

Matthew 5:13-26
Psalm 119:17-32
Psalm 119:33-40

The Message of the King: the Law and the Kingdom

Feb 1, 2015

“My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.”

Is your soul *consumed with longing* for God’s rules?

When God’s rules are observed – when his verdict is heard and obeyed –
then peace and joy fill the earth.

God’s rules – God’s decrees –
should fill our souls with longing.

When you read and sing Psalm 119, you need to have an *active* understanding of God’s law.

God’s law – his rules, his statutes, his commandments –
does not merely describe a written code.

The written word is certainly *part* of what Psalm 119 means –

“I will meditate on your precepts...I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.”

But it’s not just the written rules:

“I will meditate on your wondrous works...
I will run in the way of your commandments”

God’s Law – the *Torah* – includes both the mighty deeds of salvation history
and the statutes and rules that God gave us.

The five books of the Law – the five books of the Torah –
include *both* God’s mighty deeds for Noah, for Abraham, and for Moses,
and the covenants, the promises, and the commands that he gave them.

When you think about the Law in this way,
then you will share in the delight that Psalm 119 calls us to!

David Powlison says it this way:

“Psalm 119 is where I go to learn how to open my heart about what matters,
to the person I most trust.

I affirm what I most deeply love.

I express pure delight.

I lay my sufferings and uncertainties on the table.

I cry out in need and shout for joy.

I hear how to be forthright without self-righteousness.

I hear how to be weak without self-pity.

I learn how true honesty talks with God:

fresh, personal, and direct;
never formulaic, abstract, or vague.

I hear firsthand how Truth and honesty meet and talk it over.

This Truth is never denatured, rigid or inhuman.

This honesty never whines, boasts, rages, or gets defensive.
I leave the conversation nourished by the sweetest hope imaginable.
I hear how to give full expression to what it means to be human,
in honest relationship with the Person who made humanness in his image.”
(David Powlison, Speaking Truth in Love, p11)

So with this in mind (and heart!) let us sing Psalm 119, verses 33-40.

Sing Psalm 119:33-40
Read Matthew 5

“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v48).

Often, when we read the Sermon on the Mount,
we come away feeling guilty because we don’t measure up.

Certainly Jesus wants you to see that you are falling short of his standard.
But what I find curious about this sermon is the magnificent confidence of our Lord
that his people *will* actually look like *this*!

Moses set a high standard in the Law.
But he was a pessimist.
In Deuteronomy he said, here’s what you are supposed to do –
but you’re going to fail!
The Prophets likewise, upheld the standard of Moses.
And they agreed with him:
“you’re doomed!”

Jesus, on the other hand, says that the Jewish leaders of his day
have gone soft and have made it “easy” to obey the law.
He ratchets up the rhetoric and says that the true standard of righteousness
is *higher* than that of the Pharisees.

And yet, Jesus is an optimist.
He seems to think that his impossibly high standard is not only possible
but obviously going to happen.
And if you are his disciple, then it will happen in you.

This is why we need to see Matthew 3 and Matthew 28 as the book-ends of Jesus’ ministry.
The baptism of Jesus – where we saw the Trinity at the Jordan River:
the Spirit descending upon Jesus – and the Father declaring,
“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

And then in Matthew 28, Jesus follows up on this, when he says
“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded.” (Mt 28:19-20)

What are we supposed to teach the nations as we disciple them?

Here in Matthew 5-7, we hear what it means to do and to teach
“all that Jesus commanded.”

As we go through the Sermon on the Mount,

we need to remember what we saw last time:

the reason why we can seriously talk about *doing* what Jesus says,
is because Jesus is first and foremost describing who *he* is,
and therefore, who we are *as a people* in him.

The Sermon on the Mount is less a “code of ethics”

and more a description of the people of God as they are reoriented around Jesus.

Then again, we could say the same thing about the Mosaic Law!

The *Torah* of the old testament (the 5 books of Moses)
was less a book of statutes
than a book of stories that reoriented Israel around Yahweh.

That’s why Psalm 119 could sing and dance with delight
about the *law* of God.

The Sermon on the Mount has the same joy and delight in the Law.

Because when Jesus thinks about the Law,
he’s not thinking of it as an onerous burden to be borne –
he is thinking of the sweet words of his gracious Father
which it is his joy as a faithful Son to fulfill.

People sometimes say that the Sermon on the Mount reveals Christ as the new law-giver.

Jesus, like Moses, went up the mountain!

But that gets it backward.

The Sermon on the Mount does not reveal Christ as the new Moses.
After all, Moses went up the mountain and said, “Thus saith the LORD.”
Christ sat down on the mountain and said, “But *I* say to you.”

The Sermon on the Mount does not reveal Christ as the new Moses –

but Christ as the *Yahweh* who spoke to Moses in the first place!

And he starts by talking about how you are to reflect him in the world:

1. “That They May See Your Good Works” – Salt and Light in Kingdom Witness (5:13-16)

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

I realize that the modern discipline of chemistry did not exist in the first century –
but salt – sodium chloride – is such a simple compound
that it *cannot* lose its taste.
So some people might ask, “how can salt lose its taste”!

But in the first century, “salt” was fairly impure –
usually there were lots of other minerals in the mix
(in Judea, the Dead Sea was a common source of salt).
If your salt accidentally got rinsed, then the sodium chloride would melt away,
leaving behind a whitish substance that looked like salt –
but sure didn’t taste like salt!

This helps us see Jesus’ point more clearly:
if salt loses its taste, then it is no longer salt!
And if it is no longer salt, what is it good for?

In the same way, if you lose your distinctiveness as a disciple of Jesus,
then what are you?
If you are not salt,
then you are just a whitish substance that looks like salt.

Secondly, *you are the light of the world.*

¹⁴ “*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.* ¹⁵ *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.* ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that^[b] they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

I think sometimes we get too focused on verse 15 –
the individual lamp hidden under a basket –
“you in your small corner, and I in mine.”

But the foundational image is that of the “city set on a hill.”
Imagine that you are a traveler in a far distant land.
It’s late – it’s getting dark –
and in the distance you think that *maybe* you see a glimmer of light on the hilltop.
Do you go explore?
What if it’s a bandit?
Or maybe it’s just a star twinkling just above the hilltop...

In contrast, what if on the hilltop you saw dozens – hundreds – of lights,
brilliantly shining forth in a welcoming blaze of light?!

One light by itself may – or may not – illumine the darkness.

But Jesus says that you (plural) are the light of the world.
Let your (plural) light shine before others.
One person doing good works, here or there, is an anomaly.
A community doing good works causes others to glorify God.

This is why we encourage our small groups to look for ways to serve *together*.
Our suburban culture tends to isolate us.
Our neighborhoods are designed to keep “you in your small corner and I in mine.”
If we are going to *be* a community doing good works –
then we have to do something *intentional* to connect to one another.

But we also need to ask, what does Jesus mean by “good works”?
We know that we need to do them together – but what are they?!
First, let me point out that when scripture talks about “good works,”
they are invariably *good*.
Scripture *everywhere* speaks of believers doing “good works” –
they are not only possible, but expected, and indeed *necessary*.
As James will say, “faith without works is dead,” (James 2:17)
or as Paul will speak of “faith working by love.” (Gal 5:6)
In the same way Jesus says that those around you should see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.
If the people around us never see our good works –
then we have reason to doubt that God is our Father!
Because those who belong to Jesus will do what Jesus said.

2. Law and Gospel – Jesus and Us (5:17-20)

We saw last week that the Sermon on the Mount
is describing the life of Jesus and his people.

Verses 17-20 form the heart of the Sermon on the Mount.
Certainly the rest of chapter 5 builds off of what Jesus says here.
And if you look at verses 17-20, you can quickly see that Jesus is talking about
himself (v17-18), and his people (v19-20).

a. “Not to Abolish But to Fulfill”: Jesus and the Law [and the Prophets] (v17-18)

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. 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.

