

Exceeding Righteousness - Adam Smith

Matthew 5, 17 through 20 says this, 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 say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Let's pray once more. Father, we thank you for your Word. God, we thank you that through your Word you speak, by your Spirit you speak to us, and so, Lord, would you teach us your way.

Would you lead us in paths of righteousness for your name's sake. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.

Well, Mark Twain is often credited with saying, It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me. It's the parts of the Bible I do understand that bother me. That resonates, right? Because the Bible is a challenging book.

And at times can even feel offensive. Maybe you've had that experience in Scripture where you're reading and you come across something and like you read it again and you read it again and you're like, Surely this can't mean what it sounds like it means. What am I missing? And if we're honest about most of the time, if we're honest, probably 99% of those instances are in the Old Testament.

And because of that tension, many Christians have distanced themselves from the Old Testament or unhitched themselves from the Old Testament, treating it as though it were outdated or irrelevant now that Jesus has come and that we have the New Testament. And the only problem with that way of thinking is Jesus. Because right here in our text, Jesus doesn't distance himself from the Old Testament.

He doesn't soften it. He doesn't revise it. He doesn't redact it.

He affirms all of it. And if Jesus doesn't distance himself from the Old Testament, then neither can we. And so what does that mean? How as Christians should we relate to the Old Testament? That's the question that I want us to be able to answer today.

But in order to do it rightly, we need to start with Jesus and ask what is Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament? So Jesus says, 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. And when we hear the word law, our minds

often jump to the commands of Scripture, the rules to obey.

And that's understandable because in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the word Torah just means law or instruction. The first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy, there are 613 individual commands. And so when we think of law, we think of at least the Ten Commandments or these 613 commands in Scripture.

But I want to call you back to Jesus' words. Jesus doesn't say, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law. I have not come to abolish the law.

He says, Don't think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but I have come to fulfill them. And so in the first century, that phrase, law and the prophets, was a way of speaking of the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call today the Old Testament.

It would be like me referring to the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branch of government. It's not just referring to a part of the government. It's referring to the entire federal government.

And so when people said the law and the prophets, they were referring to the whole thing. Today, you might hear the phrase or the word Tanakh. It's an acronym.

T-N-K refers to the Torah, the Nevi'im, and the Ketuvim. It's the law, the prophets, and the writings. But in the first century, referring to the law and the prophets is shorthand for saying all of it, the whole shebang.

So Jesus is saying, I did not come to abolish the Scriptures. And so Jesus is telling us how he relates to the whole Word of God, the whole Old Testament. Because when Jesus lived, there was no New Testament.

When he refers to the Scriptures, in fact, when anyone in the New Testament refers to the Scriptures, they are referring to the Old Testament. And so Jesus is telling us how he relates to the whole Word of God. He says, I've not come to abolish it.

I've not come to tear it down. I've not come to cancel it or lighten it or redefine it. He says, I've come to fulfill it.

And Matthew's been preparing us for this from the beginning. He opens his gospel by saying, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. And so even just by associating Jesus with those two heroes of the faith, Matthew is reminding us of the promises made to Abraham and to David about the sons that they would have.

God promised Abraham would have a son, that his family would be a blessing to every family on earth. And he made a promise to David that his son would rule the nations and have a kingdom that would never end. And so Matthew, by referencing Jesus as the son of David, the

son of Abraham, he is saying that in this man, in Christ, God's promises made to those Old Testament saints is being fulfilled.

And he doesn't stop there. Through the opening chapters, Matthew shows us how Jesus is continuing to fulfill stories from the Old Testament. Sometimes it's a very direct fulfillment, as in when he refers to the virgin birth and says this was to fulfill what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, the virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son and she'll call his name Emmanuel.

Sometimes it's more layered than that, a little deeper than that, as when Matthew is writing about King Herod and his slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. Herod's trying to squash the Messiah. Matthew paints it in ways that deliberately echo Pharaoh's massacre of the Hebrew male children back in the book of Exodus.

Or when God calls Jesus and his family to flee the land and to take refuge in Egypt and then calls them out of Egypt, Matthew says that was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Hosea, out of Egypt I called my son. Matthew is pointing back to specific things that happened in the life of Israel, specific things that took place in the Old Testament and says that Jesus is fulfilling these things. Over and over and over again, Matthew is using the word fulfillment.

