7-27-25

Matthew 5:17-20

When Jesus gave what we call the Sermon on the Mount, there were huge crowds of people around Him listening. But in spite of the crowds, Jesus was specifically teaching His disciples. He was teaching them how to strive to live life; and He was teaching them how to better interpret the law. And here is the beautiful thing about these words for us today: As followers of Christ, we are not just part of the crowds listening in; we are His disciples who are being taught.

The things Jesus teaches here are not easy. Even the eight beatitudes are impossible for us to maintain in our own strength; they are very much opposed to our fallen nature. With the indwelling Holy Spirit, we can come much closer because when saved, we have received a new heart and become a new creation. Still, the fight between the old man and the new man continues and we sometimes fall and need forgiveness.

Jesus goes further when considering the law, pointing out that observing the letter of the law is not enough. There is a spirit of the law that leads to perfection and holiness; again, beyond our ability to achieve.

In spite of our inability to achieve perfect success in following these teachings of Christ, our lifelong goal is to try to achieve them anyway. In this way we are the salt and light of the world; people will see how we live and glorify God; this is a way for us to bear fruit for the Kingdom of Heaven; and this is how we show obedience to our Saviour who has called us to be separate from the world and holy to Him. One more thing: as we try to live our lives in this way, we are constantly reminded of why we need a Saviour; because God requires absolute perfection, we can’t save ourselves.

Jesus begins our passage for today with: *“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”* When Jesus uses to phrase “I came”, He is making it clear that He is there for a specific reason; that He has a particular mission. Obviously, the people He was speaking to had no clear understanding of what that mission was; in fact, they didn’t really even have a clear understanding of where He came from. His statement though has a divine ring to it. It would not be until Pentecost that His disciples were given full understanding of His divinity and His mission.

As His disciples today, we have the tremendous advantages of history behind us, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and God’s word in the Bible. We know that His mission was the salvation of all who would come to Him; to offer us the gift of eternal life. Being that we are His disciples, it has now been given to us to pass along Christ’s teachings and to share to Gospel. In this way we are the salt and light of the earth. This earth desperately needs both: it is dark and rotting. And the only cure is Christ.

The law and the prophets is a way of referring to the whole Old Testament. Jesus is making clear His stand on the Mosaic law and the testimonies of the prophets sent by God. They are not something to be done away with and that is because they are the words of God so they are truth and they are absolute. As Jesus will show in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, He has a very high regard for the law and actually intensifies it. He wants people to hold them in high regard and to have a better understanding of their true intent. We mentioned earlier, it is important to follow the spirit of the law and not the letter.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets; He did not come to abolish them. One of those prophecies is Ezekiel 36:26, *“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”* This is the covenant of salvation by grace. This is the covenant we receive through Christ. Christians are not under the Mosaic covenant; we do not try to establish our righteousness or salvation by following the law of Moses. However, Jesus makes it very clear here that we are to still follow the law.

Now, this raises some questions for us because we no longer practice the sacrificial rites of the Jewish law. Also there are some laws that Jesus seemed to modify or do away with, such as declaring all foods clean and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we don’t celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday.

I believe that the answer to these questions lies in Jesus’ fulfillment of the law. The whole sacrificial system was a temporary covering of sin with innocent blood, and it pointed forward to the need for a perfect sacrifice that would actually cleanse us of sin. Jesus fulfilled these things; His was a perfect sacrifice and His blood was able to not just cover our sins but to remove them completely; and even remove the guilt they left behind.

The law imposed many dietary restrictions and modes of life that made Israel stand apart from other nations; to be separate from them. We who are followers of Christ stand apart from the world because we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We are a holy people and we are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. We stand apart because of a spiritual separation; although that should lead to physical and behavioral differences from the world. Again, these things are fulfilled in Christ.

The sabbath was instituted for a day of rest from physical labor and to set aside special time to worship God. Jesus has fulfilled that too in a deep spiritual sense. Hebrews chapter 4 explains that Jesus is the way into the rest that God has offered us. While we still need physical rest, God has offered us eternal spiritual rest and the only way to that rest is through Christ.

