

Matthew Round / General

Matthew: Christ The Promised King / Law; Law in the NT; Teaching; Obedience / Matthew 5:17–20

Intro me

So we stepped away from Matthew's gospel - his biography of Jesus - for a few weeks to celebrate Easter, the critical foundation for our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now we're going to dive back in so let me give you a quick reminder of where we are. So, "previously, in Matthew's gospel..."

So we're looking at Jesus' famous block of teaching called the "Sermon on the Mount". We saw Jesus is setting out the **blueprint for his Kingdom of transformed hearts**. The blueprint for his Kingdom of transformed hearts. And he begins by encouraging the hopeless, the hurting, the powerless, those who long for things to be different: things will be made right. In fact, God is going to turn this world upside down. Our hunger for rightness will be filled. How? He'll change the world out there through changing hearts in here - inside his people.

We saw there'll be evidence of this change, **shoots beginning to poke up** from the seed of a changed heart he's planted in the stony ground of our lives: a people who are increasingly merciful, pure, peacemaking. We saw some will hate and oppose this, like they always have - but these salty, different people, with the light of Christ inside, will shine, shine together; and others, seeing the good that's shining out, will know and praise the source: **our Father in heaven**.

Matthew 5:16 NIV

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

That's the setup for the short, but massively important passage we're going to be thinking about together today - good deeds from his transformed people which bring glory to God - their source.

Today's passage is like the **foundation**, the underlying principle, for all the practical teaching that will follow describing those good deeds - setting out the details of life in Jesus' Kingdom. So it's really important we try and get clear about what Jesus is saying here - and what he isn't saying.

Come with me to Matthew chapter 5 and verse 17. Matthew 5:17 and that's page 969 in these blue bibles. Matthew chapter 5 - look for the big 5 - verse 17, tiny weeny 17. Page 969. And Susan's reading for us this morning.

Mt 5:17-20

Matthew 5:17–20 NIV

"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. 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. 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. 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.

There's a lot to scratch your head about in that short passage, let me tell you. But not all of it is difficult to understand. So let's start at the other end of the spectrum instead: let's start with the stuff that's totally clear, right on the surface, no space for doubt.

First, Jesus has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, agreed? That's clear, right? **Jesus even repeats himself** for emphasis. The "Law and the Prophets" is a summary term for all the Jewish scriptures - our whole Old Testament. That's not abolished. Not nullified. Not cancelled.

Why does Jesus tell us that and rub it in? He must think it's pretty likely we'll get the wrong end of the stick; That we'll be thinking something has happened to all that Old Testament stuff, perhaps it's past its best-before date so we should chuck it out as no longer fit for purpose? But if that's what we're thinking, Jesus tells us we're dead wrong.

He's super-clear here: the Jewish scriptures? They're not going anywhere. No edits. No redaction. No cropping. No touch up. No filters. Every detail there - every smallest part of each written letter - is staying put until the show's over. Until everything's done, until heaven and earth disappear, he says.

That "Heaven and earth" phrase encapsulates the whole of creation - remember right at the very beginning of the Bible "God created the heavens and the earth." Well, the Jewish scriptures aren't changing until this creation itself is gone. Look around: still some earth here? Yep. Well the the Old Testament is still here too - it stands down to the smallest detail.

Clear thing number one: The Old Testament is not cancelled; not expired or repealed.

Clear thing number two: People are meant to do and teach these commands, not set aside even the least of them. Again, that's pretty clear? **Mt 5:19** dishonour for those who set aside even a seemingly minor command; honour for those who deliver, who perform, who do these things.

Matthew 5:19 NIV

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.

Now if you've read much of the Old Testament or, to just pick on one example, you

like bacon, this might be a little worrying (see, the Law commanded no Pork). We're getting into tricky territory here, right? But still, I think we have to admit that Jesus seems pretty clear.

