



# MATTHEW

## THE KINGDOM COME

Kingdom Law  
Matthew 5:17-37

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### Introduction

Good morning.

My name is Kyle Rodriguez, I'm one of the pastors here at Union Church. We have now reached the central, orienting part of our worship service. The preaching aspect of the service is not necessarily the most "important" or most "effective" part of a Christian worship service, but it is the "orienting" part of the service.

That is, the reading of the Word of God and wrestling with it and understanding it—Hearing from God and seeking to impress his words deep within us—it is the part of our gathering together that directs and places everything else. We sing before in order to prepare our hearts to receive the word. We pray before to ask the Spirit to open our eyes to the Word. We sing after to rejoice in the Word. We take communion after to act out the Word.

It's like the main course of a good meal, which influences what sides you have and what kind of dessert you eat, what you have to drink with it. It's the primary conflict and resolution in a good story around which the introduction, conclusion and side scenes are pointing toward.

And just like the main course of a meal might not always be your favorite part of the meal, just like the one thing you might remember from a good book is a relatively minor character or description of a beautiful setting, in the same way you might be drawn to different elements of our gatherings together every week. We might sing a song that sticks with you, you might have a great conversation with the person sitting behind you after the service, or the Holy Spirit might be powerfully real to you as you take communion.

But the Word of God read and preached remains the orienting, central piece of our gatherings. And the more that you see those connections, the way the Word informs how we worship, and how we speak to one another, and how we celebrate sacraments together, the more rich and fulfilling the gathering of God's people will be.

Now, the part of the Bible we are reading this morning is also a central, orienting text.

We have been, as a church, working our way through the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospel of Matthew, and over the last couple weeks we have begun wading into the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is the most famous of Jesus's teachings, it is the longest collection of Jesus's teachings in the gospels, and it has long been seen by the Church as a summary, not an exhaustive one, but a clear and important distillation of Jesus's ministry during his life on earth.

Now, the Sermon on the Mount is an incredible sermon. It includes famous passages like the Beatitudes, which we talked about a few weeks ago, the Golden Rule, the story of the wise man building his house upon the rock, the Lord's Prayer, and much more. But too often, we as people, we miss so much of the richness of the Sermon on the Mount, because we read it kind of like a series of disconnected Tweets.

We see Jesus talking about a variety of distinct topics (prayer, anger, divorce, money), and we isolate these little bits of wisdom and kind of assume that Jesus is categorically telling us how to deal with all these random issues of life. You want to know how to pray? Go look up what Jesus taught about prayer. You want to learn about money? Go see what Jesus has to say about money. And we don't only treat Jesus's teaching like that, too often we treat the whole Bible like that.

We often treat the Bible as an anthology. Do you remember what an anthology is? An anthology is a collection. I remember growing up we had an Aesop's Fable anthology—it was this collection of stories like the Tortoise and the Hare, the Ant and the Grasshopper, the Fox and the Crow (not a lot of creativity in the titles). Each of these stories, of course, was meant to impart some kind of wisdom or practical lesson. It was the biggest book in our house. I loved it. But as I grew older, I just became really unsatisfied, because the stories were too simple, they lacked complexity. There was only so much you could get out of them.

Too often, we treat the Bible, or at least Jesus's teachings and parables, like an anthology, a random collection of isolated bits of wisdom and cute stories.

But friends, that is such an undermining of the wisdom of Jesus. Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived, he was fully God who became fully man, but too often we treat him as a dispenser of Aesop's Fables, a guy who simply gave a series of Ted Talks on isolated topics.

That's underestimating how good of a teacher Jesus was. If we are patient and willing to see the big picture of how Jesus taught, we'll see threads that connect more often than not.

And this week's passage is a great opportunity for us to do just that.

But before we dive into the passage, let's pray.

## **1. Fulfilling the Law**

**17 “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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**

In the same way that the reading and preaching of the word is the central, orienting portion of our services, this passage is understood by most scholars to be the central, orienting point of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the thesis statement that reframes how we read the rest of the sermon, especially the rest of chapter 5.

And to understand why this is important, you need to understand how disorienting Jesus’s coming was, how challenging his teaching was.

