

Sermons on Matthew

Matthew 5:17-20

The Glory of God's Law

With Study Questions

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Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹ Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-20).

Preface

The ACLU demanded that the L. A. County Board of Supervisors remove a tiny cross set among the historic symbols on Los Angeles County's official seal. They asserted that the seal is "a sectarian religious symbol that represents the beliefs of one segment of the county's diverse population" and is an "impermissible endorsement of Christianity" by the county government. "Under clearly established law," they continued, "the seal is unconstitutional."

They then warned the Board of Supervisors that refusal to remove the cross in a "reasonable time-frame" would cause the ACLU to seek a court order. Along party lines, the five-person board voted 3 to 2 (3 Democrats versus 2 Republicans) to remove the cross from the seal. Ramona Ripston, executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, told the Los Angeles Times, "This is not the most important civil liberties issue in our society...But it (the seal) does make some people feel unwelcome. And we feel the county seal should be welcoming."

Once again we observe the blatant hypocrisy of anti-Christian legislation! This comes more into focus when one comes to recognize that the most prominent figure on the seal is the Roman nymph

Goddess Pomona -- the goddess of gardens and fruit trees. Does not Pomona represent one segment of the county's diverse population? Is this not an impermissible endorsement of polytheism (the belief in many gods)? Is Pomona really more popular and welcoming than Jesus?

It would appear that we're at odds with both the goddess Pomona and the goddess Ramona! One needn't be a logician to see that the ACLU is not concerned with religion in general. They have set their cross-hairs on the Christian religion.

Why? Because the Christian faith has the audacity to openly proclaim a system of absolutes that the would-be gods of the ACLU absolutely hate and think to be absolutely wrong. How difficult it will be for the ACLU to successfully negotiate its quest to kill innocent babies when we have a nation of people who are continually reminded (by little crosses) that there is a God in heaven who is the supreme, holy, just, and benevolent ruler of all affairs!

Extract the posts and girders, and the pigs can easily collapse the deck. Removing the law of God from the affairs of men is like pulling someone's shirt over their head before seeking to throw them down a flight of stairs. They've lost their bearing. They grope in the dark. There is no lamp for their feet. We are witnessing very evil activity.

We must offer variegated prayers for this organization: that either God would grant them repentance or that He would grind them to dust.

Introduction

I don't mean to turn my sermon into a political treatise. In the above passage, Jesus wasn't preaching to the governors of Rome. He wasn't seeking to defend the law of God against His detractors; He was addressing the multitudes that willingly followed Him. But I must argue that one of the reasons the law of God is becoming despised and eradicated from our society is due to the sad reality that it has become despised in God's own church.

Jesus, apparently, needed to defend the law of God among God's own people. His affinity for the law of God is brought forth in His opening comments.

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17)

It would appear that Jesus is making two points in this passage. First, He is confirming that the Law of God (as delivered in the Old Testament) continues to be fully binding upon the human race. Secondly, He states that He is the fulfillment of the Law. Let us pursue these thoughts.

Undiminished Law

The word *destroy* (*kataluo*) is same word used by Jesus when He addressed the destruction of the temple when He said it would be "**thrown down**" (Matthew 24:2). Bad religion will be thrown down but God's law will endure forever.

People to People

Bob George hosts a nationally syndicated program entitled *People to People* that airs on the same station as the sermons from our church. Is he correct when he continually chastises people for seeking God's wisdom in the Old Testament? "Why is your counselor dragging you through the Old Testament?" he recently asked one of his callers. "There are some good stories there but we don't live there." It would appear that Mr. George is seeking to throw down the Law and the Prophets. Matthew Henry was spot on when he wrote:

The Saviour of souls is the *destroyer* of nothing but the *works of the devil*, of nothing that comes from God,

much less of those excellent dictates which we have from Moses and the prophets.¹

Bob George is merely one of the minions of this theological mischief. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, taught,

The legal commands of the Mosaic system and the commands which are to govern in the kingdom are not now the guiding principles of the Christian...the child of God is not under law as a rule of life.²

Our very church has been criticized for our occasional recitations of the Ten Commandments. Any authoritative proclamation of sin is viewed as legalistic or an attempt to put people under the law.

Through the teachings of Chafer, people have come to suppose a discontinuity between the old and new covenants. Jesus saw no such discontinuity. Jesus is often referred to as a rebel or revolutionary. He was no rebel, they were. This type of ungodly rebellion abounds today. Friends, there many teachers who have led the current Christian culture down this anti-law path; they need to hear Jesus' words in this passage.

It is no small thing to disregard the law of God. The Psalmist beckons God,

It is time for You to act, O Lord, For they have regarded Your law as void (Psalm 119:126).

The Ceremonial Law

One might rightly ask, what about the clear changes in the law? After all we no longer sacrifice animals! It may be true that in some instances the mode has changed but the law remains the same. For

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 5:17). Peabody: Hendrickson.

² Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Major Bible Themes*, (Dunham Publishing, 1926, 1953), pp. 148, 152.

example, that which was represented by the ceremonial law of animal sacrifice is now represented by the Lord's Supper. Hear John Calvin on this matter:

With respect to doctrine, we must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law: for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life, and must, therefore, be as unchangeable, as the justice of God, which it embraced, is constant and uniform. With respect to ceremonies, there is some appearance of a change having taken place; but it was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed. The coming of Christ has taken nothing away even from ceremonies, but, on the contrary, confirms them by exhibiting the truth of shadows: for, when we see their full effect, we acknowledge that they are not vain or useless. ³

The mode has changed but the law remains.

