

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Christ and the Law: A Greater Righteousness

Matthew 5:17–20

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is one of the most doctrinally important lessons in the whole study, and it deserves your most careful preparation. What is at stake is nothing less than the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New, and the nature of saving righteousness itself. Two opposite errors crouch at the door. One says Jesus abolished the Old Testament, treating it as a discarded mistake; the other so binds Christians to the Law of Moses that the cross loses its meaning. The text and the rest of the New Testament steer between them: Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets, bringing them to their intended goal, and through his death the Old Law is taken away and a new and better covenant established (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10). Christians today live under the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses, yet the moral will of God revealed throughout Scripture remains binding because Christ himself commands it.

The second great issue is the nature of the greater righteousness. Jesus is not calling for more rules kept more rigorously; he is calling for a righteousness of a different order, one that reaches the heart. This is the seam where two false gospels can slip in, and you must close it carefully. On one side is the error of mere external law-keeping, the very Pharisaism Jesus condemns, which polishes the outside while the heart stays untouched. On the other side is the error of salvation by faith only, a supposed righteousness that never produces real obedience. The gospel rejects both. The righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees is received as God's gift through an obedient, living faith, and it then works itself out in heart-deep obedience to Christ.

So aim, with your class, at both clarity and formation. Give them a confident grasp of why we are not under the Law of Moses and yet are more, not less, accountable to God in Christ. And press them past the comfortable religion of the checklist into the searching question this passage asks of every honest soul: is my righteousness merely on the surface, or has Christ reached the heart? Keep the tone one of marveling at grace. The greater righteousness is not a heavier burden we shoulder but a deeper life Christ gives, and then calls us to live out.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus says, "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (v. 17). What does it mean that Christ fulfills the Law and the Prophets rather than abolishing them, and how does this protect us from thinking the Old Testament was a mistake God simply scrapped?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the word “fulfill,” because the whole passage turns on it. To fulfill is to bring to completion, to accomplish what something was always aiming at. The Law and the Prophets were not an end in themselves; they were pointing forward, full of promises, types, and shadows that reached toward a coming reality. Jesus is saying that he is that reality. He does not erase the Scriptures; he brings them to their goal.

This protects us from a serious error that has tempted the church since its earliest days, the idea that the Old Testament was a blunder God later abandoned. Not so. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New, and every page of the older Scriptures was preparing the way for Christ. Jesus honors the Law and the Prophets as the very word of God; he simply reveals that they were always about him (Luke 24:27, 44).

Help students see the difference between abolishing and fulfilling with an everyday picture. A scaffold is not abolished when the building is finished; it has fulfilled its purpose and is taken down precisely because the thing it pointed toward has come. The sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood, all of these find their meaning and completion in Christ. They are not insulted by being fulfilled; they are honored by it.

This sets up everything that follows in the lesson. Because Jesus fulfills rather than abolishes, we will be able to say two things at once that seem to pull against each other: God’s word stands forever, and yet the Law of Moses as a covenant has been brought to completion and taken away in Christ. Holding the word in highest honor and recognizing the change of covenant are not in conflict; both flow from the truth that Christ fulfills the Scriptures.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Fulfill” as bringing to completion, not discarding (Luke 24:44)
- The unity of the Old and New Testaments under one God and one redemptive plan
- The Old Testament as promise and shadow pointing forward to Christ
- Guarding against the error that God abandoned or repudiated the Old Testament
- Honoring Scripture as God’s word while recognizing Christ as its goal

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between abolishing something and fulfilling it?
- How does seeing Christ as the goal of the Old Testament change the way you read it?
- Why is it important to insist the Old Testament was not a mistake God scrapped?

Question 2

Student Question:

Many of us carry a quiet assumption that as long as we keep the obvious rules we are fine with God. Where in your life have you been measuring yourself by a checklist of outward behaviors rather than by the condition of your heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question exposes the checklist instinct that lives in almost every religious heart. We like measurable, outward standards because they let us feel secure: attended worship, did not curse, gave some money, therefore fine with God. The Pharisees perfected this instinct, and Jesus is about to dismantle it. The question invites students to find where they have done the same.

