

Let's return to the gospel of Matthew. When we study the Bible we study the words to extract the meaning of the text. Sometimes it pays to ask why the writer organized his material the way he did. For example, Matthew 9:35... "Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness." This is a summary statement for two important sections regarding Jesus' life and ministry; we are studying chapters 5-7, commonly referred to as The Sermon on the Mount, which lays out the righteous requirements of the kingdom. Chapters 8 and 9, record stories about Jesus' miraculous ministry. Matthew is telling us two things:

- 1) The miracles Jesus performed were not done for entertainment. They were not even done to draw a crowd. His miracles provided confirmation of His message of Good News about an alternative kingdom where crooked things are made straight, broken things are restored, the blind see, the lame walk and captives are set free.
- 2) The kingdom Jesus describes in 5-7 is an upside-down kingdom counter intuitive to the kingdom of this world. In God's kingdom the poor are rich, the weak are strong, the losers are winners, the humble are exalted. It was a lot to take in for the disciples. Jesus' perspective was so different from their religious teachers that He had to regularly clarify how things work in His kingdom.

In our passage today, Jesus gives a stunning description of the requirement for entering His kingdom. I have titled this message, ***Christ Our Substitute***. The title carries a double meaning. We will end with a description of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. But that is not where I want to start. I want to start by taking you back to school on one of those days when you had a substitute. Remember? There was a time in my life when I paid the rent by being a substitute teacher. The pay was pretty good, I could work when I wanted, I didn't have to prepare lesson plans, all I had to do was show up. On the other hand, it was a thankless job. Let's face it, when you got to school and your friend said, "We have a substitute today," your response was probably, "Great! This will be an easy day." Compared to the exacting expectations of the Jewish religious leaders, many treated Jesus like a substitute teacher. His message was a breath of fresh air. "We have a sub whose yoke is easy. His burden is light." In our passage today, Jesus corrects this overcorrection. Imagine their surprise when Jesus said, Mt. 5:17-20...

In these four verses, Jesus spells out the rules of His kingdom and the righteous requirement to enter in.

1. Jesus validated the Law of God...v. 17. The phrase “the Law and the prophets” essentially means the Old Testament. Jesus viewed the scriptures the same way David did in Ps. 19:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.
The rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them is your servant warned.
in keeping them there is great reward. Ps. 19:7-11

Jesus said not one jot or tittle will be removed from the Law until everything the Law and the prophets talked about was fulfilled. The most damning thing Jesus could have done would have been to reduce the requirements of the Law to accommodate all of us lawbreakers. The Bible reveals the mind and heart of God.

2. Jesus not only validated the Law of God but He fulfilled it. Every single theme in the Old Testament points to Christ. And so, Jesus is saying, “Look, I know what you’re thinking, I’m going to set the law aside. I’m going to grade on a curve. I’m not. I’m going to reinforce the Law and make it even harder. I’m telling you, God’s standard hasn’t changed. No part of the sacred Scripture will ever be destroyed or annulled. It will be fulfilled, and I Myself will fulfill it.”

Little did these people know that they were face-to-face with the theme of the whole Old Testament. They were looking right into the eyes of the one spoken of in the law and in the prophets. He was standing in front of them. He was the one who came to fulfill the whole thing. In every way, Jesus accomplished what the law demanded and fulfilled what the prophets predicted by the power of God.

He goes on to say our standing in the Kingdom depends on how we respond to the Law of God...v. 19. Just think about what this means:

The Law referred addressed three different areas of life: ceremonial, dietary, and moral. The purpose of the ceremonial and dietary Laws was to distinguish Israel as God’s people. Their clothes, their hygiene, their cleansing rituals were done to separate them from the pagan nations around them.

Practically speaking, dietary laws addressed health concerns. Pork for example. But they were also to identify Israel as God's people. Dt. 14:21 for eg...boil a baby goat...

The ceremonial and dietary aspects of the Law were temporary until Christ fulfilled the Law. That is why Paul says, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink (dietary), or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath (ceremonial.)¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." Col. 2:16-17

The moral Law is still binding on God's people because it reflects the nature and character of God and His heart toward His creation. "Don't lie" = God is truth. "Don't commit adultery" = God is faithful. "Don't murder" = God is life. Next week you will hear Jesus say, "You know that 'don't murder' thing that you feel pretty good about because you have never killed anyone? Let's talk about that. Have you ever called anyone an idiot?"

Then Jesus throws a zinger at them in 5:20. The idea that their righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees must have come as a real shocker. "How can my righteousness possibly exceed that of the Pharisees?" If law-keeping were an Olympic event, these guys would be walking around with gold medals around their necks. How can we compete with that?

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." What is this kingdom like? A kingdom of rule-followers? A kingdom of perfect people? A kingdom of law-keepers? The religious leaders defined righteousness as perfect obedience to the Law. There are 613 laws in the OT and if you break one, you break them all.

They must have thought, "We can't do that." And Jesus has them right where He wants them. And He has you and me right where He wants us. I think the 4 most important words in your spiritual life are "I can't do that." That is why Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who mourn over their inability, who hunger and thirst after righteousness. We want to be righteous, but we just can't. Or can we?

Here's the good news – Jesus did what you cannot do. That's called grace. Jesus, our substitute, fulfilled the Law of righteousness and it was credited to our account. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine

forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Ro. 3:23-26

God’s standard for righteousness is beyond human ability. The entrance requirement into His kingdom is perfection, and we are not! One of our pastors once spoke with a dying man. When asked if he was at peace, the man said, “I just hope I have done enough.” The pastor said, “You haven’t. But Jesus did what you could not do.” The gospel is good news because God provided a substitute. Jesus IS our substitute but not a substitute teacher who lowers the requirements of the Law. He is our substitute in that we owe a debt we cannot pay so He paid a debt He did not owe. God, in his mercy, “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” 2 Cor. 5:21

God, in His mercy accommodated Himself to us so that we could have life. Country dancing... I saw Jesus that day/ at the dance/ in the form of a young woman who accommodated her daddy’s disability. Never forget that God looked down from Heaven and saw our unrighteous disability. Ro. 3:10/Ps. 14:3, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” We are all ravaged by the wages of sin, our brains permanently scrambled, our bodies declining daily, all of us afflicted with a mortal wound that we will all eventually die from. There is no way out. But rather than abandon us, God drew near by sending His only-begotten, nail-scarred Son to come to earth and invite us to dance. That’s grace. We can’t earn it and we certainly don’t deserve it. All we can do is accept God’s invitation to dance.

So, what should we do? Invite Jesus Christ to live within you. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

So, we don’t have to deny our disability and pretend to be righteous. We don’t have to try and fool ourselves and others and pretend we are strong and have it all together. We can be honest about ourselves knowing that God, in His grace, did for us what we could never do for ourselves.