

The Sermon on the Mount Fulfilling the Law Matthew 5:17-20

Introduction

At one time in England's history, there was quite a controversy regarding what came to be called the divine right of kings. The theory has its origins in the medieval dispute between the Roman Catholic Church and the secular rulers of nations as to the source of political power. Both sides agreed that the authority to rule came ultimately from God, who held the right over life and death alone. What was at issue was the legitimate vehicle of this right.

The papacy held that it flowed through God's representative, the Church and its ministers, the priests, and ultimately the Pope. Anti-papalists, however, maintained that power in secular matters came directly from God to the monarch, whether by heredity or through an election.

The argument revived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the rise of absolute monarchy in France and England. Obviously, this doctrine opposed the Catholic Church, and it was brutally set aside in England by Oliver Cromwell and France by the Republic in 1792.

It seems the more powerful a leader becomes, the more powerful he wants to be! The problem lies in the fallen nature of man. We've all heard the phrase by John Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Creation will never supersede the Creator! God is sovereign in authority! And the king of His kingdom is Jesus Christ!
But when Jesus enters this world, He does not come seeking power, or fame, or recognition. Jesus seeks out the lost and offers them reconciliation even though they deserve retribution.

Of course, the kingdom of heaven is not a democracy. It's a monarchy. Moral law and the regulation of life are not determined or arrived at by a consensus of the group. Kingdom authority runs cross-grain to our desire for importance and recognition. There are some areas of the Christian life where God seeks your obedience rather than your opinion!

Many people will concede that the Sermon on the Mount is some of the greatest moral and ethical teaching ever given, yet remain the greatest proponents of situational ethics and relative truth. The teachings of Jesus are absolutes because the Teacher rules absolutely!

As King of the Kingdom, Jesus exercises all the authority and power of the Godhead. It makes Him an absolute Ruler! But because He is sinless, He cannot be corrupted by power! And because of His grace, He is gracious towards those who are sinful! His law is absolute, His rule supreme, and His authority is

sovereign. But because He is gracious, He permits us to ask Him questions about why He says what He says.

As citizens of His kingdom, He does not give us the right to disagree with Him or disobey Him. Eternal salvation requires our obedience. Of course, salvation is God's free gift. It is offered to us because of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. But what about Gethsemane? In Gethsemane, the battle for obedience was fought!

Because of Christ's obedience to the will of God, He becomes the author and finisher of an obedient faith! When we choose citizenship in His kingdom, we are also choosing to live an obedient life according to the will of God! It is necessary to understand this to grasp what Jesus is teaching in this passage. In this passage, Jesus moves beyond character issues of discipleship into the areas of obedience and obligations of citizenship in the kingdom. Human leaders tend to command first and then offer rewards. God's pattern begins with a blessing before moving on to obligation.

Abraham is a good example. God first told Abraham, "I will bless you" (Genesis 12:2) before he commands him to "Walk before me and be perfect." (Genesis 17:1) Before God gives Israel the Law at Mount Sinai, He first delivers them from Egyptian bondage and provides food and water for them in the desert. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins with blessings before moving on to teaching about a life that truly fulfills the Law.

I. The Law Fulfilled

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus teaches that He is the fulfillment of the Law.

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 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. 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. 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 NKJV)

Jesus very clearly indicates that the Old Testament is a revelation from God. He uses the phrase "law and prophets," a semantical way of saying all the writings of the thirty-nine books from Genesis to Malachi. In Luke 24:27, Jesus further affirms this in a conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He says, "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets He interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

A short time later, those two disciples rejoin the disciples in Jerusalem, and when Jesus appears, He says Then He said to them, "These *are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written*

in the Law of Moses and *the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.*" And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.
(Luke 24:44-45 NKJV)

Have you ever failed to put a "dot" on an "i" or cross a "t"? That is so inconsequential to us that it hardly makes any difference. The term Jesus uses is "iota," which is the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet. The "tittle" (as the King James Bible puts it) or "dot" is a small marking the size of a pinhead. It compares to the Hebrew letter "yodh," the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The whole point is that these markings are so small they could easily be dismissed as unnecessary. But Jesus says that would be a mistake! They may seem to be unnecessary, but Jesus says the smallest, most insignificant part of the Old Testament has an enduring and vital quality greater than that of heaven and earth.

How relevant do you think the Old Testament is? For Jesus and His disciples, it was their textbook! It's significant that Jesus accepted biblical history that some modern scholars and saints lightly dismiss today. In fact, Jesus regarded himself as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law.

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. The only thing He came to destroy is the works of the devil. Jesus teaches here more than what our relationship to God and our fellow man ought to be. The Teacher is revealing some profound things about himself. In saying He has come to fulfill the law and the prophets, He claims that His position and teachings are the culminating and final ones in history. Therefore, we must recognize that a greater one than Moses, or Solomon or is here!

In Jesus' day, there were four types of law:

1. There was the moral law of the Ten Commandments,
2. There was the judicial law of the Old Testament that regulated society in the nation.
3. There was the ceremonial law that governed the ritual and worship of the people.
4. And there was the rabbinic or scribal law that attempted to interpret the moral law.

