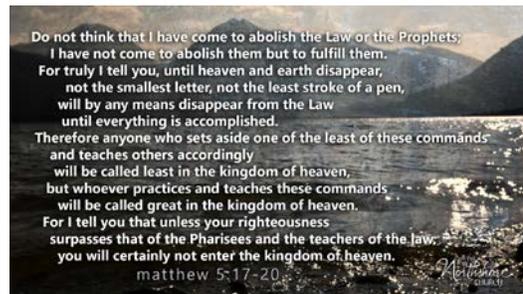


Fulfilling the Law

We are in the midst of a series, studying the words of Jesus from His *Sermon on the Mount*.

It has been a while since we read out loud together; it is good to read Scripture out loud... so let's do so starting at Matthew 5:17. These are all the Words of Jesus.

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 tell you, 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. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly 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. 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. ¹



I don't think that I am going out on a limb supposing that this all (Sermon on the Mount) was hard for the original hearers to take.

- **A lot:** We don't have any reason to doubt that this was, indeed, one sermon. This one message that is recorded in three chapters of Matthew (5-7) is something **we're** tackling in 10 pieces, spread over 4 months. We could break it down into even smaller pieces, stretch it out over even more time... and I'm sure we would still find it challenging to entirely grasp.
- **Contrary to human nature:** Most of what we find in the *Sermon on the Mount* does not come naturally. For example, Jesus started the Sermon by describing **blessing** in ways that are generally upside-down and backwards to how we might generally think of a blessed life. This Sermon calls us to change (thinking, behavior, motivations) in dramatic ways.

¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Mt 5:17–20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

- ***Contrary to what was being taught:*** The *Sermon on the Mount* not only challenges our natural way of thinking; it challenges our religious, theological ways of thinking. It was the religious ones with whom Jesus most clashed as He shined light on their systems and motivations, exposing their faults.

When we read on in the Gospels, we find that even His closest followers were confused by the teaching of Jesus. His Disciples, who would become His Apostles and founders of the Church and writers of the New Testament, were obviously confused, even though they were His closest students.

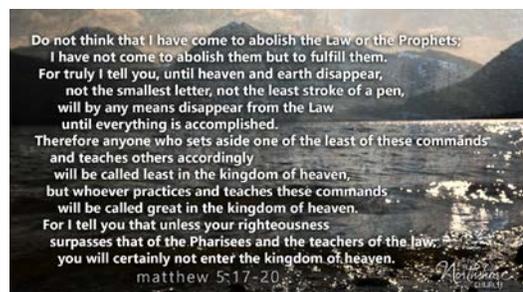
So if you are finding the *Sermon on the Mount* challenging, difficult, or even confusing... you are in good company. I would even go so far to say that if the *Sermon on the Mount* does **not** shake us up, then we probably ought to take another look because we are probably not getting it. I am confident that Jesus intends for the *Sermon on the Mount* to mess with people, especially His followers.

This passage before us is really important in our understanding of God's Kingdom; it could easily be misunderstood. But when we get it right, we find the rich truth of the Gospel.

Before we walk through the passage in detail, allow me to remind us of the *big picture* and an important key to understanding the *Sermon on the Mount*.

The *Sermon on the Mount* is best understood as ***descriptive***, rather than ***prescriptive***. This is King Jesus **describing** what it is like to be a citizen of His Kingdom, not Our King **prescribing** what it takes to qualify as a citizen. If we read today's passage, or any part of the *Sermon on the Mount*, as a set of rules to be followed, or tests to be passed... we will miss the point.

When it comes to today's passage, we could take it as a prescription... a set of rules that are impossible to follow, standards that we cannot possibly meet.



But if we understand this as a description of God's Kingdom, I am confident it will lead us to the Gospel... the Gospel that welcomes us all to be citizens of God's Kingdom.

Jesus said:

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them²

There is little doubt that there were some *wondering* about Jesus, especially in terms of the religious authority that ruled the day (the Law and the Prophets included the Pentateuch and the writings of the Prophets; essentially our Old Testament).