Remember, Jesus has come and has claimed to be inaugurating a new age for God’s people. He’s come and said: The kingdom of God is at hand! Everything that you’ve been waiting for as a people, it’s here!

Jesus wasn’t just presenting himself as a wise teacher with some helpful things to say. He was presenting himself as a new Moses, as someone who came to authoritatively teach God’s people on behalf of God himself. Just as Moses led God’s people out of slavery into a new life under God’s rule and then presented them with God’s laws as the standard of living inside God’s kingdom, Jesus now is offering people a new life in God’s new kingdom. And, understandably, this was challenging for people, because there were times when Jesus’s teaching seemed radically different than what they had been taught for their entire lives.

And this is true for many of us today, too. We still, as a people, have a really difficult time reconciling the picture of Jesus and God that we get in the New Testament with the one that we think we see in the Old Testament. How many of you have heard someone say, or said yourselves, “I like Jesus, but I’m not sure what I think about that Old Testament God. He just seems angry and judgmental.”

But hear what Jesus is saying here: The Old Testament is not abolished by his coming. It’s not nullified or destroyed.

Instead, Jesus says that he has come to fulfill the law.

And that word “fulfill” is a critical word to understanding the Bible, especially the book of Matthew.

We talked about this a couple months ago, but let me refresh your memory. In English, when we use the word “fulfill”, we usually think about it in terms of a promise. We think of Aragorn in the Lord of the Rings, when he comes to the land of the dead and says: “I summon you to fulfill your oath.” And when we read about Jesus coming to “fulfill” a prophecy in the Bible, we think that there was a promise that

something would happen, like a virgin giving birth, and we think, okay, in Jesus's life, that happened, so the promise was kept, the prophecy was fulfilled.

But that's only a part of what the word fulfilled really means.

For something to be fulfilled in the Biblical sense is for it to be brought to completion—to be filled up and brought into reality. When I was a kid, I remember the phrase “fulfill your potential” or “live up to your potential” being used a lot. Teachers would use it a lot in reference to kids, right? And when we say that in kids, we are saying: Inside these kids are just seeds of something greater and more complete. And to “fulfill” that potential is to actually see the potential come to exist in reality. And that's probably a better sense of the word “fulfill” in the way Jesus is using it.

One example of this is back in Matthew 3. Some of you will remember this from back in November. In Matthew 3, Jesus and his family are on the run from King Herod, and they travel to Egypt. And when they return from Egypt back to Israel, Matthew says: **“And so it was fulfilled (same word) what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”**

But here's the thing: That quote, from the prophet Hosea, is not a prophecy in the traditional sense. It's not a promise or prediction of something that was going to happen. Go back to Hosea 11:1 and it's very clear: **“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”** God isn't predicting something is going to happen here, he's merely describing what had happened hundreds of years before, when God had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt.

So, when Matthew uses the word “fulfill” back in Matthew 3, he's not saying that God promised that he would call his son out of Egypt, he's saying that the entire relationship between Israel and God was pointing forward to something else: to the relationship between Jesus and his Father.

And here, Jesus is using this fulfill word in a similar way. To say that Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets is to say that the Law and the Prophets were pointing to something greater, something more complete. So Jesus's teachings were not an abolishing of the law, but a fulfillment of them, he is taking the law of God revealed in the Old Testament, and he is bringing it to it's intended, final purpose.

And what is that purpose? To point to and mark out “righteousness.” But Jesus is clear, that the experts at the time, the Pharisees and the scribes, the ones who had dedicated their entire lives to studying the law, did not understand what true righteousness was. No, he says, you need a greater righteousness.

And then he gives six examples of what he means.

## 2. A Greater Righteousness

We are going to break these six examples of fulfilled law up into different categories. Remember, Jesus is saying that the law is meant to shape and point us toward the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven. So, what does that righteousness look like?

The first two examples Jesus gives are of anger and lust. And with these two examples, Jesus makes it clear that **righteousness begins in the heart**.

Jesus here quotes two different commandments, each of which is found in the 10 commandments, the central and most foundational part of the Old Testament law: Do not murder and do not commit adultery.

And in both cases, Jesus makes it clear that the root of sin, the root of unrighteousness is not merely our actions, but our thoughts, desires, and deepest emotions. In a word, our heart. Jesus says harboring anger in one's heart is, like murder, liable to judgment. He says that looking at another person's spouse with lust, is akin to adultery in the heart.

It is a "follow the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law" kind of correction.

But we are a "letter of the law" kind of people, aren't we? We are a people who want to know exactly what we must do in order to get by, and then we'll do it—and nothing else. In high school, my best friend and I had a saying: "If it's not due, don't do!" Because if a teacher was going to give out extra work, but wasn't going to grade it, we weren't going to do it! It wasn't necessary, it wasn't going to affect our grade! So it wasn't worth the effort.

And that's how so many of us treat the law of God. If God doesn't explicitly tell us to do something—or not to do something—then we are free to do what we want! It's probably not going to count on our final grade, so why worry about it?

Do you hear what Jesus is saying here, friends? True righteousness does not merely come from knowing what the law literally says and obeying it. All that does is create a robotic people, a people who can follow instructions, like a computer can execute a string of computer code. Righteousness, holiness, purity, it's not merely following instructions.

No, righteousness in people is meant to be a reflection of the character of God himself. That's what it means to be made in his image! We reflect not merely the written laws of God, but the very character of God.

And so Jesus is not interested in creating a cult of people who follow a list of instructions. He's interested in transforming whole \*people\* into truly righteous living, breathing image-bearers of God. People who follow God's law not because they've memorized a list of do's and don'ts, but because it is second nature to them. They are a people who do not commit murder because they don't allow anger to fester, but are quick to reconcile, quick to make peace. They are husbands who do not commit adultery because they are so infatuated with their wives, so whole-heartedly committed to them, that their eyes simply don't have time to linger on anybody else but their wife.

But we have a weird pushback against this, sometimes. We think: “following God’s law is supposed to be hard, it’s supposed to be sacrificial. We’re supposed to set aside our wants and desires and follow God’s law even though we don’t want to.”

As good and right as that sounds, it’s a load of baloney. You know what? Because it’s not honoring to God!

Husbands, imagine if you came home to your spouse, and you sat down and said, “Honey, today I was at the coffee shop, and a beautiful woman came up to me and gave me her phone number. And here’s the thing, I really wanted to keep it. I really wanted to call her up. And I could have! I could have done it, and you would have never known. But, even though I really wanted to, I didn’t. I threw it away instead. That’s how committed I am to you. Doesn’t that make you feel good?”

Do you think she would be proud of you? Would she feel honored? Do you think she would feel good about herself? About your marriage?

Of course not! And God isn’t interested in his people simply having a strength of will to follow his instructions. He’s interested in people who are fundamentally, at their core, righteous and good and holy and loving people.

And this happens in all kinds of areas other than anger and lust. Maybe you don’t verbally or physically abuse your spouse or kids, but are there times you resent them? Maybe you don’t actually engage in the gossip at your work or on social media, but do you look down on the same people and engage in fantasies in your head about how you might tell them off?

Now don’t get me wrong, it’s still better to fight temptation than not. And murder and adultery really are worse than simply having desires that we do not succumb to. Jesus isn’t flattening out all sin to be at the same level. But what he’s saying is that real righteousness is not merely following the right set of external rules. We cannot have the audacity to pat yourself on the back for following a set of rules when internally we are engaging in sin after sin after sin.

True righteousness is not simply figuring out the right actions. True righteousness begins in the heart.

In the next two examples, Jesus shifts a little bit, but is still illustrating how he is “fulfilling” the law. These two examples have to do with divorce and taking oaths. And here, Jesus is illustrating that **true righteousness reflects God’s good design.**

Now oaths and divorce, both in the Old Testament and today, were realities that existed because of human brokenness, right? People took oaths to counteract the too-common reality of people breaking their word. The formal process of divorce was put in place to systematize and place safe-guarded boundaries around the tragedy of broken marriages.

But Jesus is clear to say, in both cases, this isn’t the way God designed humans to work! We were meant to be an honest people, a people who kept their word, whether that word was marriage vows or business contract. So, the specific rules that Israel had put into place to deal with unfaithfulness

and the rules put in place to limit that brokenness, those rules don't actually define true righteousness, and they certainly don't deliver true righteousness by following them.