And so that brings us back to Jesus' words here. When he says that he has come to fulfill the Scriptures, Jesus is not merely saying that he fulfills individual predictions about the Messiah, though he certainly does that, but that is not the whole picture. Jesus is saying something much bigger, much more profound.

He is saying that the entire story of the Scriptures finds its completion, finds its fulfillment in him. Jesus is saying that I am the one that the entire story has been pointing to and moving toward. He says all of it, all of it speaks of me.

In one confrontation with the Pharisees, he says, you search the Scriptures because in them you believe you have eternal life. Yet it is they that testify to me and you refuse to come to me that I may give you life. After the resurrection, as he is walking with some disciples on a road to a town called Emmaus, he explains to them how from Moses, the law, and all of the prophets that they testified to him.

And so the Bible, the Old Testament is 39 books, but they all tell one story. And that story finds its completion in Jesus. And so let me just briefly remind us of that story.

If you were wondering, what is the story of the whole Bible? I am going to do it as quickly as I can. In the beginning, God creates the heavens and the earth, and he makes everything good and beautiful, and he creates humanity in his own image, and he places them in a beautiful garden, and he says, you as my image bearers are going to rule this land on my behalf. Take the garden, cultivate it, make it fruitful.

You also be fruitful. And as the garden expands, you expand into the furthest reaches of the world, and make everything on earth like this garden. All you need to do is to trust that I know

what is good, and I know what is evil, and I will provide what is good, and I will protect you from what is evil.

All you need to do is trust that, and do not think for a second that you can do it apart from me. Right? Don't take for yourself the knowledge of good and evil. Trust that I know, and that I will provide it.

And they didn't. It didn't take them long. They said, nope, we want that for ourselves.

We believe God is holding out on us. We're going to take the fruit. We're going to eat the fruit.

And then their eyes are opened, and what happens? They immediately realize they're naked, they're vulnerable. They hide from each other. They slander each other.

They blame each other. They hide from God. And death and chaos and violence fills the earth.

But God says that I will raise up the seed of the woman. He says, I'll put enmity between the seed of the serpent who led them into temptation and the seed of the woman. And the seed of the woman shall crush his head.

He will bruise his heel. The seed of the woman is going to deliver a death blow, but be wounded in the process. And then Eve gives birth to a son.

I promise, we're just out of that. This is just Genesis chapter 3, but I'm going to pick up the pace. This is so important.

Eve gives birth to a son. The offspring of the woman, the seed of the woman, Eve gives birth to a son and says, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord. And the question is, is this the snake crusher? Is Cain the one who will deliver them from the sin that they let into the world? Absolutely not.

He's not the snake crusher. He's the brother murderer. Kills Abel.

Then she has another son, Seth. And the question is, is it Seth? Is Seth the deliverer? It's not Seth. Seth dies.

His son dies. His son after that dies. Genesis chapter 5 is just this genealogy where the beating drum is, and then he died, and then he died, and then he died, and then he died.

And you're waiting. You're like, where is the one that God said would fulfill the promise? And then the world is filled with corruption, and God sends the flood and raises up Noah, and you're like, oh, maybe Noah's the guy. Noah's not the guy.

And then after the Tower of Babel, the languages are changed, and they're scattered throughout the world, and then God chooses for himself Abraham. You're like, maybe Abraham's the guy. Abraham ain't the guy.

It's not him. It's not his son Isaac. It's not his son Jacob.

It's not any of the 12 sons of Jacob, but Judah. Judah's the one. Through Judah, the guy's going to come.

The snake crusher's going to come. And then when you get into the land, right, Moses delivers them from Egypt and into the promised land, and God raises up a king, David, a man after God's own heart, from the tribe of Judah. David's the guy, and he looks like he's the guy.

And then from a rooftop, he sees Bathsheba, takes her, kills her husband. You're like, David's not the guy. God promises David, your son will be the guy.

Your son is going to sit on the throne forever. And then Solomon's born, and you're like, oh, it must be Solomon. Solomon becomes king, and he's the wisest man who's ever lived, and no one before him or after him has had his wealth or his wisdom, and he brought peace to Israel.

And you're looking at Solomon, and you're like, yes, finally, it's the guy. Then he has like 900 wives and worships all their gods. Solomon's not the guy.

