



Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Series: The Manifesto of the King, Part 10: To Fulfill, Not Abolish

Matthew 5:17-20

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Introduction and Transition

The backdrop to the words that we are looking at today is at least twofold. The first thing we need to realize is that as Jesus is preaching and teaching His disciples, He does so with the realization that the spiritual instruction which they had received before Him came primarily from the scribes and the Pharisees. They were the dominant spiritual tradition of the day and Jesus knows, as we will see in Mathew 15:6: “for the sake of (their) tradition (they had) made void the word of God.” (Matthew 15:6, ESV) By their traditions they had robbed the Word of God of authority and replaced with an authority of their own.

The second thing we need to be aware of, though the gospel of Matthew has not to this point described it, is a growing animosity of the scribes and Pharisees toward Jesus and his teaching. To put it quite frankly, Jesus made them nervous...for a lot of reasons. One is that he didn't act dreary and joyless and stern and solemn all the time, which was sort of general description of those who were considered to be holy. He wasn't boring, but engaging; not self-important, but approachable. He didn't follow religious convention. He had the nasty habit of hanging out with sinners and ignoring the laws of the Scribes and the Pharisees. Some even thought that Jesus went out of His way to break the religious traditions that the Pharisees and Scribes had so carefully crafted and codified, which, of course, He did. The things he taught were also so foreign to the ears of the religious that they wondered what in the world He was teaching. The Beatitudes were unlike anything that the religionists had ever heard. It got people to wondering by just what authority Jesus was teaching all of this stuff. Rather than appeal to the religious traditions of the Scribes and base all of His teaching on their learned interpretation of the Scripture, Jesus had this tendency to introduce is teaching with the phrase, “I say to you,” speaking in the name of God and with great and noticeable authority. It bothered the scribes and the Pharisees. They were offended at His lack of concern for their rules and regulations. They thought Him to be a threat and so the whispers about Christ had begun and one of the accusations was that is that He was trying to destroy God's Law, trying to overthrow the Law.

They saw Him as setting Himself above the Law and the Prophets to change it and to destroy it. So before moving into the next part of His sermon, He takes a moment to make a declaration regarding His teaching and its relationship to the Law of God, to establish His view of the Scripture and to set the stage for the true nature of righteousness that He expected of His disciples. Knowing what the scribes and Pharisees are thinking and saying, He makes a very clear statement of His purpose.

1) A Clear Statement of Purpose (v. 17) Now the great question is, how can Jesus who broke the Pharisees' rules say that He had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them? Just what law was Jesus talking about? He and the Pharisees and Scribes were not on the same page.

When the Scribes and Pharisees talked about the law, they were referring to the Scribal law, the Mishnah and the Talmud, which they wrote, which was a vast system of rules and regulations that were intended to define and apply the true law of God to every situation in life. The Scribal law their interpretation and application of God's law to everyday life that had become a farce and had completely obscured the point of God's Word. Take the Sabbath day as an example. The principle God gives us is that we should have a day of rest for the purpose of worship and of seeking God and communing with Him. They completely ignored the focus of pursuing God and became consumed instead with defining and prohibiting what they considered to be work. For example, one thing which was classified as work was to carry a burden. So what exactly is a burden? The Scribal Law says that a burden is carrying: food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a customs house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen. They spent hours debating whether someone could move a lamp from one place to another or if someone could lift his or her child on the Sabbath. Their rules became ridiculously elaborate. On and on these regulations droned. It was one great exercise in missing the point.

Beloved, it isn't hard to see why Jesus opposed this kind of law. It is not the law of God at all. Jesus broke the Scribal law all the time. No, when Jesus is talking about the Law and the Prophets, He is talking about the Old Testament. That is the proper understanding of this phrase – not the Mishnah or the Talmud, but the OT revelation of God. When Jesus 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, Jesus was saying, in effect, “The Old Testament is all about Me. I am the living fulfillment of the revelation of God to you in the Old Testament. I am the living fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. I would not, I cannot abolish – literally that word means “dissolve, destroy, overthrow, subvert” the Law and the Prophets. It is impossible for I have come as the fruition of the Law and the Prophets – to fill it up, to complete it, to accomplish and carry it through to its end. Jesus is claiming to be the fulfillment, the consummation of everything that we find in the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus is saying that He is the culmination of previous Scripture testimony, not a destroyer of it. This is an earth shattering statement. What does it mean? How is Jesus the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures? Several ways...

First, He is the fulfillment of all of the prophecies of the Messiah from Genesis to Malachi. Every prediction of the coming Messiah, from His mission defined in Genesis 3:15, to the place of His birth explained in Micah 5:2, the description of His crucifixion in Psalm 22 to His work of redemption explained in Isaiah 53 to His reign that Daniel described in Daniel 7 – every prophecy finds its fulfillment in Christ and in Him alone. This is astonishing. There are some 456 prophecies of Christ in the OT and He fulfils them all.