No, instead, Jesus is clear: true righteousness involves following God's good design for his people from the beginning—particularly by being a fundamentally honest, committed people.

The designs of marriage as a fundamentally life-long commitment are woven into creation itself! Look back at the creation account in Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." It was meant to be a uniting of male and female flesh, who (together) bear the image of God (Genesis 1:27). One flesh is not meant to be separated, even if God gave rules to limit and govern the hurt and suffering that occurs when a marriage is ripped in two.

And the reality of falsehood and lying was also a part of those early, foundational Genesis accounts. The breaking of oaths is what caused the rift in the entire cosmos when Eve and Adam broke their word to the Lord, eating of the tree they had promised to avoid and lying to Him when he confronted them.

So, here Christ is reminding us that falsehood and the ugly separation of marriages are not meant to exist! Just because God's word has governed those things doesn't make them lawful. We could apply this same kind of understanding of God's laws to other areas, like slavery in the Old Testament. Jesus is clear: righteousness reflects God's good and original design. Any law that does not do so is not a law that defines righteousness, but limits the horrific suffering caused by sin.

Finally, Jesus rounds out his six examples of greater righteousness by referring to the Jewish laws of retaliation and loving one's neighbor. And here, Jesus makes clear that **true righteousness is marked by selfless love.**

The first law that Jesus refers to is the "eye for an eye", which was a phrase used to describe the limit of retributive justice that someone could enact under Old Testament law. If someone stole your cow, you couldn't respond by murdering their wife. The punishment, or the payment, had to be just and fair—not escalating retaliation.

But the Israelites, just as we would, took this upper limit of retributive justice and took it as a command: We must retaliate in like kind for every offense.

But Jesus says, instead of being a retaliatory people, the people of God are called to be a generous people. The point here is not to lay out a new law: that anytime somebody asks something of you, you *must* listen to their request without thinking. That could get absurd very quickly. And we know that Jesus himself did not give in to everybody's request—later in Matthew, John and James's mother asks Jesus to give her sons the place of honor beside his throne, in his new kingdom, and Jesus denies her request with a polite redirect.

The point for Jesus, using hyperbolic language, is to illustrate, again, down to the heart level, the kind of character the people of the Kingdom are called to have—a character not marked by retaliation as we judge what somebody deserves, but of selfless generosity.

The second law that Jesus refers to is the law to love your neighbor. But here, Jesus also cites “and hate your enemy,” which is not a command in the Old Testament, but an inevitable reality for broken humanity: If the command to love is limited to my neighbor, then I am free to follow my natural inclination to hate my enemy. In fact, for the Jewish people one could almost see how this would nearly be a duty! They were God’s chosen people, hatred of the enemy was a hatred of evil and idolatry and paganism.

But Jesus rejects this kind of limitation, as if the love that God’s people are to be marked by could be limited by geographical proximity, nationality, or political party. Instead, even enemies, even those who hate you, are to be recipients of your love. Again, Jesus is concerned with the fundamental character traits of his people. The righteousness of the kingdom of God is a fundamentally loving righteousness.

And this culminating example shapes all of the other examples Jesus has used so far. Love is what allows citizens of the kingdom of heaven to reconcile with one another, what drives them to keep their marital vows in heart and action, what drives them to keeping their word no matter how strong of a promise was given, what keeps them from retaliating at every opportunity.

The righteousness of the kingdom of heaven is marked by heart-level sincerity, which reflects God’s good designs, because it is fundamentally a loving righteousness, one that permeates and transforms one’s whole being.

### **3. To be Perfect**

But this passage comes to a close with a verse that puts a distinct point on this whole section. It’s a verse that circles back to our opening paragraph and reframes it in a new light. It’s a verse that ties it all together.

**<sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

This is not merely the final summary statement of the “Love your enemies” section, as the formatting in our modern Bibles might make it seem. This is the summary statement of the entire chapter, particularly our passage today. It is a reminder that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus said back in verse 20, one must have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees—perfection, in fact, is the prerequisite.

