

Jesus and the Law
Matthew 5:17-20

Turn to Matthew 5. One of the questions that Christians ask each other is “what about the Old Testament? Does the Old Testament count, or not? If only some parts apply to us, how should we decide which parts? How should Gentile children of God now understand the OT?”

That was a very big question in New Testament times, and it comes up in many NT writings. That’s what Jesus talks about in our Scripture today. Different NT writers talk about it in different ways. We’ve spoken about this many times.

The short story is that the NT writers see themselves building solidly on the OT. What happened in Christ was all predicted in the OT, and the NT writers use the OT again and again to teach and guide NT Gentile churches. I want to say that part again: the NT writers use the OT regularly to teach and guide NT Gentile churches.

I was taught that the OT was no longer much use, and we were fortunate to be rid of it. It was just about that strong. Being a NT teacher changed my mind, because NT writers knew the OT, and loved it and used it.

One of the things that plays into what the NT says about the OT is who the writer thought would read the writing. Most of the NT books were written for Gentile churches, but three at least were written for Jewish believers. Throughout the first century, there were churches that were entirely or at least mostly Jewish.

Matthew was written for churches like that. Mark and Luke and John were for Gentiles, but Matt for Jews. Hebrews was also written for Jewish Christians, and so was James. I’m pretty sure 1 Peter was as well, although that one is debated. But Matthew was written for Jewish believers.

Nothing about the coming of the Messiah said that Israel would stop obeying Moses. In the OT, once the Messiah came, God’s people would be more faithful than ever to the law, it would be written on their hearts, and they would be hungry to obey God’s laws and ways.

So Jesus begins, in 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.”*

This probably comes up because of the beatitudes, because the beatitudes promise the kingdom of heaven to those who live in certain ways, but those ways are *not* how those Jews understood the law to read. The beatitudes sounded different than the Law. Let’s read the good news again:

*Good news from God for the poor in spirit, yours is the kingdom of heaven.
Good news from God for those who mourn, you will be comforted.*

*Good news from God for the meek, you will inherit the earth.
Good news from God for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, you will be filled.
Good news from God for the merciful, you will be shown mercy.
Good news from God for the pure in heart, you will see God.
Good news from God for the peacemakers, you will be called children of God.*

So the question Jesus expects is: “Jesus, are you getting rid of the Law? This sounds different than the Law. Are you teaching a different kind of righteousness than Moses taught us?” In one word, the answer of Jesus is “NO!” In two words, “certainly not” or “definitely not” or “absolutely not.” Are you getting rid of the Law? No! A different righteousness? No!

I Came to Fulfill - 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.

Jesus came to fulfill the Scriptures. That’s a little different than teach the Scriptures. He came to fulfill them. Jesus treats the Law and the Prophets as one big promise. He’s making a big claim for himself. He’s saying, “I am what the Law and the Prophets promise. I came to finish what the Scriptures started, I came to end what the Scripture began.”

I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. The last beatitude said, “*Good news from God when you are persecuted **because of me.***” Now that makes more sense. Jesus will finish what the Law and the Prophets began. Jews who believed that about Jesus got in a lot of trouble with Jews who did not believe in Jesus, as we see in the book of Acts.

People sometimes treat the sermon on the mount as only excellent moral and ethical teaching, but nothing more. They don’t see why we need to follow Jesus to do this. Well, anyone who wants can decide to live this way, but this sermon is not just moral teaching. Jesus builds this teaching around himself. He is the authoritative voice of God several places in this sermon.

The beatitudes, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the merciful, and so on, are the fulfillment of the Law. That’s the basic truth here. Jesus is not getting rid of the law or the prophets, not at all, he’s telling us what they were after all along. Beatitude people are keeping the law. That’s what Jesus says here, pure and simple.

Anyone who lives by the beatitudes, and the sermon on the mount, is living by what the law and the prophets meant to be teaching. Micah 6:8 - “*What does the Lord require of you? To act fairly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*” Act fairly, love mercy, walk humbly with God – that’s a fine summary of the beatitudes.

The Law will all happen – 5:18

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 it all happens.

Notice the last four words: *until it all happens*. Again, Jesus treats the law like a promise, a prediction of something that will happen. It's much like "I came to fulfill the Law" in v17.

Jesus holds the Law in high regard here, even the details. I don't understand all of this, how this actually works out, nor does anyone else, but the basic idea is clear. The Law was aiming at something, and none of it is going away until I fulfill it all, until it all happens.

Sometimes Jesus exaggerated to make a point. We call that "hyperbole." We are not sure we should ever take Scripture that way, so I will illustrate. Jesus said that when we pray, we should go into a closet and pray so no one else could hear, only God.

But his own apostles in Acts often led others in prayer, and there are prayer meeting in Acts. Jesus didn't mean we must always pray in a closet. He meant don't pray so people will hear, pray so God will hear. That's part of being pure in heart.

Jesus also said that when we give money, we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Think about that. Your left hand should be in your pocket, or in a mitten, when you give? It takes two hands to take cash out of your wallet, it takes two hands to get out your check book and write a check. Are we disobeying the Lord?

No, he just means don't give to impress people, give to worship God. That's part of being pure in heart. In Acts, people brought money and set it at the feet of the apostles. We're told about Barnabas, who sold a good chunk of land and gave the money to the apostles. Left hand and right hand and whole congregation knew all about that. Jesus exaggerated to make a point.

So when Jesus says "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear" he's probably exaggerating a bit, he's making clear that he's no enemy of the Law, he is for it, beginning to end.

In vv17-18 Jesus shows great respect for the Law of Moses, but more as promise than as laws, more as prediction than rules to live by. And whatever it is that the Law is promising, Jesus fulfills it, that much is clear.

