

Surpassing Righteousness

Matthew 5:17-20

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We come this morning to what is, theologically, the most difficult passage in the Sermon on the Mount. I must say that, for all the joy in preaching on the Sermon, I have had a certain dread about taking this passage on. The words are really shocking, not to mention puzzling. And there is a lot at stake here. The relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the relationship between the gospel and the law. The form and shape of Christian obedience.

By way of introduction, let's talk about how this passage is functioning in the flow of the Sermon. It is a heading, a banner over the central teaching portion of the Sermon. After this text, there are six short passages – going all the way to the end of chapter 5 – six passages known as the antitheses. Meaning, six illustrations which show the contrast, between the way the scribes and Pharisees were handling the law, and what Jesus requires.

So each of these six bits of teaching has a form like: you have heard it said, BUT I say to you – that the antithesis. You've heard this about such and such a commandment, but I say to you – and then we get Jesus' pronouncement. So, in one sense, it's hard to tell (fully) just what Jesus means in our passage this morning, until we see it worked out in the six examples that follow. Nevertheless, this is the principle, the standard, that Jesus will uphold and apply as he continues to teach the ethic of the kingdom. With that we will make two points. Christ and the law in vv. 17 and 18. And Christians and the Law in vv. 19 and 20.

I. Christ and the Law

First, then, Christ and the law. Verse 17: Do not think – even this opening phrase indicates that Jesus is either correcting misunderstandings of his teaching – of his relation to the Torah – or he's trying to forestall them (to anticipate them). 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.

To abolish would be – and this is the language he uses in v.19 – it would be to set aside, or to nullify, to make the law somehow irrelevant or invalid. To do away with it. And right here we can see some of the difficulty. Doesn't the rest of the New Testament in fact say that some of the law is in fact abolished or set aside

or abrogated? Doesn't Jesus himself set aside the food laws? Doesn't the whole Book of Hebrews set aside the sacrificial system and the Levitical priesthood? And it won't do to say that Jesus is not talking about the ceremonies and sacrifices and food laws and the like – that he's only talking about the moral law, the principles summarized in the ten commandments.

There are two reasons why Jesus means the whole law. The first is – notice this – he has not come to abolish the Law OR the prophets. Not merely the Law. The Law and the prophets. That is shorthand for the whole of the Old Testament scriptures. Sometimes the word “law” stands in for the whole Old Testament. But often “law and prophets” is shorthand for it.

And secondly – the reason this is not just some subset of the law is – that the text is upholding the abiding validity of the very least of the commandments. So the whole law, all of it, is what is in view here. He comes not to abolish, but to fulfill. Notice, the contrast is not between abolishing the law and keeping it (or obeying it, though Jesus does obey it) or even between abolishing it and keeping it unchanged.

The contrast is between abolishing and fulfilling. And this “fulfilling” is the key to understanding what is happening here. To “fulfill” does not mean merely to properly interpret – though the Lord will do that as well. And the classical dispensational idea that unless the law is repeated in the New Testament, it is not binding, won't do here. Neither, by the way, will the (somewhat) reformed idea that unless a thing explicitly repealed it is still binding.

Jesus is doing something much more dynamic than either of those proposals. Something that is tied to the explosive coming of the kingdom. The key to understanding it is in noting that there are a bunch of what are called “fulfillment” citations in Matthew's gospel. What I mean is this: Matthew is often saying something like: this was done to FULFILL what is written in the prophet. This was done in order to fulfill the Scripture.

Or we might think of Jesus at his baptism, where he says to JTB: Let's do this to fulfill all righteousness. To fulfill, then, means to bring to completion. To bring to its goal, its telos, its purposed consummation. It's as if Jesus is saying something like: In my appearance, my life and teaching, my death and resurrection, the law AND the prophets – the whole Old Testament canon -- comes to its full and final expression. Or as he puts it in Luke's gospel: the “The Law and the Prophets prophesied until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached.” The law and the prophets are now taken up into the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed.

Thus, he is saying: I am the bringer of the kingdom, the eschatological consummator of the law. Now, for all practical purposes this might mean that some of it is no longer binding – such as the food laws or the sacrificial system.

But even there the whole Old Testament remains as canon, as the wisdom and Word of God, and as valid, in and through Christ, who is the fulfillment and final interpreter of the law.

We might say the law is transfigured and brought into its final glory, its maturity, through the death and resurrection – and the heavenly teaching - of Jesus, the Christ, the anointed Messiah of Israel. And this fulfillment IN CHRIST, is why Jesus can make HIS words the final words, when he says, at the end of the Sermon:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

Now, I want you to step back. Imagine yourself as a first century Jew for whom the Torah is life itself. It is, in a real sense, the world. And it is viewed as more valuable and precious and enduring than the universe itself. After all, Jesus, a good first century Jew said: It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for the least stroke of the law to pass away.

And now, you can see just how audacious, how astonishing a claim this is. It is blasphemous and absurd for any man (or mere man) to speak like this. I have sovereign authority over the law. The issue, in other words, is not my relationship to the law. The issue is the law’s relationship to me. For Moses speaks of me. I am the subject of the law. I am the content of the law. And my life, my words, my teaching, will now (that the End is set in motion) determine how the law functions.