Help the class see why the checklist is so seductive. It is manageable, it is comparable (we can rank ourselves against others), and it leaves the heart untouched. We can keep an external rule while harboring contempt, lust, greed, or pride underneath, and the checklist will never know. That is precisely the religion Jesus says is not enough.

Guide them toward one honest example, not general confession. Where specifically have they been satisfied with outward compliance, the appearance of faithfulness, while something underneath, an attitude, a hidden habit, a relationship, stays unaddressed? The goal is not to despair over the checklist but to let Christ move past it into the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seduction of measurable, outward religion that leaves the heart untouched
- Self-comparison and ranking as substitutes for true righteousness
- Outward compliance coexisting with inward sin
- The difference between managing a reputation and submitting a heart

Discussion Prompts

- What “checklist” do you quietly use to reassure yourself that you are fine with God?
- What can hide underneath a perfectly kept outward rule?
- Where is God asking to move past your behavior into your heart?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus declares that not “an iota, not a dot” will pass from the Law until “all is accomplished” (v. 18). How does this statement uphold the full authority and trustworthiness of God’s word, even as it points toward the Law being brought to completion in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus could not have affirmed the authority of God’s word more strongly. Not the smallest letter, not the tiniest stroke of a pen, will pass away “until all is accomplished.” This is a ringing endorsement of the complete trustworthiness and authority of Scripture down to its finest details. Whatever we say about the change of covenants, we must never let it weaken our confidence in the word of God.

Hold the two halves of the verse together. On one hand, the permanence: God's word does not fail or fall to the ground. On the other hand, the goal: "until all is accomplished." The Law remains in full force until it reaches its appointed completion in Christ. The verse itself contains the seed of the truth that the Law was always pointing toward a fulfillment, an accomplishing, that Christ would bring.

Apply this to how we regard the whole of Scripture, including the New Testament that Christ would give through his apostles. If Jesus held the Law and the Prophets in such honor, how much more should we tremble at and trust the completed word of God now in our hands. The complete New Testament is our authority today (2 Timothy 3:16–17), and it deserves the same reverence Jesus shows the Scriptures here.

Guard against a subtle modern error, the picking and choosing that treats Scripture as a menu. Jesus' words rebuke any approach that keeps the parts we like and quietly sets aside the parts we do not. The authority of the word is not ours to negotiate; it is ours to receive and obey.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The full authority and trustworthiness of God's word, down to its smallest details
- The permanence of Scripture held together with its goal of being accomplished in Christ
- The complete New Testament as our authority today (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- Reverence for Scripture as the pattern for the church
- The error of treating the Bible as a menu to pick and choose from

Discussion Prompts

- What does it say about God that not the smallest stroke of his word will fail?
- How should Jesus' reverence for Scripture shape our own?
- Where are you tempted to treat the Bible as optional or negotiable?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think about how you actually treat the Scriptures day to day. Do you handle God's word as something fully authoritative over your life, or as a collection of suggestions you weigh against your own preferences? What would change if you trusted every "iota and dot" of it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves the doctrine of Scripture's authority into daily practice. It is easy to affirm that the Bible is God's authoritative word and then live as though it were advice to be weighed against our preferences. The question asks students to notice the gap between their stated belief and their actual habits.

Help them be concrete about what trusting every “iota and dot” would change. Would it change how they make decisions, how they handle money, how they speak about others, what they do when Scripture contradicts their feelings or their culture? Authority that never costs us anything is not authority at all.