For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:18)

Starting with "For assuredly" which is *amen*, Jesus is emphatic. Heaven will be shaken to rubble and earth to dust before the stability of God's law budes a micron. "Till all is fulfilled" refers to all which God has ordained for all of redemptive history. Jots and tittles are like the dot on an 'I' and the stem on an 'R'. The smallest stroke remains in full force.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19).

To break (*luo*) means to untie or loosen⁴. Jesus isn't merely speaking of the run-of-the-mill disobedience of sinful man. He is speaking of the unraveling of God's law. Divorce, theft, deceit, the ignoring of the Sabbath, the withholding of the tithe have all become acceptable behavior because we are living in a so-called age of grace versus law. People forget that Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, though they sought to obey God's law, were all under grace.

Least in the Kingdom

When Jesus speaks of being lesser or greater in the kingdom of heaven, I believe He is speaking of the kingdom of God as it is expressed in the visible church. The place where God's people gather, His praises sung, His victory proclaimed, His sacraments administered and His Law and gospel preached is His kingdom. When the preacher loosens the sandal of God's law it brings an impotence to that kingdom and I will now seek to explain why.

The Fulfillment of the Law

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

The teaching and preaching of the Law of God with full impact is necessary for Jesus fulfilled the Law. "Wait a minute" you ask, "If Jesus fulfilled it, why preach it?" Here is where the big mistake happens. People, for some reason interpret *fulfill* as *destroy* or

⁴ John the Baptist's word when he spoke of being unworthy to loosen Jesus' sandal (Mark 1:7).

abrogate (annul or do away with). But He just said He did not come to do away with the Law!

In verse 20, He warns that unless our righteousness exceeds (abounds over and above) that of the Pharisees (the religious leaders who were meticulously detailed in their law-keeping), we won't be least in the kingdom—we won't even enter the kingdom! Is He saying we need to observe the Pharisees and one-up 'em? If they give ten percent we must give eleven!? How absurd that would be. Calvin taught,

By confining the law of God to outward duties only, they trained their disciples, like apes, to hypocrisy.⁵

Jesus didn't just make this statement out of thin air. The righteousness which exceeds the scribes and Pharisees somehow has to relate to what He was just saying about the Law and the Prophets. This is our final point and we must be very clear about it.

Keeper and Fulfiller

When Jesus said He fulfilled the Law, two things come to mind. He was the fulfillment of the ceremonial law and keeper of the moral law. In other words, the entire priestly system, with its washings, vestments, and sacrifices, were designed to teach us about Jesus; and the moral law, which the human race transgressed and continues to transgress, was obeyed perfectly by Christ.

Three Kinds of Righteousness

Once again, how does the preaching of the law bring its hearers to possess a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees? First let's recognize three kinds of righteousness: *natural*, *imputed* and *imparted*.

⁵Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Natural righteousness is the kind of righteousness had by the Pharisees. It proceeds from an unregenerate (spiritually dead) human heart. It is not genuinely concerned in the least with the glory of God but with human observation and self-contentment. This kind of righteousness is a stench in the nose of God (Isaiah 64:6).

Imputed righteousness is a freely given righteousness. It has nothing to do with the person's intellect, will, or behavior. Jesus rises in God's holy courtroom of our sure conviction and willingly submits Himself to the punishment we deserve and willingly grants us the glory and righteousness that belongs to Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). We are silent and motionless in this transaction between the Father (who is the judge) and the Son. We can offer nothing but astonishment when the gavel pounds the bench and we hear the words "your sins are pardoned."

Imparted righteousness is that behavior which naturally and necessarily follows this acquittal. For the judge has not merely pardoned us, He has adopted us. I submit that the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is this imputed and imparted righteousness.

Why Preach the Law?

So why preach the law? Because,

The law of the Lord *is* perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord *is* sure, making wise the simple (Psalm 119:7).

Because

...by the law *is* the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20b).

Two things happen when the law is preached and men make every effort to obey it: life becomes better for them and all who are around them, and they recognize what dismal failures they are at keeping it.

It is this explosive recognition of sin that causes us to ask, **“Who then can be saved” (Matthew 19:25)?** Churches then become filled with sinners seeking to find solace in the only Law-Keeper—the one who fulfilled the Law—the only **“name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11).** Because Jesus fulfilled the Law, those who believe in Him are viewed as those who have fulfilled the Law.

It is this kind of righteousness that the Apostle Paul equates with walking in the Spirit. In Romans he writes,

...that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4).

Make no mistake friends, when the Law of God is made minimal, the cross becomes minimal as well. And the souls of men are in jeopardy.

Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven. ⁹⁰ Your faithfulness *endures* to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides. ⁹¹ They continue this day according to Your ordinances, For all *are* Your servants. ⁹² Unless Your law *had been* my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction. ⁹³ I will never forget Your precepts, For by them You have given me life. ⁹⁴ I *am* Yours, save me; For I have sought Your precepts. ⁹⁵ The wicked wait for me to destroy me, *But* I will consider Your testimonies. ⁹⁶ I have seen the consummation of all perfection, *But* Your commandment *is* exceedingly broad (Psalm 119:89-96).

Questions for Study

1. What two points is Jesus making in Matthew 5:17-20)?
2. Why do you suppose the law is continually rejected in some churches (page 5)?
3. What about the ceremonial law? Is it abrogated? Explain (pages 5, 6).
4. What are a jot and a tittle (page 6)?
5. Explain the full force of Jesus' statement regarding "breaking" the law (page 7).
6. What does it mean that those who break the law will be "least" in the kingdom (page 7)?
7. In what two respects did Jesus fulfill the Law and the prophets (pages 7, 8)?
8. How can a person's righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees (pages 7, 8)?
9. What are the different kinds of righteousness (pages 8, 9)?
10. What purpose does the law serve (pages 9, 10)?