

## “The Fulfillment of the Law” Matthew 5:17-20 Shane Hatfield 4/17/22

Let's go to God's word. If you have a Bible, open it to Matthew 5. We are going to continue our study in the Sermon on the Mount. The title of this morning's sermon is “The Law and the Good Life.” Now remember the question that I put before us in this sermon series is what is your version of the good life? Inside the answer to that question is another question which is this: What is the role of the law in the good life? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents the kingdom life as the good life. He starts out with the Beatitudes and Jesus describes the character of the good life. He says happy are those who are poor, contrite, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure hearted, peaceful, and persecuted. He says, that's the good life. Then He describes the effect that that character has on the world. As we live out the Beatitudes we will be persecuted. But we will also be the salt that gives people a taste of the good life, and the light that gives people a vision of the good life. When Jesus was talking about being the light of the world, He said that the world would see our good works and praise our Father in heaven. So naturally, an attentive student would ask themselves, ‘Well, what are the good works that Jesus is talking about?’ So, Jesus, being a good teacher, then goes into describing the good works of the good life in basically the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

So, our text this morning introduces Jesus' view of the relationship between the law and the good life. Please read along with me as I read Matthew 5:17-20.

<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Psalm 119 tells us that God's word is sweeter than the honey from the honeycomb. Let's taste and see that the Lord's word is good.

A movie that came out about twenty years ago that I really liked was called “Saving Private Ryan.” It describes the desperate search for Private James Francis Ryan during World War II. You see, Ryan and his three brothers all fought in World War II and three of his brothers died, and Private Ryan was missing. So, the government found out about this and they said they don't want this mother to lose all of her children in the war, so we need somebody to go find Private Ryan, to rescue him, and to bring him to safety. They contacted Captain Miller who was played by Tom Hanks and they sent him and his men to find Private Ryan. The whole rest of the movie is this harrowing mission as they go through the city of Normandy to find Private Ryan. Eventually they do, and Private Ryan and his friends are guarding two bridges in one of the cities and they went to Private Ryan and they said, ‘Private Ryan, we've come to rescue you. All of your brothers have died. We're giving you a ticket home. You don't have to fight in the war anymore, you can leave.’ And Private Ryan says, ‘These guys are the only brothers that I have, so I'm going to stay with them and I'm going to fight.’ So, Captain Miller and his men, what are they supposed to do? They are supposed to protect Private Ryan, so that's what they do. They stay to protect him. Of course the Germans come to take the bridge and when the Germans come there's a fire fight and the Americans successfully fend off the Germans but in the process of the

fire fight Captain Miller is shot. As he lays on the ground dying, Private Ryan runs over to him, picks him up, looks at him and with his last breath, Captain Miller looks at Private Ryan and says, ‘Earn it. Earn this.’ The movie closes with an older Private Ryan and his family standing over Captain Miller’s grave and Private Ryan says to his family he hopes that he has been worthy of all that Miller and his men did for him and he asks his wife, ‘Have I led a good life? Have I been a good man?’

When Christians think about the death of Jesus, when people think about the death of Jesus, I think what happens to us in our mind is we imagine ourselves looking at Jesus, looking at Him on the cross, and like Captain Miller with his last breath, somehow, we pervert the gospel and we hear Jesus saying, ‘Earn it. Earn this.’ Somehow, we twist the gospel of what Jesus has done *for* us and we turn it into something that we have to earn for ourselves. Then, when we look at the law of God, we hear that voice in the back of our head, ‘Earn this,’ and we think to ourselves, ‘Well, this is how we earn it. We keep the law. Jesus died for me so that I could keep the law to earn the salvation that He paid for.’ What happens when we do that is the law of God becomes something that we either fearfully keep, or we frantically fight off. We spend our lives in fear and failure and frustration, because we can’t be the person that Jesus died to make us to be.

