

The Heart of the Law and Righteousness

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please take a seat. Well, as we come to God's Word, let me just briefly pray again for us.

Father, we do thank you that you continue to speak to us through your Word. Give us minds to understand it, we pray, and hearts that would seek to live it out, and not for our glory, but for yours. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, some time ago, I asked my son to put his shoes away. That was the law I gave him, so to speak. Put your shoes away. They're in the lounge room. You need to put them in your room.

And I watched as he grabbed his shoes, stood at one end of the hallway, and threw them down the hallway into the middle of his bedroom floor. And so I went, Tim! To which he replied, What? They're in my room!

To which I muttered, Little Pharisee. However, I was the same when I was a kid, apparently. Well, today, Jesus teaches his disciples that kingdom living means having a righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees.

[1 : 1 1] Now, just to remind you of where we're up to, you'll remember if you've got your Bibles there, Jesus comes, chapter 4, verse 17, preaching the kingdom of heaven.

He says, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. And then in verse 18 and following, he calls some disciples to himself and tells them that they will be fishermen, fishers of men, that they will fish for people.

And then Jesus goes through doing miracles and proclaiming the kingdom of God. And then last week, we heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which speaks about the good life.

And we looked at that for a couple of weeks. And we saw at the end of it that the disciples were to stand out as different. And we looked at that last week. By the way that they live, they are to stand out as salt, light, and a city on a hill.

For then some people will persecute them, but others will see their righteous lives and praise their Father in heaven. Now, that was part of the way that they were to fish for people.

[2 : 2 1] And so today, Jesus begins to teach them how their lives are to be different, how they're to stand out, what sort of righteousness they're to have. And this teaching begins at chapter 5, verse 17.

And it's the bulk of the sermon, really. It continues to chapter 7, verse 12. Let me show you how it's bookended. So in your Bibles, chapter 5, verse 17, there you've got the phrase, abolish the law or the prophets.

Do you see that? Do not think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets. And then at the end, that is at chapter 7, verse 12, we have that same phrase. So over the page, right-hand corner there, he says, so in everything you do, do to others what you would have them do to you.

For this sums up the law and the prophets. And that little phrase, law and the prophets, the word prophets doesn't come up anywhere in between. So those two phrases kind of bookend this section, which is teaching on how to live righteously.

And then after that, after the bulk of the sermon, it's really Jesus calling us to decide. So for example, in chapter 7, verse 13, we've got a choice, two ways to live. We can either go through the narrow gate or the wide gate.

[3 : 37] Then over the page, in chapter 7, verse 15, we can either be like the true prophets or the false prophets, or the true disciples or the false disciples, verse 21. Or we can be like, verse 24, the wise or the foolish builders.

You see, there's two ways to live in each little episode, each little saying that Jesus gives. But the bulk of the sermon is about righteous living, the righteous living that is to surpass that of the Pharisees.

And that means we are to practice the law. For Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fill it. See verse 17? So come back with me to chapter 5, verse 17, if you're not there already, and we'll have a look at this little passage.

Today, chapter 5, verse 17, Jesus says, do not think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets. No, I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Now, the law and the prophets is another way of saying the whole Old Testament.

Jesus is saying that he has come not to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. Now, what does the word fulfill mean? Well, it means to complete, to bring the Old Testament to completion.

[4 : 47] In other words, Jesus is the conclusion of the Old Testament story. He is the one the Old Testament points to and finds its ultimate meaning in. You might remember that Jesus says something similar after he was raised from the dead.

On the slide, there's a couple of verses from Luke chapter 24. After Jesus was raised from the dead, he says, this is what I told you, disciples, while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms.

Then he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures. You see, everything written in the Old Testament points to Jesus. It finds its ultimate fulfillment and meaning in Jesus.

For example, the Old Testament spoke about prophets and priests and kings and sacrifices and so on. Well, as you know, they all find their conclusion in Jesus. He fulfills those categories, if you like.