Don't set aside any command, or teach that to others - 5:19

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.

Sets aside a command and teaches others the same – we’re talking here about someone deliberately deciding to break the Law of Moses, and teaching others to do the same. Jesus wants no part of that.

On the other hand, in Matthew 15, Jesus said that nothing going into a person through their mouth could defile them. That is not what Moses said. Moses gave them strict food laws from God. That’s why I think Jesus is exaggerating to make a point, and that’s why it’s important to take Jesus seriously when he treats the law like a promise or prediction he came to fulfill.

Past the Righteousness of Pharisees

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.

This is a scary verse, isn’t it? What is it that Pharisees do not have, that followers of Jesus have, and we certainly must have it, to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The answer is the beatitudes. Good news from God for the poor in spirit, good news from God for the merciful, and so on. The Pharisees, like Jesus, held the Law and the Prophets as the words of God. They were agreed on that. But in their enthusiasm for the whole Law, they got lost in the details, and couldn’t see the central teaching. Other Scriptures make this clear.

Matthew 22, the two great commands: *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and 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.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Love God, love the people in your life the way you love yourself. The most important things.

Matthew 23:23-24 - *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.*

“You law teachers and Pharisees, you neglect fairness, and mercy, and faithfulness, you neglect the important teachings of the Law. You should have done that, without neglecting the tithe of your spices. That was good, too. Don’t stop that. But those kinds of things are not the center, fairness and mercy and faithfulness are the important matters of the Law.” They lost that.

Luke 18:9-14 - *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

It was good that the Pharisee was not a robber or an adulterer. It was good that he fasted twice a week, and tithed faithfully. It is good that he’s not a tax collector, make no mistake. But there’s no poor in spirit there, and no mercy. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful. Those things are the most important.

If the Pharisee had said, “God, you’ve been so good to me, you’ve rescued me and helped me. Please show the same kindness and mercy to this tax collector, be gracious and help him,” that would have been much better.

Matthew 7:12 - *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.* Treat others as you’d like to be treated. This is the Law and the Prophets.

Micah 6:8 - *What does the Lord require of you? To act fairly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.* That’s from the prophets. The Pharisees tithed the spices that grew in their yard, which Jesus respected. But this line from the prophet Micah did not steer their lives.

So, people, there are many religious habits that are good, but be careful. In my online class this week, we had a discussion about reading your Bible every day. Some of my students feel godly because they read the Bible every day, and most feel like they are failing the Lord, because they cannot get themselves to read the Bible every day.

Reading the Bible is a good thing. There are very few days when I do not read the Bible. I would be lost without it. But remember that it has only been possible since the printing press a few hundred years ago. For God’s people over the ages, it was impossible, ordinary people never had Bibles, so it simply cannot be an essential part of pleasing the Lord.

What does the Lord require of you? Act fairly, love mercy, walk humbly with God. In everything, in *everything*, do to others what you’d like them to do to you, for this is the law and the prophets.

Jesus is very clear – as far as he’s concerned, someone who always treats people well and never does daily Bible reading is far head of someone who reads their Bible every day and is often unkind toward other people. That would be the righteousness of the Pharisees and law teachers.

Reading your Bible is good. But read the beatitudes to see the righteousness that the Lord is after. Religious life gets cluttered, my brothers and sisters, and the beatitudes take us back to the heart of what the Lord wants, how we stand before God, and how we treat the people around us.

Beatitude People Sin Every Day

By now some of you are getting uncomfortable about your sins and about all the ways in which you are not good followers, and you are not very good beatitude people. Maybe you've been uncomfortable about that through this whole message.

There's good news. Mt 1:21 says Jesus will save his people from their sins. The key is to be one of Jesus' people. But his people do sin, and Jesus saves his people from their sins. The Lord's Prayer is written in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. It is a daily prayer that includes asking God to forgive our sins.

Jesus in the Lord's Prayer is remarkably comfortable with the truly righteous needing God's forgiveness every day. We will need it from God, every day, and we will need it from each other, every day, and we will forgive one another every day. I will need God's forgiveness, and I will need to forgive you, and you will need to forgive me. That's how the kingdom works.

Followers of Jesus, who show it by being beatitude people, sin every day, and God forgives them every day. We are not free to take the beatitudes casually. Take them seriously, because that's what makes us Jesus' people. But such people still sin every day.

In Matt 26:28, Jesus says, This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' followers need to have their sins forgiven, and Jesus died so that could happen. So keep clear that the righteousness that goes past the Pharisees and law-teachers includes needing forgiveness every day. Jesus saves his people from their sins.

Do such people earn the kingdom of heaven, or deserve it? Far from it. Such people are poor in spirit, and hunger and thirst for righteousness. They don't deserve it, and know that. They receive the kingdom of heaven because God is pleased to give it to them, because God is always urging people to come to his Son, so he can give them the kingdom.

Regular failure is not the problem. Not being hungry for the righteousness of the beatitudes, that is the problem. But if we aim ourselves at this, God takes care of the rest. Amen.

PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, we get this. We begin to see what kind of righteousness you are after. Thank you that Jesus was so clear. Thank you for showing us plainly what it is that you value and prize. You have not left us in doubt. And it all flows from your own kindness, your lavish gift of the kingdom itself to us who are poor in spirit.

Thank you for offering us the kingdom, thank you for daily forgiveness, thank you for showing us how to live. Forgive our many failures, help us to forgive one another. May your Holy Spirit renew our minds, our speech, our actions, so that we pursue this. These are the fruit of the Spirit, and we want your Spirit to produce that fruit in us. You have begun a good work in us, we are counting on you to complete it. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To you who are able to keep us from stumbling, and to bring us into your glorious presence, without fault and with great joy— to you our only God and Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.