What I want to do this morning as we look at the law and the gospel, the law and the good life, what I want you to see is this: the law is not the way that we earn God’s grace. We receive God’s grace through Jesus Christ by faith in Him, by trusting in Him, and as we receive His grace, He frees us to live the good life and the law shows us how to live the good life that Jesus earned for us. The good life is not something we earn. The good life is something that Jesus paid for us, and the law shows us how to live in the good life. So, we’re going to look at three things this morning. We’re going to look at Jesus and the law, Christians and the law, and the gospel and the law.

First, let’s talk about Jesus and the law. If you look back at verses 17-18, Jesus gives His perspective on the law. He says, “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. 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.” So, the law and the prophets is a Jewish way of referring to the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. Right? What we call the Old Testament. Jesus teaches two important point about the Old Testament. First, He says He did not come to abolish it.

Now, why did He say that? He said that because it’s likely that people were accusing Him of rejecting the Old Testament because He didn’t take some of the typical Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament law. For example, Jesus regularly talked with women and the rabbis in His day said this about talking with women. They said, “He who talks much with womenkind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law, and at last will inherit Gehenna.” Jesus regularly shared fellowship with people who were considered sinners. This signified that He accepted them as friends and welcomed them. Well, the rabbis in His day said this about eating with sinners: “Keep thee far from an evil neighbor, and consort not with the wicked.” So, in their mind, holy men, righteous men, avoid talking with women and avoided eating with sinners, but Jesus did both of those two things. They accused Him of rejecting the law, but Jesus said, ‘I’m not rejecting the Old Testament law. I’m not here to abolish it.’

And then He gives us the second principle: ‘I came to fulfill it.’ Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament law in two ways. First, He fulfilled it by showing us the fullest extent to which the law applies. He showed us how the law applies to everything in life. What He would not do is He

would not let the scribes and the Pharisees selectively apply the law of God to certain areas and certain ways. No, no, no, they wanted to restrict the law and relax it so that they could keep it. But Jesus came to show the full depth and scope of the law.

Secondly, Jesus fulfilled the law by being the substance that it foreshadowed. The entire Old Testament foreshadows the person and work of Jesus. We talked about that last fall when we looked at the covenants in the Old Testament. You can go through the Old Testament and in some way, you can look at every major story, and even every minor story in detail, and in some way, they foreshadow the coming of Jesus. The Old Testament law is the shadow of which Jesus Christ is the substance and He perfectly embodied God's law. So, this means if we want to understand the relationship between the good life and the law, we look at Jesus. We look at the way that He lived His life. Jesus shows us the fullness of what it meant to love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.

On Friday night, we had the privilege of celebrating Good Friday with RiverOaks and the passage that I got to read in the worship service was the passage where Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane and He is praying on the night before His crucifixion. He is there with His disciples in the garden, He knows that He is about to be crucified, He knows what's about to happen. He knows that all of the sin and suffering from all of the world is going to be placed on His shoulders. He's there in the garden literally on His knees sweating drops of blood, and what is His prayer? His prayer is "Thy will be done, not My will be done." To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, is to face sin and suffering and say, 'Thy will be done, not my will be done.' That's what it looks like to embody the law of love.

And then Jesus embodied the fullness of what it meant to love your neighbor as yourself. He honored His parents even though they didn't understand Him. He told the truth even when it was uncomfortable. He gave people life even when it cost Him His. He used His words to build others, even when they reviled Him. He lived a life of continual thankfulness despite the continual demands that He faced. He always looked out for others He was 'a man for others,' as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Him. When He was out in the crowds, He heard a leper cry out for help and everybody else would have left the leper alone, but what did Jesus do? He moved toward the leper and He healed him. He was walking through a crowd and there was a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and Jesus is on the way to heal someone who is dying, and that lady stops to touch His cloak with this superstitious faith. What does He do? Does He rebuke her and say, 'Get away from me, woman? Don't you know I have things to do?' No. He stops. He talks to her. He heals her and He says, 'Your faith has made you well. Go in peace.' When a sinful woman came to a meal to wash His feet with her tears and her hair, did Jesus say, 'Get out of here! What are you doing? Who are you? Don't you know that I'm a rabbi and I can't be around sinful women?' No. He says, 'Woman, you are forgiven.' And He sends her out in peace. He showed us the fullness of a life trusting and obeying God's law. It's a life of love for God and love for others and that is something that we desperately need to see.

