

TO FULFILL THE LAW—WITH LOVE

Matthew 5:17-48

Key Verse: 5:17

“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.”

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with the eight blessings to develop the inner life of his disciples. This was a great contrast to the teaching of the Pharisees, who emphasized outward actions, claiming self-righteousness. To some, Jesus’ words sounded revolutionary. They wondered whether Jesus was trying to abolish the Law and the Prophets. Jesus declares that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Moreover, his disciples must attain a righteousness surpassing the Pharisees. In a word, Jesus teaches us how to fulfill the Law with love.

First, Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets (17-18).

Look at verse 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.” As Jesus’ disciples, how we think about the Law is very important. Some people, past and present, have claimed that since they believe in Jesus’ teachings they are no longer bound by the Old Testament Law. They even want to discard the Ten Commandments. Consequently their lives become directionless and chaotic. They even fall into licentiousness. There are many today who call themselves Christians whose quality of life is not better than that of ungodly people. This is especially true in the area of sexual immorality. Such people do not understand Jesus. Jesus does not abolish the Law or the Prophets. Rather, Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets. How does Jesus do so?

In the first place, Jesus had awesome respect for the Law as the very word of God. Look at verse 18. “I tell you the truth, 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.” We are awed by the vastness of the heavens. A man looking up at the night sky can feel like a speck of dust, and that the earth is a grain of sand, in the endless array of planets, stars, and galaxies. We think of the earth as our home and walk over its surface with confidence. But scientists tell us that the very ground we walk on is made of plates that are moving and shifting, sometimes colliding, giving rise to mountains, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Someday the heavens and earth will disappear. 2 Peter 3:10 says, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” Jesus says that until that moment comes, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the Law. In other words, we can trust the Law of God more than the ground we walk on. The Law of God will govern the heavens and the earth as long as they exist.

Jesus emphasized that the written word of God is infallible. Jesus said that not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen would by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. The Law of God is perfect (Ps 19:17). In chapter 4, Jesus defeated the devil when he quoted the word of God with absolute faith, saying repeatedly, “It is written.” Even Jesus did not add anything or take away anything. Jesus accepted the written word as it is. Jesus believed that everything written in the Law would be accomplished in precise detail. The Bible is God’s word. What is written is exactly what God said. God will accomplish it without fail, regardless of opposition. This is more certain than the ground we walk on.

In the second place, Jesus fulfills the Law through his perfect obedience. One theme of Matthew’s gospel is the repetition of the word “fulfill.” Jesus’ virgin birth, Jesus’ escape to Egypt, Jesus’ return from Egypt, Jesus’ life in Nazareth, and Jesus’ ministry in Galilee all fulfilled the words of the prophets. Further, Jesus’ healing ministry (8:17), Jesus’ ministry as the Servant of Israel (Mt 12:17), Jesus’ teaching in parables (Mt 13:14,35), Jesus’ triumphal entry as King of the Jews (Mt 21:4), Jesus’ arrest and betrayal (Mt 26:54,56;27:9) all fulfilled specific prophecies from the Old Testament. John’s gospel explains this well. On the cross, Jesus knew that everything had been completed. But there was one more word of Scripture to fulfill. So Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” They gave him a taste of wine vinegar, fulfilling Psalm 69:21. Then Jesus said, “It is finished,” and breathed his last. Jesus had lived in conscious obedience to God’s written word from the beginning of his life to the end without a hint of rebellion, and without making even one mistake. Jesus offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice. Among all people who have ever lived in history, only Jesus did this.

In the third place, Jesus fulfills the Law with sacrifice. In the Law, God instructed Moses to make an elaborate temple system. At its center was the sacrifice of animals to atone for the sins of the people. It was necessary, for no matter how hard they tried, they could not keep the law of God perfectly. They sinned, both intentionally and unintentionally. Their sin broke their relationship with the holy God. The only way of atonement was through blood sacrifice. Leviticus 17:11 says, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." Yet, the blood of an animal is not equivalent to the blood of a man who is made in God's image. These animal sacrifices anticipated the coming of Jesus. Hebrews 9:14 says, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God." Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). Hebrews 9:28 says in part, "...Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people...." In this way, Jesus' sacrifice fulfilled the Law.

In the fourth place, Jesus fulfills the Law with love. What motivated Jesus to bear such great pains and even death to fulfill the Law? It was the love of God. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God loved us so much that he sacrificed his most precious one and only Son to save us. Jesus loved God enough to obey this command. And Jesus loved each of us enough to die for us. Jesus fulfilled the law with the absolute love of God.

Second, your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees (19-20).

Jesus regarded the Law and the Prophets as the very word of God, fulfilling them with awesome respect, sacrificing his life. Jesus taught his disciples the same attitude. Look at verse 19. "Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Those who break the Law will earn the eternal nickname "Least." Jesus' disciples should practice and teach the Law.

Look at verse 20. "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." The Pharisees and teachers of the law considered themselves righteous based on what they did for God. They lived disciplined lives, observing rituals and ceremonies. But they did not repent before the word of God (Jn 5:39-40). There was no love of God in their hearts (Jn 5:42). Romans 3:20 says, "...no one will be declared righteous in (God's) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." The Pharisees' self-righteousness was unacceptable to God. How can we have righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees? It does not come from competing with the Pharisees. It comes from God by his grace. Romans 3:21-22 say, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." This righteousness produces the fruit of love in our hearts. Then we can love God and love others with the love of God.

Third, Jesus teaches how to practice the law with love (21-48).

