

Kingdom Righteousness

“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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-20 ESV)

In the first 16 verses Jesus focuses on the what kind of character is blessed and valued and honored in the kingdom of God, and the kingdom influence that believers are to have in this world. Beginning in verse 17 Jesus begins to explain how his teaching of the kingdom relates to the law of Moses, a subject which was a growing concern with the religious leaders.

To the religious Jew, the law of Moses wasn't just a part of their faith, it was the centerpiece and the anchor of their faith. The orthodoxy of every teacher was measured by their adherence to the law of Moses. In the same way that today a Christian measures the orthodoxy of a church by its beliefs about the gospel, what it teaches about salvation and Jesus and grace, a faithful Jew would measure a teacher's orthodoxy by its adherence to the Law. To abandon the law of Moses was to be a heretic of the worst kind, a teacher not worthy of being called a Jew, deserving to be stoned to death.

Even at this early point in Jesus' ministry, the religious leaders are beginning to have some serious concerns about where Jesus stands with the law of Moses. They have already seen him violate the Sabbath (according to their interpretation of it) by healing a man's withered hand and allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath. Now, as they have been listening to this sermon, they've heard Jesus talking being poor in spirit and mourning and being meek and merciful and so on, and he has connected these character qualities with entering the kingdom of God but there hasn't been anything said about the law - in their minds the most essential metric for anyone to be qualified to enter God's kingdom! The religious leaders already don't like Jesus, and no doubt at this point they are beginning to scrutinize his teaching to determine where exactly he stands with the Law of Moses.

Let me pause here and say that I think there can be a lot of confusion in the church about where Jesus stands with the law, and how we as Christians are supposed to relate to the law. John Newton, the converted slave trader and author of the hymn Amazing Grace, wrote in one of his letters, *Ignorance of the nature and design of the law is at the bottom of most of our religious mistakes.*¹

On the one extreme are Christians who use a whole new set of laws to rope off who is a Christian and who isn't. Christians don't listen to this, they don't wear that, they don't smoke, chew, or go with girls who do. They might give lip service that we can only be saved by grace, but what seems important to them is their list of do's and don'ts and that spirit can permeate entire churches. It's called legalism - earning God's favor by what we do.

But on the other hand there are some who think that Jesus came to get rid of that pesky law so that we can do whatever we want and still be good with God. There was a guy in the 2nd century named Marcion

¹ *The Letters of John Newton, pg. 40*

who believed that there were two Gods, the God of Law revealed in the OT, and the God of Love, the Supreme God, who was revealed in Christ. He ripped out every reference to the OT in the gospels and epistles and later his disciples rewrote Matt 5:17 to have Jesus saying that he came not to fulfill the law, but to abolish it. That's extreme, of course, but there are Christians who functionally act as if Jesus came to do away with the law because they believe grace means that as long as we say we believe in Jesus, we can do whatever we want. It's called licentiousness: grace gives us a license to sin without consequence.

How Jesus relates to the law of Moses and how we as Christians are to relate to the law can be a huge area of confusion, so let's look at what Jesus says about the law, and we can break it down in this passage into two segments: *how Jesus relates to the law*, and *how we are to relate to the law*.

1. How Jesus relates to the law (vv. 17-18)

If you read this quickly you might get the idea that Jesus is affirming the importance of the law, and that is true, but the way he affirms the law, rather than removing controversy, only created a greater controversy. While Jesus does affirm the Law, he does it with an authority that only God could have.

At this time it was the practice of Jewish rabbis to claim no authority of their own. The only way they could teach with authority was by importing it into their teaching either by quoting the scriptures or by quoting some venerated, dead rabbi's teaching. They claimed no authority of their own, they needed to derive their authority from other sources.

