

# THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

## Session 4 – “The Fulfillment of the Law” – Matthew 5:17-20

John Wesley once wrote: “I follow the Bible in all things, both great and small.” Do you agree with John Wesley? Why or why not? This passage is of great importance not only for its definition of Christian righteousness, but also for the light it sheds on the relation between the New Testament and the Old Testament, between the Gospel and the Law. It also emphasizes the supreme value of God’s Word.

**Verse 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.* (NIV)

1. Why might some people have thought that Jesus came to abolish the Law and the Prophets?
2. Quoting famous rabbis was very important in Jesus’ day. Teachers would make reference to the Talmud, the body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend. But Jesus spoke with his own authority: “Truly I say to you”. How is this different? John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, was an important “early Church father” of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote that Christ’s saying was not to repeal the former laws, but a drawing out and filling up of them.
3. What is the difference between abolishing and fulfilling? The second century heretic, Marcion, who claimed that Christians had no need of the Old Testament, rewrote the New Testament by eliminating its references to the Old Testament. Some of his followers changed verse 17 to read: “I have come not to fulfill the law and the prophets, but to abolish them” But there is no justification for this in the original Greek.
4. The Old Testament consists of doctrine, prophecy and ethical precepts. In what sense has Jesus fulfilled each of these? Christ fulfilled the doctrinal teaching of the Old Testament by bringing its partial revelation to completion by His person, His teaching and His work. Jesus fulfilled predictive prophecy because what was predicted about the Messiah came to pass in Him. And He fulfilled the ethical precepts of the Old Testament by obeying them and giving us their true interpretation. The first public teaching of Jesus was in the Synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah and then said, *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* (v. 21) One of the very important things from the Old Testament that Jesus fulfilled was the role of the high priest. This is what the writer of the book of Hebrews said: *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool, 14 because by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.* (Hebrews 10:11-14) **Verse 18.....** *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.* Older versions of this verse say “not one jot or tittle.” The Greek word for “jot” is actually “iota” – the smallest of Greek letters. The tittle is the serif on a Hebrew letter. (We have them on our letters, too.... look at the capital T. A tittle or serif is the little part that hangs down from “cross bar”.) In this verse itself, Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament which says in Isaiah 40:8, *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever;* and Proverbs 30:5a, *Every word of God proves true.*

5. In reading this passage, what would you say was the attitude of Jesus toward Old Testament Scripture? What does that tell us?

6. Are there parts of the Bible that you tend to skip over or neglect? Why? Jesus is stressing the importance

of the permanence of God's Word. The Apostles stressed the same thing. Peter did and James did, and especially Paul. Look at 2 Timothy 3:14-17....*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God's person may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* Let's note just two things for now. First, that Timothy is reminded that he had known and held sacred the Scriptures from infancy. Paul is obviously referring back to the first chapter of this letter (v. 5) where he said, *I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.* Timothy already knew this but Paul wanted to be very sure as this would be foundational for Timothy's ministry in Ephesus, just as it must be foundational for all Christian ministry today. Secondly, Paul gives us the reason for the importance and permanence of God's Word, namely that *All Scripture is God-breathed* (or inspired). The Holy Spirit of God is the ultimate source of Scripture. Or, as Peter puts it (2 Peter 1:20-21) *Above all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but they spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* At the coronation of Queen Elizabeth on June 2, 1953, she was presented with a Bible by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian!), which was inscribed with these words: "Our gracious Queen: to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God." Question 5 above essentially asks, "What did Jesus believe about the Bible?" Do we really know? Yes! He quoted the Old Testament (what was the Bible at His time) frequently. In response to the first temptation in the wilderness, Jesus said, *It is written: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."* (Matthew 4:4) Jesus' response to all three temptations begins with the words: *"It is written...."* It is a single word in Greek: "Gegraptai" which has the idea of being carved in stone! At the end of Jesus' life, we find Jesus again quoting Scripture from the Cross. (And it was, of course, on the cross that Jesus enacted the greatest fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial law.) Another memorable use of Scripture by Jesus was the evening of His resurrection when He led what must have been the most exciting Bible study of all time with two disciples who were on their way to Emmaus. When they expressed disappointment that Christ had been crucified, Jesus responded: *"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.* (Luke 24:25-27, emphasis added)