There has been a lot of debate over the meaning of verses 17-18.
Some people think that “fulfill” means “abolish” –
and so therefore the law of Moses no longer applies to Christians.
Others think that “fulfill” means “confirm” or “establish” –
and so therefore the law of Moses is still binding on Christians.
Both are missing Jesus’ point.

It's worth pointing out that the word translated "abolish" means to "tear down" to "destroy" or to "make invalid."

Jesus says that he did not come to tear down, to destroy, or to invalidate the Law (or the Prophets).

Jesus came as one born *under the law* (Galatians 4).
He is not pitting himself *against the Law* (or the Prophets).

But he is signaling to his disciples that what he is about to say will lead *some people* to think that he *is* against the Law (and the Prophets).
And he wants us to understand that what he is doing is not *abolishing* or *tearing down* the Law (or the Prophets),
neither is he *confirming* or *establishing* the Law
(as though he was just a prophet "like" Moses).
Rather, Jesus is *fulfilling* the Law (and the Prophets).

Jesus' teaching here in Matthew 5:17 is at the heart of what Matthew is doing throughout the whole gospel.

Matthew uses the word "fulfill" 16 times –
most of those times are talking about how Jesus "fulfills" what was said in the Old Testament.
We've already seen it in chapter 1:22,
when the Virgin Birth fulfilled what Isaiah 7 said –
"the virgin will conceive and bear a son."
We saw it three times in chapter 2 –
"Out of Egypt I called my son" (v15)
"Rachel weeping for her children" (v17)
"He shall be called a Nazarene" (v23)
We saw it at the baptism of Jesus –
"to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15)
and after the temptation of Jesus –
"the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light" (4:14).

Immediately after the sermon on the mount we'll see it again in chapter 8 –
"He took our illnesses and bore our diseases" (8:17")
and again in chapter 12 ("Behold my servant")
and in chapter 13 to explain the parables.
In chapter 21 the triumphal entry will fulfill Zechariah 9,
and the betrayal and arrest of Jesus fulfills the scriptures (ch 26 and 27).

In other words, "fulfill" is a word that Jesus used to describe his relationship to the scriptures –
and Matthew latches onto it and shows all sorts of examples in the ministry of Jesus.

Too often the discussion about Matthew 5:17 stops with the Law.

But Jesus does not say that he is only talking about the Law.
Jesus speaks of the Law *and the Prophets* –
as if to say that the whole of the Old Testament is filled up in him.
Jesus fulfills the Law.
Jesus fulfills the Prophets.

Everything in the whole Scripture comes to its proper conclusion and *telos* in Jesus.

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.
He did not come to confirm or establish the Law or the Prophets.
He came to *fulfill* – because all the Law and the Prophets are oriented *toward him*.

He explains what he means 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.*

There are two “until” clauses in verse 18.
“Until heaven and earth pass away” –
(the modern English of this is “until hell freezes over!”)
In other words, this is never going to happen!

But that needs to be qualified –
because of the *second* “until” –
“until all is accomplished.”
(or “until *everything happens*”)

R. T. France says it nicely:
“The jots and tittles...are not lost,
but taken up into the eschatological events to which they pointed forward.” (p186)

If you want to understand how to read the Law and the Prophets as a Christian,
then listen to the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus says that not an iota – not a dot – of the Law
will pass away until all is accomplished,
he is saying that the *whole Law* is still useful for us.

There is a sense in which our modern concept of the “rule of law”
has gotten in the way of how we read the Bible!

We tend to think of “law” in terms of statutes and rules which are binding on everyone.
The older concept of law was that “laws” are the decisions of the one (the ruler)
who governs me.

We look at a list of laws and assume that this was a “code” of law

that was binding on the people.

The ancients looked at a list of laws and saw *examples* of what to expect from the judge.

For instance, the Code of Hammurabi consists of 282 laws.