And it's not his son or his son or his son. All the kings came after him. Some were decent.

Some were awful. And then the Old Testament ends after having been sent into exile. God's like, I'm done with you in the land.

You keep blowing it. Get out. But I will bring you back.

And he brings them back. And they rebuild Jerusalem. They rebuild the temple.

And they're waiting for the guy. They're still waiting for the one who would crush the head of the serpent. Waiting for the one who would obey.

Waiting for the one who would deliver them from sin, Satan, and death. Waiting for the one who would restore creation. See, the Old Testament, the whole Bible, it's like this symphony.

If you've ever listened to a beautiful professional orchestra playing a symphony, you know that there are these melodies that never fully resolve. And there's harmonies that create this tension. And you know what it's like when the big moments, they lift and you feel the dissonance in the chords and in the music and you're waiting for what in music is called tonic resolution.

It's that chord that brings everything home. And so what Jesus is saying is all of the drama of Scripture, all of the longings, all of the failures, all of the victories, all of that story that creates this dissonance and these beautiful examples but still never resolves. He says, I am the resolution.

I am the chord that is struck that brings all of the tension into one beautiful, final, lasting,

eternal note. The whole thing, He says, is leading to Me. I am the climax.

I complete the story. And so how then, knowing this and living this and experiencing this, how then do we relate to the Old Testament? First, read it. I mean, step one.

If we could just be a church where everyone read the Bible, starting point, read the Bible. Read it. And read it with Jesus in mind.

Because listen, you cannot understand the Old Testament apart from Jesus, but you also cannot understand Jesus apart from the Old Testament. The Old Testament informs us of who He is. And then once we know who He is, we go back and we read it again and it's like watching a movie with a twist ending for the second time.

Like I remember, I don't know why, all my movie references are dated. The Sixth Sense, right? I see dead people. You've had like 30 years.

This isn't a spoiler. You already know. Mel Gibson was dead the entire time.

Okay, you watch it. It's not Mel Gibson, is it? It's Bruce Willis. I need to go watch it again.

Bruce Willis was dead the whole time. And then you find that out and you go back and you watch it and you're like, ah, I see it. Now when we go back and we read the Old Testament knowing that it's all fulfilled in Jesus, it's all pointing to Jesus, we read it again.

We read it with different eyes. We see things that we missed. We see things not as these little messianic Easter eggs that we find and we're like, ha ha, I found it, God.

Yes. But we read the whole thing and it leads us to worship. It leads us to delight and appreciate the Savior that came to crush the head of the serpent and deliver us from the cycle of death and sin.

And so we read it. We read it with Jesus in mind. But don't just read it as if to understand a story, right? Read it not just to, because it's good.

I mean, it is. It's beautiful. But read it to learn how to live it, how to live in light of this.

Jesus goes on now and he zooms in on the law, right? He was talking about the law and the prophets and now he zooms in on the law. He says, For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until it is accomplished. He says not the least stroke of a pen, whether the dot of the I or the cross of a T. He says none of it, none of it's going away from the law.

None of it's going away from God's instruction. If you want to know how to live in light of God's character and God's desires, then look to the law because it all still applies. He says not one letter will disappear from Scripture.

And so on the one hand, that's good. It's preserved. We can still read it, but Jesus doesn't stop there.

He keeps going. He says, Whoever relaxes even the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

And then he hits us with the impossible standard. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Now that would have absolutely floored his audience.

See, we think of the Pharisees today as hypocrites, right? They're the bad guys. But in the first century, they were not regarded by the people as bad guys. They were the most disciplined, most Scripture-saturated, most obedient people in Israel.

And so imagine this. Some of you all are in school. Some of you remember school, right? Imagine being in a class and you are fighting like the Dickens just to keep a C, right? Some of you are like guilty.

Fighting to keep a C. And your professor comes to you and says, Hey, we're going to have an exam. The exam is 613 questions. And if you miss just one, you not only fail the course, but you're expelled from school.

The pressure, right? And then he says, the department chair just took the test? Failed miserably. What hope do you have? What hope do you have if even the experts in the subject can't pass the impossible test? And he says our eternal destiny depends on this exceeding righteousness, this perfect righteousness. If the Pharisees fall short, who has hope? If Jesus truly means what he says, if every word of scripture still stands, if every command still carries authority, and if even the most righteous people of his day fall short, then salvation is impossible.