But Jesus speaks with an authority that is beyond the authority any ordinary human being could claim, and it's self-generated, meaning Jesus isn't asking anyone if it's ok if he speaks with this level of authority and he isn't deriving this authority from any other source. It comes from and resides in his Person. He begins with authority in the negative:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets...(vs. 17)

The Law was given to the Jews by God and teachers could adhere to the Law or they could abandon the Law, but they couldn't abolish the law. By way of analogy, think about a convention of weatherman all doing what weathermen do: predicting some sunny days and some cloudy days, and you might have some disagreement between them - some predicting it's going to be partly sunny tomorrow, and others predicting it's going to be partly cloudy (I've never understood what the difference is between partly cloudy and partly sunny. Aren't they kind of the same thing?). But then someone stands up who rather than fitting in by trying to predict the weather, acts like he's controlling the weather, and just as you're trying to process where he gets off speaking with such authority, he exclaims, "I haven't come to extinguish the sun." What? Who does this guy think he is? No man could abolish the commands that came directly from the hand of God. Who does Jesus think he is?

But Jesus goes on to say, "I didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them." Again, it's hard for us to comprehend how massive this claim is. Jesus is saying that everything that the OT spoke of, everything it pointed to, everything it foreshadowed, is fulfilled in him. Do you ever wonder why we don't continue to observe the ceremonial laws in the OT? I remember when I was a new Christian I read about offering sacrifices to God and I thought, "wow, am I supposed to do that?" The ceremonial laws - such as sacrificing bulls and goats and lambs and doves to God - were all pointing to Christ and found

their complete fulfillment in him. We don't kill a lamb every Passover anymore, not because Jesus abolished the Passover Lamb, but because he fulfilled it. He was the Perfect and True Passover Lamb, dying on the cross to pay for our sins once and for all. But the ceremonial laws were abolished by Jesus, they were fulfilled in him.

But what about the moral laws - don't steal, don't covet, don't break the Sabbath, honor your father and mother, don't commit adultery - the laws that teach us how God wants us to live, the laws that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai, how does Jesus relate to them? Jesus deliberately chose a small mountain as the setting for the sermon on the mount because he was the new Lawgiver, greater than Moses, who was transmitting the law of the kingdom to God's people. I mentioned in the first message that this new law of the kingdom didn't abolish the Law of Moses, it amplified it, but I don't think that's quite accurate. I think it's more accurate to say that Jesus wasn't amplifying the Law, he was clarifying what God meant in the Law all along. And so, as in following verses Jesus says, "you have heard it said...you shall not murder...but I say to you" Jesus isn't reinterpreting the Law, he is correctly interpreting the law as God meant for it to be obeyed, as God meant for it to relate to our hearts. We'll talk more about that in a minute.

Jesus goes on to say that the heavens and the earth will pass away before one single iota or dot (crossing of a "t" or dotting of an "i") is erased from the Law. It would actually be easier to extinguish the sun than it would be to destroy the word of God.

Jesus could speak with such authority because he has such authority. Jesus relates to the Law as only God could relate to the Law. Jesus is the Son of God, the Creator of the heavens and earth, the Creator of mankind, the author of the Law and the Prophets and the One who met Moses on the mountain and gave him the Law. These religious leaders who claimed to love the law so passionately were standing face to face with the author of the law, and they hated him. But that's the problem. While they were concerned that Jesus was doing damage to the law, they couldn't see that, while they claimed to love and obey the law, they were actually misinterpreting it so badly and so corruptly that they were, in effect, abolishing the true meaning of the law. Jesus is setting right what they had so messed up with their corrupt religious system. Jesus will go on to describe what kingdom righteousness looks like and it all has to do with how we as his disciples relate to the law.

2. How Jesus' disciples are to relate to the law

Because God's Law will not be abolished or will pass away until every single letter is accomplished, Jesus warns against relaxing the Law or teaching others to do the same. If legalism is a problem in the church, lawlessness is equally a problem. God didn't give the law to mess up our lives and make us miserable. He gave the law as the way to live a blessed and happy life. The law of God is the way He intended for us to live, it's the guardrails that keep us from running our lives off the side of the road. The message of the kingdom isn't that God doesn't care about us keeping the law or being righteous anymore. How are Christians to relate to the law? Jesus tells us in verse 20: *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus just set the bar of righteousness up incredibly high. The men's high jump gold medalist at Rio was Derek Drouin, who jumped 2.38 meters or a little higher than 7'9". This is like Jesus putting the bar at 8' and saying, whoever doesn't jump higher than Derek Drouin will never enter the kingdom of heaven. This

