

## Living the Law

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SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

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Tuesday night Lynn and I returned home from a week in Russia. We had the opportunity to spend a number of days with about 150 young people who are working as Young Life leaders all over the former Soviet Union. It was amazing to watch those who had been raised as atheists demonstrate their love for Christ. I thought about what it must have been like to experience a total change in mentality right in the middle of growing up. Imagine living under one system, one mentality for the first 15 years of your life, and then one day everything you were taught was true is thrown up for grabs. We were in Red Square and saw the enormous walls where paintings of Lenin and Stalin once stood. Now they are just blank. It's like they have had to wipe out a part of their past to establish something new.

When Jesus Christ came on the scene, it was natural for people to wonder if the same kind of thing was happening. Out with the old; in with the new. Nothing about Jesus conformed to the old system. He was not a Pharisee or a formal teacher of the law, yet he spoke with authority. After hearing him speak, people said, **“What is this? A new teaching! With authority he even commands the unclean spirits and they obey him”** (Mk 1:27). He went even further than that and was openly critical of the official teachers of the law. He was always contradicting what they said. At times, he seemed to focus much more on the grace of God than on the demands of the law. He told stories like the Prodigal Son to show that God held out open arms to sinners. But even worse, he hung out with these people - sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. They were his friends. He went to their parties. He enjoyed their company. So it was natural for people to wonder, “Is this some kind of new morality? Is this guy changing the rules?” These were people steeped in the OT Scripture. Their whole world view was rooted in the idea that to be pleasing to God you had to keep the law. All of a sudden, this guy comes on the scene, who obviously has tremendous authority, but who seemed to be turning his back on the law.

This brings up a very important question: What is Jesus' relationship to the law? Did he come to erase the image of Moses like the Russians erased the murals of Lenin and Stalin? Did Jesus establish a completely new law? This is important because it determines what OUR relationship to the OT law will be like. Should we disregard the teaching of the Old Testament in favor of the New? Did Jesus come abolish the old morality in favor of something new? Does

truth change? We might even point to the New Testament to defend that. Paul said that as believers we are not under law but under grace. Doesn't that mean we no longer have to regard the teaching of the Old Testament law?

In Matthew 5:17-20 Jesus addresses these questions. What he says might surprise you. He says what we do with ALL of God's truth is all-important. He comes down even more conservative than the Pharisees. His interpretation of the law and its demands on all of us is even more strict than the most conservative Scribes of his day. He says his commitment to the OT law is so great that people who don't obey it better than the Scribes and Pharisees won't even be allowed into his kingdom. Why is that? Why must we as followers of Jesus take all of God's Word, even the law, with utter seriousness? There are four reasons found in this passage,

**“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, 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. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

### I. Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets (v. 17)

The first reason is found in v. 17. Jesus says he didn't come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. When Jesus speaks of “the law and the prophets” he's talking about the sum of the OT Scripture. But this raises questions. Didn't he abolish some parts of the OT? God gave Israel a whole menu of foods they couldn't eat - pork, rabbit, lobster or shrimp. Yet Jesus declared all foods clean. God told Israel to stone a person caught in the act of adultery. Yet Jesus showed mercy to a woman condemned of that very thing. There are huge chunks of the OT devoted to telling people how to sacrifice animals and grains to God, yet few of us feel compelled to make a trip to Jerusalem each year to offer a lamb.

So what did Jesus mean? Some people say Jesus was only talking about certain parts of the law here. They divide the law into three parts - civil, ceremonial and moral. The first two had to deal with Israel's government and religion, the last with the Ten Commandments. They say Jesus was only talking here about not abolishing the Ten Commandments. The civil laws were abolished because the church is not a nation like Israel was. The ceremonial is abolished because the final sacrifice was made with Jesus offering himself up on the cross. But the moral law remains binding. These distinctions might be helpful, but Jesus doesn't leave room for that. He makes it clear that he's talking about the whole force the OT Scripture. That's what "the law and the prophets" means. And in the next verse he talks about "the smallest letter or stroke" not passing from the law. I'm not convinced Jesus gives us the option of making these distinctions.

So what did he mean? The key revolves around this word "fulfill." Jesus says he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. That word means "fill up." Recently my son and I worked on a science project for school. We had to make a display of our work on a large display board. To do that I sketched out the layout on the board in pencil, and then my son filled it all in with color. The law and the prophets were pencil sketches, and Jesus Christ was the one who filled it all in.

Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets both directly and indirectly. He was the direct fulfillment of many OT prophecies. Micah 5:2 says Christ was to be born in Bethlehem and that is where he was born. There are hundreds of such prophecies which Jesus directly fulfilled.

But he also indirectly fulfilled the law and the prophets. Hosea 11:1 says, "**Out of Egypt I called my son.**" God was talking about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt under Moses. But Matthew quotes this verse when as a baby Jesus was brought back to Israel by Joseph after the death of Herod the Great. There is a sense in which the whole history of the Jews was a pencil sketch of the life of Christ; it all pointed to him. The sacrificial system pointed toward Christ and his death on the cross. The use of the sacrifices were abolished, but their meaning was fulfilled in Christ.

So the first reason we must take all of God's word with utter seriousness is that Christ himself is the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets. If we abolish any part of the OT Scripture, we abolish something that points to Jesus Christ.

## II. The law will endure unchanged (v. 18)

The second reason is that the words of the OT Scripture are enduring and unchangeable. Jesus gives

two illustrations to make this point. First, he takes a telescope and looks at the universe and says that as long as the universe (heaven and earth) exists, the Scripture will endure. The law and the prophets are not the noble but misguided notions of prescientific nomads. They can't be replaced by something new.

We visited several old Orthodox churches in Russia full of beautiful icons and paintings. Someone from our party asked what happened to these churches during the Communist reign. The priest told us that the churches were used for storage. The icons were discarded as useless relics and the paintings were painted over. He said after the fall of Communism they went into the churches and scratched off the new paint and found the paintings of Christ and the apostles were still there underneath. The priest said, "Even Communism couldn't get rid of Christ. He was there all along."

Jesus says that about the OT. You can't get rid of it. You can't paint over it. You can try. We can take our modern ideas of Communism or humanism and try to prove that the earth was a product of time and chance. We can take our enlightened ethics and say what Proverbs says about disciplining our children is dangerous. But no matter how hard we try to do away with it, the Scripture will remain as long as the universe remains.

In the second illustration Jesus sets aside his telescope and picks up a microscope. He says not the "smallest letter or least stroke of a pen shall pass from the law." The smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet was about the size of an apostrophe. The least stroke was a tiny dot that distinguished some Hebrew letters from others. Imagine that! Every detail of the OT is inviolable. It can't be changed. There are some who say, "It's just the ideas of the Bible that are inspired, not the words." Jesus says, "Not just the words, but every letter, every comma, every so-called dot of the I."

So the law continues to endure unchanged. That's the second thing.

## III. Adherence to the law will determine status in the kingdom (v. 19)

The third thing comes as a consequence of that. Verse 19 says that adherence to the law will actually determine our status in the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus says, "Whoever annuls even the least of these commandments will be least in the kingdom, and whoever keeps them will be called great in the kingdom."

It's important we understand what Jesus meant by "these commandments." A surface reading says he means the commandments of the law. What we need to remember though is that it was Christ's own interpretation of the law

that was correct and authoritative. Much of that comes right here in the Sermon on the Mount. As a matter of fact, starting in v. 21 Jesus interprets several of the Ten Commandments. So when he says, “these commands” he means not just the OT but his own understanding of it. In essence, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was saying, “I am establishing a kingdom. As King I am giving you commands which explain the true meaning of the law. Your standing in my kingdom will depend on your obeying and teaching these commands.”

We might ask the question, why would we be tempted to minimize or fudge on one of his commands? What might tempt us to do such a thing? One thing is that we know we can't keep them, so we avoid responsibility by saying Christ didn't really mean what he said. I mean, he says unchecked anger is a violation of the commandment not to murder. He says lusting is tantamount to committing adultery in your heart. It's clear that Jesus raised the bar instead of lowering it. But we see that and know we can't keep it, and so we say, “He didn't really mean that. We all lose our temper at times. We all say things we shouldn't say. We all look a little bit too long at a nice looking women. It's just a 'guy thing.'” So we rationalize his commands because we can't keep them, and we teach others the same things. Jesus warns against that. He doesn't want us to downplay his words.

Another reason we do this is we really don't know how to balance grace and truth. We know we are to be people of grace. We know that's the central message of the NT. We have seen how Jesus treated broken sinners with such love and tenderness. We've also seen how people who cling to truth can toss it around like grenades. So we minimize Christ's commands, or reinterpret them, because we don't want to violate grace.

