

MATTHEW 5:17–20. (EHV)

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. So whoever breaks 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 them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Many people today portray God like an easygoing grandfather rocking back and forth on a front porch swing, watching his grandchildren flinging mud at each other and hitting each other and calling each other names, and chuckling indulgently and saying, “Kids will be kids.” Similarly, many people today portray God’s Son, Jesus Christ, as someone who is accepting of everybody just the way they are and happy to love them and let them remain just the way they are.

Jesus dispels any such notions in these verse of his Sermon on the Mount today. One could argue that these verses are the most important in Jesus’s sermon. He essentially gives the theme of his sermon here. He introduces us to two fulfillments of the law.

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets,” Jesus says. “I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them.” In Jesus’s day, people would often refer to the Old Testament either as the Law and the Prophets, or as the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Here it is clear that he is especially referring to God’s moral law or commands as revealed in the writings of Moses, namely the first five books of the Bible, and in the rest of the Old Testament.

Jesus says that he did not come to destroy or abolish God’s commands, which is perhaps the impression people got from Jesus’s kindness, patience, gentleness, and forgiving spirit. He came not to destroy them, but to fulfill them. In the immediate context, it is clear that the primary fulfillment Jesus is referring to is a filling up of the law, that is, showing just how broad, demanding, and far-reaching it is. That’s why he goes on to say, “So whoever breaks 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 them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Notice how there is no middle ground. In the eyes of God, you are either disregarded and despised, or you are great and valued. And in order to be great, the commandments must be perfectly observed in our own lives and taught to others, down to the smallest letter and detail.

Jesus later goes on to fill up the law and show just how broad, demanding, and far-reaching it is by showing how all of God’s commands aren’t just aimed at our actions and words, but also at our thoughts and our hearts. Some of those identifying as Christians call Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount the New Law or the Law of the Gospel, saying that the instruction Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount releases the hidden potential of God’s law in the Old Testament and has new demands arise from them, demands that proceed to reform the heart. But Jesus is saying that these expectations were in the Old Testament the whole time. They have

always been God's will. It's just that people weren't paying attention and listening carefully to God, and they didn't take God's law seriously, something which continues today.

In fact, Jesus says, "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus takes the Pharisees and experts in the law to task in many places in the Gospels, but it is never for their outward obedience and observance of God's law. It's that their outward actions gave a false impression of what was in their hearts. Outwardly, the Pharisees and experts in the law were blameless. Very rarely would you have been able to pin any sin on them. But Jesus says our righteousness has to surpass that of the Pharisees and experts in the law. We must conform to God's law not only outwardly, but also inwardly, not just in words and actions, but also in our thoughts and hearts. That is what God's law demands. That is God's law filled out. If we do not meet that standard, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You can see, can't you, that these are not demands that reform our hearts. These are demands that condemn our hearts. That isn't a smiling-on-the-front-porch-swing God, is it? That isn't a Jesus just fine with who we are naturally, is it?

But that is the primary fulfillment that Jesus is referring to in the immediate context. Nevertheless, in the broader context, there is another fulfillment Jesus is talking about. He hints at it when he says, "Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until every last little bit takes place."

You see, Jesus didn't just come to fill out God's law, to show us how broad, demanding, and far-reaching it is. He didn't just come to make sin utterly sinful, as the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 7:13. He also came to fulfill God's law, that is, to carry out all of its demands in our place down to the smallest letter and finest detail. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 4:4-5: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law."

In theological terms, we call this Jesus's active obedience. His passive obedience was his taking of our guilt and sins and suffering the punishment for them on Good Friday. But his active obedience was his living his life in perfect obedience to and conformity with God's law on our behalf, his weaving of our robe of righteousness with his perfect life, not just in his words and actions, but also in his thoughts and in his heart. He never had an inappropriate thought about a woman. He never had an intrinsic hatred for anyone, even when he was sharply rebuking them. He was never discontent with what God gave him, even when he had no place to lay his head. Jesus himself once asked the crowd if any of them could prove him guilty of sin, and he was only met with silence (John 8:46). But he didn't do this just to shame us. He did this for us, on our behalf, as our substitute, to redeem us. He did it so that he could not only take away the sin that was ours, but so that he could also give us the righteousness that was his.

This is the righteousness that Jesus gives us through his word and through baptism, which work saving faith in us and strengthen faith in us. When God gives us faith in Jesus, that faith takes hold of Jesus and his merit in such a way that we are clothed with Jesus. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ."

This means that, for all believers, God sees them as people whose righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, as people whose righteousness extends throughout his entire law, down to the smallest letter and finest detail, as people whose righteousness is perfect. Not because we are perfect in ourselves, but because through faith in Christ we are clothed and covered in the righteousness of another, namely Christ our Savior.

That doesn't mean that we can just take the entire Sermon on the Mount and ignore it. That doesn't turn God into the smiling-on-the-front-porch-swing God, nor does it turn Jesus into an indulgent, mollicoddling brother who is fine with us just the way we are. No, as we heard last week, by giving us faith, he has made us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. By giving us faith, he has enabled us to begin to keep God's law in our thoughts, words, and actions as God wants it to be kept. By clothing us in perfect righteousness, he has enabled us to begin to live righteously and to want to do so. If we don't want to, if we just dismissively wave our hands at God's law, that's a sign that we don't treasure the righteousness Jesus has won for us and don't believe in his saving work. It shows that we don't understand just what he has rescued us from in fulfilling for us what we could never have fulfilled in a million lifetimes.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has not abolished the law. He has fulfilled it. He has shown us just how demanding it is, and he has satisfied its demands in our place. He has shown us how surely doomed to eternal damnation in hell we were, and he has shown us how sure we may be of eternal life in heaven through faith in him. God isn't our chuckling, indulgent grandfather. He is our serious, yet loving heavenly Father and Savior, through Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord. Amen.