Now, that is a difficult standard—particularly because of the lengths to which Jesus has just gone to show that the perfection he’s talking about is not merely avoiding sinning, but being completely and



totally transformed from the inside-out, living up to God's original good designs, and loving everyone (even our enemies) to the "nth" degree. In a word, the perfection that Jesus is talking about here is not merely to avoid every sin, but to be whole and complete—a perfect image-bearer of the Creator.

Jesus's kingdom asks much of its citizens: That they are marked by a righteousness, a perfection that permeates the whole person. Whose outward actions are reflections of a rightly ordered heart, a heart that ultimately reflects the heart of God himself. That is a high standard.

And it is at this point where we must be reminded of the principle, we discussed earlier this morning: we cannot read the Bible in short, isolated chunks. And the reason in this case is simple: We cannot disconnect Jesus's teaching with Jesus's actions. We cannot disconnect his teaching from his life, his death, and his resurrection. Because, what all four of the Gospels make clear, what all of Christian teaching and evangelism in the early Church after Jesus makes clear, is that the central, orienting point of the entire story of Jesus is not his teaching, it's not his miracles, it's not his leadership style, but it is his death on a cross and, after three days in the grave, his being raised back to life.

Oh, friends, how it grieves me how many friends and family members that I have who would read the words of Jesus, read his teachings, and think, wow, those are wise and helpful things—and then they would completely ignore the rest of his life! Oh, the unfathomable damage that is done when we rip Jesus's teachings away from his dying! You cannot truly understand the teachings of Jesus and apply them to your life if you do not put them in the context of his death on a cross and his rising to new life.

So, as we read through the book of Matthew, or any other part of the Bible, honestly, we are never going to tire of reading in light of Jesus's \*entire\* life, particularly how his life would end.

The place where that word "perfect" that Jesus uses here in Matthew 5 is used most often in our New Testaments in the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 5, we read that Jesus's life of obedience and suffering actually led to him being "made perfect". His fulfillment of the Law and Prophets was not merely his teaching being a fuller and more perfect expression of the Law and Prophets, but his whole person was a fulfillment of the Law and Prophets. He was a perfect, whole, mature embodiment of God's will and design for humanity.

At the cross, we see that it is Jesus who lives up to this impossible standard, and he lives it out in the cross itself.

And being made perfect, Jesus went to the cross as a perfect sacrifice. He died the death that we deserved, though he was perfect, in order to pay for our imperfections.

- He is the one who, despite having every reason to be angry with us, left the glory of heaven in order to reconcile us with God.
- He is the one who was cut off so that his people would not be thrown into hell.
- He is the one who was faithful to his bride, his people, unto the point of death, despite her unfaithfulness to him.

- He is the one who is the ultimate fulfillment of every promise that God has made to his people, the Yes and Amen for all of God's promises.
- He is the one who was not merely slapped on one cheek, but whipped and bruised on our behalf, yet did not recoil from giving all of himself.
- He is the one who, while we were his enemies, loved us enough to die for us.

He is perfect, as his heavenly Father is perfect, living and breathing and suffering and dying as a perfect image-bearer, the true and righteous human, for our sake.

And in doing so, Hebrews 10:14 says something radical: "by a single offering (himself!) he has *perfected* for all time those who are being sanctified."

Do you hear that, brother or sister? The standard of greater righteousness, the standard of perfection, that is required to enter into the kingdom of heaven, is not one that you can attain by mere effort, by trying to be a better person. It is one that only comes by whole-person transformation, and that transformation can only come about through the person of Jesus himself!

But he's done it! If you have put your faith in him, if you are being sanctified day by day as the Spirit of Jesus works within you, he has *perfected* you for all time! You might not feel it right now, as you go through your life and you snap at your spouse, as you catch yourself in lust, as you pass by the homeless person without a second thought.

But the work of Christ is so sure, so secure, that it may as well be done already. In the eyes of the Father, you are already perfect, as he is, even if in time and space you still need refining and sanctifying.

Jesus is both the example and the empowerment of this perfect righteousness.

Because he's been the example, because he's died to give you the power to attain righteousness, this good news is not an excuse to laziness, as if grace has simply been an excuse to sin. Instead, it's a call to strive. As Paul says, not because we are already experiencing that perfection, but we strive to make it our own, because Christ has made us his own.