

The Law and the Prophets

Jesus has started His great Sermon on the Mount, three chapters that have revolutionized how people think about themselves, about God and about how they relate with others. These words of Jesus are widely considered to be the most powerful teachings ever spoken on this planet. They never lose their power to impact our thoughts, to stir our conscience, to humble us before God and to change our lives.

Let's dig in to the first paragraph after Jesus introduced the new person, the Kingdom person, through His eight Beatitudes and the bridge of salt and light that ties the Beatitudes to the main teaching sections that follow:

Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfill them. I assure you, until heaven and earth disappear, even the smallest detail of God's law will remain until its purpose is achieved. So, if you break the smallest commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But I warn you — unless you obey God better than the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees do, you can't enter the Kingdom of Heaven at all.

(Matt. 5:17-20)

Jesus opens this block of teaching - which, as we will see, has a lot to do with the Law of Moses - with a blockbuster claim. "Don't think I came to get rid of the laws that God gave to His people through Moses; I haven't come to do away with them, or the prophets, but to fulfill them!" It's hard to imagine a greater claim or a bolder statement.

We have to ask a whole bunch of questions about these statements. Why did Jesus say, "Don't misunderstand why I have come"? Why did He think that anyone would have concluded that He would do or say anything against the law or the prophets? What does He mean when He says He is going to fulfill both law and prophets? That's verse 17 and then you read in verse 18 Jesus saying that the law will last as long as heaven and earth last - that not one little stroke of the pen will be altered in the law until heaven and earth disappear. What does that mean? And what does He mean when He says that they won't disappear until "everything is accomplished", or, as the New Living puts it, "until its purpose is achieved"?

That's a lot of questions and we're only dealing with the first two verses so far. Let's look at them in turn. First, why did Jesus say, "Don't misunderstand why I have come"? There are lots of speculations about what people might have been saying about Jesus - after all, He was a miracle-working teacher who commanded more respect from the people of the land than did their religious leaders. He taught in ways that seemed so radically new, different than the ways they had been taught by their rabbis. People had to be wondering if this man could possibly be their promised Messiah. But the bottom line is that, while all those ideas are possible explanations,

there are many others as well. What if Jesus said those words simply because He knew that heresies would rise in the second century which promoted a view that the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, were outdated, that Jesus had done away with them and brought in a whole new religion? The heretic Marcion left that phrase out altogether and some of his followers flipped it around, writing, "I have not come to fulfill the law and prophets but to abolish them". So, either at the time He spoke those words, or in the years after He spoke them, people did misunderstand why Jesus had come and did suggest that perhaps He had come to abolish the law and the prophets.

What is meant by that phrase: law and prophets? This was a commonly used phrase to summarize the Hebrew Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament or the Old Covenant. Some of Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, would have pretty early on been suspicious that Jesus had come to get rid of the law, while others of His opponents, namely the Sadducees, might have hoped that He had come to abolish the prophets - the prophets had long challenged their presumption to power in Israel. The prophets demanded justice and righteousness and threatened God's judgment on the power base of wealthy families in Israel - which became known as the party of the Sadducees.

Maybe the most important question to ask of Matthew 5:17 is the question of how Jesus would "fulfill" the law and the prophets. What did He mean by saying that He had come for that purpose? And here we have a rich bounty of answers:

1. One of the classic answers to this question goes back as far as St. Augustine who replied to the argument of the Manichees in the fourth century who thought Jesus had done away with the law. Augustine's reply was that Jesus was correcting the perversions of the law that the Pharisees and scribes had introduced. He was bringing the people's understanding of the law back to God's original intention when He gave the law through Moses to the Israelites. Augustine thought that in that sense, Jesus was fulfilling the law. That understanding remained through the Middle Ages and the Reformation period.
2. We also understand that Jesus fulfilled the law by dying on the cross to pay the atonement price for the sins of those who would put their trust in Him. The whole system of sacrifice that was initiated in the Old Testament points to the need for the exact offering that Jesus made of His own life at Calvary.
3. Another way in which Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets is that He perfectly lived up to their demands. He was the example of righteousness that the law described and that the prophets called for.
4. Jesus fulfilled the law by the gift of the Holy Spirit who changes the inner life of people, giving us a desire to love and honour God and to obey His commands. This is a new thing, prophesied, for example by Ezekiel (11:19,20):

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My rules and obey them.

And in many other ways, as you study the writings of the Old Testament law and prophets, you see them pointing to Jesus and as you compare them with the Gospels,

you see Him fulfilling, accomplishing, completing, what the laws and prophets called for.

What an amazing claim! What a bold declaration in front of the people He was presenting Himself to. Jesus is telling these people that He has come to complete, to fulfill, what their Scriptures, the law of God that bound their national life into a unity of focus, was all about. He's saying, "It's all about Me." And that message never changed. In fact, it got more intense and direct until, near the end, Jesus told His disciples, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me." Wow!

Next comes verse 18 and we had some more questions for Jesus there. Let's look at the NIV:

I tell you the truth, 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.

The smallest letter in Hebrew is the *yod*, which looks a bit like an apostrophe. There are more than 66,000 of them in the Old Testament. The least stroke of the pen is called a *serif* and is a tiny little extension on some letters to distinguish them from other letters that are similar. There are so many that I couldn't find a number for them. Jesus says that the Word of the Lord is unchanging. It was true and right when it was written and nothing has happened to change what is true and right in God's eyes. Truth and righteousness don't change because the opinions of human beings change, nor do they change because we're wiser now than God was when He gave them.

Notice that when Jesus quotes from the writings of the law and the prophets that He uses the phrase, "It is written." He doesn't say, "It was written", "it has been written", or anything else that would suggest, "Once upon a time." When He quotes the Scriptures He is saying, "It was written, it is written and it will always be written." This is God's word and it won't change because we're uncomfortable with some part of it or because we think we've advanced beyond it somehow. The law and the prophets remain until "everything is accomplished".

Notice that Jesus says two huge things in these verses that suggest that the law is actually not a permanent thing. It's not false, it's not unfair, it's not something we can dismiss because it's a gift from God and accomplishes things that He wants to accomplish. But Jesus said, in verse 17, that He had come to "fulfill" the law and here in verse 18 He says that the law and prophets remain UNTIL everything is accomplished. Both those sayings tell us that while the law is good and true, it is not permanent. When someone announces that something has been fulfilled, they are saying that there's been a change. When "everything is accomplished", something has been completed. It's done. No one would have expected Jesus to say either of those things, either that He would fulfil the law or that the law and prophets remain until a specific time, so these are radical statements. They point to a new order of things, with Jesus at the centre of it.

Now we come to verse 19 and this can be a bit confusing, to say the least. Jesus is speaking to the “in sync” people, to the person who is “in” the kingdom and He describes what it means to be ‘great’ in the Kingdom and what it means to be ‘least’ in the Kingdom. The ‘least’ title goes to the person who not only breaks God’s commands, but teaches others to do the same. This is the person who thinks they know better, who thinks that God might have been wrong about this law or that principle. They are Kingdom people, and are drawing close to Jesus, but they have trouble with trusting God fully in some area of His laws. The ‘great’ title goes to the person who not only practices God’s laws, but teaches others to do the same. We use the word ‘great’ far too often and too easily - but just imagine with me what it would be like to be described as great in God’s eyes. “Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

And then Jesus concludes with these words - again, I’ll use the NIV to give us some different perspective:

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.
(Matthew 5:20)

That sounds like bad news. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the pros at keeping the laws. They had calculated that the law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions and they tried their best to keep all of them. How could Jesus say that you have to do better than that if you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? What He’s asking is seemingly impossible ... except that it isn’t.

The righteousness that the Pharisees and teachers of the law practiced was all external, all on the outside, where it could be seen by others. In other words, it didn’t have anything to do with the condition of their hearts and God’s laws were always aimed at the heart. But these men were also self-satisfied. They were able to pray with heads held high, “I thank You, O Lord, that I’m not like this sinner beside me here.” They were complacent in thinking that their keeping of 613 external rules was sufficient to merit God’s approval, but didn’t recognize or deal with their pride, their lack of compassion, or even their lack of true love for God.