Most of the laws take the form of case studies –

“if a herdsman steals an animal under his care and sells it,
he shall pay the owner ten times the loss”

This is not a modern law code.

(Imagine having only 282 laws that tried to cover all of modern American life?!)

Hammurabi thought of himself as a wise and just king,

and so he gives 282 examples of his best and wisest decisions –
so that future judges could learn from his wisdom.

You might call it “Hammurabi’s greatest hits”!

When you look at the Law of Moses, you see a very similar pattern.

The Law of Moses is not a rigid “code” –

after all, there are very similar cases that are judged *differently* within the Law!

It’s not a “contradiction” – it’s that there were two different cases,

and so when Moses applied the same principles of divine justice,
the result was two different judgments.

I mean, seriously,

does anyone think that God is a mechanistic God who rigidly applies ironclad rules
without any regard to the situation those rules are being applied to?

That’s not the way the Old Testament reads!

Wise and godly kings and judges sometimes don’t do exactly what Moses had said.

And yet, we see that they did what was right and just before God.

Why am I certain that I am reading the Law correctly?

Because Jesus, the one who speaks authoritatively (“but I say to you”),
tells us to read the Law in this way.

Verses 17-18 show us that if we do not read the Law and the Prophets in the light of Jesus,
then we will fundamentally misunderstand them.

Verses 19-20 then begin to apply this principle to us:

b. Exceeding the Righteousness of the Pharisees: the Law and the Kingdom (v19-20)

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.* ²⁰ *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

What it does mean for the disciple of Jesus to *do* the commandments and *teach* them?

What does it mean to observe Torah?

In Jesus' own day there were several schools of Jewish thought.
There were the Sadducees,
the Pharisees (actually, there were several different rabbinic traditions
within the camp of the Pharisees),
the Essenes – a semi-monastic form of Judaism.

Jesus says that all of them have missed something essential about the Law.
Namely, the Law (and the Prophets) are all about Jesus.

So, when you read the OT, you *cannot* just dismiss it and say,
“Oh, well, that’s just the OT – it doesn’t apply to us anymore.”
Any teacher who says, “that’s just the OT”
will be considered “least” in the kingdom of heaven.
In other words, yes, they believe in Jesus, so they will be in the kingdom of heaven,
but they are rebuked by Jesus for their failure to do and to teach his word.

but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

So what does it mean to *do* the Law?

Over the next few weeks, Pastor Jon and I will be explaining this.
Because the rest of the Sermon on the Mount will be setting forth
what it means to *do* the Law in the manner that Jesus requires.

And the first point is found 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.*

The Pharisees were meticulous in their observance of the Law.

Not only did they scrupulously follow the Laws of Moses,
but they added extra traditions in order to make it easier to keep the Law.

Jesus expects that verse 20 is going to sound shocking to you!

If my righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees,
that's going to be hard – probably impossible!

But keep listening!

Jesus is going to explain to us that the Pharisees have not understood righteousness at all!
(In Matthew 23, he will issue a scathing condemnation of the Pharisees –
using many of the same principles of the Sermon on the Mount
in order to show that the Pharisees are, in fact, *unrighteous!*)

So it’s actually very easy for your righteousness to exceed the scribes and Pharisees!

[And I’ll give it away right now: all you have to do is love God and love neighbor!]

If you are trying to “keep the rules” and “do all the right things” –

then you are trying to beat the Pharisees at their own game.
And you will fail.
Even if you succeed at outdoing the Pharisees at their own game,
it will simply mean that you fail even more spectacularly than they did!

Righteousness is not defined as ‘rulekeeping.’
If you want to know what it means for your righteousness
to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees – listen to Jesus!

We’ll be working through the details in the coming weeks –
but let me start today with one simple example in verses 21-26:

3. “But I Say to You”: Putting It into Practice (5:21-48)

²¹ *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’*

Notice that Jesus starts with the Ten Commandments.

