



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from April 25 afternoon through May 2 morning

The Sermon on the Mount, Week 2

Matthew 5:17–20

“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.”

There were those who lived during Jesus’ earthly ministry who believed Jesus’ attitude and actions regarding the Mosaic Law pointed to his attempt to abolish (destroy) it. In these statements from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly explains this is not the case. He did not come to destroy the Law or Prophets (Old Testament writings), but rather to fulfill them. The Greek verb *plērōsai* that is here translated as “fulfill” has several possible meanings:

(a) to accomplish, obey; (b) to bring out the full meaning; (c) to complete (‘to bring to its destined end’, Davies, p. 100), by giving the final revelation of God’s will to which the Old Testament pointed forward ...

R. T. France, Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 119.

Given the context and other similar statements by Jesus, most Bible scholars point to the third meaning of the verb as the most accurate. Another way to state this is, “Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.” The entirety of the Old Testament writings pointed to his coming, to his earthly ministry, his perfection, his substitutionary death and his resurrection. He completed what the Law and Prophets began: God’s plan of redemption for all mankind.

If the Law and Prophets are then fulfilled by Jesus, why would he state that the Old Testament must continue to be held in high regard? Why would he teach that not even the smallest letter or smallest mark of the pen in the Old Testament would not pass away before heaven and earth pass away? Why would he emphasize the need to continue to follow their teachings instead of relaxing their teachings? Key to understanding this is the content of the rest of this sermon, in which Jesus goes beyond teaching obedience to the letter of the Law and instead teaches obedience to the spirit of the law. In addition, it is also important to note there is a timeframe

for adherence to the Law (until heaven and earth pass away). This is likely not a specific reference to the end of the world, but rather to the coming kingdom of God which has now appeared in the person and work of Jesus. So then, Jesus taught that obedience to God is essential. It is not born out of strict adherence to the Mosaic Law, but rather obeying the spirit of that law, which actually takes obedience to a higher level; that of the heart. This can only be done in the power of Christ, which begins at the moment of salvation by faith and continues in a lifetime of sanctification.

This, then, is a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Their “righteousness” was an outward one, focused on obeying the letter of the law in daily actions. The righteousness that exceeds this is that of faith in Christ, which allows entrance into the kingdom of heaven and empowers the believer to live in obedience to the higher standard that is the spirit of the law. It should also be noted that the Mosaic Law was not necessarily intended to be list of rules obeyed by the “letter,” but rather a temporary door created by God to reconcile Himself to people who sought to obey it from the heart.

Joshua 1:7-10

This passage records God’s words given to Joshua, that as Israel’s new leader he must be strong and courageous. This was directly connected to his commitment to the Law of Moses. As he and God’s people meditated on the Law day and night, they would experience prosperity and success in the mission God had given them: to enter into the promised land and defeat those who occupied the land. God reminded Joshua that He was with the new leader everywhere he went.

Romans 3:21-31

Paul explains that the righteousness of God is applied to people who have received the grace of God through faith in Christ. He said this righteousness became a reality apart from the law, although the entirety of the Old Testament (“the Law and the Prophets”) pointed to it. Even those in the Old Testament have been given an opportunity to accept God’s grace through faith, though they looked forward to the coming of Messiah. Paul clearly taught that faith in Jesus did not “overthrow” the law, but rather it “upheld” the law.

Romans 10:1-13

In this passage, Paul expresses his passion for seeing Jews come to faith in Christ. He states that they have chosen to be ignorant of the righteousness of God which comes through faith. This seems to support the idea that the Law was always meant to be followed in faith, from a heart that possessed a love of God. Granted, it was to be followed in faith as a precursor to the coming Messiah, who in fulfilling the law would also be “the end of the law for righteousness ...” This righteousness of God through faith in Jesus is readily available for both Jew and Gentile. There is no need to reach up to heaven or reach down to the abyss (Paul here employs the tactic of presenting a course of action that is impossible, to underscore that human beings are unable to do anything to make salvation available to themselves; God already has done this). Paul writes that salvation is only through faith in Christ alone, and this faith is then manifested in an outward declaration of it.

Philippians 3:1-11

Paul warns the church in Philippi to watch for those who put confidence in their own flesh, and uses himself as an example of one who at one time did this. His heritage, his training and his work would have been enough to earn favor with God if that was possible through the Law. However, once he encountered the risen Christ, he placed his faith solely in Jesus and left all of this human heritage and effort behind. Paul expresses that knowing Jesus and the power of his resurrection was all that mattered to him as he shared in the sufferings of his Savior and looked forward to his own day of resurrection.

Discussion Questions

1. As followers of Jesus, what should be our attitude towards the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets)?
2. What is the relationship of Jesus to the Law and the Prophets? How does this help you understand the “big picture” of Scripture?
3. What is a type of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees?
4. Do you view obedience to God as a relationship or a list of rules ... as something joyous or something laborious? How did you arrive at your view? Do you think it needs to change, and if so, how?
5. What is the difference between an empty outward obedience and obedience from the heart?
6. How do the companion passages from this week (readings Tuesday-Friday) help you understand Matthew 5:17-20?