In our heart of hearts, the Pharisee in our hearts, the sin that lives in us, what we want to do is we want to do exactly what the Pharisees did, and we want to bring the law down. We want to relax it so that we can keep it, and that's what we're going to look at second, the Christian and the law.

Jesus says in verse 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the

kingdom of heaven.” So, the scribes and the Pharisees were the religious people of Jesus’ day. They were the religious professionals. They were going to do it *right*. They were going to keep the law. So, what they did was they calculated that the law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they spent their entire lives trying to keep all of them perfectly all the time, and Jesus says, their righteousness wasn’t even enough to get into heaven let alone be the greatest! How is that? Because in their sinfulness what they did was they relaxed the law of God and they tried to bring it down to a place that they could keep it. They relaxed it, and then they added their own oral tradition to it so that they could build a system of legalism that they could keep so that they could have their own self-righteousness.

See, they missed that the law was never about building your self-righteousness, the law was always about God saving us and us keeping the law because of gratitude for what He has done for us, but they saw the law as a way to build their own self-righteousness. They tried to make it external and straight forward and keep-able but listen to what Jesus says about their self-righteousness. In Matthew 15:8-9 He says, ““This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”” Their holiness was unholy because it was without love. They didn’t have a true heart of love for God and for others. They’re not the only ones who live like this. Our sin causes us to do the same thing. Christians and religious people today still create a system of legalism that allows us to try to relax the law so we can keep it. What we do is we distort God’s law into something we can keep, so we can build our own self-righteousness.

Dr. Dan Doriani is a professor at Covenant Seminary and he, in talking about this passage, describes three forms of legalism that we still fall into today, and I think they’re incredibly accurate. He says the first and the most pernicious form of legalism attempts to attain or retain salvation by works. It’s the person that’s trying to follow God’s law to save themselves or the Christian who’s trying to follow God’s law to retain their salvation. This legalist, in a sense, performs good works to gain the favor of God, and that god becomes the patron of achievers. The second form of legalism, and this is more subtle, and this may be more where we fall into, fabricates new laws based on tradition or misinterpretation of Scripture and then grants these new laws the authority of the Scriptures, themselves. So, this kind of legalism, he says, may forbid what is permissible, such as playing cards or it may require what is advisable, such as morning devotions. It’s that kind of legalism that slips in and wants to find all of the little pet sins of culture and say, those are bad, those are wrong, when they’re not in Scripture, or the kind of legalism that takes a good, legitimate application out of Scripture and makes a law out of it that everyone has to keep. The last form of legalism, he says, can mean an exceptional concentration on law and obedience to the exclusion of every other aspect of life. He says, many scribes and Pharisees suffered from all three forms of legalism, and he could add that many Christians, including myself, and us, struggle with these as well.

And so, I’ll ask you, the Pharisee in your heart, which of these types of legalism do you struggle with? Are you here today because deep down in your heart you know that you’re a sinner and you really think that this is the Sunday that if I come this Sunday, then I can earn God’s grace through my attendance. You can’t do it. Have you created a system of laws where you are taking things that are extra-Biblical and you are making those requirements for people? Are you are taking things that are advisable, that are good, and you are making them new laws that are a burden to you and to your family? Are you concentrating so much on focusing on the law and perfect obedience that you are merciless to everyone around you? It’s that form of legalism that slips into our hearts and causes us to fear God and to rebel against Him in

frustration. It's how we distort God's law. That's the religious way of distorting God's law, but then there's the irreligious way.