The Old Testament did not contain the scribal law. It was orally handed down from generation to generation until around the third century A.D. It was summarized and codified and became known as the Mishnah. Later Jewish scholars wrote commentaries to explain the sixty-three tractates in the Mishnah, which would become known as the Jerusalem Talmud, which was 12 printed volumes. The Babylonian Talmud had sixty printed volumes.

For instance, in the Ten Commandments' moral law, God said there should be no work on the Sabbath Day. It was a day of rest. The scribes, therefore, set out to define what "work" was. In the Mishnah, they detailed what it meant to carry a burden on the Sabbath day. A burden was defined as:

- Food equal to the weight of a dried fig.
- Enough wine for mixing in a goblet.
- Milk enough for one swallow.
- Honey sufficient to put upon a wound.
- Oil enough to anoint a small member.
- Water enough to moisten an eye-salve.
- Paper enough to write a custom house note.
- Ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet.
- Reed sufficient to make a pen.

And so on endlessly it goes. Then the Pharisees would try to live this way! That is not the law Jesus came to fulfill! He clearly set aside the scribal law. The Law Jesus came to fulfill was God's moral law! And He did fulfill it! He carried it all the way up to Mount Calvary, where He became the sacrifice sufficient to save all sinners.

The book of Hebrews clearly indicates that the ceremonial law of the Old Testament was a pattern or type of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in every respect. Jesus fulfilled the judicial law by ushering in a new Israel, a new community united in faith.

The Church, this grafted-in Israel, would be based upon Grace, not Law! How could He do this? Because He was the fulfillment of the Law. He kept all of its requirements. And so far as we know, Jesus is the only member of the Hebrew faith to have ever made that claim. This claim makes him either a deluded ego-maniac or the Son of God!

II. God's Grace Revealed

The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross reveals God's grace! Jesus is God's grace extended to all those who believe in Him. The grace of God is not a license to practice sin. When you accept Christ's sacrifice for you, you can experience the relief and joy of knowing your sins have been forgiven and your failures are not going to hound you for eternity. That is the gift of grace! However, receiving God's grace does not mean that you can do whatever you want whenever you want to do it!

Jesus didn't abolish the law – He fulfills it. And He can fulfill it in your life when you accept His salvation and surrender to His Lordship. Don't think you can break the little rules just because you keep the big ones. In verse 19, Jesus says, *“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 NKJV)*

You might be saved by the sacrifice and grace of the Savior, but what kind of citizen are you in the kingdom of heaven? You may feel that so long as the major

areas of your life are OK, it doesn't hurt to ease up some smaller areas now and then. But the devil doesn't confront us with the big temptations first. He knows it's the little foxes that eventually spoil the vine. Do you presume upon the grace of God, or do you practice your faith through obedient living?

Some say they love God but then turn right around and despise and slander their brother or sister in Christ. We say we want the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts, but then we lose our temper and humiliate ourselves and others. The grace of God is not an excuse or cover-up for poor behavior. The grace of God is our link to an obedient life! The grace of God is what gives us hope and faith to become a better person.

III. Obedience is Still His Will

Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes. They failed by getting lost in keeping all the man-made laws and losing sight of the big picture. To be righteous does not mean adding more tasks and duties to your life.

God is not impressed by your ability to multi-task. The righteousness that Jesus is talking about is His righteousness. Jesus wants us to choose to live and face life the way He did. That's the righteousness that excels. It is choosing to love and value people unconditionally, regardless of their background.

It also includes a willingness to confront evil – not because you're better than everyone else, but because you are devoted to living right! It means that you can love and value those who are hateful and abusive yet still stand in opposition to them! Righteousness will even make you willing to face a cross for the sake of someone else's salvation.

The righteousness that exceeds comes from the heart, not the head! It is an internal motivation, not an external demonstration. It is precisely what the scribes lacked. Jesus illustrates this in six ways. The righteousness that exceeds says:

- Killing is an attitude, not just an act.
- Adultery is not just physical. It's a mental disposition.
- Divorce is allowable for infidelity, but not for just any cause.
- You must keep your word instead of looking for semantical loopholes.
- Turning the cheek and going the extra mile is more righteous than retaliation and retribution and
- Loving your enemy is more powerful than hating him.

Conclusion

The citizens of Christ's kingdom accept the grace of God as sufficient to atone for sin and believe in living the Christ-life! It is the grace of God that creates the opportunity for everlasting life. Kingdom citizens see Christ as the fulfillment of the

law and the Old Testament. The righteous don't get lost in ritual and tradition, but neither do they ignore it.

Paul writes this to the Corinthians believers, "What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews, I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law; to the weak, I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some." (1 Corinthians 9:18-22 NKJV)

That is the mission of kingdom citizens! Our righteousness is the righteousness of Christ. It can be agonizing to surrender what you want for what Christ wants. But the reward is incomparable! The righteous concern themselves with Christ-like and godly attitudes that are not just endless details and continuous tasks.

Are you willing to allow Christ to fulfill God's law of love in your heart through your obedient service, or do you find yourself offering one excuse after another for why you can't make progress in your faith? Maybe it's time to give up your earthly ambitions to Jesus and begin to reclaim and pursue your citizenship in Christ's kingdom! Maybe we need to give up trusting our own plans and ideas and let Jesus fulfill His law of love through us.