

The King Who Fulfills All Scripture

Matthew 5:17-20

I've not been directly involved in any home remodeling or business construction, but in talking with those who have, my impression is that dealing with proper building permits and codes is at times one of the most annoying aspects of the project. They can feel controlling or restrictive. They can end up costing you a lot of extra money, or even thwarting your vision for the project because of some potential safety violation. And so there's all sorts of temptation to kind of just skirt around them. To fly under radar and go about building your project on your own terms.

There are of course several of ways one could do this. The first is simply to ignore the code and start building. To forget about any permits or regulations and dive right in. The problem is that when the building inspector shows up, he's going to want to know, "By what authority are you building this project, and according to what standards?" You see, the codes and regulations (as annoying and expensive as they are) are generally there for a reason, for safety and protection—not just for you and your family, but for guests and for someone who might purchase your home later.

The second way to circumvent the system is to make sure everything looks good from the street. To make sure the building permit is posted prominently for all to see, and that anything someone my readily notice is taken care of, and then cut every other corner possible. Sadly there are contractors who encourage clients to do that. But that too defeats the purpose of the code.

As we look this morning at Matthew 5:17-20, which is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, you might think of his Sermon as the blueprints for the building project known as God's kingdom. Jesus is laying out what life looks like as part of God's kingdom, under the authority and rule of King Jesus. And like any building project, there is a code—in this case, the Old Testament Scriptures, what he calls "the Law and the Prophets" in v. 17.

We've been looking at these blueprints for a few weeks. Or to change the imagery, we've been talking about how the Beatitudes in vv. 1-10 are like a family portrait of life in God's kingdom. And last week we talked about what that family portrait is for—not just our personal nostalgia, but as a display to the whole world of what God is like. Jesus' followers are the salt of the earth. They are the light of the world.

But this portrait raises a few significant questions, especially for the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. For starters, they already had a portrait of what life was supposed to look like under God's rule—it was called the Law of Moses. And the job description of being the "light of the world," as we noted last week, was first given to Israel, God's covenant people. The Lord says to them in Isaiah 42, "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles" or nations (Isa. 42:6).

Jesus anticipates these questions. He knows the Jewish religious leaders are going to show up like building inspectors, saying, “You got a permit for this? How does this building project line up with code?” How does the kingdom you’re building line up with what the Law and the Prophets said? Because they thought they owned the code, and they had a building project of their own going on, and saw Jesus’ kingdom as a threat.

Now many of us today are asking a slightly different question than the religious leaders. They wanted to know how the thing lines up with code, we want to know why anyone even cares about the code anymore. What’s the big deal? We look at the Old Testament today as somewhat outdated and awkward and often inconvenient and even embarrassing. We don’t see why it should even matter if Jesus is building his kingdom according to that code. He’s Jesus, he can do what he wants, right? In fact, maybe we would like a little more distance between us and the Old Testament. We don’t always like the code.

But the code matters. Even for Jesus. It matters that his kingdom accords to Scripture. And so what Jesus shows us in Matthew 5:17-20 is that his kingdom is not only according to Scripture, *it’s the very fulfillment of all that Scripture looked forward to*, both the redemptive plan and the moral purpose of the Old Testament. What the Old Testament said about God’s plan of salvation and how God’s people should live is fulfilled in Jesus and his kingdom. This passage in fact lays the groundwork for what he’s going to talk about for the rest of his Sermon. It’s the bridge between the beatitudes at the beginning, and his discussion on law and right living that follows.

Why Does the Old Testament Matter for Jesus and his Kingdom?

Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, “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.” The first question I want to ask this morning is, Why does the code matter? Again, we are prone today to neglect the Old Testament, sometimes even to intentionally avoid it. There are all sorts of reasons for this. For many we’re simply unfamiliar with it. Like a neighborhood that we don’t know, when we go there everything feels strange and we often find ourselves getting lost. And so we just don’t go there very often. Some of us have been there enough to know we’re not sure we like what we find. We have honest questions about some difficult sayings. And so we’re suspicious of it. And then some of us are simply apathetic. Don’t know, don’t care, not sure why anyone else does.

