

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, March 13, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:17-20

17 "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. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 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.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #11
RADICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Sitting on the side of a US highway waiting to catch speeding drivers, a State Police Officer noticed a car going along at 22 MPH.

The officer thought to himself, "This driver is just as dangerous as a speeder!" So he turned on his lights and pulled the driver over.

When he got to the car he noticed that there were five elderly ladies -- two in the front seat and three in the back - eyes wide and white as ghosts. The driver, obviously confused, said to him, "Officer, I don't understand, I was doing exactly the speed limit! What seems to be the problem?"

"Ma'am," the officer replied, "You weren't speeding, but you should know that driving slower than the speed limit can also be a danger to other drivers."

"Slower than the speed limit?" she asked. "No sir, I was doing the speed limit exactly... Twenty-Two miles an hour!" the woman said a bit proudly.

The Officer tried not to smile and explained to her that "22" was the route number, not the speed limit. A bit embarrassed, the woman grinned and thanked the officer for pointing out her error.

"But before I let you go, Ma'am, I have to ask... Is everyone in this car ok? These women seem a bit shaken and they haven't said a single peep this whole time."

"Oh, don't worry officer, they'll be alright in a minute. We just got off Route 119."

Let's take a moment to review where we have been these past ten weeks. Jesus is teaching His disciples and some of those who have chosen to follow Him. It is early in Jesus ministry, and for whatever reason, Jesus decides that this is an important time to instruct His followers about what it means to live as a citizen in the Kingdom of God. He begins by teaching His followers the radical truths of the Beatitudes. He begins and ends the Beatitudes with instruction for the person who will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. We become citizens of the Kingdom when we recognize and then act upon our spiritual poverty, trusting in Jesus and His grace alone to save us from our sin.

Jesus follows the Beatitudes up with two radical illustrations about who the follower of Jesus must be in his or her generation. We have been called to live as salt and light in this world.

There is also a progression that is happening here. We move from the third person (blessed are they), to the second person (blessed are you), and in just a moment you will see Jesus move to the first person (I). Christ is shaking things up, teaching with an authority unparalleled up to that point in time and unparalleled since. No one had ever taught with the authority that Christ taught with, and no one has ever taught with the authority that Christ taught with since.

Now, let's take a look at the radical righteousness that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. And we'll begin with looking at Jesus' relationship to the law in verses 17-18 of Matthew 5. Let's begin with verse 17.

17 "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.

Denn Guptill has written, "I am convinced that Christ stated this specifically for all those well intentioned people who are forever saying, 'I'm not under law, I'm under grace.' Somehow we seem to have gotten the idea that Christ stamped the Old Testament with big red letters that say 'null & void.' We have drawn the faulty conclusion that the Old Testament no longer matters, that it no longer applies, that it's just a collection of historical books. Well except for the Ten Commandments, most of us would let those stand at least the two biggies, murder and adultery. And yet Christ plainly said I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Can these words really be coming from the mouth of Christ? The same Christ that Paul wrote of in Romans 10:4 (NIV) Christ is the end of the law?"¹

It's a good question, isn't it? Did Jesus Christ declare the Old Testament law to be null and void? No! Christ clearly said in Matthew 5:17 that He didn't come to abolish the Law or the prophets but to fulfill them.

So, what is the significance to that statement to people living in the year 2011? Face it, most of us don't go through our workweeks having conversations with co-workers about the law and the prophets. If we did, people might look at us like we were off our rockers.

¹ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=40346

But, if you lived in Israel, in the first century, everybody talked about the law and the prophets. It was as much a part of daily conversation as reciting Twins box scores or talking about the news of the day might be in our daily conversation. To the Jew, the law was life. And, Jesus saying that He had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets could only mean one thing. He was declaring Himself to be the Messiah. Not only that, but He was declaring for all people, in all times, that the Old Testament was of utmost importance. For, we cannot understand who Jesus is, without an understanding of what the Old Testament is. The grace of the New Testament is forever tied to the law of the Old Testament. Jesus must have fulfilled all the prophecies of Messiah in the Old Testament to truly be the Messiah.

