

The Law, Righteousness and the Kingdom  
Matthew 5:17-20

### Introduction

The issue of righteousness should be of great concern to all people. It was certainly the concern of the Jews of Jesus' time. They knew from both the Mosaic Law and their own history that there were blessings in being obedient to the Lord and curses for disobedience. Even on the personal level, they understood that any expectation they could have to be treated favorably by God was directly tied to living in a righteous manner. The Pharisees believed that they could achieve personal righteousness by carefully keeping their religious traditions while the Scribe thought they could do this by their diligent study of the Scriptures. Most everyone else knew they were not living up to the righteousness demanded by the Law of Moses and were hoping Messiah would soon come and change things. That is one of the reasons that Jesus so quickly attracted the attention of both the religious leaders and the people.

Jesus was different from everyone else. He was not associated with any of the religious sects of His time. He was not a Pharisee and did not hold to their traditions, yet He talked about living in holiness. He was not a Scribe, yet He was extremely capable with the Scriptures and could quote freely from both the Law and the Prophets. Jesus was not a Zealot (they were seeking to overturn Roman rule), yet He kept saying that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Jesus had grown up in Galilee, a region of the country the religious elite of Jerusalem disdained as backward and its people as uneducated country bumpkins. Yet Jesus, even at 12 years old, was found in the temple amazing the teachers there with His understanding and His answers to their questions (Luke 2:46-47).

The question that was on the mind of everyone was, "*could this be the Messiah?*" The Zealots wondered when Jesus would overthrow Rome and set up His kingdom if indeed He was the Messiah. The religious leaders already had their doubts about this because He did not come from any their schools. Because Jesus did not follow their traditions or interpret the Scriptures the way they did, they also seriously questioned whether He was obedient to the Law of Moses. How could a man be righteous, let alone the Messiah, if he did not obey the Law of Moses? The common people chaffed under the traditions set up by the Scribes and Pharisees and were hoping that Jesus was the Messiah in the belief that the Messiah would overturn the Law of Moses and set up a new standard of righteousness based on Jeremiah's prediction of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31).

This morning we will be examining Matthew 5:17-20 which is the section of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus anticipated these questions which were on the minds of the people. He addresses the issues of the Law, righteousness and the kingdom. Follow along as I read Matthew 5:17-20.

*"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

### Jesus & Scripture

Notice that Jesus begins by saying, "*Do not think I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets.*" He knows what they are thinking and seeks to correct the question in their minds even before it is asked. Jesus did not come to abolish - destroy, overthrow, nullify - the Old Testament Scriptures. The phrase "*the Law and the Prophets*" is a common reference in the New Testament for the Old Testament scriptures (Matthew 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 28:23; Romans 3:21). The