

## The Law, Love, and the Kingdom of Right Relationships

**Romans 13:8-10**

**Matthew 5:17-20**

This morning's Scripture is the third part of the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, the preamble of grace. The entire preamble is an invitation to see as Jesus sees. It's all about having clear vision, and seeing rightly; and Jesus reminds us of this over and over again throughout his teaching. In fact, in the middle of the sermon on the mount Jesus interjects a reminder about it; it seems out of place in the flow of things, but it's a short break in the teaching, a little "oh, by the way" reminder to his hearers of the importance of having clear vision. He says this (6:22-23): *"The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness."* Jesus is not talking about literal eyesight here. He's giving a reminder about seeing the world, ourselves, and God clearly and rightly. Having *heathy* vision, attitude, outlook, however we want to put it. Because appropriate actions will then follow.

He wants us to see with Kingdom vision, as he sees. First, to see the world as he sees it (beatitudes); to see ourselves as he sees us (salt and light; people of positive influence in the world); now, here is the third part of the preamble of grace, the invitation to see *Jesus* as he sees himself.

And remember, this is the upside-down and backwards kingdom he is talking about. That will come into focus again (pun intended) in this morning's teaching from Jesus.

Before reading our text, I'd like to make an introductory comment, relevant to today's topic, about the evangelistic nature of the gospels. I'm not sure if the word evangelism or evangelistic is a bad word for any of you. I understand that many have had bad experiences of evangelism, or a faulty gospel being pushed onto people; or because the word has been hijacked in recent years and has come to mean something very different than it truly means.

The word evangelism or evangelistic isn't a bad word to me—the gospel writers are evangelists; that's why they wrote their gospels, and they make it clear that's why they are writing—to proclaim the good news of Jesus and the Kingdom, and make the case for Christ being God in the flesh, the loving Savior of the world coming near to us, and therefore worth following.

The word evangelism means “gospeling” — “good news-ing.” And I'd like to reclaim that word as a good and helpful and useful word. Because Jesus himself is the original evangelist: proclaiming good news, justice for the poor, healing, and mending a relationship with God.

So, here is a comment about the gospel writers as evangelists. This is important to our understanding of what Jesus says to us this morning.

If we compare the 4 gospels of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—each gospel writer crafts the story of Jesus in a way that speaks to, or evangelizes, a certain audience. For example, Luke—who is a physician—takes special note of the healing ministry of Jesus—all the gospel writers take note of Jesus' healing, but, as a doctor, Luke takes special note of that and includes more healing events than the other gospels. Luke also has a special concern for and focus on the poor and the outcast (which, in that culture, included women). So, in Luke's gospel, we have more accounts of the women who followed Jesus, and Luke records the parables that Jesus told about God's mercy to the poor and the lost—for example the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan—all of which only appear in Luke. These folks are his audience.

Now let's talk about Matthew, since the Sermon on the Mount is in Matthew's gospel. **Matthew's** evangelistic audience is a Jewish audience. Matthew is a Jewish follower of Jesus trying to convince his fellow Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. That Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament has said and promised. Therefore he crafts the story of Jesus in such a

way that Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of their longings for a savior and, specifically in Matthew, Jesus is seen as the new Moses—the great law-giver. That is Matthew’s main purpose as he writes his version of the gospel: to prove that Jesus is the Jewish messiah, the Savior. That Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the people have yearned for.

So... there are more quotes from the O.T. in Matthew’s gospel than there are in all the other gospels combined, and in the Sermon on the Mount specifically, the part of the Old Testament Jesus quotes is the law, especially the 10 commandments. After all, this is Jesus, the new Moses. He goes up on to a hillside to give this Sermon on the Mount in Moses-like fashion.

Yet in the sermon on the mount Jesus doesn’t just quote the 10 commandments; he reinterprets them and teaches us the true and positive inner meaning: he reveals to us the *spirit* of the law and doesn’t just reiterate obedience to the *letter* of the law. We’ll see that starting next week.

This brings us to our text today. Matthew 5:17-20

<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, 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. <sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others

accordingly 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.”