We tend to divide the Law of Moses into three basic sections: the ceremonial law, the civil law, and the moral law. This is okay because it helps us to get a grasp on them and it helps us to see which Jesus has fulfilled and which we must still follow. The ceremonial laws have been fulfilled in Jesus; we no longer need to sacrifice animals for our sins because they have been completely atoned for. But we are still called to sacrifice for the benefit of others and to bring glory to God. This includes our time, our money, and our comfort.

In the civil laws, we can still see a good foundation for the civil laws we have now. Yet a number of the civil laws carried harsh penalties including capital punishment. These penalties show the seriousness with which God takes sin and hopefully we adopt that same seriousness. But again, Jesus fulfills much of what we see in the civil punishments. Jesus took on the capital punishment we deserved. In His mercy, we are able to live longer and the hope is that we will turn to Christ.

It is primarily the moral laws that we are to follow. These are what’s written on our hearts. We follow these because they match God’s character and they are absolute truth. They are not going to change. We are saved by grace by faith in Jesus Christ; the evidence of our salvation is living by God’s moral righteousness. It also sets us apart from the world and helps us to be a holy people unto God.

Jesus goes on to emphatically state that the law is not to be trifled with. He says that not the smallest part of the law would pass away or not be fulfilled. The King James translation uses a phrase many of us are aware of: jot or tittle. The jot was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. A tittle was a tiny mark on some letters to distinguish them from a similar letter. Jesus pushed down to the tiniest parts of the Hebrew language to make His point: the law is not to be done away with. Even the parts that are already fulfilled in Christ still teach us about God and His character.

As a side, notice that part of Jesus’ statement: *until heaven and earth pass away.* Jesus is letting us know that the earth and the heavens are going to pass away. History will not continue forever, it will come to an end. Peter is more direct in 2 Peter 3:10, *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.”* The good news is that this takes place to make room for the new heavens and the new earth where we will live forever.

Jesus goes further and tells of a terrible consequence for negating even the least of the laws and teaching others to do so. It appears that they will still make it into heaven, but there will be an eternal loss of rewards. Be very careful with the commandments that are given throughout the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible. We can’t disregard any; because they come from God, they are important, even if we don’t see how important they are.

The scribes and religious leaders had counted up 613 laws in the Pentateuch. This gave them lots of excuse to sit around and argue over which was the most important and which might be of lesser importance. Unfortunately, the usual goal of this was to see which ones they might get by with not paying attention to or to cherry pick the easier ones. Just fallen human nature again.

But from these debates came the question asked of Jesus as to which was the greatest commandment. Usually it was asked in an attempt to trap Him, but in Mark 12 a lawyer asks in earnest, which shows they were not all corrupt. Regardless, the answer was the same: For the greatest commandment He quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”* Then He went ahead and told them the second greatest commandment quoting from Leviticus 19:18, *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”*. By calling these two the greatest commandments, Jesus in no way lowered the importance of the other 611. And that is because these two encompass all the others.

Jesus’ last statement in this passage would have shocked those who were listening to Him. The scribes and Pharisees had a reputation for being righteous; they strictly followed the law. Now, we know that we cannot establish our own righteousness by our works. We also know from Jesus’ confrontations with the religious leaders that many were corrupt and that their righteousness was just a show and they used their power and position to take what they wanted.

But laying that aside, the ones who sincerely tried their best were not righteous enough. The people would understand that if the Pharisees weren’t righteous enough, then they didn’t stand a chance. What they would later learn, and what we now know, is that we must be covered in the righteousness of Christ. That is the only way we can be justified to stand before the almighty God and be acceptable to Him. And, of course, that can only happen by accepting the gift of grace offered to us by Jesus Himself, that comes from His work on the cross.

Prayer

Lord, we read so many times in the Psalms how blessed it is to spend time meditating on Your law. We confess that sometimes we see them as just rules for another culture and people and time. Sometimes we can’t even see their relevance; it is easy to pass them by without too much thought.

But as we read Your word we come to understand differently. Your word is always relevant; it is living and active and can reach to our very marrow to change us into the likeness of Christ. Your law is beautiful, Lord. It reveals who You are, it helps us to understand Your character, it leads us into paths of righteousness. It is a precious gift You gave to Your people and is now available to the world.

Help us Lord, to glean what we can from Your law. Open our eyes to its beauty and create in us a strong desire to read and meditate upon it. And Lord, thank You for Your law and for the wonderous good it does us.

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen