

The Fulfillment of the Law

Introduction

The gospel is disruptive.

The news of Jesus' birth disrupts the courts of power.

The ministry of John the Baptist disrupts the status quo from the wilderness.

And at Jesus' baptism, the literally veil that separates earth and heaven is rent as the Spirit rests upon Christ and the voice of the Father declares His good pleasure!

So it shouldn't be a surprise that one of the questions that might arise in relation to Jesus is whether he is doing away with what has come before.

Everything is being disrupted so does that mean that the Law and the Prophets are going to be disrupted too?

Jesus answers this question in his Sermon on the Mount that we will look at this morning.

As we consider Jesus' answer to this question I have divided my sermon into the following three imperatives:

1. Exceed the Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees
2. Exit the Vicious Cycle
3. Be Transformed by Following Christ

Exceed the Righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees (vv. 17-20)

In verse 17 Jesus directly addresses the question, "***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.***"

While Jesus' ministry is disruptive, it isn't revolutionary.

Jesus isn't looking to do away with what came before.

Rather, what Jesus teaches here in his Sermon on the Mount is that he is the "fulfillment" of the Law and the Prophets.

"Fulfillment"

That word "fulfillment" is a significant one.

It literally means "to give the true or complete meaning to something".

Jesus and his ministry do not invalidate the authority of the Law but give the law its true and complete meaning.

Jesus is the truth and meaning that the Law and the Prophets have always been straining and pointing toward.

To understand this we must first understand something that has always been true about the Law in the Old Testament.

The Law itself was never static, it was always pointing beyond itself to its fulfillment.

One of the clearest ways to see this is the way that the Law itself is developed and matured by later places in the Old Testament.

In many ways, the Psalms are rightly understood as a type of fulfillment of the Law.

Like the Law of Moses, the Psalms also have five books.

But more than that, the Psalms is the fulfillment of [Dt. 17:18-20](#).

In [Dt. 17](#) the king of Israel is commanded to make his own copy of the Law so that he might meditate on it.

In many ways, the Psalms are the result of the king's meditation on God's law.

As king David meditates on God's Law he writes the Law in musical form.

The Law is supposed to mature from plain spoken words to glorified music on the lips of God's people.

Similar things happens in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

Throughout the Prophets there are repeated references to the Law.

But these references offer a certain interpretation and application of the Law that works similarly to what Jesus does here in [Matthew 5](#).

So when Jesus says that he is "the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets" he is saying that he is the ultimate end goal of what has been developing throughout the history of the Law and Prophets.

Exceeding Righteousness

Because Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets his disciples must live in obedience to the commandments of the Law.

This is what Jesus is getting at in vv. 18-19.

Indeed, in verse 20, Jesus tells his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if they are to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The Scribes and Pharisees were those in Jesus' day who were known for scrupulously observing the Law.

This means that, at first glance, Jesus is calling for his followers to be some sort of super Pharisees or super scribes.

But when we take what we have learned about Jesus being the "fulfillment" of the Law, then we can begin to understand what Jesus means by this.

What's more, we can begin to live as followers of Christ who walk in a righteousness that truly does exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

In fact, this is what Jesus teaches in the remainder of our passage.

In verses 21-48, Jesus walks through the entire second table of the Ten Commandments.

Jesus' teaching on "anger" harkens to the sixth commandment on murder.

The portion on "lust" harkens to the seventh commandment adultery.

Jesus' teaching on "divorce" builds on [Deuteronomy 24](#)'s expansion on the 8th commandment about theft.

His words on "oaths" refer to the ninth commandment on bearing false witness.

His teaching on "vengeance" harkens to the tenth commandment on covetousness.

Finally, he gives the summary statement of the whole Law & Prophets to love one's neighbor as oneself.

As Jesus walks through the second table of the Law he shows his disciples how they are to walk in a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

He does this, as Alastair Roberts has pointed out, by first revealing a vicious cycle that results when sin takes a foothold in your heart.

Then, Jesus presents a way of "transformation" to guide his disciples in the way of righteousness.

Exit the Vicious Cycle (vv. 21-47)

Let's begin by considering the vicious cycle.

In [Romans 7](#) Paul explains in part what Jesus teaches about this vicious cycle in the Sermon on the Mount.

According to Paul, the Law is holy, righteous and good.

But in our sin, our response to the Law leads to death.

Here in [Matthew 5](#), Jesus begins each section by stating the law:

You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not swear falsely.

However, after stating the Law, Jesus shows how our sin leads us into a vicious cycle that the law itself cannot heal.

The law teaches that you shall not murder.

But the reality is that when you have anger in your heart against your brother, the seeds of murder are already present.

The same is true regarding adultery.

The Law teaches that adultery is forbidden.

But the reality is that looking upon a woman with lustful intent means that adultery has taken root in your heart and moving to express itself in dangerous ways.

When the New Testament speaks of the Law it never disparages the law.

Rather, what it acknowledges the Law's inability to bring about the righteousness of God.