Aim for one area of genuine submission. Where is there a clear teaching of God’s word that they have been holding at arm’s length because obeying it would be inconvenient or unpopular? The invitation is not to a heavier legalism but to the freedom of actually trusting that God’s word is good and worth obeying.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between affirming Scripture’s authority and living under it
- Submission to God’s word even when it conflicts with feelings or culture
- Concrete obedience as the test of whether we truly trust Scripture
- The goodness of God’s commands as motivation for trust

Discussion Prompts

- Do you treat the Bible as authoritative or as advice you weigh against your preferences?
- What would change this week if you trusted every word of it?
- Where is there a clear teaching you have been holding at arm’s length?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus warns against relaxing “one of the least of these commandments” and teaching others to do the same (v. 19). At the same time, the New Testament teaches that the Old Law was fulfilled and taken away at the cross (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10). How do we hold these together, honoring the abiding authority of God’s commands while understanding that Christians now live under the New Covenant in Christ rather than the Law of Moses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the most demanding question of the lesson, and you should give it your fullest attention. The tension is real: Jesus warns against relaxing the least commandment, yet the New Testament plainly teaches that the Law of Moses was fulfilled and taken away at the cross. The resolution lies in the word “fulfill” and in the flow of redemptive history. During Jesus’ earthly ministry, before the cross, the Law of Moses was still in force, and to teach people to break it was to lead them astray. But Jesus was even then pointing toward the accomplishing of all things in his death and resurrection.

Teach the change of covenant clearly and from Scripture. When Christ died, he canceled “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands,” nailing it to the cross, and the

festivals, food laws, and Sabbaths that were “a shadow of the things to come” found their substance in him (Colossians 2:14–17). Hebrews says that in speaking of a new covenant, God “makes the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13), and that Christ “does away with the first in order to establish the second” (Hebrews 10:9). We are no longer under the Law of Moses as our covenant.

Now resolve the apparent contradiction precisely. Christians are not lawless. We have passed from the Law of Moses to the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21). The commandments that bind us now are the commands of Christ and his apostles in the New Covenant. Much of God’s moral will carries straight across, not because Moses commanded it, but because it expresses God’s unchanging character and is reaffirmed by Christ. So we honor the abiding authority of God’s commands while recognizing that the covenant under which we live has changed.

Help students avoid two ditches. The first is antinomianism, the idea that because we are not under Moses we are under no law at all and may live as we please; the New Testament is full of commands and warns that the disobedient will not inherit the kingdom. The second is a return to the Old Law, binding circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, or the festivals on Christians, which Paul treats as a falling from grace (Galatians 5:1–4). The faithful path is full submission to Christ under the New Covenant.

Bring it to a confident summary your class can carry home. We are not under the Law of Moses; that covenant was fulfilled and taken away at the cross. But we are under Christ, and his yoke binds us to a righteousness deeper than Moses ever required. The change of covenant does not lower the standard; in Christ it goes higher, all the way to the heart, which is exactly where the next verses are headed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Law of Moses still in force during Jesus’ pre-cross ministry, fulfilled and removed at the cross (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10)
- The new and better covenant that makes the first obsolete (Hebrews 8:13; 10:9)
- Christians under the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21)
- God’s moral will carried forward by Christ’s authority, not by the Mosaic covenant
- Avoiding both lawlessness and a return to the Old Law (Galatians 5:1–4)

Discussion Prompts

- How can we say the Law was fulfilled and taken away, yet still be fully accountable to God’s commands?
- What is the difference between being under the Law of Moses and being under the law of Christ?
- Why is binding the Old Law on Christians as dangerous as throwing off all law?

Question 6

Student Question:

Be honest about whether there are commands of Christ you have quietly decided are optional or outdated. Which one have you been “relaxing,” and what would wholehearted obedience look like there instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Jesus’ warning about relaxing commandments into the student’s own obedience. Most of us have a few commands of Christ we have quietly filed under “optional,” usually the ones that are costly, countercultural, or simply inconvenient. The question asks students to find theirs.

Help them think across the range: commands about speech, forgiveness, sexual purity, generosity, gathering with the saints, loving enemies, the priority of the kingdom. We rarely deny these outright; we simply soften them, make exceptions for ourselves, or treat them as ideals rather than commands. That softening is exactly what Jesus warns against.