Second, Jesus fulfils the commands of the moral Law of God fully and completely. He alone has kept every commandment of the Law, living a perfectly righteous life demanded by the Law of God. This what Paul means when he says that Jesus was born under the Law in Galatians. He is the fulfillment of the Law in that He was born under the Law and completely obeyed it. Though He was tempted, He was without sin. Every commandment He obeyed; every requirement He met; every standard He lived up to. He shows us the real meaning of the Law and the real character of godliness and righteousness in His obedience. In that, He is the very perfection of God on display.

Third, not only does Jesus fulfill the commands of the Law, but He also fulfills the demands of the Law against sin by dying on the cross as the perfect sacrifice to save sinners, bearing God’s wrath and satisfying the demands of the Law of God – the soul who sins shall die (Ezek. 18:20) – in the place of those that would place their faith in Him. (Col. 2:13-14, Isaiah 53:5–6, ESV) It is Christ’s fulfillment both of the commands and the demands of the Law that makes our salvation a reality. (2Co 5:21 ESV) Because Christ has perfectly fulfilled the commands of the Law, we stand before God clothed in His perfect righteousness, so that in the eyes of the heavenly Judge, it is as if we were the embodiment of righteousness itself. Because Jesus has fulfilled the demands of the Law we stand before God cleansed and forgiven of our sin, our debt to God’s

holiness perfectly and fully paid. This great exchange is the good news of the gospel and can only be result of Christ fulfilling the Law and the Prophets. This is how He is the source of our righteousness, because He has fulfilled the commands and the demands of the Law perfectly and completely.

Moreover, Jesus fulfils the ceremonial, sacrificial Law of God, the Law that governed Israel's worship. He embodied all of the laws, types, and symbols that pointed toward Him in all the sacrificial system - the Lord fulfilled all those prophecies in Himself. Jesus, Himself, is the final ultimate sacrifice for our sin. The whole ceremonial and sacrificial system of the Old Testament, both the priesthood and the sacrifices find their perfect fulfillment in Him. There is not a need for continuing sacrifices that could never cleanse from sin but were only a picture of the coming Savior's sacrifice. Jesus has brought an end to the sacrifice of bulls and goats: (Hebrews 9:12, 26, ESV)

The priesthood in Israel came to its fulfillment in Christ. The OT priests cannot compare with Christ. They offered the sacrifice of atonement for the people of God once a year, Jesus once for all time. They offered sacrifices for their own sins, Christ sacrificed Himself for the sins of others. They entered by themselves behind the veil into God's presence, Jesus tore the veil in two and opened the new and living way to God for all who believe. The priests offered the blood of bulls, Christ offered His own blood. They were fallible, Christ infallible. They were insufficient, Christ perfectly sufficient.

The Tabernacle and the Temple, the OT places of worship, cannot compare with Christ. They had doors but Christ is The Door. They had an altar for sacrifice, Christ's cross is the altar and He is the sacrifice. They had a laver for washing the body, but Christ cleanses the soul. They had lamps that needed to be refilled, but Christ is the light of the world that shines eternally. They had the bread of the presence that had to continually be replenished, but Christ is the eternal bread of life. They had incense that continually ascended to God, but Christ's own prayers ascend for the saints. They had a mercy seat, but Christ is the mercy seat of God. The offerings, the feasts, the covenant of grace – all of it comes to fulfillment in Christ alone. The OT, all of it, points to Him – Isaac, Jacob's Ladder, Moses, the serpent on the pole, the Passover, the Rock in the wilderness, David and countless more types of Christ all point to Him. He is the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures.

Jesus did not come to abolish the OT, nor could He. He is the very fulfillment of the OT. And what that means is this. As the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures, He is the one, in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, that can rightly interpret them. So in just a little bit, starting in verse 21, when Jesus will counter the Pharisees instructions saying “You have heard it said...but I tell you”, Jesus is not abolishing the Law at all. Instead, He is correcting the perversions that the Scribes and Pharisees had made of the Law. Jesus has come to fulfill the Law and Prophets so it only makes sense that He, as its Author and its Subject, has:

2) The Highest View of Scripture (v.18-19) Do you see what Jesus is saying here? Far from abolishing the Word of God, He is making a statement regarding the permanence of it. He is stating in no uncertain terms that the Word of God is central and enduring and impossible to ignore. Christ could never destroy it – it’s indestructible.

