

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 3: Christ and the Law: A Greater Righteousness -- Matthew 5:17-20

Imagine the unease rippling through the crowd. Here is a young teacher from Nazareth saying things no one has ever said, blessing the people the world overlooks, calling ordinary folks the light of the world. To some listening, he must have sounded dangerous, like a man come to tear down everything sacred. Was he setting aside Moses? Was he loosening the commandments? Was he about to declare that the Scriptures so carefully copied and treasured for centuries no longer mattered? You can almost feel the question hanging in the air.

Jesus answers it head-on. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets," he says. "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Far from tearing down the Scriptures, he has come to bring them to their intended goal. Every promise, every shadow, every pointer in the Law and the Prophets had been reaching forward toward someone, and now that someone was sitting on the hillside in front of them. He is not the enemy of the Scriptures; he is their fulfillment, the One they were always about.

Then he says something that must have stunned them. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The scribes and Pharisees were the gold standard of religion, the people who tithed their spices and counted their steps on the Sabbath. And Jesus says the righteousness of the kingdom must go beyond even theirs. Not more rules stacked higher, but a righteousness of a different kind altogether, one that reaches past the hands and the lips all the way down into the heart.

This is the doorway into everything that follows. In the rest of this chapter Jesus will take commandment after commandment and drive it deeper than anyone imagined, from murder to anger, from adultery to lust. Before he does, he plants this flag: he has come to fulfill the Scriptures, not discard them, and to give his people a righteousness that is real and heart-deep, not a polished performance for the eyes of others. The question for us is the same one the crowd faced that day. Will we settle for a religion of the surface, or will we let the King give us the deeper righteousness only he can produce?

Group Discussion: Jesus insists he came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them, and then calls for a righteousness that exceeds even that of the most fastidious religious people of his day. Why is it so tempting to settle for an outward, rule-keeping religion, and what does Jesus seem to mean by a righteousness that goes deeper than that?

Personal Reflection: Search your own heart honestly. Where are you most tempted to be satisfied with looking righteous, keeping the outward forms while something underneath stays untouched, and what would it mean to let Christ reach that deeper place?

Read Matthew 5:17–20

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: Colossians 2:13–17, the record of debt nailed to the cross and the shadows fulfilled in Christ; Hebrews 8:6–13, the new and better covenant that makes the first obsolete; Romans 8:3–4, what the Law could not do, God did in Christ so that its righteous requirement might be fulfilled in us; Jeremiah 31:31–34, the promise of a new covenant with God's law written on the heart; Matthew 23:23–28, Jesus' rebuke of a righteousness that cleans the outside of the cup while the inside stays full of greed.