For in Jesus, we have the ultimate prophet through whom God speaks to us in these last days. Jesus is the true promised king, descended from David, who will rule forever because he's been raised to new life.

[5 : 57] Jesus is also the ultimate high priest through whom we come to God. And Jesus is the perfect sacrifice who makes it possible to come to God. You see, Jesus fulfills all these Old Testament categories and promises.

Even how we relate to the Old Testament law is to be understood through Jesus. And this matters because Jesus says we cannot ignore the Old Testament law. Why? Well, because he doesn't.

You see, in verse 17, he's not come to abolish the law and the prophets. But rather, verse 18, he says, the law is going to stick around. He's going to fulfill it, but the law is going to stick around.

Verse 18 says, For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

Do you see what he's saying? We cannot ignore the Old Testament law because Jesus has not abolished it. And what's more, it's not going to pass away until heaven and earth pass away, until God has accomplished everything he promised, like sending Jesus to return and establish a home of righteousness here on earth.

[7 : 06] And until that all happens, not the smallest part of the law will pass away. It's here to stay. And so we cannot ignore it. Rather, we are to practice it, he says.

See verse 19? 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.

See, Jesus says we're not to set aside. It's a similar word to the word abolish in verse 17. Even the smallest command, instead we're to practice them.

But what does this mean? After all, there are Old Testament commands which say, on the first slide, tells us to sacrifice one male goat for a sin offering and two lambs each a year old for a fellowship offering.

So we're to keep sacrificing our pets. Take Lenny the lamb and sacrifice him. Or, I don't know, who likes bacon and eggs? Well, the next law would prevent us having half of that.

[8 : 14] So the next slide. The pig is also unclean, although it has a split hoof. It does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses. Is Jesus saying in verse 19, then we have to obey this and therefore eggs only?

Or what about the next one? The next slide from Leviticus 19. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. So does that mean pure wool blends only?

No cotton polyester? What's Jesus saying here? Now, we know instinctively that we don't have to obey those laws, don't we? But there are other laws like do not murder that we know we should obey.

And what's more, Jesus is saying in verse 19 that we're not to set aside even the least of these commands. And so are we to obey the Old Testament law or not?

And if not, if it's just some laws, how do we know which ones? We need to understand what it means for Jesus to fulfill the law and the prophets.

[9 : 24] And it means, firstly, we no longer have to obey the Old Testament law to get right with God. Rather, we are to trust in Jesus who fulfills the law for us.

We read on the next slide from Galatians 2. We know that a man is not declared righteous by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Now, I think we all know that, don't we?

But the second thing it means is that we're no longer, in one level, we no longer have to obey any of the Old Testament law. Even the Ten Commandments at one level. Because Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament and brought it to completion.

Instead, we are to obey Jesus. He's the one that pointed to. Paul writes this on the next slide from Romans 7. He says, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

In other words, we are to obey Jesus now with the Spirit's help and not the Old Testament law. But the thing is, Jesus actually wants us to do what was at the very heart of the Old Testament law anyway.

[10 : 36] Jesus wants us to love God and love our neighbor. Later on in Matthew's Gospel, it reads on the next slide, verses that I'm sure you're very familiar with.

Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And notice the last part. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. You see, Jesus is saying, at the heart of the Old Testament law, the thing that drives every Old Testament commandment, even the least of them, is love.

Love for our maker and love for our neighbor. All the commandments, including the least of them, hang on those two commandments. And so while we don't have to obey the Old Testament law, we will practice those laws.

Even the least commandments, if they help us to love God and our neighbor. I think this is how it's working here. Jesus is saying, do not set aside even the least of these commands by seeking to love God and love our neighbor.

[11 : 53] And this is actually how we work out which commands we are to stick with and practice. For example, eating pork. If it's going to be unloving to God or to our neighbor, then I take it we don't eat pork.

We obey the law. Your neighbor might be Jewish or Muslim or something like that. There may be situations where it's unloving to eat it. And so we would obey that Old Testament law. But there are other situations where it's not unloving to eat pork.

And so therefore we don't have to obey that particular Old Testament law. But at the heart of it, we're obeying the law of love, which stands behind all the Old Testament laws.

And in that way, we are not setting aside even the least of these commandments. Because we're obeying the heart behind the law, you see. What's more, this principle of love also helps us to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees, which Jesus goes on to say in verse 20.

He says in verse 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. Now, this is an extraordinary statement.

[13 : 07] We normally think the Pharisees are the bad guys of the Bible. And at one level, they are. So when we read that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, we think, easy.

But for the disciples back then, this would have been a shocking statement. I mean, out of all people, the Pharisees were the most righteous looking people in society.

They were the people who were most serious about keeping God's law. In fact, they even created more than 300 extra laws to keep God's Old Testament laws. So to say that your righteousness had to surpass or exceed the Pharisees to enter the kingdom will be like saying that your singing here at church has to be better than Pavarotti for you to be allowed to sing here at church.

It's ludicrous, isn't it? Or just play basketball in the hall. Then your skills have to be better than Michael Jordan if you want to be allowed in to play basketball in the hall. It's kind of what is happening here.

Jesus is saying we cannot enter the kingdom unless our righteousness surpasses that of the most righteous looking people of his day. It's an extraordinary statement. So what does Jesus mean then?

[14 : 18] How can we enter the kingdom? Well, some say that Jesus is simply pointing out the fact that we cannot surpass the Pharisees in righteousness. So don't bother trying. Just forget it and go straight to Jesus.

Now, it's right that we go to Jesus and trust in him to be made right with God. But that's not quite what Jesus is getting at here. See, Jesus is teaching his disciples what it means to live out kingdom lives, to live out right living righteousness.

He expects them to surpass that of the Pharisees. I mean, it's why he's giving this sermon so they can live these kind of lives, these righteous lives.

And so how are we to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees then? Well, Jesus doesn't explicitly say, rather he shows us with some examples. So have a look at the first example in verse 21 to 22.

Jesus says, Now here, Jesus is claiming the authority of God.

[15 : 35] He kind of says, I tell you now. And it's no wonder the crowds are amazed that he's teaching at the end of the sermon. But the thing I want you to notice is that when Jesus says, I tell you, he's actually broadening the command to include a more wide application, isn't he?

So, for example, murder here is not just physical killing, but it also includes mental killing or killing with our words, so to speak. And then Jesus repeats this pattern with some other examples.

Now, we're not going to go through all these examples now. We're going to go through them in the coming weeks, but just see if he can pick up the pattern. So verse 27, have a look there. You've heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery.

See, it's not just physical. It's broadened, isn't it?

The application is broadened to include more mental and so on. Or verse 31, it has been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.

[16 : 37] But I tell you, and dot, dot, dot. Do you see the pattern? Or verse 33, again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.

But I tell you, do not swear, just tell the truth. And on it goes. Do you see the pattern? Each time Jesus broadens the Old Testament law and applies it in a greater way.

And that's how our righteousness is to surpass the Pharisees. You see, the Pharisees thought that if everyone just kept the law, then God would end Israel's judgment.

He would kick out the Romans and restore the kingdom. But they got so carried away with keeping the law that they forgot about pleasing the one who gave the law, God. In other words, they got so caught up with the letter of the law that they neglected the heart of the law, which, as Jesus said, is love.

Oh, we see this later on in Matthew's gospel, where the Jews asked Jesus, is it lawful to heal someone on the Sabbath? You know, they're thinking, no, it's breaking the law.

[17 : 44] And so Jesus heals the man with the shriveled hand and says it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Love is behind the law, you see. Love is at the heart of the law.

But the Pharisees got caught up with the letter of the law because they wanted God to kick out the Romans and restore his kingdom. And when you just want to obey the law to get something or to avoid something rather than out of love, then you will always look for the minimum you have to do, the minimum requirement instead of the maximum application.