Some of the earliest heresies of the Christian church came from a school of thought that said that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament law. John Stott writes about the second-century heretic, Marcion. Marcion was so convinced that Jesus' coming had eliminated all Old Testament law that he rewrote the New Testament, eliminating any references to the Old Testament. If Marcion came across a passage where Jesus, Peter, Paul, or any of the other New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament, Marcion would simply remove the passage from the text. Some of Marion's followers changed the words in Jesus' sentence in Matthew 5:17 to, "I have come not to fulfill the Law and Prophets, but to abolish them!"²

So many "Christians" throughout the centuries have lived their lives as if Christ came to abolish the law. It's about grace grace grace all the time.

So, did he fulfill the Law? We know that He fulfilled the prophecies. Yes, Jesus fulfilled the law. He lived a perfect life, fulfilling the law perfectly, keeping every command of the law to perfection. And this perfect Lamb of God perfectly fulfilled the requirements of the law by dying on the cross as our perfect sacrifice. I could go on and on today telling you how Christ fulfilled the law, but I want you to see what this has to do with you.

Jesus expands upon the importance of the law in verse 18.

18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Listen to what Guptill writes about this. ". . . after all Christ was executed for breaking the law. He didn't follow the prescribed hand washing, he healed the sick and picked grain on the Sabbath. And yet here He speaks about the law with as much reverence as any Scribe or Pharisee. Christ tells us Matthew 5:18 (NIV) I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Now the King James Version is a little more poetic because it says, not a jot or a tittle will pass away, it's not as clear but it's prettier. The jot was the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the lodah, it looked like an

² John Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity Press, 1978), p. 72.

apostrophe. The tittle was a serif and it was a projection from an individual letter that changed the emphasis. And Christ said that not even something as small and insignificant as those two marks would disappear from the law.”³

Kent Hughes writes, “There are approximately 66,420 yods in the Old Testament.” He says that the number of serifs is innumerable.⁴

So, what is this law that Jesus speaks of?

- 1) It was the first five books of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Pentateuch. These five books were considered the way, the truth and the life.
- 2) It was also the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments represented the supreme Jewish law. All other law was reflected in these commands.
- 3) It represented the “law and the prophets” or the entire Old Testament.

When Jesus said that not even the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen will be any means disappear, he was talking about the Old Testament. Of all the ancient books ever written, none has been preserved as accurately as the Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls are considered one of the greatest archaeological finds of all time. The reason? These manuscripts dating back to shortly after the time of Christ show that the accuracy of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures have been remarkably preserved. What we have today is what we had back then. Great care was taken in preserving the Word of God.

In the day of Jesus, an Orthodox Jew would hold the Old Testament to be holy, but he or she would also hold the laws of the scribes and the Pharisees to be holy. The Scribes authored the Mishnah. The Mishnah contains 800 pages of laws and regulations that the Children of Israel were to follow. The Talmud is a 72 volume work of the Rabbis that contains interpretation of the Old Testament law. Can you imagine following such laws? Jesus perfectly lived out the law of the Old Testament, but He didn’t subscribe to the rigid regulations spelled out in Mishnah and the Talmud. Why? Because the Mishnah and the Talmud sought to live out the letter of the law and ignored the spirit of the law. Jesus cared about the law, because He is the lawgiver. The same Jesus who spoke to the disciples gave the law as the second member of the Trinity.

Jesus now turned his attention to the relationship between His followers and the law.

What does the Old Testament law have to do with you?

Jesus said, in verse 19, 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

³ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=40346

⁴ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 94.

Two thoughts here –

- 1) Woe to the person who knows the law, ignores it, and teaches others to ignore it too.

Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 18:6-7: 6 "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

We have got to be so careful about how we handle the Word of God. To lead someone astray unintentionally is a serious thing. To lead someone astray intentionally will lead to serious consequences. The person who does so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. They will still be there, but that is it.

- 2) Jesus tells us about one who will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven. His disciples were constantly jockeying for position. They wanted to be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus gives them one of the secrets to those He will give a place of honor to. The great person in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who practices and teaches the commands of God.

Jesus wants us to be doers of the Word. James wrote, "19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

(James 1:19-27)

Jesus wants us to know, understand and apply His law. Then He says something astonishing!

20 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.