But Jesus’ words also hint at the only possible way to outdo the Pharisees and teachers of the law: admit that we’re not able to outdo them in our own strength. Just like He said at the beginning of the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Once we recognize our weakness, and humbly admit that we’re not capable of being more righteous than the Pharisees, the door is opened to us to enter God’s Kingdom. Once we admit that we don’t have anywhere close to 613 rules that we live our lives by, that we are sinners who have missed the mark, then the mark has done its work. It has shown us our true condition, our need for God’s grace, and it leads us to the place where we are willing to ask for that grace.

This part of the Sermon on the Mount is only confusing if you try to read it as law, as something Jesus taught that was independent of grace. Reflect again on these words:

“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.” You can react and say, “Oh, no, Jesus didn’t come to abolish the Law. That means that I am still a failure because I don’t do everything that the Law says I should do. I am in big trouble with God because of all of my failures.” And people do say things like that when they read words like these, or, *“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven.”*

What they are missing is that Jesus said He had come to fulfill the law. When the law is fulfilled, by definition, it is satisfied, its purpose is completed. When Jesus fulfilled the law, He satisfied its demands on our behalf and, Paul says this so clearly in Romans, AND Jesus gave to us a righteousness that is not of the law. This is a different kind of thing, not based on our performance but on His righteousness. The righteousness that comes to us as a gift is the righteousness of Christ, and it definitely exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. That’s what we needed, and that’s what Jesus supplied to us.

If Jesus didn’t do away with the law, but did fulfill it, what functions does the law still have today? Is it still relevant? If so, what can we learn from it?

1. It reminds us that we are sinners, dependent on grace for our salvation.
2. It shows us what is pleasing to God, what honours Him, and that helps to guide our actions.
3. We understand more deeply what Jesus did for us in both perfectly obeying the law of Moses and doing it with a pure heart, a heart that delighted to please His Father.
4. Knowing the Law and its demands should inspire deep gratitude for what Jesus has given us - the freedom we have to be led by the Spirit rather than trying to be justified by our law-keeping.

So, let’s end our discussion of this passage by making some applications; in other words, by looking at how we can allow Jesus’ teaching to make a difference in our approach to life.

1. One of the weaknesses of the modern church is that too many of us think we have a choice about whether or not we like certain aspects of God’s character. The fact is, as we saw earlier, that people from almost every generation have said things like, “I reject the God of the Old Testament, but worship the God of the New Testament,” as if that was our choice to make. In this passage Jesus makes it clear that there is continuity between Old and New, that He stands solidly in line with the God who inspired both the law and the prophets. He says, “I’m not throwing out the law and the prophets, but fulfilling them, completing them” if you will. Yes, there are things that are hard for us to understand about some of the events we read about in the Old Testament, but that doesn’t mean that we have a right to judge God for them. We can’t see above the plane of human existence, so we can’t determine what the greater values might be that were at stake in the conquering of Canaan, for example. Ask your questions - that’s never disallowed - but don’t pretend that you have a right to be fully satisfied with the answers you

get. Somewhere in the journey we're on, God will ask us to trust Him. And somewhere on the journey we'll be satisfied, like Job was, with Him and Him alone.

2. The second application is simply to learn what the Old Testament has to teach us. There is a rich body of text that includes the law, the prophets, the poetry of Israel and the books of history. There is rich symbolism that helps us understand the words of Jesus and stages of revelation that prepare us for the fuller revelation of the New Covenant. Studying the law and the prophets is a rewarding effort.
3. One final application: Jesus is clearly preparing His disciples for a message of profound grace that they will be asked to take to the nations. There is room here for misunderstanding and for failure, and neither disqualify a person from being able to enter the Kingdom. And there is, not set out explicitly yet, but it's coming, there is the gift of grace that allows you to have a greater righteousness than the Pharisees. Live gracefully, and live in gratitude for the grace of our Lord Jesus, and be gracious with everyone, as you practice this word of the Lord: "Freely you have received, freely give."