At some point, people just think they've failed God so bad that they just say, 'God, I just want you to get as far away from me as possible,' and so, they create their own view of the good life and their own system of rules to achieve it. Pastor David Zahl, he playfully, but prophetically points this out in what he calls his Seculosity Creed, a creed of the secular. It kind of parallels the Nicene Creed, and I want to read it for you. This is playful but I think it's true and I've got it up there for you. I thought maybe this might give us a little levity in the middle of our sermon. Listen as he writes:

*"We believe in One Self,  
The Authentic and Improving, Arbiter of the Real and Enough.  
Of all that is, both Online and IRL.*

*We believe in one goal, our becoming Tom Brady  
Or possibly his wife Giselle.  
Eternally killing it  
Productive but Creative, Undistracted yet Non-Anxious  
True Soulmate of true Soulmate  
More engineered than born  
Of one Algorithm with the Influencer  
Through whom all moments go viral.*

*For our tribe, and our tribe only  
Tom became vulnerable  
Delivered and Oprah approved TED Talk  
And achieved Work Life Balance.  
For our sake he was pilloried on social media  
Gained Weight and was cancelled.  
A few news cycles later he started trending again.  
In accordance with admissions standards  
His daughter was accepted at Stanford  
Where she now studies Sustainable Entrepreneurship  
He will run for Office one day, to redeem the Millennial and the Boomer  
And his haters will be forever Silenced.*

*We believe in the True Diet, the Biohack, the Source of All omega 3s  
Which proceeds carb-less from the Compost,  
Which with Fizzy Water is devoured then  
Instagammed  
Where it is shared with Gwyneth Paltrow.*

*We believe in One Pure and Non-Problematic Politics  
We acknowledge the Permanence of Other People's Mistakes  
We look for the Upward Mobility of our Children  
And of the Promised Singularity.*

#blessed”

In this secular creed that he has masterfully created, I could never do that, by the way. Don’t ever expect me to do something like that. What is hidden in there are rules and assumption and laws about the good life, that every person who has rejected the law of God assumes and consumes. Even maybe, some of us Christians, or some of us religious people, we’ve taken our Christianity and our religiosity, and we have wed it with the secularity and we have created a mutt of Christianity.

What Jesus has come to do, is He has come to save us from our religious ways that we distort God’s law and from our irreligious ways that we discard God’s law, and He is giving us a righteousness that comes not from our doing and teaching all of Jesus’ commandments, but from Jesus’ doing and teaching the commandments. See, Jesus says that the good life will not come from relaxing or distorting or discarding the law of God, but rather by doing and teaching all the law commands. How could anyone be righteous? If that is Jesus’ standard of righteousness, doing and teaching all of the law that God commands, how can we do that? How can we keep it?

We can’t! That’s why there’s Easter. Some of you have been wondering, ‘When is he going to talk about Easter!?’ Now we’re going to talk about Easter. We look at the gospel and the law. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, legalistic fear, failure, and frustration will consume all of us. Whether you’ve been a Christian your entire life, whether you’re a religious person or an irreligious person, you cannot escape legalism. Thanks to Jesus we can receive a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and the Pharisees and Tom Brady, but it only comes through His death and His resurrection. You see, Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets not only by perfectly living a life of love and loyalty to God’s word, but by perfectly and sacrificially giving Himself for us on the cross. You see, all of the rituals, the sacrificial rituals in the Old Testament, they all pointed to Jesus. They all pointed to a sacrifice that must be made so that unrighteous people can be made righteous, and Jesus fulfilled that part of the Old Testament. He fulfilled the law and the prophets by taking the punishment that we deserved. On the cross, we see that God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He died to make the unrighteous, righteous. He died because He loved Pharisees and He wanted to rescue them from their Pharisee-ism. He died because He loved secular people that have consumed and believed all that the world has offered, and He wanted to rescue them. He had to pay their punishment. God’s justice had to be satisfied on the cross. So, on the cross, He took all of the punishment that we deserved for our unrighteousness, so we could have His righteousness.

