, integrity, and purity, but it works all these in our hearts and lives. The gospel does not give us outward liberty to sin because of the superior excellence of a supposed inner sanctity; but the rather it produces outward sanctity through working in our inmost soul a glorious freedom in the law of the Lord. What a king we have in Jesus! What manner of persons ought we to be who avow ourselves to be in his holy kingdom! How conservative ought we to be of our Father’s revealed will! How

determined to allow no trifling with the law and the prophets!” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*]

- one has illustrated the difference between the scripture’s teachings and that of the Pharisees by comparing it with school work: the Pharisees could be compared to a math class while the scriptures’ demands may be compared to an English or History class. The difference between these is that in math there is a definite right or wrong and one either knows the correct answer or not. The Pharisees taught an external religion which could be met by outward conformity and it was measurable whether one lived up to those standards or not. English or History however does not have so definitive right or wrong answers. One preparing for a test could study and study and still not have the assurance that they had done enough. This is comparable to the scriptures and the demands of righteousness put forth by Christ. Regardless of how holy an outward appearance we may live, we must ultimately kneel before the Lord and confess our wickedness, our failure to do some of the commands of God, our sinful thoughts and desires which are hid from others, our attitudes which do not align with holiness, etc. **Our lives therefore are not as simple as being either “on” or “off”. We cannot divide believers as either being a “good Christian” or a “bad Christian”. Rather it is like a scale of a hundred with no true believer being at the bottom but neither is any believer at the top. We press onward to the high calling of Christ but until our total sanctification at death we never reach perfection.** Unlike the Pharisees, there is always more to be cleansed from our lives, more which may be improved.