Aim for one honest naming and one step toward wholehearted obedience. The point is not to manufacture guilt but to recover the seriousness and the joy of taking Christ at his word. Encourage students to pick the command they have been relaxing and to ask what glad, full obedience would look like there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to treat costly commands of Christ as optional
- Softening, excepting, or idealizing commands rather than obeying them
- Wholehearted obedience as the proper response to Christ’s authority
- The joy, not just the duty, of taking Christ at his word

Discussion Prompts

- Which command of Christ have you quietly treated as optional?
- Why is that particular one easy for you to relax?
- What would glad, full obedience look like there this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus says our righteousness must “exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees” (v. 20). The Pharisees were experts at external compliance. In what specific ways does the righteousness Jesus calls for go beyond external compliance, and where does it come from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now Jesus names the goal: a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. The crucial point is that he is not asking for more of the same. The Pharisees were the champions of external righteousness; you could not out-Pharisee a Pharisee at rule-keeping. Jesus calls for a righteousness of a different kind, one that goes deeper than behavior into the heart, motives, and desires.

Show how this anticipates the rest of the chapter. Jesus will say it is not enough to avoid murder; the heart must be free of murderous anger. It is not enough to avoid adultery; the heart must be pure. The greater righteousness is not a longer list of external rules but a transformation of the inner person, so that obedience flows from a changed heart rather than being painted on the surface.

Address the obvious question your class will feel: where could such a righteousness possibly come from? Not from us. Pharisaism is what human effort produces at its religious best, and Jesus says it is not enough. The greater righteousness must be given. It is the work of God, who under the new covenant writes his law on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33), and produces in his people, by his Spirit and his word, a righteousness the Law could never produce from the outside (Romans 8:3–4).

Keep the balance the gospel keeps. This inward righteousness is genuinely received as a gift, but it is not therefore passive or merely internal. It works itself out in real obedience, the very obedience the rest of the Sermon describes. The heart God changes is a heart that then does the will of God. Internal transformation and external obedience are not rivals; the first produces the second.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The greater righteousness as different in kind, not just degree, from Pharisaic rule-keeping
- Righteousness that reaches the heart, motives, and desires (anticipating 5:21–48)
- The impossibility of producing this righteousness by human effort
- God writing his law on the heart under the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33; Romans 8:3–4)
- Inward transformation producing, not replacing, outward obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Why is more rule-keeping not the answer to Jesus' call for greater righteousness?
- Where must a righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees come from?
- How does a changed heart show itself in changed behavior?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where have you been more concerned with how your faith appears to others than with what God sees when he looks at your heart? Name one area where you have polished the outside while neglecting the inside.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the searchlight on the gap between appearance and reality in the student's own faith. Almost all of us care, more than we would like to admit, about how our faith looks to others. The question asks where that concern has outrun our concern for what God actually sees.

Help students locate the gap concretely. Perhaps they are known as patient but seethe inwardly; known as generous but resent it; known as devout but pray little in private. The aim is not to shame but to invite the relief of honesty before a God who already sees the inside and loves us still.

Move toward one act of inward attention. Where have they polished the outside while neglecting the inside, and what would it look like to tend the inside this week, in private, where only God sees? Remind them that the God who sees the secret heart is also the God who delights to cleanse and change it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to manage reputation over reality before God
- Naming specific gaps between public image and private heart
- The relief of honesty before a God who already sees the inside
- Tending the inner life in secret, where only God sees

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you more concerned with how your faith looks than with what God sees?
- What is one gap between your reputation and your real heart?
- How could you tend the inside this week, in private?