In fact the way that He speaks of its worth and weight and significance and relevance is compelling. An iota was a Greek word that spoke of the smallest Hebrew letter called a yod, which kind of looks like an apostrophe. There are 66,000+ yods in the OT. The dot would have been the little tiny extension on some letters that differentiated them from other similar letters – think of the difference between say a t and an f, for instance. Not one of the innumerable dots or 66,000+ yods will disappear until everything in the Word of God has been fully and completely accomplished. The Scripture cannot be broken. Its truth cannot be avoided. Holy Scripture and its teaching will not change. Over and over again when Jesus quoted the OT, He used the perfect tense – “it is written” – which means “it was written, it is written, and it always will be written.” The Scriptures are more enduring than the universe. Jesus said: (Matthew 24:35, ESV)

We need to hear this in our googlized information age. We live at a time when there is more information available to us than we can ever possibly grasp. We have at our disposal enormous amounts of information. The assumption is that new information is better information, that all this new information will make us better and improve our lives, and makes us smarter and wiser and brilliant. But here is the truth, despite all of our access to knowledge, there is a body of truth that is more authoritative and more relevant than any knowledge we could possibly gain outside of it. The Word of God is still the most important collection of knowledge known to the world, because it, alone, is the ground of reality and the only foundation of truth. It alone defines reality.

Jesus would not and cannot abolish the Word of God. In fact, far from abolishing the Word of God, Jesus established the foundation of His entire ministry on the Word of God. The Scripture is the rock upon which Christ built His ministry. Shortly after His temptation, Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21, ESV) Far from overturning the Scripture, Jesus is emphasizing the truth that it is impossible to accept Christ's authority without accepting Scripture's authority and vice versa. They stand together. They're so intertwined, it is impossible to weaken the authority of one without weakening the authority of the other. To submit to Christ as Savior and Lord is to submit to what He taught about the binding, eternal, and authoritative nature of Scripture. Do you see what this says of casual confessions of faith in Christ minus a life defined by His word?

Because Christ has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and because not an iota or dot will pass from the Law until it has all been accomplished, therefore greatness in the Kingdom will be measured by conformity to God's commandments and teaching them to others. Jesus says: 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. Jesus does not set the law of God aside but fulfills it and so do his faithful disciples.

Now immediately we get a little nervous here. What about grace? What is all this talk about commandments? We are under grace not law. Well, understand something. There is an error going around that because we are saved by grace, we no longer have anything to do with the Law. Since we are under grace, obedience is sort of optional in the Christian's life. We set grace in opposition to the pursuit of true righteousness and obedience to God. But that is foolishness.

Jesus fulfilled the Law and saved us by His grace through His blood – that is true. But in the New Covenant, the moral Law has not been abolished for us as believers, instead it has been written on our hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit. (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26–27, ESV)

Because we have been given a new heart committed to Him, we desire to please God by obeying Him. Enabled by the indwelling Holy Spirit and the grace of God we can now obey the Law that God created us to obey in the first place. It is not that grace gives us a pass on the moral law of God; it is that grace enables us, when we walk in the Spirit, to keep it in the right manner, as we will see Jesus explain in just a moment. It is by the grace of God, whereby He gives us a new heart and saves us that we can begin to be obedient from the heart to the commands of God. Motivated by worship, out of love for our Lord, from a desire to pleasing to Him we will be obedient to the commandments of the Lord and we find that they are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3, ESV) In fact, the Apostle John makes clear the relationship between true salvation and obedience to the commands of God: (1 John 2:3–5, ESV) Jesus said: (John 14:15, 23–24, ESV)

Jesus makes it clear that when the law is rightly understood it is not opposed to gospel; it goes hand in hand with the gospel. The gospel purpose is that we will be conformed to Christ's image. What is He like? What is His character like? It's revealed in the law. And so when the gospel takes hold of our lives we begin to delight in the law and we say with the psalmist, (Psalm 119:97, ESV) The Law is not the enemy of a redeemed man, it shows us the character of Christ for which we have been created.

That is why Jesus would say: Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same (that is, whoever modifies or weakens God's standards because of ignorance, or misunderstanding or outright disregard) will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (they will still be in the kingdom of heaven but blessing, reward, fruitfulness, joy and usefulness will all be sacrificed to the extent that they are disobedient), but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Greatness in the Kingdom of heaven is not determined by spiritual gifts, apparent success, popularity, reputation, or size of ministry – but by a believer's faithfulness to Scripture as demonstrated by His life and His teaching. This is how seriously Jesus takes righteousness in the Kingdom of Heaven. He takes it that seriously and let me tell you why -- because the last way that Jesus fulfills the Law -- the way in which I did not mention earlier is this -- through His believers by means of the Holy Spirit. "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:3–4, ESV) Keeping the Law for Christians is not a matter of salvation, but is the evidence of salvation. Not that our

obedience is perfect, but the direction of our life is toward greater and greater godliness, as Christ by His Spirit fulfills the righteous requirement of the Law in us.

