

## Jesus the Law-Fulfiller

Matthew 5:17-20

### Where We Have Been

The Sermon on the Mount, as we have learned, is Christ's call to live in light of the coming kingdom (see 4:17). So far, we have seen how Jesus describes the *character* of kingdom people (the beatitudes, 5:1-12) and the *influence* they have on the world (as salt and light, 5:13-16).

### Jesus and the Old Testament

All this has been an introduction. Now in 5:17, Jesus begins the body of the Sermon with a monumental claim: "I have come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets." He makes this clarification because his Jewish audience would have been wondering, "How does this teacher and his vision for the kingdom of God relate to our holy Scripture—the Law and Prophets?" After all, it was their Scripture (our "Old Testament") that taught them to expect the kingdom of God and told them the righteous requirements for life in God's kingdom. Would Jesus *add* to it? *do away* with it?

Jesus' answer to this unstated question is clear: he had *not* come to abolish the Scripture, but to fulfill and complete it. He was neither pointing people *away* from the Law, nor pointing people *to* the Law, but pointing people to *himself* as the fulfiller of the Law. In essence, he was saying that all the rituals, promises, commands; all the poetry, prophecy, and wisdom find their significance, meaning, and fulfillment in himself—who he is and what he would do.

Notice how these two verses serve as twin bookends for the body of the Sermon on the Mount, with the "so" of 7:12 closing off this entire section:

Matthew 5:17

Do not think that I have come to abolish **the Law and the Prophets**; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. . . .

Matthew 7:12

**So** whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is **the Law and the Prophets**

### Greater Righteousness

To scrupulously keep the law is inadequate to enter the kingdom of God. A "greater righteousness" is needed; one that is informed and empowered by Jesus himself. Throughout the "body" of the Sermon (5:17-7:12), then, Jesus is showing what this "greater righteousness" looks like. In other words, the body of the Sermon on the Mount provides various examples of how the Law and Prophets are fulfilled in the lives of those who trust and follow Jesus Christ.

- 5:21-48 - Greater righteousness: six examples from the law (murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and hatred)
- 6:1-19 - Greater righteousness in religious practices (giving to the poor, prayer, fasting)
- 6:19-7:6 - Greater righteousness in everyday life (wealth, anxiety, response to others' sins)

### Our Response to the Need for "Greater Righteousness"

How should we respond to Jesus' holding up this requirement of "greater righteousness"? Some people think Jesus' main point was to emphasize that keeping the law is essentially a matter of the heart; so we must be attentive to the spirit as well as the letter of the law. Others think that

Jesus was simply proving that we are unable to fulfill such a law and so need to trust him alone for salvation.

Both views contain some truth but are inadequate by themselves. It is true that some examples of greater righteousness emphasize the importance of the heart (e.g., lust and adultery, 5:28). And it is true that these commandments leave us feeling inadequate to fulfill them by ourselves. But, to state it again, Jesus is neither pointing us to the Law alone, nor away from the law, but to *himself* as the fulfiller of the law. Precisely how he would fulfill the law is evident from the rest of Matthew's gospel: by dying for our sins and rising again, he fulfills not only the prophecies but also the requirements of the law on our behalf. By ascending to heaven and bestowing the Holy Spirit on his followers, he gives those who believe in him the power to live out this "greater righteousness."

As followers of Jesus, we go to the Sermon on the Mount to learn how to live out the life of Christ that is in us (see Galatians 2:20). We are not told, "You are a citizen of the kingdom, so it doesn't matter what you do." Neither are we told: "Do this in order to become a citizen of the kingdom of heaven." Instead, we are told, "Because you *are* a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, this 'greater righteousness' is the way you can and must live."

### **Questions for Discussion and Application**

1. Jesus claimed that he did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament), but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). What does this teach us about how much he valued the Old Testament? How does this contrast with the way many people today (maybe even ourselves) tend to treat the Old Testament?
2. Jesus' statement in 5:17 is arguably the most important statement in the Bible about how we should read the Old Testament. How would you respond to someone who claims to be able to understand the Old Testament without considering how it points to Jesus?
3. Suppose someone told you: "The impossibly high standards of the Sermon on the Mount simply point us to our need for Christ." What important lessons from the Sermon on the Mount might that person miss?
4. From what you know about the examples of law-keeping throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (consider for example 5:27-30, 38-42, 6:16-18), what is so much "greater" about the "greater righteousness" that Jesus speaks of?
5. Some people treat the Sermon on the Mount as a standalone sermon. Why is it important to see the Sermon on the Mount in light of the rest of the book of Matthew, that is, in light of Jesus' death, resurrection, and bestowing of the Holy Spirit?