The commands, "Do not murder", "Do not commit adultery", "Do not steal", "Do not bear false witness", and "Do not covet", can do nothing to solve the problem of our murderous, adulterous, thieving, false, and covetous hearts.

The Law aggravates the sins in our hearts.

The anger of our hearts against others wants to grow into murder.

The lust in our hearts towards others wants to grow into adultery.

The covetousness in our hearts wants to grow into theft.

And the falseness in our hearts wants to grow into a murderous tongue.

This is the problem that Jesus speaks to here.

This is the problem that the Law cannot solve, but the Law itself has always pointed to the solution as it has pointed to Christ.

Be Transformed by Following Christ (vv. 21-47)

And this brings us to our final point which is to be transformed by following Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus not only points out the vicious cycle created by our sin, he also presents a way of transformation.

Murder

Jesus begins with murder by showing that the issues goes beyond the surface.

The anger in our hearts makes us liable to judgement because, if not dealt with, it will manifest itself.

Murder in the heart begins a vicious cycle that ends in death.

This is the story of Cain and Abel.

God told Abel that sin was crouching at the door ready to devour him.

So what is the way forward?

The solution to the murderous anger that is festering in your heart is to go and make peace with your brother and to quickly come to terms with with your accuser.

The Spirit of God works to transform the anger in your heart as he guides you through the way of transformation that Jesus describes.

Adultery

This is true for all the things that Jesus speaks to.

The Law forbids adultery, but the reality is that lust in the heart is a seed that wants to grow.

But Jesus provides guidance for dealing with this sin in the heart.

Jesus says to take radical action to address the cause of the temptation.

He says to be unsparing in how active we should be in this regard.

As you take radical action in dealing with the sin of the heart, you find that the Spirit is already at work transforming and sanctifying you.

This isn't, "do your part" so that God will do "his part".

No, as you follow Christ's commands, you find that the Spirit is already at work, prompting you to follow Christ in the first place!

Divorce

When we come to divorce, Jesus' teaching works from the other direction.

With murder and adultery, Jesus speaks about what the law forbids.

Here with divorce, Jesus speaks about what the Law permits according to [Deuteronomy 24](#).

But Jesus here seems to present a law that is stricter in some sense than [Deuteronomy 24](#).

Again Jesus is calling his followers to see the root of sin in the heart and to be transformed.

If you go back and read [Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#) you will find a vicious cycle.

A man divorces his wife and then she becomes another man's wife.

Then the second man divorces her.

Deuteronomy speaks about what is legal in a situation where things are already broken.

So how does the vicious cycle of sin come to an end?

It is to understand that God created marriage to be good and lasting.

Of course their are grounds for a lawful divorce.

But the way of the kingdom is committed to seeking reconciliation where at all possible.

Oaths

From divorce Jesus moves on to oaths.

The law teaches that you are not to swear falsely but shall perform what you have sworn to the Lord.

Jesus ministered in a time when many did swear falsely about their oaths.

When Jesus pronounced his woes on the scribes and Pharisees in [Matthew 23](#), he points out the various ticks they had set up to get out of their oaths.

But again Jesus presents a way of transformation:

Instead of making oaths, his disciples should simply engage in truthful speech.

The transforming way of Christ is to live in the truth and have no need for oaths.

Retaliation

Jesus goes on to speak about retaliation.

The Law taught the principle of an “eye for an eye”.

This was ultimately a limit on how much someone could require of another when they were wrong.

But this leads to a vicious cycle:

Because of sin, the principle of an “eye for eye” lends itself to resisting evil by evil means.

If you are slapped on the cheek you can return with one slap.

But will you be perfectly measured in your justice?

When you exact your pound of flesh will that end the conflict?

The answer is “no”.

This is what you find in gang wars or mafia conflicts.

One side kills a member of the other side and retaliation never settles the matter, it escalates it.

Jesus advocates not taking what is your due.

Resist the vengeance that is your right.

Arrest the process of the vicious cycle before it begins.

Even if it means taking the second slap on your own cheek.

Love Your Enemies

Jesus concludes with loving one's enemies.

Jesus quotes from [Lev 19:18](#) which calls Israel to “love your neighbor as yourself”.

But Jesus adds to it something that is not found in the Law, “and hate your enemy”.

Jesus is presenting a commonly held belief of his day.

When God called Israel to love their neighbor (other children of Israel), this didn't mean that they weren't to hate their enemies (like the Romans).

Of course, such a perspective will inevitably lead to a vicious cycle.

Hatred of one's enemies allows hatred to fester in one's heart against those whom God has made.

The one who hates their enemies is sceptical of God's ability to love their enemies.

But Jesus presents the way of transformation:

Instead of hating your enemies, he calls you to pray for them.

If you do this you will be like your Father in heaven.

If you love your enemies and pray for them you will truly be peacemakers, who will be called sons of God.

In doing this you become like God who loved us while we were his enemies.

Learning to love your enemies is the transforming way of Christ.

For in Christ, God loved his enemies and gave himself for them.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!