I once heard a seminary professor describe it this way. He said that one time there was an island in the Asian area around Singapore, and it had very strict laws, and it had very strict capital punishment. During this time, there was a drought in their community, and there was one well where they had to get water, and they had to protect that well because that well was their source of life. And so, they said that there were only certain times and certain people who could go to the well and draw water. One night there was a boy who was handicapped and he went to that well and he took water from the well. The group of people found out about it and they brought him to the judge and this boy stood before the judge and the judge stood there with this dilemma. On the one hand, there has to be justice. If there’s not justice, then the whole community will be thrown into chaos. On the other hand, you have this boy, he had compassion on this boy. He wanted to be merciful to this boy. You had this boy who didn’t understand the law. He didn’t understand that he broke the law, and he was a boy who could never withstand the

punishment of this law. The punishment was twenty lashes with a bamboo cane. So, the judge was faced with a dilemma. What would he do? He convicted the boy. He said, ‘This boy is guilty.’ They sent him to the executioner. They tied him to the pole where he would take his twenty lashes with the bamboo cane, but before the executioner could administer the first lash, the judge went up to the boy, he wrapped his arms around the boy, and he told the executioner, ‘I want every lash to fall on my back. You punish him, but I’m going to take it. Not a single blow falls on him.’

And that’s a picture of what Christ did for us on the cross. Christ said, ‘I want to take every lash for their lust, for their greed, for their animosity, for their strife, for their unforgiveness, and for their odious self-righteousness. Every lash falls on my back.’ In doing that, He established a righteousness that we receive, not a righteousness we achieve. On the cross, Jesus said, “It is finished.” He paid the debt that we owed. He fulfilled the law that we broke. He was sacrificed so that we could be saved, and all who come to Him by grace through faith receive His righteousness and receive the good life that He earned.

When you receive that grace in Jesus, what that does is it transforms your view of the law. As William Cowper famously wrote in one of his hymns, “To see the law by Christ fulfilled, to hear His pardoning voice, changes a slave into a child and duty into a choice.” When you see the law of God fulfilled on your behalf, it changes you from a slave to a child and it changes your works from a duty into a choice. How do we know that that law has been fulfilled? The resurrection! The resurrection is the proof certificate that Jesus has fulfilled the law for us, that He has paid our punishment, that He has freed us from sin, and now we can go, and we have a new King, and a new God, and we live a new life.

There was a pastor who lived during the Civil War era, and his name was Moses Drury Hope, and he was the church planter and pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia, for a short 52 years. He grew up a strict abolitionist and he appalled slavery, as he rightly should have. When he got married, his wife brought with her seven slaves as a dowry, and on their wedding day he went to all seven of those slaves and he handed them a certificate of freedom. He said, ‘Here is your certificate of freedom. You can go anywhere you want to go, and you can do anything you want to do.’ One of the slaves left and returned to his wife, the six others all stayed and served him faithfully until the day that he died.

When he gave them the certificate and they stayed, he tried to explain to them, ‘No, listen! You are free! You can go anywhere you want to go! You can do anything that you want to do!’ He was baffled that these slaves would want to stay with him. One of them looked at him, this man who had cared for animals all of his life, and he said, ‘Sir, if I can go anywhere, and go and do anything that I want to do, I would really like to go to your barn and take care of your animals and live with you as long as you would have me.’ And that man did. He served Moses Drury Hope for the rest of his life. Why would he do that? He did that because in a world that told him he was worse than property, that he was nothing. In a world that disgraced him, and disdained him, this master came and loved him, freed him, and provided him with a life that was better than he could have ever imagined. He decided that he wanted nothing more than to stay with this master and live with him.

That’s how Christ transforms our view of the law. The death and resurrection of Jesus has freed us, it has changed us, and transformed us, and so, we hand ourselves over to our good God and Father, and we serve Him all of our days. Not trying to earn His love, but because He loves us, because He gave His only Son for us. So, when we’re standing over our grave, or we’re standing over someone else’s grave or we’re standing over the cross on their grave, we’re not

standing there thinking, ‘Did I earn it? Did I do enough?’ The answer is no, you didn’t! But Jesus did. In Him, it is finished. In Him, it is fulfilled. Receive it and live. Let’s pray.