“You shall not murder” (v21)
“You shall not commit adultery” (v27)
“You shall not swear falsely” (v33)

This is important, because the Ten Commandments are not “statutes” – they are not “case law.”
The Ten Commandments (both in Exodus and in Deuteronomy)
are the guiding principles of the Law.
Everything else needs to be understood in the light of these ten words.

And remember how the Ten Commandments begins?
“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the house of bondage...”
The Ten Commandments begins with salvation history.
The law itself is rooted in the gospel –
the good news of what God has done to save his helpless people.

So Jesus is going to help us understand what it means to keep the sixth commandment –
“You shall not murder.”

And so Jesus expounds the sixth commandment in light of the rest of the Law –
and remember that the “Law” includes not only the statutes, but the stories as well!

Listen:

²² *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother^[c] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults^[d] his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell^[e] of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and*

the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ *Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Everyone rightly sees that Jesus is applying the 6th commandment to the heart.

Just because you managed to make it through your whole life without murdering anyone does not mean that you have kept the 6th commandment!

Do you ever get angry?

In verses 21-26, Jesus speaks about anger, murder, *and sacrifice*.

If you are thinking about *Torah* – the Law – not merely as statute, but also as story – then you cannot help but think of Cain and Abel:

Cain and Abel both brought their sacrifices to the altar.

And Cain grew angry with Abel – and Cain murdered his brother.

Jesus says that in *his family* – if you are aware that your brother has something against you, then you need to leave your gift at the altar, and go, be reconciled to your brother.

Notice how in this one example,

you can see how every part of the Law comes together.

There is the overarching principle of the moral law – the 6th commandment:

“You shall not murder.”

There is the civil principle reflected in the penalty – “will be liable to judgment, or “to the council.”

And there is the ceremonial principle of the altar – the offering of the sacrifice.

And there is the allusion to the *story* of Cain and Abel.

But notice how Jesus applies his principles to us.

The ceremonies of the law have not passed away –

you still need a burnt offering, a grain offering, and a peace offering –

but Christ *is* that offering – that once-for-all sacrifice –

and so when you bring your bull to church,

I will simply say, ‘No, look at Jesus!’

That’s why the Westminster Confession says that the ceremonies have been “abrogated.”

They have been set aside – not because they are irrelevant,

but because they prefigured Christ,

and therefore, since Christ *is* the bloody sacrifice

we simply bring the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Where do we see the “gift at the altar” in the NT?

Certainly at the Lord’s Supper.

At the Lord’s Supper we come together

to partake of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
If we are not reconciled to one another,
then we should not partake.
If you *know* that someone is holding something against you,
then go, be reconciled to your brother – before you partake.
But there is another place where the gift at the altar is seen:
part of the purpose of the sacrifices at the altar
was to make financial provision for the priests –
those who serve in the temple.
And Paul says that pastors have a similar role in the NT.

But Jesus' words here would apply as much to the "offering" as to the "Lord's Supper."
Your financial gifts to the Lord would be tainted by your anger and bitterness.
I don't think I've ever heard a pastor say this –
(maybe they're afraid that people would stop giving!!)
but Jesus' point is that you need to offer this gift –
but you may *not* offer this gift while you are unreconciled to your brother.

In the OT, the gifts that were brought for the support of the priests were holy.
They were part of the sacrificial worship of the people of God.

As we saw in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul sees the financial support of pastors in a similar light.
In the modern world, we've rather pulled these things apart.
But God doesn't want the gifts of murderers.
Those who are at enmity with one another should not come to the Lord's Table –
neither should they give money to the church.
Or, to put it the way Jesus does –
they should *first* be reconciled,
and then come and offer your gift.

Notice the high priority that Jesus places on our communal identity in him.
If you would be a disciple of Jesus, then you must be reconciled with your brothers.

But also notice this!

Jesus assumes that you will *need* to be reconciled!
Jesus' standard of righteousness is *not* that you never sin!
Jesus' standard of righteousness is that when you sin, you repent!
And when you are sinned against, you forgive.
The disciple of Jesus seeks reconciliation –
and thus, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."