

## **Series Sermon on the Mount**

### **Scripture Matthew 5:17-20**

Jesus started His teaching with a description of the character of true disciples, and then He explained the influence that these disciples could and should have in the world. Character was described in the Beatitudes and influence was described with the metaphors of salt and light.

The ethical teachings of Jesus were of such a radical nature that many of His listeners would conclude that they were outside the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus recognized these assumptions of His listeners, and so He quickly affirmed His complete and unswerving loyalty to the law, and then He explained the objective of His teaching: to get the minds of His listeners refocused on the original intended meaning of the Old Testament writings.

### **Read Matthew 5:17-20**

The phrase, “do not think,” indicates that Jesus understood the reactions of the crowd to His teaching. In verse 17 He categorically denied that He was attempting to set aside the Old Testament Law and the utterances of the prophets. The expression, “the Law and the Prophets” was a way of referring to all of the Hebrew Scriptures. Instead of doing away with what God had revealed about His will for His people in the Old Testament, Jesus declared His purpose with the statement: He had “come to fulfill them.”

When we read the word “fulfill” in conjunction with the person of Jesus, we usually think of the many Old Testament prophecies and promises concerning His coming as the Messiah. Matthew mentioned several of these prophecies in the first four chapters of this Gospel. For example, Jesus’ birth “fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah” concerning the virgin birth. Another example: when Jesus’ parents took Him to Egypt, it was “to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Hosea.” (*see Matthew 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16*). These were examples of one kind of fulfillment, that of prophecy.

The “fulfillment” in verse 17 is different. This reference concerns Jesus as the One who had come to interpret and clarify the true meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus was the living Word of God, and in this role He proclaimed the original and true intentions of the Law. He made known the authentic purposes of the Law.

Through the centuries, the truth which was behind the Law had been neglected and twisted so that the Jewish people of Jesus’ day did not have a proper understanding of how to be in relationship with God. The shock and surprise of the crowd at the statements made by Jesus in the Beatitudes was an indication of their incorrect understanding.

In His teaching Jesus endeavored to refocus and reorient people to the original meanings and purposes of the Law and to the character that people had to have in order to be acceptable to God. He began this process with the Beatitudes, and it was the rationale behind all of the Sermon on the Mount. Although His teaching seemed too radical to be valid to many of the people, Jesus was, in actuality, accurately describing the Law. He had not come to detract from and destroy the Law.

Jesus said in verse 18, “I tell you the truth.” Whenever Jesus spoke these words He was stressing the seriousness of what He was about to say. Jesus affirmed the lasting quality of the Law in an emphatic way by using the word “until” two times. He said that the Law would endure “until heaven and earth disappeared” and “until everything in the Law was accomplished.” Thus Jesus verified, first, that the full authority of the Old Testament would be in effect throughout all of human history, and, second, that the nature of God’s purposes and plans were eternal. The first “until” refers to duration; the second one to the redemptive nature of God’s activity.

In verse 18, Jesus illustrated the truth of what He was communicating, and He did it in a way which mimicked the teaching style of the religious scholars of Israel. He said that the Law would endure down to the smallest detail. The smallest letter in the Greek language is the “iota.” This is a word which has come into our English language. We use it in sentences such as, “It doesn’t make an iota of difference.” The “least stroke of a pen” is a little mark which is added to Hebrew letters. Some of the older English translations referred to these two marks as “jots” and “tittles,” or “dotting the I’s and crossing the t’s.” Jesus used this terminology to emphasize that the Law was not ever going to change, not even in the most insignificant way, and that He had no intention of destroying any part of the Law.

Although the permanence of every aspect of the Law was affirmed, Jesus did indicate, in verse 19, that some commandments of the Law were more important than others. This is confirmed in other places in Scripture. On one occasion, when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, He responded, “The first and greatest commandment is, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’” Then He said, “The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus then added, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (*Matthew 22:37-40*).

The truth of verse 19 was confirmed in another way also. The religious teachers of Israel had determined that there were 613 individual commandments in the Law. These many commandments were divided into “positive” and “negative” categories, and also labeled as “heavy” and “light.” The religious scholars had lengthy debates about which commandments belonged in which categories, but they agreed that the commandment to “Love the Lord your God” was the first and greatest of the commandments, that it was the “heaviest” of all. Other “weighty” commandments included profaning the name of God and misusing the Sabbath.

*[In case anyone is interested, some of the religious teachers considered Deuteronomy 22:6-7 to be the “lightest” commandment in the Old Testament. These verses stated, “If you come across a bird’s nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go.”]*

The religious teachers were hung up on their detailed analyses of the fine points of the Law. In both their attitudes and in their behaviors, they were very legalistic. They put a lot of emphasis on external behavior. In fact, their way of judging the righteousness of people was to observe what people did. Keeping the Law was, to them, a matter of visible behavior. It is no wonder that Jesus sometimes lost patience with them. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites” He said on one occasion. “You give a tenth of your spices, but you have neglected the weightier matters of the law — justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ... You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (*Matthew 23:23-24*).

Notice that, in those words, Jesus wanted the teachers to keep all parts of the Law. He said that the tithe of spices, which was literally “light” in weight, and the other “weightier” parts, such as “justice, mercy, and faithfulness,” were both important. None of the Law was to be neglected or ignored. Even though the “lighter” laws might be comparable to the “jots” and “tittles,” they were just as important as any other commandments. What was being emphasized here was not the minutiae of the law, those details over which the religious leaders were obsessed, but understanding of and faithfulness to the overall meaning of the law. Jesus was clarifying and teaching the real intentions of the Law, which was concerned primarily with heart attitude, and not just with external actions.