That's exactly the point. It's exactly the point that Jesus is making. The Old Testament is a story about how no one was ever able to meet the righteous demands of God's law.

Jesus has been leading us here the entire time. Go back to his words at the beginning. I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

He doesn't merely fulfill prophecies. He doesn't merely keep the law for himself, but he fulfills righteousness itself. He fulfills the picture of what it means to be a truly human being made in the image of God.

He is the greater Adam, who instead of defining good and evil for himself, trusted his Father completely. He's the greater Moses, who doesn't just give the law, but obeys the law completely. He's the greater David, not just a man after God's own heart, but the perfect representation of the heart of God in human flesh.

And he's the true temple, the dwelling place between God and man, heaven and earth coming together. He's the great high priest who doesn't merely offer sacrifices for his own sin, but is the sacrifice for our sin. The only righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees is Jesus.

And through faith in Jesus, the righteousness that belongs to Him is credited to you. It's not righteousness that you are able to achieve. It is righteousness that must be received.

The theological term for this is imputed righteousness. It is righteousness that is given to you that came from outside of you. Think of righteousness like a bank account.

Every sin is a withdrawal. Every disobedience is a debt. And Christ, through His perfect life, death, and resurrection, has transferred His infinite wealth of righteousness into the accounts of all who trust Him.

And so your righteousness account is complete. Regardless of what you have invested into it yourself, Scripture says even our greatest deeds are like filthy rags before the Lord. That no one does good, not one.

That you're hopeless, and yet because of Christ, God the Father, when you stand before Him, looks at you and says, righteous. See, forgiveness, forgiveness wipes your slate clean. Okay, if you were in like the negative, forgiveness gets you back to zero.

Forgiveness doesn't get you righteousness. Jesus gives you both forgiveness, erasing all of your debts, and righteousness, giving you infinite wealth in Him. God doesn't just look at you and say, forgiven.

He looks at you and declares, righteous, as though everything you've ever done was exactly the way God would have you do it. You're righteous. But listen, Jesus doesn't just give us righteousness so we can live however we please.

Oh yes, God calls me righteous, now I can go do anything I ever want, and now I stand before God, I'm righteous. He doesn't give us righteousness so we can live however we please. He gives us His righteousness, and gives us His Spirit, so that we can desire and be empowered to live in righteousness.

This is the promise of Ezekiel 36, verse 25, speaking of God, God says, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes.

I will empower you, enable you, to walk in My statutes, in My law. And Jesus fulfills this promise. And Ezekiel says that the result will be our ability to walk in the statutes of God.

Now why would God give you the ability to walk in His statutes if He did not expect you or

desire you to walk in His statutes? And so we need to ask the question, how do we observe God's law? How do we as Christians apply the law to our lives? There's lots of opinions about this, and honestly, we don't have time today to work through all 613 laws. But if you didn't make lunch plans, I would have a lot of fun with that. Just kidding.

But Jesus is going to do this for us over the next couple of weeks. As we progress through the Sermon on the Mount, He's going to talk about murder and anger, lust and adultery. He's going to talk about oaths and prayer and tithing and fasting and all of these things.

He's going to break down the law and teach us how it applies to our lives. But for now, this is what I want to ask. I want to ask a simple basic question.

Why would anyone not want God's law to apply? Why would anyone not want to apply the law of God to their lives? At the root, we have two options. One, because we believe God's law is irrelevant. Or two, we believe that His law is not good.

The only reason we wouldn't want to apply God's instruction to our lives is either because we believe it's outdated and irrelevant or it is not good. It's not something that should be lived out in our lives. Because if we truly believe that God's law is from God, that it reveals His character, that it shows us how we were designed to live, that it describes the way life actually works best, why wouldn't we want it? Why wouldn't we want to apply that to our lives? Like if you buy something and it has instructions, you want to know how the thing works and so you go to the instructions.

And sometimes you might not go to the instructions and then you risk breaking it. And that's what we do with our lives. We don't go to the instructions and so we risk breaking ourselves or others.

Why would we not want to know it and follow it? God's law isn't random. It's not arbitrary. Those 613 commands cover everything from civic life and worship and relationships and morality.