But what we call the Old Testament, and what Jesus and the early church called “the Law and the Prophets” (v. 17), or sometimes just “the Law” (v. 18), is holy Scripture. The word of God. The same Word of God that Paul is speaking about in 2 Timothy 3:16 when he says, “All *Scripture* is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” There was no New Testament yet when Paul wrote that; he’s talking about the Old. The Old Testament was God’s word long before the New Testament was written. And it remains God’s Word today.

The Spirit did not waste his breath making small talk in the Old Testament, just waiting for the New Testament conversation to begin. Rather, the Old Testament lays the foundation for everything that follows. In it God reveals himself and his character. He is “the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers

to the third and fourth generation” (Exod. 34:6-7). He is a God of incredible mercy and grace, as well as untouchable holiness and justice.

This gracious and holy God reveals his holy standard for his people in the Old Testament as well. There is a *moral vision*, and way God calls us to live. As he is holy, so we are called to be holy (e.g. Lev. 20:26). As he is love, so he calls us to love him and love our neighbors as ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:4-5). This is one of the central purposes of the Law he gave Israel at Mount Sinai. It was instruction for life, as well as stipulations for blessing and curse. God’s holy standard for his people.

But because God knew no sinful human could keep that standard, the Old Testament also reveals God’s plan of salvation for his people. What God purposed in creation, what Adam corrupted through his sinful rebellion, God promised to redeem and restore through his covenant people. He promised to bless all nations of the earth through Abraham, and later Israel. Through David he promised to rescue his people and establish his kingdom and dominion to the ends of the earth. And he promised to fulfill all this by stepping into his own creation, taking on human flesh, as the Messiah-King.¹

The Old Testament shows us who God is, what he expects of us, and what he promises to do. Its authority stands and its purpose will be fulfilled. As Jesus says in v. 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.” So it’s utterly crucial and absolutely necessary that Jesus and his kingdom correspond to the Old Testament. God is not divided against himself. If there is no correspondence between Jesus’ kingdom and the Old Testament Scriptures, then there is no authority, no credibility, and no kingdom. The code matters. The Jewish leaders were right to ask that question.

How Does Jesus and his Kingdom Fulfill the Old Testament?

But Jesus doesn’t just say that his kingdom *corresponds* to the Old Testament, like a house built according to code. He’s saying that the *whole purpose* of the code in the first place was for the building of *this* house. The very reason the code exists is to point to *this*. The whole Old Testament points to Jesus and his kingdom.

Pastor Doug O’Donnell writes, “It would have been bold if Jesus said, ‘I have come to adhere perfectly, as no man has ever done, to the Law,’ or if he said ‘I have come to give the best and final authoritative teaching on the Law.’ Both of those would have been enough for the religious crowd first to scratch their heads and then to rend their garments. But to say what Jesus actually said will get one crucified.”² “I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to *fulfill* them” (5:17). Jesus is saying here that the whole Old Testament was about him and his kingdom.

So how does Jesus fulfill the Old Testament? In countless ways. But there are two specific ways that Matthew is highlighting for us.

¹ For a sketch of this plan, see e.g. Gen. 1:1-2:4; 12:1-3; Exod. 19:4-6; 2 Sam. 7; Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 59; Ps. 2; 89; 110.

² Doug O’Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 91.

The first is that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament *plan of redemption*. Matthew has been going to great lengths to make this point already. He's already used the word "fulfill" 6 times in the book, and will use it another 7 times to point out ways in which Jesus fulfills the plan of redemption revealed in the Old Testament. He is the son of Abraham who brings God's blessing to all nations, the son of David who sits on his throne (Matt. 1:1). He is Immanuel, God with us, who came to save us (1:21) through his life, death, and resurrection on our behalf.

So Jesus fulfills the Old Testament by accomplishing its redemptive plan. Second, he does so by fulfilling its *moral purpose*. Remember how the Old Testament reveals God's standard of holiness for his people. It has a moral purpose, expressed in the Law, a purpose that God's people are called to live out in obedience. As one author comments, "Jesus did not come to do away with the Law and the Prophets but to bring out by word and deed the quality of life they were intended to produce."³ In other words, Jesus is saying that the way to keep the standard of holiness found in the Old Testament—the only way to faithfully keep it—is now through allegiance to him and his kingdom.