Let me illustrate. Take my son, for example, who I mentioned at the start of the sermon. When I asked him to put his shoes away, he threw them down the hallway and into the middle of his bedroom floor. You see, he did the minimum requirement.

He obeyed, but the minimum. All right? They were in his room, but it was the minimum requirement so as to avoid punishment and get back to the TV. That's what the Pharisees were doing.

Now, my son is not that bad, I should say. But if he was really wanting to love me with his whole heart, then he would not do the minimum requirement of my command, but he would do the maximum application.

[18 : 56] He would pick up his shoes, walk down the hallway, open his cupboard, put them neatly next to his other shoes, shut the cupboard and then walk out. And I would wake up and it was all a dream. But that's what Jesus is getting at here.

You see, if we're to fulfill even the least commandment, the love behind even the least commandment, then we will seek to do the maximum application.

Take tax time, for example. When we fill in a tax returns, do we look for the least amount of tax to pay to avoid getting in trouble from the tax office? Or do we think, well, God says to pay taxes and the government needs money to run the country.

Let me see if there's any other taxes that I can pay. We naturally look for the minimum requirement, don't we?

Not the maximum application, because we want to obey the law, but not obey it too much. But you see, that's the heart of the Pharisee. And Jesus is saying we're to surpass, exceed that kind of legalistic righteousness.

[20 : 08] We're not to do the minimum requirement, but that maximum application. We're not just to avoid physical murder, but we're to avoid getting angry unjustly as well. We're not just to avoid swearing falsely, but we're to tell the truth all the time.

And so on and so on. And it's in this way that we truly love God and our neighbor. It's in this way that we will be shown to be God's kingdom people, who, as we heard from our first reading, have had our hearts cleansed by God.

And God's spirit put in us to move us to keep his whole law to the maximum. It's by having this surpassing righteousness that we will stand out as salt, light, and a city on a hill.

Different to the Pharisees and the world around us that seeks to do just the minimum requirement. And when we stand out, well, sometimes we'll be persecuted for it.

But others, other times people will see our righteous lives and praise our Father in heaven. This is part of how we are to fish for people, you see, and bring them to Christ.

[21 : 18] I don't know if you remember that really old campaign, do the right thing, put it in the bin, something like that, vaguely. I grew up when I was big.

And it came back in resurgence for a year in Sydney when I was living there. And Sydney had a big campaign to kind of clean up the streets and put rubbish in the bin and so on. And I've mentioned to you before my friend Stuart.

Well, Stuart decided to take his girlfriend down to the park and to pick up rubbish. Not the most romantic date I can think of. But why was he doing that?

Well, because he wanted to obey the law to the maximum. You see, he was seeking to love God by obeying the authorities. And he didn't do the minimum requirement of just putting his own rubbish in the bin.

Instead, he sought to do the maximum application of putting other people's dirty rubbish in the bin. Now, when I heard that, my first thought was, that's a bit excessive. But that is the point.

[22 : 15] We're to have excessive righteousness. Righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees. For then we will stand out as different. And when our friends found out, some of them hassled him, you know, persecuted him.

But others stopped to take stock at the seriousness with which he followed God. And who knows, perhaps some of them even now are praising God because of him and his righteous, his excessive righteous life.

This is the challenge for us in the Sermon on the Mount. And in the coming weeks, Jesus will unpack what that looks like in different areas of our life.

But for now, let's pray that we won't fall into the trap of the Pharisee who seeks the minimum requirement. But that we would genuinely love God and love our neighbor and seek to do the maximum that we might stand out as disciples of Christ.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for these words of Jesus, though they are very challenging.

[23 : 24] Father, we pray that you would help us to remember your love for us, that we would love you and love our neighbor.

Father, that we would seek to stand out as your disciples, living lives of excessive righteousness, that people may see our good deeds and praise not us, but you.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.