must have blown the disciple's minds. No one was considered more righteous than the Pharisees and scribes. They had a list of 248 regulations (do's) and 365 prohibitions (don'ts) that needed to be carefully obeyed for someone to be righteous. That's 613 do's and don'ts altogether. Now they'd be the first to admit that they didn't keep them all perfectly, but they sure worked hard at it. So maybe they succeed at keeping 585 of them, and blow it with 28 of them. Is Jesus saying, you'd better keep at least 595 of them, or 605? Or all 613? Or are there another 200 rules they didn't even come up with? Is Jesus measuring us by that metric at all? He says we need to jump higher, but he doesn't say how much higher. Is 8' high enough? Or is it 10'? or 20'?

Is Jesus trying to demoralize us, to cause us to despair of ever being righteous enough to enter heaven? In one sense, yes, and in another sense, no. Jesus isn't pointing at heaven's standard of righteousness and saying "you'd better reach that standard!" He is pointing at heaven's standard of righteousness and saying, "I came to ensure that you reach that standard, I came to enable your righteousness to exceed the Pharisee's inadequate level of righteousness." So, yes we despair of ever being righteous enough in our own strength, but we don't despair because Jesus makes us righteous enough to enter heaven. And he does this in two distinct ways.

- 1) Through faith in Christ we have been made perfectly righteous in God's sight. The Apostle Paul, at one time a Pharisee and member in good standing of the Sanhedrin, abandoned the righteousness he once banked on for the better righteousness provided through Christ: *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...* Phil. 3:8-9.

The Pharisee's righteousness was their worst enemy, because it made them feel confident to reject the righteousness that God was making available through the atoning death of His Son. God gives us the perfect righteousness of His Son as a gift when we believe in Jesus. In God's sight we are forgiven and cleansed of all our sin and perfectly righteous.

- 2) Jesus doesn't stop there. He also works in our lives to help us grow in living a righteous life. But it's very important for us to know that Jesus doesn't expect us to live a righteous life in our own strength either. He gave us the Holy Spirit to work true righteousness in our hearts, where it counts. The problem is that for all their efforts at being righteous, the Pharisees weren't actually righteous at all. Not as God defines it. They hadn't set the bar at 7'9", in effect they had set the bar incredibly low but marked it at 7'9". They fudged the numbers, the bar they set wasn't really righteous because their hearts were filled with evil and hypocrisy and sin. They simply wanted to look like they were righteous, they wanted to stand on the podium and get the gold medal, but they didn't really concern themselves with truly being righteous, not on the inside where it counts. Their righteousness wasn't real. Let me demonstrate: in one pocket I have a \$5 bill. In the other I have a \$500 bill. Which would you rather have? Would it make a difference if you knew the \$500 bill was Monopoly money? The denomination of the bill is much higher, but the value of the bill is worthless because it's not real.

The Holy Spirit works in our hearts, convicting us of sin (but really just a little at a time - if He were to convict us of all our sin at once, we'd be devastated), and then He works on us in a patient, loving way to help us repent of that sin and be free from it, so that we begin to live righteously. Not perfectly, not completely, always in process, but it has this over the Pharisee's righteousness: it's real.

Jesus didn't hang with religious people - most of their crowd were fakers and hypocrites, just trying to look all put together. Jesus hung out with liars and cheats and prostitutes and thieves, but being near him began to work on their hearts to change them on the inside. And that's what he continues to do in our lives through the Person of the Holy Spirit.

If you are trusting in Christ, God has made you righteous in His sight, not by what you do, but by what Christ did on the cross. Your righteousness far exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees. And if you are trusting in Christ, the Holy Spirit is working in your heart and life to help you grow in righteousness. Convicting you of this sin, helping you grow in that righteous response. Jesus will take us through some specifics but God wants you to trust Him for His work in your life, and cooperate with the Spirit to put off sin and put on holiness. Jesus isn't pointing at the high bar and saying "do better" - he's a personal trainer working with you and in you to help you live life the way God intended it to be lived. Righteousness and the law weren't given to mess up our lives or rob us of happiness, but to guide us in the way of joy and happiness.

You are righteous in Christ. And you are being made righteous in Christ. And he is faithfully working every step of the way.