This has huge implications, both for us today and for the religious leaders in Jesus' day. First, it means that holiness still matters. The Jews in his day wouldn't have disputed that, but we sometimes do. We often think that salvation by grace means that how we live no longer matters. Maybe we're afraid of being accused of being legalists, so we downplay holiness and obedience. Maybe we're so unimpressed with God's holiness that we're unconcerned about our sin. But the reality is that we are saved from sin *in order to live holy lives that look like our Father*—to shine his light and show the world what God is like (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 2:11-14). Jesus means what he says in v. 19: "Anyone who breaks [or 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." The moral life God intends for his people not only stands, but will be fulfilled through Jesus and his kingdom.

The second implication is that in claiming to fulfill the Law and Prophets, he is reclaiming the Scriptures from the religious leaders of the day, who had hijacked them for their own purposes. There were several religious groups at that time who claimed a strong adherence to the Old Testament Law. He mentions two of them in v. 20: the scribes or 'teachers of the law' and the Pharisees. The scribes were experts in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Pharisees set themselves apart from the rest of the Jews through their system of religious piety. They not only claimed to keep the building code, they went above and beyond it, adding extra regulations and expecting everyone else to keep those as well. "For example, if the Law decreed to fast once a year, they fasted twice a week; or if the Law commanded resting on the Sabbath, they excluded every kind of work on Saturday."⁴ Both groups saw themselves as gatekeepers of God's Law, the building inspectors everyone else had to answer to.

But Jesus challenges not only their authority as building inspectors, but whether they themselves even sufficiently keep the code. He says in v. 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."

³ Robert Mounce, *Matthew* (NIBC; Hendricksen, 1991), 43.

⁴ O'Donnell, 94.

That's pretty shocking—on several levels. The scribes and Pharisees were the super-religious. How does one's righteousness surpass them? Doug O'Donnell writes, "The closest equivalent today would be for the average Roman Catholic to hear the divine pronouncement, 'Unless you are holier than His Holiness (i.e., . . . the Pope), you're not getting into heaven!'"⁵

But there's two things going on in Jesus' pronouncement there. First, he's exposing the superficial righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and second, he's calling us to a deeper righteousness, a righteousness that goes below the surface and comes from the heart, which is what the Law called for in the first place.

The scribes and Pharisees were like the builders who posted the permit in a prominent place for all to see, but in reality cut all sorts of corners where people couldn't see, even while adding extra regulations—all so that they could look good. They were the hypocrites Jesus talks about in Matthew 6: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. . . ." (Matt. 6:1-2). They're the kind of people who when they help someone out, they post it on Facebook for all to congratulate them. Their law keeping was superficial and self-righteous.

In the categories of v. 19, they were the *least* in the kingdom, who not only relaxed God's law but taught others to do so as well. Jesus asks them in Matthew 15:

And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ⁵ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' [Gee, mom, I can't help you with groceries this week because I'm going to make an extra gift to the church], ⁶ he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. (Matt. 15:3-6)

They relax the law. And they also teach others to do so. Jesus says of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:15: "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."

"They do all their deeds to be seen by others," he says in 23:5 (ESV). There's was a superficial and self-righteousness. And none of us here are immune from this. How often do we find ourselves doing something to serve God, and realize that if someone else wasn't seeing this right now, we probably wouldn't be doing it? Or we do it but we do so grudgingly, with self-pity and bitterness. Or else when we do it, we tweet about it, so others will know what a good job we did.

The reality is that we are all, left to ourselves, a bunch of hypocrites and performers. We've bought the lie that our significance and identity is caught up in what others think of us, and so we have to put on the show. If what gives us acceptance is looking holy, we'll be holier-than-thou. If what gives acceptance is bucking the system, we'll push every button we see. We'll say one thing to look good, but do another that costs us less. Left to ourselves, we are self-righteous

⁵ O'Donnell, 94.

sinners, who either find pride in God's law (when we're able to keep it), or who resent the Law (when we are crushed under its weight).