Verses 17 and 18 set forth the foundational principle that Jesus wanted His listeners to understand. Verses 19 and 20 are application. Notice that verse 19 was actually a warning to those inside the kingdom, and not the religious leaders of Israel. (It is the next verse, verse 20, which is addressed to those outside the kingdom.) Verse 19 indicates that there are ranks of “least” and “great” in the “kingdom of God.” Just as there are lesser and greater commandments, there are lesser and greater disciples, and the context indicates that the distinctions concern obedience to the law.

Keep in mind that Jesus was directing His teaching specifically to His disciples. He did not want any one of His disciples to break any of the commandments, and so He warned His disciples to be careful about their obedience to His commands and to what they communicated and taught to others. The terms “least” and “great” were Jesus’ way to distinguish the faithfulness of His followers in regard to their obedience to the will of God, as Jesus Himself would reveal that truth. Jesus Himself had come to fulfill all parts of the Law, and He wanted all His followers to do the same.

Verse 20 indicates that Jesus expected His disciples to practice a righteousness which exceeded that of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. This verse is, first of all, an encouragement to the disciples to be more obedient to the intentions of the Word of God than were the religious teachers and Pharisees. At the same time, it was a warning to the religious leaders that they were not members of the kingdom of heaven, even though they assumed that they were. Just imagine the reaction of the crowd to the statement in verse 20. They assumed that the leaders of Israel, of all people, were guaranteed a place in heaven.

The “teachers of the law” were scholars who studied and interpreted the Old Testament Law. They sought to maintain the standards of the Law through the training of student disciples and through their general teaching in the temple and synagogues. Through the centuries, they had become so bogged down in the fine points of the Law that they were no longer properly focused on the central meanings of the Law.

The Pharisees, like the teachers of the law, were also committed to the fulfillment of the demands of the Old Testament, and their zeal was recognized by everyone in Israel. Unfortunately, in their zeal to adhere to the Law, they had developed a system of rules based on traditions, and these traditions had led them away from the true intentions of the Law. Jesus stated that neither group had a place in the kingdom of heaven.

I think we can recognize that Jesus objected to the misinterpretations and misapplied practices of the religious leaders concerning the Law, not the Law itself. In His role as the “fulfiller” of the Law, Jesus was reorienting His listeners to the original intentions and motives of the Law — those aspects which had been lost in the overly detailed analyses and legalistic extremes of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

Jesus began verse 20 with the same phrase used in verse 18, “I tell you,” which directed His listeners’ attention to the great importance of the words which would follow. The subject of great importance was “righteousness.” Jesus was calling His disciples to, and refocusing the attention of His listeners to, a different quality of righteousness than that manifested by the religious authorities.

Jesus was not talking about an intensification of effort in keeping the Law. Doubling down on the behaviors of the Pharisees was not the way of kingdom people. Rather, the Good News of the kingdom, which He had begun to proclaim with the Beatitudes, required, first of all, that people respond to Him because He was the fulfillment of the Law, and, second, that people must be repentant and have a change of heart.

Jesus wanted His listeners to know that kingdom righteousness was the result of an “inside-out” experience, and that kingdom righteousness could not be obtained through external actions or personal efforts. Scripture declares that God accepts those who come to Him with “a broken spirit, and a broken and contrite heart” (*Psalms 51:17*), or, as stated in the Beatitudes, those who are “poor in spirit,” who “mourn for justice,” who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and so on. It is spiritual transformation of the heart which will produce transformation in behavior. It doesn’t happen the other way around.

We have now covered the first 20 verses of Matthew chapter five. I hope you have recognized that Jesus has been guiding His disciples back into an understanding of the true intention of God’s law. The focus in this beginning part of the Sermon on the Mount has been on inner righteousness. Jesus explained that people who repented of their sins and acknowledged their dependence on God would receive the blessings of God. As stated in the Beatitudes, they would be “comforted,” would “inherit the earth,” would be “filled with righteousness,” “receive mercy,” “see the reality of God,” and would be “called sons of God.” In short, benefits of “the kingdom of heaven” would be theirs here on earth. As a result, the disciples would be more righteous than the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

A few years later, the Apostle Paul had his transforming experience when he encountered Jesus on his journey to the city of Damascus. A former Pharisee, he was faultless in regard to his legalistic righteousness, but he considered his old spiritual assets to be “rubbish.” His new desire was “to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of his own that came from the law, but having the righteousness which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that came from God” (*Philippians 3:5-9*). That was the kind of righteousness that Jesus was introducing to His disciples.

Verse 20 is considered to be the key verse in the entire Sermon on the Mount. It certainly emphasizes the importance of personal righteousness. In the next several messages we will study a series of contrasts between the internal, spiritual righteousness required by Jesus in His teachings and the external, legalistic, self-righteous practices of the Pharisees.

In the verses today, we learned that Jesus, and Jesus alone, was able to interpret the Old Testament Law accurately and authoritatively. And we learned that the attainment of the righteousness of the Law is vitally linked with membership in the kingdom of heaven. If we are going to be Jesus' disciples, we must keep our focus on Him and on His teaching.