### **Romans 13:8-10**

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup>The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This is the word of the Lord

Jesus makes two grand statements in this passage: first, about himself (I have come to fulfill the law & prophets) and second, about us (our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The latter statement provides a transition to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount). Let’s look at those two statements.

First, Jesus fulfills the law and prophets. Jesus has just explained, in one sentence why we have, and need, the Old Testament in our Bibles. Or, as Phillip Yancey rightly calls it, the Bible Jesus read and loved (the Old Testament); these were his Scriptures that he, and all Jews, read and loved. And here is one reason why we ought to read the Old Testament, and hopefully love it too.

Part of it, for us, is history. The Old Testament tells our story. And who doesn't want to know their story?? Jesus is saying, in part, I have not come to start a new religion—I'm not the latest new thing, or new guru to follow. Rather, Jesus is saying I have come to be the fulfillment of God's salvation story, and to invite *everyone* into that story; but now with a new way of *living* that story: by faith, hope and love in our hearts, and not by more rule-keeping.

Again, Jesus did not come to start a new religion, but to provide continuity with, and fulfillment of, the law and prophets. He's inviting us to go back and read all of the Old Testament, but with a new set of glasses. To read every part and piece of it and say, "Oh, I see it now: this points to Jesus Christ."

Therefore, when Jesus says he fulfills the law and the prophets it means that God keeps his promises. That all of the promises of God given in the Old Testament are true and fulfilled in Jesus. That's one of the things we recognize and celebrate during Advent (since it's coming up). When we read from Isaiah 11, for example, "A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse... and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him; the spirit of wisdom and understanding..." and, "he shall be called Wonderful Counselor... Prince of Peace" we can say "Thank you,

God, for keeping your promise—that’s Jesus.” When we read *any* such promises in the Old Testament, we can say thank you God, for fulfilling it in Jesus.

So, as we read the Old Testament, let it increase our faith. We don’t just read it intellectually, or for its rules. But for how it shows us God’s faithfulness, from Genesis to Malachi, and how he continually worked his purposes out and brought them to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. That is meant to increase our faith, our trust in God.

When Jesus says he fulfills the law and the prophets this also means that he resolves the problems that the Old Testament law cannot resolve. For example, the OT law has provision for forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial system; but it doesn’t resolve the problem of sin itself—it’s source and how sin perpetuates itself in the human heart. Jesus resolves that by absorbing sin in himself on the cross, and by destroying the *power* of sin, as the apostle Paul explains it. The law could not, and cannot, do that. The law is like a mirror that shows us how dirty our face is, but it can’t wash our face for us.

In Gal.3:24 the apostle Paul says it this way: “the law was our disciplinarian (our guardian, our tutor) until Christ came.” It was simply an external guard, or structure, an exoskeleton, to keep people in line until the world was ready for

Christ, who would show us how to make it an inside job—a matter of heart, and not just a matter of legal justification and better behavior.

Jesus is saying, I want to strengthen your *internal* skeleton, not your external structures. The external structures are important to the extent that they get you going and on your feet, but no one spends their whole life on crutches or using leg/arm braces, as a way of living; muscles and bone structure would atrophy and result in great weakness, not strength. Jesus means to strengthen bone and muscle, metaphorically speaking, inwardly.

For you Bible nerds who want to study this more, read and study Paul's letter to the Galatians. It's the entire reason he writes that epistle; to say, we are not under law anymore, but under grace. We are free, not to do anything we want and be disobedient, but to live by faith, hope and love—our internal guide and strength that express themselves outwardly in love. Paul's summary line is Gal.5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; only faith working itself out through love." In other words, legalities are not what matters anymore; faith expressed through love is what counts.

Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets. Read them, and see how they point to Jesus Christ. This is the invitation to see Jesus as he sees himself. Which brings

us to Jesus' next phrase, which naturally flows from what he just said about himself. It's the transition to the rest of the teaching:

Jesus says "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law you won't enter the Kingdom of heaven." That's a heavy statement at first glance.

Upon hearing these words, one can imagine the disciples saying, "Whoa, wait a minute! These serious people (the Pharisees and legal experts) calculated that in the law there are 248 commandments of what one should **do**, and there are 365 prohibitions of what one **shouldn't** do. And they kept them meticulously. That was what righteousness meant. And now you expect us to **surpass** that?!?" How do you surpass perfection?

I don't know about you but a surface reading of this makes me feel kind of heavy—more righteousness... like I need to do more, or try harder. It reminds me of a track practice in high school when some of us played a joke on one of the high jumpers. We set the bar for him at the height he wanted, and then he turned walked to his starting point. While his back was turned, we quickly set the bar about a foot higher. We had a good laugh as he got part way into the air and

realized what had happened. The bar was so high it was ridiculous. It wasn't so funny to our friend. He was very competitive.

Jesus is not doing that. He's not raising the bar ridiculously high for us. He's actually removing the bar altogether and inviting people to a different kind of activity, which is not an individual competition, a worthiness contest, but into a mutual mission effort of building the Kingdom of God together. It's the Kingdom of right relationships. So, this is actually a grace teaching!

Because Jesus is going to redefine righteousness for us, from here on. The Pharisees and law experts understood righteousness to mean obedience without fault. But **true righteousness, in Jesus Christ, is when we are on a journey toward becoming *rightly related*, in our heart, to God and to others** (repeat).

We can do that! We can do that. That's not an impossibly high bar. It's not a ridiculous expectation. Because Jesus will graciously show us how, and pave the way for us to be in right relationship with God and others. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount is now going to explain that "surpassing righteousness" that Jesus calls us to. The internal, spiritual graces, that reveal right relationship with God and others, in the Kingdom of God.

That's why Paul tells us in Romans 13 that *love* is the fulfilling of the law. Not *perfect obedience* is the fulfilling of the law (that high bar of righteousness). But right relationships are the fulfilling of the law. All of the commandments in the law are summed up in this one word, Paul says: love your neighbor as yourself. We can do that. We can work toward that

It doesn't require perfection, but a *willingness* to take steps toward others, and God, in love—imperfections and all. A few verses later in Romans (14) Paul will instruct us to "Pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding," and he declares that "the Kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." In other words, the Kingdom of God is right relationships, creating and sustaining well being and wholeness, and rejoicing together.

We can do that. In fact, that sounds kind of cool to me.

Jesus and Paul simplify things dramatically. The Christian life really is not that complicated. It's not about perfect obedience to 613 commandments. It's about living a life of love. Jesus shows us the way; and is going to show us the way in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. It's not rocket science; it's actually quite simple. In fact, Jesus distilled all of the commandments down to 2: love the

Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength; and, love your neighbor as yourself.

That is the surpassing righteousness that Jesus is talking about. And we can all do that. It's challenging in a different way—*not* in measuring up to a high bar of rules, but in having the courage to let our vision, and our heart, be changed. *That's* the challenge. But it isn't an onerous challenge because it's the challenge of trusting that this is a grace teaching, because it doesn't all depend on us. This is not a try harder, work for it, earn it type of righteousness. Since we live on this side of the cross and resurrection and Pentecost, we know that it's Jesus' life in us—*his* righteousness in us—that makes this possible. It's the Spirit of the risen Christ at work in us.

Veni Sancte Spiritus (“Come Holy Spirit”)—16<sup>th</sup> century prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, send forth the heavenly radiance of your light.

Come, father of the poor; come, giver of gifts; come, light of the heart.

Greatest comforter, sweet guest of the soul, sweet consolation.

In labor, rest; in heat, temperance; in tears, solace.

O most blessed light, fill the inmost heart of your faithful.

Without your spirit, we want for good.

Cleanse that which is unclean, water that which is dry, heal that which is wounded.

Bend that which is inflexible, fire that which is chilled, correct what goes astray.

Give to your faithful, those who trust in you, your manifold gifts.

Grant the reward of grace, grant the deliverance of salvation, grant eternal joy.

Through Christ eternal, Amen.