In verses 21-48, Jesus teaches his disciples how to understand the law spiritually, not legalistically. This is possible when we have the love of God in our hearts. In this way Jesus develops the real meaning of the Law and applies it as God intended. In essence, Jesus teaches us the heart of God. Let's think about these six teachings.

Teaching number one: Anger is the same as murder; repent and be reconciled. Look at verses 21-22. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.'" Like the people of our time, there were many in Jesus' day who said to themselves, "I have not killed anyone, yet. Therefore, I have kept the sixth commandment." But Jesus teaches that anyone who is angry with his brother breaks this commandment and deserves the same punishment as that of a murderer. Words spoken from an angry heart can murder another's spirit. One young boy had some artistic talent; not a lot, but some. His classmate, who was very gifted in art, was always angry and even hateful due to his broken family. So he severely criticized the first boy as having no sense of art. From that time, the first boy despised himself as having no sense of art. Words spoken

in anger can be lethal. Jesus says this is serious, serious enough to put one in danger of the fire of hell. Who is blameless before this interpretation of the law? No one. Then what should we do?

Look at verses 23-24. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” When we approach God to make an offering, he first looks at us before accepting our offering. He wants us to be right with him. So he helps us to remember relationship problems so that we may solve them. To God, it is urgent that we be reconciled to our brother, more urgent than making our offering. It is because grudges are the seedbed of feuds that can destroy people, families, even communities. The famous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys, which took place in Kentucky and West Virginia from 1878-1891, claimed the lives of 13 people. They say that this feud was started, in large part, by a dispute over the ownership of a wild pig. When small grudges fester, they can lead to tragic consequences. On the other hand, there is Abigail in the Bible. She heard that her wicked husband Nabal had offended David by treating him and his men with contempt. In fact, David was on his way to Nabal’s house to kill him and all the males in his household. Abigail went quickly to David, pleaded for mercy and gave him a generous gift. Her pleading reveals that she knew God’s mind and had David’s best interests at heart. She was a woman of divine wisdom and good judgment. God accepted her intercession, David stayed his hand, and needless bloodshed was avoided. Look at verses 25-26. “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Teaching number two: Lust is as serious as adultery and deserves eternal punishment in hell. Look at verses 27-28. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Many people claim that they are free to think whatever they like, including lustful fantasies, and as long as they don’t hurt anyone, it is okay. Jesus says it is not okay. Lust in the heart is equivalent to the sin of adultery. A man who indulges in pornography has committed adultery in his heart. A woman who dresses so as to entice physical attraction is a cause of adultery, and equally guilty. Exchanging flaming hot text messages, provocative e-mails, or passionate phone conversations are all equivalent to adultery. Yet in our society, lust is often regarded as normal. Marketers use lust to sell products by attaching glamorous actors or actresses to just about anything from cell phones to hedge trimmers. Some cheerleaders resemble dance hall girls. Many recent movies are more like pornography. Yet so often in our society, we think of this as normal. How does Jesus tell us to deal with lust? Look at verses 29-30. “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” Of course, it is not the eye or the hand that causes us to sin. Even if we gouged and cut off all of our body parts we would still be sick with sin. Sin resides in the heart and it is only the blood of Jesus which can cleanse us and make us pure. So we must depend absolutely on Jesus. Still, we must realize the seriousness of lust and take every preventive measure possible to avoid falling into the sin of lust.

Teaching number three: Divorce causes adultery and it deserves the same punishment. Look at verses 31-32. “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” The teaching Jesus quotes is rooted in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Moses said that if a man found something indecent in a woman he could give her a certificate of divorce and send her away, and she could remarry. Moses’ teaching was a concession to hardhearted people. But the Pharisees made it the proof text for a liberal teaching about divorce. They taught that it was okay to divorce as long as it was done legally. Liberal Pharisees interpreted the words “something indecent” to be anything from speaking critically of her husband in the presence of his parents to poor cooking. Soon men would divorce their wives for any and every reason. They thought it was okay. But Jesus says that divorce, for any reason except marital unfaithfulness, causes adultery. God does not see things in mere legal terms. God looks at the heart. One who breaks a marriage vow taken in the presence of God has broken faith with God and man. A certificate of divorce does not make it right. Jesus said plainly that divorce causes adultery. The punishment for adultery has already been stated: it is eternal condemnation in the fire of hell.

Teaching number four: Simply say “yes” or “no.” In verses 33-37 Jesus deals with a problem common in his day. People were taking all kinds of oaths to buttress their credibility, when in fact, they could not keep their oaths. Their effort to make oaths turned out to be lies. Jesus said that we should not swear oaths at all, recognizing our powerlessness to make our own hair white or black. Look at verse 37. “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

Teaching number five: Go beyond legal justice to the heart of God. Look at verse 38. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’” These words or their equivalent are found three times in the Pentateuch (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Dt 19:21). When a person injures another person he has injured God’s creature. Justice required that what he did to another must be done to him. This law was given to teach people to honor God and to honor other people as God’s creatures. However Jesus’ disciples must go beyond legal justice to the heart of God. Look at verses 39-42. “But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Teaching number six: Love your enemies. Look at verses 43-47. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” This is a challenging teaching. But we must remember that Jesus loved each one of us while we were still his enemies. When we look at Jesus, we can love our enemies. As we do so, we can grow in the image of God to be universally generous. Look at verse 48. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Jesus set the highest standard for his disciples in spirit, ethics, morality. We cannot meet it by will power. Only the love of God in us can help us do this. We can fulfill the Law with love. In Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands.”