And in the very beginning, there's 613 commands, but in the very beginning, there is one command. Do not eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The heart of the one command, again, is trust me that I know what is good for you and I know what is bad for you and I know what is good for the world and I know what is bad for the world.

Trust me that I know and will provide what is good and that I know and will protect from what is evil. Trust that I know what is good. And that is the heart behind the entire law of God.

Do we trust that God knows what is good and what is evil and will provide what is good and protect us from what is evil? Or will we, like Adam and Eve, look at the law and say, oh man, that's so restricting. Man, all of these good things I can enjoy, but I can't enjoy that. We hear this voice of the serpent saying, God's holding out on you.

Those things are good. It's good for you. God doesn't know.

He's an old fuddy-duddy, all old and just like, you know, old-fashioned and doesn't like to have fun. God's holding out on you. It's the voice of the serpent.

We look at the Old Testament law and we go, ah, it looks pretty tough. And the serpent's like, yep, it's because it's not good. God doesn't love you.

God doesn't want you to have fun. Take it for yourself. You choose for yourself.

Choose for yourself which laws to follow, which ones are good and which ones are offensive. Choose for yourself which of God's laws are good and which of God's laws are evil. You know, that's what our culture is doing.

They look at the law of God and they say, this law right here, God's a bigot. This law right here, God's a sexist. This law right here is not good.

That law right there is evil. These ones right here, these ones are good. You follow these ones.

Pick and choose for yourself what is good and what is evil. You're not following the law of God. You're following the law of the serpent.

Choose for yourself. Take for yourself. You define what is good and what is real and what is true.

Do you trust God to define good and evil or do you take that responsibility into your own hands? Man, we are running out of time. We're going to get into how this practically applies over the next several weeks, but here's where we need to land. We are not saved by observing God's law.

We are saved by the righteous life and the blood of Jesus shed for us. We are saved from the penalty of sin, but we are saved and empowered to follow our Savior. Oftentimes, what we experience when we look at the law of God is a life that feels very different than we're used to, very different than we're comfortable with.

For so long, for the last several decades, the church has tried to be relevant to the world in order to show them what Jesus is like. All that's happened is we've become more like the world. Many of God's laws, like the food laws, were designed to keep people separated and distinct from the world so that they wouldn't drift morally and theologically and just look like the rest of the world.

That was part of the reason that God gave them their law, to keep them distinct and keep them separate. Yet the church, for the last several decades, has been, how can I be enough like the world to have the opportunity to show them Jesus? Then we wonder why the divorce rate in the church is the same as it is outside of the church. We wonder why there are moral failures of our spiritual leaders and alcoholism and affairs and all of these things because we've been trying to

be like the world.

Listen, if you want to show people the beauty of Jesus, how about you stop trying to live like the world and start trying to live like Jesus who fulfilled the law? If you want to show people the beauty of Jesus, live the way that Jesus lived. Not because that will save you, but because He did save you. Live it, not in fear, but in freedom, knowing that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So here's the invitation for us today. Receive the righteousness that you could never achieve. Put your faith in Jesus, believing that He is the fulfillment of all of the scriptures and that He fulfills them in your place.

And then read them, study them, meditate on them, not to earn God's love, but to experience God's heart. Stop trying to decide for yourself what is good and what is evil and believe what God says is true and stand for truth. Stand for righteousness.

Stand on the Word of God as your authority and by the Spirit of Christ, walk in it. Amen? Amen. Father, would you please give us the grace that we need to live the lives that you have called us to live.

Lord, we are so unable to do this in our own strength. We need your Spirit. But Lord, thank you that we can approach this with freedom and not with fear because you have taken our condemnation from us.

And so now, Holy Spirit, would you come? And during this time of response, during this time of worship, that I pray that you would convict us for the times that we don't appreciate your instruction and don't want to live holy lives. Not because the law seems strange to us, but because it seems hard to us. Holy Spirit, come and convict us of the times that we don't want to apply it to our lives.

We don't want to pursue righteousness. And Lord, I pray that today would be a shift, but a moment where that all changes, where we stop seeing your law as something that keeps us from good and start seeing it as something that keeps us for good. Holy Spirit, come and reveal the heart of Christ to us and teach us to walk in your ways.

In Jesus' name, amen.