Question 9

Student Question:

This is the hinge of the whole Sermon: Jesus says that without a greater righteousness, one will “never enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 20). Yet he is not teaching salvation by flawless law-keeping, nor by mere faith with no obedience. How does the gospel give us a righteousness we could never produce on our own, and how does that gift then work itself out in a real, obedient, heart-deep life? Connect this to how a person actually comes into a right relationship with God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax of the lesson, and it must be handled with great care, because two false gospels press in from opposite sides. Jesus says that without a righteousness exceeding the Pharisees no one will enter the kingdom. Yet the rest of the New Testament makes plain that no one earns this righteousness by flawless law-keeping, for all have sinned (Romans 3:23). So the righteousness that admits us to the kingdom cannot be one we manufacture; it must be one God gives.

Reject the first error plainly: salvation by sinless law-keeping. If entrance depended on never breaking a command, the kingdom would be empty, for the Pharisees themselves, the best external performers, fell short. The greater righteousness is not a higher score on the same test. It is the righteousness God grants to those who come to him on his terms, through Christ, whose perfect obedience and atoning death secure what our obedience never could.

Reject the opposite error just as plainly: salvation by faith only, a supposed righteousness that produces no obedience. Jesus is not describing a merely declared righteousness that leaves the life unchanged. The very next verses, and the whole Sermon, insist that the righteousness of the kingdom is lived, not merely claimed. A faith that never obeys is not the faith that saves (James 2:17–24). The gospel never pits God's gift against our obedience; the gift produces the obedience.

Now teach how a person actually comes into this right relationship with God, because your class will rightly ask. The New Testament answer is a living, obedient faith: hearing the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ, believing in him as Lord and Christ, repenting of sin, confessing him, and being baptized into him for the forgiveness of sins, after which we are added to his people and walk in newness of life (Acts 2:36–41; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). This is not earning righteousness; it is receiving God's gift in the way God appointed, by a faith that obeys.

Bring the two truths together so your class lands in the right place. The righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees is God's gift, received through an obedient faith, and then lived out as a real, heart-deep righteousness by the power of God at work in us. We could never produce it; God supplies it. And the same grace that supplies it teaches us to live it (Titus 2:11–12). Marvel at this with your class: the standard Jesus sets is impossibly high, and the gospel is the good news that God himself meets it in us and then forms it through us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The impossibility of entering the kingdom by sinless law-keeping (Romans 3:23)
- Righteousness as God's gift in Christ, received not earned
- Rejecting salvation by faith only, since saving faith obeys (James 2:17–24)
- Coming into right relationship with God through a living, obedient faith: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:36–41; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- Grace that both gives the righteousness and trains us to live it (Titus 2:11–12)

Discussion Prompts

- Why can no one enter the kingdom by simply keeping rules well enough?
- How does the gospel give us a righteousness we could never produce, without making obedience optional?
- How does a person actually come into right relationship with God according to the New Testament?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has confronted the difference between surface religion and a righteousness that reaches the heart. Where is he exposing surface religion in you, and what is one specific way you sense him inviting you into a deeper, more honest obedience this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone asks students to let this passage expose surface religion in their own lives and to name one step into deeper, more honest obedience. After a doctrinally heavy lesson, this question grounds the truth in a single, livable response.

Help them choose realistically and inwardly. The deeper righteousness Jesus describes is not won by gritting our teeth and trying harder at external rules; it grows as we bring our actual hearts to God. So the best step is often something quiet: an honest prayer about a hidden attitude, a confessed double-mindedness, a willingness to let God reach a place we have kept at the surface.

Close on grace and wonder. The greater righteousness is not a crushing new standard but a deeper life Christ gives and forms in those who belong to him. Send your students home not despairing at how high the bar is, but trusting the One who both sets the bar and supplies the righteousness, and who is patiently forming his own life in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Letting the passage expose surface religion personally
- Pursuing inward, heart-deep change rather than mere external effort
- Bringing the actual heart to God as the path to deeper obedience
- Resting in Christ as the one who supplies and forms the righteousness he requires

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Jesus exposing surface religion in you through this passage?
- What is one honest step into deeper obedience this week?
- How does it help to know Christ both sets the standard and supplies the righteousness?