Some commentators want to take the phrase "**these commands**" and connect that not to the commands of the Jewish law, the commands coming from the Law and the Prophets that Jesus was talking about just seconds ago, but instead to the commands that Jesus hasn't even spoken yet, the ones he is about to give us instead which are something quite different.

I find it really hard to believe that's what Jesus meant here. Having gone on specifically about the Law and the Prophets, having emphasised how there's no way even a tiny bit of that is going anywhere, then to use the phrase "these commands" without it connecting to one of the principal and best known components of those unexpired scriptures, the commands of God, just doesn't seem plausible to me.

In fact, when Jesus closes this whole section of teaching, or commands, with the so-called **golden rule** of "do to other what you would have them do to you" he tells us straight up that command is a summary of this very same Law and Prophets; literally he says that "is" the Law and the Prophets. I don't think we can plausibly say Jesus' commands are something different to the commands contained in the Law and Prophets if Jesus himself equates his commands with them.

Matthew 7:12 NIV

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

So "these commands" that we're meant to actually do come from the Law which always stands. Also notice here the emphasis Jesus puts not just on doing, but on teaching - **repeated twice**, not just a careless detail. He's talking about more than just personally embracing these commands, it's about calling others to do that as well.

Now don't panic. We're not done. We're just collecting up the clear things first, remember? **So clear thing one:** The Old Testament is not cancelled or repealed.

Clear thing two: People are meant to do and teach these commands.

Now, if you were in Jesus' original audience, and you heard him set out these two clear things, and you were thinking about the tiny details of the law, thinking about people who practice and teach them, you know who would have come to mind? The Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

Who knows the details down to the letter of the Law? Who practices them, even the least of the commands? Later on, Jesus will tell us Pharisees tithe - that is, they set aside a tenth for God - even the herbs and spices in their food. The Pharisees do it! Who teaches this stuff, the law, the prophets? Well the clue's in the name, duh. "teachers.. of the law.." teach the law. So the Pharisees and the teachers of the law match up exactly to what's clear here.

You'd be thinking they must be the apple of Jesus' eye, then. These Pharisees who

treasure the details of the Law. These Scribes who teach this Law. If Jesus is a fan of anyone, anyone at all, if anyone's in, it's going to be them.

Well boom, time for clear thing number three: they're not. **Mt 5:20**

Matthew 5:20 NIV

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.

Do better than them or you'll certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven. That means those lovers of the detail, those doers and teachers, they will *certainly not* enter the kingdom of heaven - you have to exceed them. That "**certainly not**" translates the strongest possible negative in the original language. Bold and underlined, people. There is zero room for confusion here. Jesus is utterly clear. According to Jesus, only people surpassing *even them* in righteousness could possibly enter. Pharisees and teachers of the law, will certainly not enter. Mic drop.

That's clear, right? Jesus is **100% clear they are out.** It just .. uh .. doesn't seem to add up very well. The Old Testament isn't cancelled. Those who do and teach it are honoured. Yet .. those who were well known for doing, the Pharisees, and those who were well known for teaching, the teachers of the Law, have certainly not made the grade. You have to exceed them, surpass them, to enter Jesus' new Kingdom.

Is this the most depressing bible passage ever? Is Jesus' big point here "you suck; the best of you suck; it's hopeless; go home"? Should we stop right here and all just quit? .. Nah, it's a touch early - we're not quite done yet.

Jesus is crystal clear they didn't make the grade, they're not in. The question is why...

Option a: they did pretty good, just not good enough. Like me in the Duolingo sapphire league for my fellow language learners; 177 XP - I was doing pretty good with my language lessons this week. But not quite good enough - there are folk out there, crazy folk presumably who do nothing but Duolingo, who have me beat. Neuza - 321XP in one day, seriously? [**matt@hopecity onedirve**]

Is this the picture Jesus wants us to go away with? Pharisees? Teachers of the Law? Good effort. Nice try. But, sadly, that's only a D. And you need a C or above. [and then Jesus turns to his disciples and says] "**go and do likewise.** But better." That's one way of reading this - right idea, just not good enough. Try harder.