7. The most important question that comes out of all of this is: What do you believe about the Bible? If you had to explain it to someone else, what would you say? **Verse 19....** *Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* Jesus was living in a time when the teachers had discounted much of the Old Testament and replaced it with their own interpretations and additions. Do people do this today? Yes, they do. Some "pick and choose" what they want to believe or follow. Some pull verses out of context to make them say what they want. Some give Bible passages interpretations they were obviously not meant to have, often violating the cardinal rules of biblical interpretation. In our Bible studies together, I have mentioned the importance of the first two rules of accurate interpretation:

(1) Let Scripture interpret Scripture. That is, one part clarifying another.

(2) The part cannot contradict the whole, nor the whole the part. In other words, if you are interpreting one part of Scripture in a way that contradicts another part, it is wrong. We also cannot leave out parts because they are "inconvenient" for us. Remember what the Apostle Paul said to the Ephesian elders about his teaching as he took leave of them: *"I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will (or counsel) of God."* (Acts 20:27)

The “commandments” of which Jesus is speaking in verse 19 refers to the Old Testament commands, but He is about to clarify, and expand their meaning in the coming verses.

8. According to Jesus, what are the two responses we should have to the Law? How will our response to the Law determine our status in the kingdom? To put verse 19 in another way, personal obedience is not enough. Christians must also teach others about the commandments of God. These were the final words of Jesus in what is referred to as the “Great Commission”: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* (Matthew 28:19-20)

**Verse 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.*

9. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were zealous about observing the Law. How can our righteousness possibly surpass theirs? It is in kind, rather than degree. It is righteousness of the heart, rather than following ceremonial rules. The scribes and Pharisees attempted to make OT commands more manageable by describing in tortuous detail what it actually meant to obey particular laws. One of the most exacting enlargements of the law was concerning the observance of the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders dictated how far one could walk, what they could or could not carry, etc. As a result, they followed the letter of the law, but completely missed the spirit of the law. We will see that Jesus actually went the other way (“you have heard it said... but I say to you”).

10. Jesus states that only those who have this surpassing righteousness will enter the kingdom of heaven. How can this be harmonized with his statement about the poor in spirit (those who admit their spiritual bankruptcy) entering the kingdom (5:3)? Ultimately, the only way that we can have the kind of righteousness that Jesus demands is when we receive it from Him. The Apostle Paul talked about this “imputed righteousness” in 2 Corinthians 5:21.... *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* This also shows our salvation is not based on good works (see Ephesians 2:8-9) Some people claim that Jesus abolished the law for the Christian and that we are only responsible for obeying the “law of love,” perhaps even quoting Galatians 5:14: *The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”* Thus, some people assume that if our actions are motivated by love, then we can do whatever we wish – even those things that are contrary to the law.

11. Do you see any problems with this view? How would you respond to this view in light of Jesus’ words in this passage? Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees’ interpretation of the law; but he never disagreed with their acceptance of its authority.

12. How should we study and apply the Old Testament law today? As we conclude this study, let me remind you that our righteousness comes only through the grace of God through Jesus Christ. As we read in Titus 3:4-7.... *But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.* In one of the lesser-known verses of the hymn, “Rock of Ages”, Augustus Toplady put it this way: “Nothing in my hands I bring / Simply to Thy cross I cling; / Naked, come to thee for dress, / Helpless, look to Thee for grace; / Foul, I to the fountain fly; / wash me, Savior, or I die. / Rock of Ages, cleft for me; / Let me hide myself in Thee.

The Sermon on the Mount-4

"...our present sufferings are not worth comparing  
with the glory that will be revealed in us."

*Romans 8:18*