But true righteousness, a righteousness that not only fulfills the law but *delights* in it, as the Psalmist wrote ("Oh how I love your law!" Ps. 119:97)—true righteousness that accords to God's kingdom, depends on God and goes *beneath* the surface. It is a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and Pharisees because it comes from the heart, a *changed* heart—a heart redeemed by the gospel, filled with God's Spirit, and surrendered to Jesus' authority.

This is where Jesus is going in much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout the rest of chapter 5 he shows with divine authority what the law is really supposed to look like when lived out—not a surface-level obedience, as the scribes and Pharisees promoted, but an obedience from the heart. "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28).

This is what the Law and Prophets were after in the first place. Not a superficial or self-righteousness, but a righteousness that comes from the heart. As Samuel said to Saul in 1 Samuel 15, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). Or David in Psalm 51: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:17).

And this is what Jesus makes possible as the one who rescues his sinful people and fills them with his Holy Spirit. Because Jesus fulfills the Old Testament's redemptive plan, he is able to bring about its moral purpose in and through us—to help us obey from the heart. In the language of the Prophets, Jesus is establishing a *new* covenant. Not like the old covenant, written on tablets of stone, which we were unable to keep because of our hearts of stone. But a new covenant, where God gives us hearts of flesh to replace our heart of stone and writes his law on our new hearts, that we might walk faithfully with him (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27). He cleanses our sinful hearts through his sacrifice on the cross, and gives them life and strength to obey through his resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Not that we will do so perfectly. As long as we are in this body of flesh, waiting for the Lord's return, we will continue to wrestle against sin (cf. Gal. 5:16-26). And not that our obedience will look the same as Israel's obedience. This is often one of the very confusing aspects of obeying the Old Testament as Christians.

What Jesus says in v. 18 is obviously very true—not even the least part of the Law will pass away till the end. But because Jesus has come and brought his new covenant, our obedience doesn't always look the same. For instance, whereas most of the Ten Commandments we obey in the exact same way, the entire sacrificial system is now different. The sacrifices and offerings that the Law prescribed for Israel's worship have now been fulfilled in Christ (cf. Heb. 8:1–10:18). They were all pointing forward to the cross, and now that Christ has fulfilled them on the cross, we actually disobey God if we were to offer them. We obey those laws by clinging to Christ. Other laws, like dietary restrictions, which were a daily reminder that Israel has a chosen people (just as God made distinction between them and the nations, so they were to make distinctions in their diet, see Lev. 11:45-47)—those laws have been done away with because in

Jesus God has opened the kingdom to all nations, just as he promised Abraham (cf. Acts 10). The message of those laws still stands—sin is atoned by a blood sacrifice, God chooses a people from himself. But the application is different in Jesus.

In all these, however, the standard of holiness remains. And God supplies the ability to keep it by his Spirit. We can't just ignore the code and go about building whatever we want in life. Nor is it enough to simply look good from the street—to obey on the surface but not mean it from the heart.

God calls us to a radical obedience in Jesus. An obedience that fulfills the moral vision of God's law. An obedience that shines his light to the nations. An obedience that comes from a heart changed by the gospel of Jesus. What the Old Testament said about God's plan of salvation and how God's people should live is fulfilled in Jesus and his kingdom.

And so I invite all of us to ask ourselves the question: is my righteousness genuine? Does it come from a heart changed by the gospel?

- Where have I neglected God's law out of convenience or selfishness?
- Where have I relaxed his view of holiness, or taught others to do so?
- Where do I need to repent?

And where you find yourself falling short, the response is not to try harder. You can't manufacture true obedience. Nor is the response to wallow in guilt, shame, and despair. The response is to go back to Jesus. Go back to the beginning of his Sermon, back to poverty of Spirit. A brokenness that mourns over our sin. Go back to Jesus' life, where he did what you and I could never do in keeping God's righteous law perfectly in our place. Go back to the cross, where every sin, every failure, every time we relaxed God's law or taught others to do so, was poured out on him. Where he bore our sin, the weight and penalty for our sin—the holy wrath of God. Go back to his resurrection, where life conquered death, where sin's power was broken, and where God launched his new creation, the age of the Spirit. Rest in the Holy Spirit, and move forward by faith, “struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within” you (Col. 1:29). Jesus is in you. Jesus is enough. Jesus is worth it.