For instance, I know how difficult it is to teach on divorce when some of my listeners are either divorced people or people suffering in an awful marriage. These things are painful enough; I don't want to cause more pain. I don't want to be insensitive. And so I find myself wanting to minimize what Jesus says about divorce. Right here in chapter 5 he says it's wrong unless under some very narrow circumstances. There are times when I would rather not have to teach that, but Jesus says, “If you are going to represent me, you have to teach my truth correctly.”

It's the same thing with people who are single. I'd rather not have to tell them things like they can only marry a believer and they need to stay morally pure until marriage. It's hard enough being single. Why should I make it even harder? It's tempting to fudge in the name of grace. But when we replace truth with grace, we're on dangerous ground.

On the night of Jan. 6, 1996, three friends were driving around rural Florida playing pranks. They pulled some 20 street signs out of the ground. The next day three of their 18-year-old buddies, who had just finished bowling, breezed through one of those intersections without stopping. Their car sailed into the path of an 8 ton truck, and they were all killed. One year later the three pranksters were convicted of manslaughter, and with tears in their eyes, sentenced to 15 years in prison.

It's a dangerous thing to pull down even one of the signposts that God puts on the highway of life. We have to hold onto God's truth as tightly as we hold onto God's grace. The two go together.

Jesus fulfills the OT Scripture. The OT Scripture will endure unchanged. Adherence to it will determine our status in the kingdom. But the fourth thing is the most surprising: It's not just status in the kingdom that is at stake; it's entry into the kingdom.

Look at v. 20,

**“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

#### **IV. Entry into the kingdom will require more righteousness than the Scribes (v. 20)**

Jesus is not changing the subject here. The righteousness he's speaking of is the sum of keeping his commands. Jesus says unless you do this better than the Scribes and the Pharisees you won't even get in. How can that be? These were the guys who calculated that the law has 248 things to do and 365 things not to do. They had memorized the list. They ordered their entire lives around the list. Furthermore, doesn't this mean that salvation is earned according to good works? Doesn't that contradict the first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” How can you be poor in spirit and be more righteous than the Scribes?

The key to understanding this is to see that Jesus is NOT saying our righteousness must surpass theirs in degree, but in kind. He's not saying that if they kept 240 of the commandments we have to keep 245. No. The greater righteousness Jesus calls for is greater because it's deeper. It's a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees had a righteousness that was external and formal. The whole point of the rest of chapter 5 is that Jesus understands the law to go beyond external conformity to inward righteousness of mind and motive.

This is hard for us to understand because this isn't the way the law works in society. When you pay your income tax, the IRS could care less what your attitude is about it. They just care that you pay what you owe. A woman may decide one day to murder her husband, but the law will never bring her to court for that. She can think about it for weeks, but until she does it the law has no power to convict. But Jesus cares about the heart.

But we still may wonder, "Well, how can I have that kind of righteousness if I don't even do very well at keeping the list? The answer is what happens when someone in total poverty of spirit puts their trust in Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus comes into their lives and begins to work within; from the inside out. This is what the New Covenant is all about. The prophets predicted it. God said through Jeremiah, **"I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts"** (Jer. 31:33). He told Ezekiel, **"I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes"** (Ezek. 36:27). So the demands of the law help us see our poverty of spirit, and this drives us back to grace, and once we know his grace the Spirit drives us to a deeper observance of the true intent of the law.

### **CONCLUSION**

Why does Jesus hold to the truth of God as seen in the law and the prophets so tightly? Because Jesus fulfills the law and if you obliterate the law you obliterate something that points to Him. Because the law endures as long as the universe. Because adherence to it will determine our status in the kingdom. And because through the Spirit he brings a deeper and better righteousness, and without that, you can't even enter the kingdom.

What we do with God's truth is all-important. Chuck Colson writes, "When people stop believing in transcendent truth, debates about ideas degenerate into power struggles. After all, if there is no truth, then we cannot persuade each other by rational arguments. All that's left is power. Whatever group has the most power imposes its opinions on everybody else."

Yet this is how it is, often even in the church! We live in a world where morality is a fashion show and new fashions come every season. We are tempted to throw out the old wardrobe and put on what is currently in fashion. Someone has said that people used to smoke with pride in public and fornicate in private. Now it's the opposite. People are ashamed to smoke in public, but they parade their sexual adventures with pride. The world is constantly changing the rules. The world is constantly erasing the images on the wall and replacing them with something new. But Jesus didn't do that. He held onto God's truth. And so must we. What we do with God's truth is all-important! Don't set it aside. Don't play fast and loose with it. Let it convict you. Let it drive you to Christ. And once you have come to Christ, let it be your goal to let the Spirit of God so work in your life that you begin reflect the righteousness of Christ.

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