

Surpassing Righteousness

Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 12

HBC 9/27/20

Matthew 5:17-20

The **Pharisees** were the common man's definition of spirituality and righteousness in the culture in which Jesus lived. The professional or clergy arm of the Pharisees was the group known as **the scribes**. Their endless making and keeping of rules and regulations made a **great show** of religious fervor. But all through His ministry, it was these people who opposed Jesus at every turn. Their hypocrisy reached its zenith with their plot to murder the Son of God.

Today we deal with a pivotal passage. It's a turning point in the Sermon on the Mount because it's the end of the introduction and the introduction to the next major section. It's pivotal because it tells us Jesus' view of the Scriptures. Jesus did not come to reform the religion of His day. Instead, He came to bring complete **transformation** to the hearts of everyone who would embrace the grace of God.

Our passage talks about **surpassing righteousness** necessary for salvation. It surpasses anything any religious system of man produces. It is rooted in the Scriptures.

I. **Jesus and the Law** (17-18)

Matthew 5:17: *Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.*

Abolish is a word usually translated *destroy* or *overthrow*. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets forth the righteousness of His kingdom. From the beginning He deals with the outrageous charge of His enemies that He proclaimed novel new teachings. Rather than being contrary to the Old Testament, Jesus' teaching and ministry was in complete harmony with it.

The Law or the Prophets is an idiom for the entire collection of the Hebrew Scriptures, what you know as the Old Testament. They include:

The law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms (Luke 24:44)

Moses and the prophets (Luke 16:29, 31, 24:27)

The Law (Matt. 5:18, John 12:34)

Your law (when speaking to Jews)

By saying *the law OR the prophets* Jesus means that He is in complete agreement with the writings of Moses **and** the later additions and comments upon it by the other men of God who contributed to the Scriptures. In reality, the honor Jesus gave to **the law and the prophets** was much greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. The truth of the matter is that **they** were the ones setting aside the law and the prophets. Here's one thing Jesus said about them:

Matthew 15:6–9: . . . *And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you [Isaiah 29:13]: 'BUT*

IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'

There is all the difference in the world between doing good works **out of gratitude** for what God has done for you in sending His Son, and the impossible attitude of doing all the good things you can **in order to try to win the favor** of God.

Matthew 5:17: *Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to **fulfill**.*

Fulfill is the key word in the description of Jesus' relationship to the Law of God. Jesus is the fulfillment of **the prophecies of the Messiah**. He is the **Savior**, who died to save us from the penalty of our sins. He is also the **Messiah**, who will bring to earth the Kingdom of Heaven, in which righteousness will triumph.

Jesus is also the fulfillment of **the laws of sacrifice**, all of which were designed to reinforce our understanding of our sinfulness by requiring that sacrifices be repeated over and over again. Study the book of Hebrews and you'll come to understand how Jesus is the perfect Priest with the perfect sacrifice **once for all**.

Galatians 3:24–25: *Therefore the Law has become **our tutor to lead us to Christ**, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.*

Matthew 5:18: *For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

Truly I say to you is literally **Amen**. It's used sparingly in the New Testament in uses like this, to introduce an important statement that contradicts popular opinion or expectations, or would cause surprise. **This is something important!**

Until heaven and earth pass away means just what it says. Until the universe in its present form disappears, God's word stays in force. Read all about it in 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 22, where we're introduced to the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Not the smallest letter or stroke is an interesting word picture. A similar English idiom would go something like *not a **T** will remain un-crossed and not an **I** will remain un-dotted*.

As Jesus spoke, some of the Old Testament had already been fulfilled—certain prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. Other parts were in the process of being fulfilled as Jesus went about His life and ministry.

Until all is accomplished is specific. **Until** is a little word expressing a time relationship—all things God's word says will be fulfilled in the course of time. Those who accused Jesus of de-emphasizing the importance of the Law were dead wrong.

II. Jesus and Teachers of the Law (19-20)

Matthew 5:19: Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

All we have from Jesus is **by grace**, and **none of it is earned**. Nevertheless, there is a lot at stake for how a person handles the truth. On the one hand, there is the matter of eternal rewards for faithfulness. On the other hand, there is the issue of **professing** to proclaim the truth but not living up to your claim—a condition for which great punishment from God is reserved.

The concept of **great** and **least** in the Kingdom of Heaven is a matter determined by faithfulness to what God says. **Entrance** into the kingdom is on the basis of Christ's righteousness received by faith, but **reward** and standing in that spiritual kingdom is on the basis of fidelity to Scripture.

Another idea hinted at in this verse is that not every commandment of God's law is of equal significance. The rabbis divided the law into 613 commandments, 248 of which they considered positive and 365 negative. They debated endlessly about which ones were heavier and which were lighter. In some quarters, there was the belief that if you could pick out the most important few and keep them rigorously, that you could be excused from having to worry about the others.

That thinking is another symptom of the attitude that **misses the point** of dealing with the heart. When you think in terms of trying to perform so as to gain God's favor, you miss the entire point that you **can't** solve your own sin problem. Your only hope is for (1) **Complete forgiveness**, available through the death of Jesus Christ, and (2) **Complete transformation**, which comes from allowing Him to work in your heart to change you from the inside out.

Remember when Jesus was asked: Which is the **greatest** commandment?

Matthew 22:35–40: One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Notice something important about Jesus' answer: He **didn't diminish** any of the commandments. He identified the ones that were **most central** to the whole picture. All other commandments have something to do with either **loving God** or **loving other people**. Jesus insisted that **every** aspect of what God said was important. Those who opposed Him were totally committed to the details, but missed the real issue of the heart.

Matthew 5:20: *For I say to you that unless your righteousness **surpasses** that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Immediately after this statement, Jesus is going to be specific. The rest of this chapter is a series of examples of how the religion of the scribes and Pharisees was on the wrong track. The **surpassing righteousness** Jesus requires is **righteousness imputed** by God to the heart of the one who accepts God's provision.

Genesis 15:6: *Then he [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

Romans 4:3: *For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."*

Many people today have fallen in to the same trap that ensnared the Pharisees. Maybe you're one of them, and you know the feeling of being on a spiritual treadmill, spending lots of energy and going nowhere.

Romans 12:2: *And do not be **conformed** to this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Conformed = squeezed into a mold. **Transformed** = the word from which we get *metamorphosis*, total change from the inside out. Listen to the summary statement Jesus makes later in this sermon:

Matthew 5:48: *Therefore **you are to be perfect**, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

The standard God has for you is no secret. It's all in the Bible. We need to remember He is the **God of all grace**. He is the landowner who graciously gave a full day's pay to the workers who worked only one hour in the vineyard. He is the God who remained faithful to Peter through all his failures and sins and made him into a mighty apostle. He is the God who promises to never leave us, nor forsake us.

The **surpassing righteous** you need is the righteousness of Jesus Himself.

2 Corinthians 5:20–21: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*