But that's not Jesus' point here. Like me give you option b instead. These Pharisees, these teachers of the law, that Jesus rules out, they thought they were winners, they thought they'd won, society around them thought they'd won - but they were playing completely the wrong game. "touchdown!" they shout, whamming the ball into the ground across the line. But it's cricket. And that's **just not cricket.**

How much righteousness do they really have to their name? Here's how Jesus rates them later on: Mt 23:28

Matthew 23:28 NIV

In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside

you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Yes, they may appear righteous on the outside - but their actual score is zero. And yes, you have to surpass that big fat zero to enter the kingdom of heaven. The people Jesus has drawn into his disciples' minds with this talk of law and practising and teaching, the ones who were celebrated - and wanted to be celebrated as winners - in fact were, as Donald Trump would put it "total losers".

Jesus isn't setting out a ridiculously high bar here. Any righteousness they had was just an appearance, hollow. Like an empty eggshell. And just as fragile - because there was nothing really there at all. Jesus is looking for something quite different in his Kingdom. Not more of their hollow outward righteousness, but another kind of righteousness altogether.

Remember our tagline for this whole block of Jesus' teaching, this is **Jesus' blueprint for his Kingdom of transformed hearts**? Well, without that transformed heart, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven - you cannot enter. Elsewhere Jesus uses another way of describing this same, essential, fundamental transformation: "you must be born again" - John 3:3 - you cannot even see the kingdom, let alone enter it.

John 3:3 NIV

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

True righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus' kingdom, is the evidence sprouting up from the seed he's planted within us, the gift of a transformed heart. It's this inside-out righteousness which surpasses the outside-in righteousness of the pharisees; which is the evidence that you're a part of Jesus' kingdom of transformed hearts. That's the big point here - the main thing. **"Surpassing righteousness" is an inside-out righteousness**; the only kind of righteousness which really counts, the only real righteousness at all.

That's what makes sense of this passage. This "surpassing righteousness" must be an inside-out righteousness.

[pause]

We have a few more minutes together. With that insight in hand, let's see if we can make any headway towards unlocking some of the other mysteries in this short passage, answering some of the other questions it throws up for us. Because it sure does throw up some doozies.

And let's start with an easier one: If Jesus hasn't come to abolish, nullify, cancel the Law or the Prophets, what exactly is he doing with them? What is his relationship to the teaching of the Old Testament? Notice in Mt 5:17 that he's not just come to keep it, or to do it like you might expect; he's not simply come to replace it with a v2. He's come **to fulfil it.**

Matthew 5:17 NIV

“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.

To fulfil *them* - the Law and the Prophets. Now fulfilling prophecy I get - Matthew's gospel tells us again about ways in which Jesus fulfils the various things foretold by the prophets about him in the first part of our bibles. But what does it mean to fulfil the Law?

To fill it up? Some people think this is about Jesus filling out the details, explaining the deeper meaning of the law. But then you'd have him fulfilling the prophets one way, and the law another in this one sentence. That doesn't make the best sense, I think.

I think this is more about how just like the prophets point to something yet to come, the Law has a future goal, an end, an objective too. There's something it's pushing towards, something yet to come. And just as Jesus has shown us that the Pharisees and teachers' outside-in appearance of righteousness didn't fulfil that - that wasn't where the Law was pointing - this inside-out righteousness coming from the transformed hearts of Jesus' kingdom is exactly where it was pointing.

And the prophets speak about exactly this sort of transformation - take a look at **Jeremiah 31:33** - you get this connection between God's law and transformed hearts:

| Jeremiah 31:33 (NIV)

| “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “**I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people.