No one was thought to be more righteous in the day and age of Jesus than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Jesus' words were not only revolutionary; they had the potential to put Jesus and His followers in hot water with the authorities. Listen to how Kent Hughes describes the scribes and Pharisees. "The scribes and Pharisees made obedience to God's Law the master passion of their lives. They calculated that the Law contained 428 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they tried to keep them *all*. How could anyone surpass that? And how could such righteousness be a condition of the kingdom? Jesus seemed to be saying, 'Don't think I have come to make things easier by reducing the demands of the Law. Far from it! In fact, if your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never make it!'

What a dilemma! What is the solution? Part of the answer that the Pharisees' righteousness was not so (to use Daley's word) great. It was merely external. It focused on the ceremonial. Its man-made rules actually were unconscious attempts to reduce the demands of the Law and make it manageable. Those rules insulated them from the Law's piercing heart demands. These men were also self-satisfied. A Pharisee could stand on a corner, look at a publican, and say, 'I thank God I am not like that man.' Jesus was demanding a deeper obedience. The Pharisees saw obedience quantitatively (obedience to a myriad of little laws), but Jesus saw it qualitatively. The righteousness that Christ demands is supremely radical. It is immeasurably higher than the rabbis' concept of righteousness. Jesus closes this whole section by saying, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (v. 48).

Christ's intransigence, his hard unbending words, were actually full of grace. When he said, 'For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven,' he was speaking as kindly as he ever spoke, for he was explaining in the most dramatic terms the impossibility of salvation apart from grace."⁵

It is the Spirit of God in you that makes it possible to live a life of radical righteousness. To the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul spoke of this mystery. Listen to Romans 8:1-4:

1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, 4 in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

You and I apart from God are far from righteous. We've all been guilty of lying. We've all been guilty of lust. We've all been guilty of placing something or someone ahead of God in our lives. Ray Comfort, of Way of the Master Ministries has a unique way of sharing Christ with others by taking a look at the radical righteousness required by God and comparing it with our righteousness. He will ask a complete stranger, "Do you consider yourself to be a good person?" And, the person will generally answer, "Yes." He'll then ask, "May I ask you a few questions to see if it's true?" And they'll say sure. "Have you ever told a lie?" "Yes." "What does that make you?" "A human . . . a person . . ." "That makes you a liar." "Have you ever stolen something?" "Yes." "What does that make you?" "A thief." "Have you ever taken God's name in vain?" "Yes." "What does that make you?" "I don't know." "The Bible says that makes you a blasphemer." "Have you ever lusted after a woman in your heart?" "Yes" "Jesus said that if you even look at a woman with lust in your heart you are an adulterer." "What will you say to God when He says why should I let a lying, thieving, blaspheming adulterer into heaven?"

And, what can we say? Is that a righteousness that exceeds that of even the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law? I've told you before, and I'll tell you again, you hired a lying, thieving, blaspheming adulterer as your Senior Pastor. I've been guilty of all of those things. It is only because of God's grace that I can meet God's demands of a radically righteous life. How serious are you and I about keeping God's law? Our lives are only righteous because of the work of Christ in us. In a few minutes we are going to sing the song, "In Christ Alone." I love the lyrics of the song which rightly proclaim that it is the power of Christ in us that allows us to stand before a Holy God. God is so serious about forgiving us from our sin that He sent His one and only Son as to bridge the gap between us and God that was created by sin. Let's not cheapen that grace by scoffing at God's commands.

Did you know the majority of Christians can't name the Ten Commandments?

If we are followers of Jesus, these commandments matter. As we close today, I want to read the Ten Commandments, and I want you to take a personal inventory on how you are doing in following these commands. As we go through these write 1-10 in your sermon notes, and then rate yourself on a scale of 1-10, 1 being poor and 10 being great on how well you follow these commands.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Christian, if you have experienced God’s forgiveness, don’t take His grace for granted. Celebrate what He has done for you and recognize the radical obedience that He requires of you. If you’ve never trusted in Christ, do so today. Ask Him to be your Lord and Savior. I’m going close with a prayer. If you would like to receive Christ’s forgiveness, and the salvation that only He can offer, I’d invite you to pray this prayer in your heart as I pray it out loud. At the end of that prayer, I’m going to ask you to raise your hand if you have trusted Jesus as your Lord and Savior today.