Jesus is making clear that far from abolishing the Law and the Prophets, the Word of God, He fulfills it. Far from having a low view of Scripture, He has the highest view of Scripture. Far from relaxing the moral requirements of the Law, he held strongly to the commandments of God and called His disciples to do the same. In fact, in the most pointed statement of this small section, Jesus declares that exceeding righteousness that discipleship requires.

3) Righteousness that Exceeds the Scribes and Pharisees (v. 20) For Jesus to say these words would have come as a shock to his hearers. The scribes and the Pharisees were the most respected religious people of their day. They were considered to be extremely righteous and meticulous in their keeping of the Law. A proverbial saying was, that if God only saved two men, one would be a scribe and the other, a Pharisee. So what was Jesus doing here? Was He raising the bar and demanding a better performance than the Pharisees? Not at all. Jesus is calling for a righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees not in degree but in kind. Jesus is not telling His disciples that their righteousness must exceed the Pharisees in degree. Jesus is not saying that if the Pharisees keep 312 laws, His disciples must keep 313 to see the Kingdom of Heaven. That is not it.

Jesus did not expect his disciples to surpass the scribes and Pharisees at their own game. That is not what He was saying. The Pharisees desired to codify righteousness, to prescribe the proper behavior in agonizing detail, as we have seen, for every foreseeable situation. That is not true righteousness, it was dead legalism. And I want to define that word clearly here so that we are all on the same page with what I am saying. There are three senses, three species if you will, of legalism. The first and most deadly form of legalism attempts to attain or retain salvation by human works. The legalist in this sense performs good works in order to gain the favor of God, who becomes the benefactor and blessing of achievers. The second form of legalism fabricates new laws, based on tradition or misinterpretation of Scripture and grants these laws the force of Scripture itself. This kind of legalist may forbid what is permissible, such as dancing, or he may require what is sensible such as morning devotions. But either way, He is making a new law, a new standard of binding commands. The third kind of legalism is an exceptional concentration and focus on law and obedience, rigid observance of rules, to the exclusion of other facets of the life of faith, acts of mercy and kindness, devotion to God and

meaningful prayer. Jesus said of the Pharisees, (Matthew 23:23, ESV) In truth, many of the scribes and Pharisees suffered from all three species of legalism.

Their righteousness was really self-righteousness. It was external and superficial. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was surfacy, shallow and hollow. Their righteousness was selective and self-made. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was self-glorying. They did everything before men so others could see it and applaud. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was abominable and detestable in God's sight. So in Luke 16:15 Jesus says, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." (Luke 16:15, ESV) He was speaking about the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

So, Jesus did not expect his disciples to surpass the scribes and Pharisees at their own game. He was not saying that His disciples needed to construct better rules of righteousness. Jesus knew that there is no moral net fine enough to strain out every moral question. True righteousness exceeds the self-righteousness of the Pharisees not in degree but in kind. True righteousness is born of a regenerate heart, born of faith, born of love to God. True righteousness is the outgrowth of a saved heart and soul, of a man or a woman made new by the power of God and the cleansing blood of Christ – a righteousness born of gratitude and love. It goes beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law.

Jesus instructions in the Sermon on the Mount are not a new, external legal code to follow. Rather they are illustrations and expectations of the ways of an obedient heart before the Lord. Jesus makes the issue of righteousness a matter of the heart. The righteousness of Christ's disciples surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees because it is rooted in a heart for God – a heart made alive and obedient and sensitive and submitted to God. Too many people – the Pharisees for instance – perform "good" deeds from a desire for prominence and recognition, out of craven fear, resentful obligation and duty, selfish calculation, or because they have never had the chance to do the evil they want to do. Jesus disciples, however, obey from the heart. They obey from a higher motive, from a living and loving faith.

This explains Jesus' comments on the law in the rest of chapter 5. He illustrates with six examples the difference between the spirit and the letter of the Law. He taught us that the law was summed up in this: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"; and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). True righteousness is rooted in redemption and a relationship of submission and love to Christ, not rules. That's the real issue.

But we leave this morning needing to ask ourselves...

What do we believe about regarding the testimony of the Word of God? What do we believe its testimony regarding the gospel? Do we believe Christ's testimony that He is its fulfillment?

What do we believe regarding the Word of God itself – do we have the same high view of Scripture which Jesus had? Is that evident in the way that we submit ourselves to it?

Do we believe Christ's words regarding true righteousness? Does ours exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees – not in degree but in kind?

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