An inside-out law rather than an outside-in one is a law written on our hearts. It's even clearer in **Ezekiel 36** [read] - notice how the transformed heart, how the indwelling Spirit of God, fundamentally changes our relationship to the Law, making that inside-out righteousness a possibility: Ezk 36:26-27

Ezekiel 36:26–27 NIV

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Does that kind of make sense of how Jesus fulfils not just the Prophets but also the Law, also fulfils the Kingdom it calls for, one of **transformed hearts**?

So what about a rather harder question: If the Jewish Law is unchanging even in the smallest details while the world endures, and there's dishonour for those who set aside the least of its commands but honour for those who practice and teach it, should we just all be going **ultra-Jewish right now**? From the heart, perhaps, inside-out like we've been talking about, surpassing the Pharisees. But still, ultra Jewish? Do we need to quit bacon and get down with Moses?

Again, perhaps the best thing to do is to start with stuff that's clear.

Is there any rule, any Law for Christians at all, any way we are meant to behave, or are we just free to do what we want any old time? Well, every Kingdom has a King - a King has authority in his Kingdom. You say you're a part of his kingdom? Then he's your king, right?

Our King Jesus isn't shy or secretive about the fact that he has taught his followers ways to behave, things to do, and that he expects them to obey - and to teach others. **Jesus' parting words**, often called the Great Commission, make this totally clear: disciples are meant to teach new followers of Jesus to obey everything the King has commanded.

Matthew 28:18-20 NIV

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

So absolutely there is a rule, a Law, for Christians: the commands of Christ. He ends this block of teaching we're working through by calling us not just to listen to him, but to put his words into practice. He ends his time on earth telling his disciples obedience to his commands is fundamental to disciple-making.

Second thing that's clear: **Jesus' commands don't look the same** as living the way Jews of his day understood you had to in order to keep Law. Three of the most prominent features of the Old Testament Law would be food restrictions, sabbath keeping, and circumcision. In the gospels we see Jesus' understanding of the first two is radically different from the Jewish one - it's not what goes into the mouth that makes someone unclean, but what comes out of it, he says Mt 15:11. And it's right to do good on the Sabbath, not only to rest - Matthew 12:12. The earliest church is completely clear that circumcision is no longer required: Acts 15 if you want to read the story or Galatians 5 if you want the logic.

Jesus sees huge continuity between his commands and the Old Testament. Remember we talked earlier about how he concludes this block of teaching we're looking at today with a summary, "do to others", and then he puts a huge equals sign between that, and the Law and the Prophets: Mt 7:12

Matthew 7:12 NIV

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

But at the same time, that can't mean Jesus is commanding us to keep that Law as Jews of his day or Jews today would understand that. Or, to be quite honest, the way you and I might imagine we had to live if we simply opened up the Old Testament and read and tried to follow all its commands, assuming they stood forever and were unchanged in any detail like Jesus has just told us.

Instead I think it comes back to this idea of fulfilling the Law - achieving its aim, its

goal. The goal of the law was right living. That goal still stands in every detail. The question is how that's fulfilled - how right living can come about. And that's not by having the right set of rules to follow; the world is too broken for that; we, our hearts are too broken for that. **It's not about having the right set of rules to follow, but by having the right heart to follow with.**

Look, I know this is tricky stuff. People have spent their lives trying to get their heads around this. It's easy to get tangled up in details, confused and lost. So as we come to a close this morning, we need to focus back in on what's clear here, to fix it in our minds and take it with us out into the world.

The rightness that we need, that this world needs, that it was created for, this surpassing righteousness of the Kingdom of Heaven, can only come from a new heart, a God-transformed heart. That new heart is the only way into the Kingdom, into an inside-out righteousness, into the life of the kingdom. And that new heart can only be yours through faith in Jesus - the one who fulfils the Law and the Prophets.

If I can invite Jon to come join me and perhaps begin to play, we'll take a moment to reflect and then I'll pray.

[those who know they need a transformed heart this morning]

[those who have cried out in faith but still seem to have the same old cold heart]

[those who don't know the way to go, what to do in a situation]

[praise to you, the God who transforms hearts]