And toward the end of the sermon, Jesus will evoke the Law and the prophets again in promulgating the Golden Rule. So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. That, in a nutshell is what he is doing here, but it is no less revolutionary for its simplicity.

And, lest we think this fulfillment means we will get an easier, more user-friendly version of the law. A sort of: “Jesus fulfilled the law, so we don’t have to,” kind of thing. He will solemnly disabuse us of this in v.18. It’s solemn because he opens with: For truly, literally Amen, I tell us. Amen is used to strengthen the certainty, the reliability, the importance of what is being said.

All the promises of God – of the law and the prophets are AMEN in Christ. Indeed, he is called the Amen in Revelation 3. And to say amen BEFORE you speak – not after as a sort of wish/affirmation as we do – to say it before you speak, is to heighten the gravity/authority of what is about to be said.

Amen, I tell you: until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of pen, will by any means disappear. The smallest letter is the Greek

iota. It corresponds to the Hebrew word yod. It's a tiny letter. The smallest stroke probably refers to these tiny extensions in Hebrew which differentiate one letter from another. A few Hebrew letters look virtually identical, and you have to look closely to tell them apart. In any event – the duration of the law's authority – all the law - is affirmed. Not the smallest part of it will disappear. Until heaven and earth disappear, until all is accomplished. That is, until all that the law prophesies of, until all that it speaks of comes to pass in my eternal kingdom.

Now, we should understand this in light of all we've said about fulfillment. It is the commandments AS understood in the words and work of Christ that is in view. So here we have this: until heaven and earth disappear, not one stroke of the law shall disappear. But he can just as easily shift the focus to his own words, which he does in Matthew's gospel, where he says: Heaven and earth will pass away, but *my words* will never pass away. (Divinity). That's Christ and the law.

II. The Christian and the Law

Our second point is the Christian and the law. What are the implications of all this for us? Well, we get it, beginning in v.19 – *THEREFORE. Anyone who sets aside* (a wordplay on “abolish”), *if anyone sets aside one of the least of these commandments AND teaches others* (teaching), *will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*

Whoever practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Following Jesus means – with all the qualifiers – following the Torah. Christian sanctification is guided, nourished, indeed obligated, to keep the law, not as a covenant of works, not for our justification, but as part of our grateful duty to God our Redeemer.

Jesus makes it clear that greatness in the kingdom comes from keeping and teaching his commandments. Obedience to the law – the full, Christ-shaped form of the law-- is not optional. It is what people justified by grace alone do. We are not antinomians who dispense with the law, nor are we legalists who are saved BY law-keeping. We are Christians, disciples of this Jesus, who says we will not be saved WITHOUT law-keeping.

Then, as if there was not enough challenging stuff here, Jesus says: For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. This would have caused gasps from Jesus' hearers. For these were the law keepers. If anyone paid attention to the jots and tittles, if anyone sought obedience to all 613 commandments – it is them. They would heartily – with verses 18 and 19 of our text. In fact, one orthodox Jewish rabbi says of Jesus' words here: In all of rabbinic literature I know of no more unequivocal, fiery acknowledgement of Israel's holy Scripture.

Jesus is not saying the Pharisees were bad. He is saying their approach to the law, for all its rigor, is not good enough. Simple rule-keeping – even of all 600 rules - will not do it. You will have to surpass them – literally, greatly surpass them. The six antitheses which follow – and which we will be looking at next week, Lord willing – will unpack what it means to exceed this righteousness.

As an aside – Jesus is not playing a game here, trying to drive us to despair so that we say only Christ is our righteousness. There is no hint of that here. He is not speaking of how we are justified – he is speaking of how we live AS his disciples. Or, to put it differently, “your righteousness” here is your conformity to God will, your behavior, NOT Christ’s righteousness given to you – that’s an important subject – but it’s not in view here.

Now, it will turn out that our righteousness will need to be deeper, internal, from the depths of the heart. And more extensive – to every person, to all the poor, to the least of these, even to our enemies – than even the Pharisees imagined. But, nevertheless, this real, internal and external obedience to the Christ fulfilled Torah MUST be manifested in our lives IF we are to enter the kingdom of heaven. And this is why as the fulfiller of the law, the bringer of the new covenant, the giver of the Spirit, Jesus gives us new hearts and writes the law into our inner persons.

This is the covenant I will establish declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

It is out of this renewal, this bestowal of a new heart, that this radical obedience flows. One must be born again – made new – to heed this uncompromising call to Torah keeping from the lips of Christ. This text is – in a more stark and arresting form – simply what Jesus – and the apostles say elsewhere.

John 14: If you love me, keep my commands.

John 15: If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

1 Jn 2: We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.

1 Jn 3: The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them.

1 Jn 5: In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.

In short, to love is to keep the law, and vice-versa. This is what is meant by loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And loving our

neighbor as ourselves. This is how our Lord begins the middle teaching section of his sermon. And at the end, in chapter five verse 48, he will say words – equally shocking – which hark back to this very opening. And those closing words are the summary of Christian life, and they will not be relaxed or waived away for followers of this Christ:

Here they are: You, therefore, **MUST** be perfect as you heavenly Father is perfect. Thanks be to God for the gift of the law and the prophets, for Christ the fulfillment, who enables **THIS** perfection, this obedience, in all true disciples. Amen.

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