Some were **worried** that He was abolishing the Law and the Prophets; while others were **hoping** that He was abolishing the Law and the Prophets. Some saw Jesus as a rebel, refusing to conform to the established rules; while others saw Him as a revolutionary, blowing up the old, failed systems. Some sought to condemn him for being a rebel; others applauded him for being a revolutionary.

Jesus proclaimed that He was neither rebel nor revolutionary; He had no interest in abolishing the Law and the Prophets.

I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.³

Fulfill is a powerful word.

First, **fulfill** says something very important about God. It reminds us that God is perfect (holy) and does not change. The One who stands outside of time is not impacted by time or circumstances. God is always holy, always good, always just... and that never changes; God is immutable. So it follows, of course, that Jesus does not change God's law, and He certainly does not abolish it.

Fulfill is so much more than *conserving* or *preserving* God's law. Jesus is more than a mere preacher or teacher of the Law. By saying that He fulfills the Law, we see that Jesus is not merely holding on to some notion of the Law in a nostalgic way, not clinging to a relic.

² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 5:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 5:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

By proclaiming that He fulfills the law, Jesus affirms the Truth of the Law, the essence of the Law... while declaring that things will not continue as they were.

I came across an illustration that might help us grasp what it means for something to be fulfilled. Consider an **acorn**. If we wanted to merely abolish or destroy an acorn, we might smash it with a rock, cut it up into pieces, throw it into a fire, or otherwise mutilate it so that it would be no more.



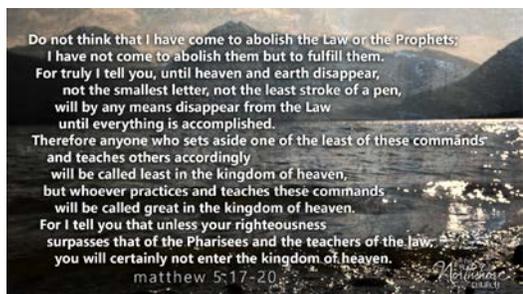
But if we took that acorn and buried it in the soil in such a way that it would do what it was designed to do... eventually we would have a mighty oak tree.

When we come across an oak, do we expect to find that original acorn? A scientist would tell us that the DNA of that original acorn is there; the substance of that acorn is evident in every part of the tree. But the form of that acorn is long gone. Yet, standing in the shade of a magnificent oak, would we say that the acorn was destroyed? How could we? Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the acorn, the seed, was **fulfilled**?



Jesus said that He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

¹⁸ For truly I tell you, 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.⁴

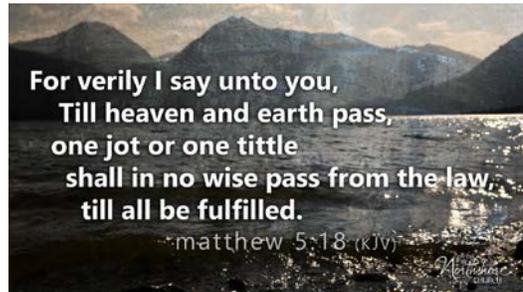


⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Mt 5:18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

There is a phrase that shows up over 30 times in the Gospel of Mathew that is translated in our NIV translation of the Bible as “truly I tell you.” It is as if the other stuff Jesus said was not true, not the Truth. But that is not what it means at all.

In a more traditional translation, like the King James Version, it reads:

¹⁸ For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.⁵



This might be one of those times the KJV helps us, since a word like verily seems so odd to us; the *word* is odd to us because the *concept* is odd to us. This word **verily** is more than merely **truly** as our NIV translates. Verily is more like “with absolute authority, this is the final word.”

That is an odd concept to us because rarely does anyone have *the final word* on anything. We might think we do... but we often find out that we don't. I often thought that as a father I had the *final word* with my young sons... but every father knows that we can be overruled. Our final word might be overturned by a mother... or possibly even a higher authority. As a Christian father, there is no more humbling moment than when our “final word” is overturned in prayer, and in response to Our Heavenly Father we have to go to our kids with a changed heart and mind, possibly even needing forgiveness from our kids. Father's ought to be careful with a *final word*.

Our President thought he had the *final word* with an executive order... that is until a judge issued a restraining order. And that judge doesn't have the final word either as appeals and rulings will go up the chain, likely all the way to the Supreme Court (reminding us that elections matter when it comes to appointing judges). And, it turns out that the Supreme Court doesn't have the final word either... because **We the People** ultimately have the power to change the laws and even change the Constitution. The final word is very rarely the final word.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Mt 5:18). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

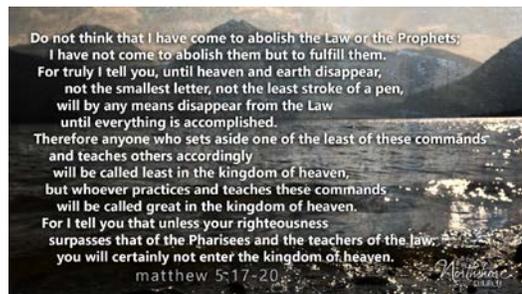
So it would be silly for us to speak in terms of *verily*, proclaiming *the final word* on anything, because doing so would elevate ourselves to some sort of godlike status... silly, that is, unless one truly possess the authority to claim the final word, unless One is truly God. Jesus uniquely has the right and authority to proclaim something as *verily*, to proclaim something as the Truth and the *final word*.

In regard to the Law, Jesus says that not one *jot* or *tittle* shall be abolished; rather, it will be fulfilled. The body of Law is made of individual laws. Laws are made of phrases. Phrases are made of words. Words are made of letters. And letters are made of jots and tittles, dots and strokes... like the dot over an *i* or a stroke that crosses a *t*. When it comes to the Law, Jesus proclaims that not even the smallest part will be abolished.

¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven⁶

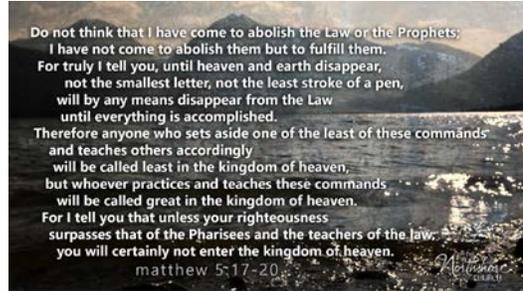
This is a condemnation aimed squarely at **religious** people. It clearly isn't meant for those who do not know the Law; how can anyone *set aside* something they know nothing about? This is for those who **teach** the commands... religious people. Among those hearing these words of Jesus for the first time would be the Pharisees, the most religious and meticulous among them. These were those who would go to great lengths to demonstrate their righteousness by following intricate rules... but it turns out that many of these intricate rules were far from the true meaning of the Law. Some even were meant to navigate religious people around the law. Those who thought they were the greatest because of their fierce attention to religious detail were actually the least in God's Kingdom according the King Jesus.

They mummified the law... taking what was once living and productive, layering religious strip on top of religious strip of their own making. Encasing it in ornate packaging and revering it. But what was left inside was still decaying and dead.



⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Mt 5:19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Before we go *clucking our tongues* at the Pharisees, carefully consider our own religious ways. Could it be that our adherence to certain rules or positions actually serves to move us away from the Gospel? Might our own fierce attention to religious detail take us from being first in the Kingdom to being among the least? These are the kinds of things we need to pray about as God fulfills His Kingdom in our hearts and through our lives.



We want to be among those that Jesus describes when He says:

whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.⁷

And how can that be? We read on:

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.⁸

The highest standards of righteousness among the crowd that day were set by the Pharisees... yet Jesus says that their standard was too low. It had to be disheartening to hear Jesus say such a thing.

A Pharisee would hear Jesus and naturally think, “How can this be? I have kept every rule, and performed every ritual, yet that standard is not high enough.”

And every other person might think, “I can’t even possibly imagine clearing the standards set by the Pharisees, that bar is beyond my reach. Yet Jesus calls us to clear an even higher bar.”

What can we do? There is no way we can possibly attain such a lofty standard of righteousness. It could seem hopeless... and it would be hopeless if we forget where we started.

Jesus said:

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.⁹

⁷ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 5:19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 5:20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 5:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Jesus did not merely *proclaim* the demands of the Law and the Prophets; He did not merely tell us about the righteous demands of our Holy God. Jesus fulfilled them. Jesus paid it all. Jesus is The Way.

If in our own way we expect our righteousness to make a way for us to enter God's Kingdom, we will fail. It does not matter what standard we apply. We can't be

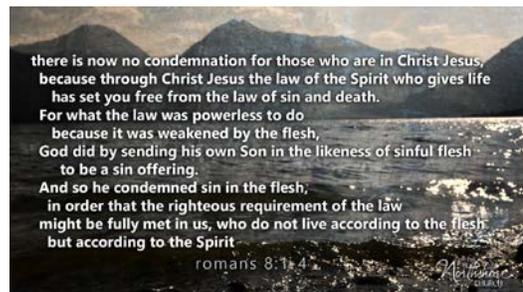
- kind enough, or
- generous enough, or
- productive enough, or
- smart enough, or
- compassionate enough, or
- holy enough.

Whatever our righteousness is, if it is merely **our** righteousness it will not pass the standard.

But if our righteousness is His righteousness, then the Kingdom is ours; we are citizens of God's Kingdom because Jesus fulfills the righteous demands for us.

Romans 8 puts it like this:

there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, ⁿ God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. ^p And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ¹⁰



This is the Gospel. God's holy standards of righteousness are higher than we could ever attain in our weakness. On our own we are hopeless. But, thanks be to God, He sent His Son.

¹⁰ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 8:1-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Again, in terms we've used before, this is not Jesus **prescribing** that citizens of His Kingdom must strive to attain some degree of righteousness to gain entry; rather, Jesus is **describing** that citizens of His Kingdom are credited with righteousness that far surpasses anything we could ever attain with our mere efforts.

Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets in every conceivable way. In His example and teaching, through the way He fulfilled every Old Testament promise... but it seems that the most vital way He fulfilled the Law and Prophets was through His suffering, death, and resurrection. He paid the price as our sin offering.

On this first Sunday of the month, we are called to the Lord's Table... and with this bread and this cup we remember this vital way that Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law.

By His broken body and spilled blood... through His suffering as He bore the weight of our sin, Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law.

So we come today, remembering in the way that He taught us, breaking bread to remember His broken body, and taking the cup remembering His spilled blood.

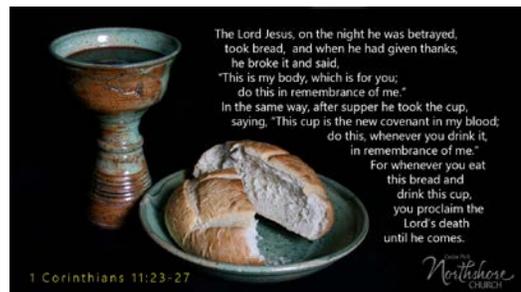
It is a moment of reflection. If you are anything like me, I suspect that we each bring some elements of rebellion and revolution.

We are faced with God's call to holiness and righteousness, and we rebel. We say yes to ourselves and no to God.

Or maybe we propose a sort of revolution... casting off God's call and saying we have a better way.

Rebellion and revolution. These seem like days on the verge of rebellion or revolution... or both.

Jesus demonstrated a different way. Not a way of rebellion or revolution... but of redemption and fulfillment.



With this bread and this cup, we choose again; we choose **redemption**. We set aside our efforts, whether they are efforts of rebellion or revolution, and we rest in His redemption. We remember that only He fulfills the righteous demands of our holy God. We are redeemed. And by the power of His Spirit, His good purpose and will is being fulfilled in us and through us.