

Jesus and the Law

We are looking together at the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is basically teaching his disciples, while a huge crowd listen in. He is explaining what it is like living as part of the Kingdom of God, which is living with a recognition that God is in charge. Jesus' teaching was pretty radical and at first it 'blew people's minds' but latter it attracted immense hostility from the religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus says something here that would have been very challenging to his disciples and to all those listening, as well as sowing some early seeds of conflict with the religious teachers.

Reading Matthew 5:17-20

The scribes and the Pharisees were the guardians of the Torah, God's Law. They prided themselves on being the champions of righteousness. Jesus said, *"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."* How can that be possible? The scribes and Pharisees were the experts in righteousness, how could ordinary folk like those listening to Jesus here ever go beyond the righteousness of the their religious leaders? If what Jesus was saying was true then how could they ever enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Is Jesus setting them an impossible standard to attain? Yes and no!

When Jesus taught he often used the phrase "You have heard it said ... but I tell you." It sounded very much as if Jesus was setting aside the teachings of the OT, generally know as the Law & the Prophets, and no doubt he had been accused of setting aside the Law of God. Jesus responds to this perception. *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."* So this morning let us look at what the Law is, how Jesus fulfilled the Law, what relevance the law has to us today and how our righteous can surpass that of the Scribes & Pharisees.

1. The Law and the Prophets.

The Jews divide their scriptures, which is has exactly the same content as our OT, into three sections. **The Torah** (Law) the first five books. **The Nevi'im** (Prophets) which includes the early prophets Joshua, Judges, Samuel & Kings and the later prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the twelve 'minor prophets' (from Hosea through to Malachi. The third section, **The Ketuvim** (writings) was made up of some historical books and the wisdom literature. The remaining books are Psalms, Proverbs and Job; Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles. This makes 24 books but if we count books like 1 King and 2 Kings as separate books and the minor prophets as 12, we get a total of 39 books of the OT which together with the 27 books of the NT gives us 66 books in the Bible. The Hebrew scriptures were known generally as The Law and the Prophets. So Jesus is referring to the whole of what we call the Old Testament. Jesus says that he had not come to abolish but to fulfil what was written in all these books.

All Jewish boys were taught the OT scriptures but Jesus knew them better than most, as he had a more perceptive grasp of all he heard. Remember how, when he was

twelve, he was 'sitting among the teachers of the Law, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers'. The Holy Spirit was preparing him by showing how so many of these scriptures were all about him! Can you imagine what that was like for young Jesus as he heard the scriptures read in the Synagogue, the Holy Spirit was whispering to him, "That's you, Jesus". "That is going to happen to you". John quotes Jesus in his Gospel, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is **these that testify about Me.**" Jn 5:39 and "For if you believed Moses you would believe Me, for **he wrote about Me.**" Jn 5:46. Jesus was very aware of what the scriptures taught, particularly the many ways in which the OT was all about him and he loved those scriptures and would never think of criticising them or undermining them or abolishing them.

2. How did Jesus fulfil the Law & Prophets?

Jesus, to some extent, set about fulfilling the many prophecies about him contained in the scriptures. But in many cases he couldn't do anything to make them come true - they just happened. He had no control over where he was born and brought up and so many other prophecies about him. But he did have a choice in making the most important prophecy about him come true, as we see when Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemane, "*If there is any other way out of this, then take this from me, but not my will but your be done.*" 'He set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem' knowing that death on a cross awaited him there.

There are many allusions to the cross in the OT. An animal had to die to provide its skins to cover up the nakedness of Adam and Eve; this was the very first sacrifice, and Jesus sacrifice clothes us with his righteousness. Abraham's trek to the top of Moriah with Isaac carrying the wood, to sacrifice his own son was on the very same mountain that 2000 years later Jesus would ascend, carrying his cross as the Father made him a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Jesus was also like the Passover lamb, so that when the Angel of death saw the blood of the lamb painted on the doorposts he passed over and did not take the lives of the firstborn males. All the many sacrifices the Jews had to make and every one of the ceremonial trappings and rituals have some allusion to Jesus, his death and resurrection, or to who he is. It would take us hours to go through all these pictures and prophecies in the OT as Jesus did with two disciples he met on the road to Emmaus, when "*beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.*" and their hearts burned within them.

3. What relevance does the Law have for us?

The Letter to the Hebrews deals with this question in considerable detail. Jesus did not abolish the law, but by fulfilling it, he has now made many parts of it obsolete. 8:13. The law could never make anything perfect. Its main job was to show us how imperfect we are, so its commands are 'weak and useless', 7:18. By replacing the old covenant, that was based on the Law and was flawed, with a new covenant based on grace most of the rituals and ceremonies especially the sacrifices are now completely obsolete. In fact if we were to sacrifice an animal for our sins today it would say that Jesus' sacrifice was not effective to take away our sins! All the laws about '*food and drink and various washings were imposed until a time of reformation.*' 9:10. Such as time came about with the coming of Jesus. So these laws are no longer relevant either.

What we have left is the moral law, and the Spirit writes this in our minds and on our hearts. What does that mean? It means that we now have the power within us to accomplish these aspects of the law. No longer is the law external like the sign that says, "Keep off the grass" that just makes us want to go and walk on it. Having it written in our hearts means that we want to do this stuff; the desire is in us and we don't want to kick against it, as we so often do with outward laws. If anything Jesus teaches that the inner requirements of the law are even tougher than the outward as we shall see in the rest of Matt 5.

4. How can our righteousness surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees?

Their righteousness was as good as it gets by anyone trying to keep the law. But it was based on self-effort and the only way they could maintain it was by living a highly regulated life in which they meticulously observed a whole load of specific regulations. But many of the more personally challenging commandments were watered down and a whole load of petty regulations, which were far easier to comply with, were added to the Law. This is why Jesus spoke against them so strongly, not because he was seeking to abolish the law, but because he was so angry that they broke many of the most difficult commandments, and taught others to do the same, while adding masses of petty observances that did not reflect anything of the heart of God that was expressed in the original Torah. So these teachers of the law had the outward form of godliness but they had no power to truly live a godly life.

They lived under condemnation; they were always falling short of their own ideals, but rather than making them humble, they hid their hypocrisy and were all too quick to condemn others, as we see with the 'woman caught in adultery'. (I've often wondered, what about the man?) Jesus told her, when they all slunk away without any casting the first stone, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more!"

By grace we are so completely forgiven that there is no condemnation at all, ever! No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because Jesus took all our condemnation on himself when he died on the cross. It is now impossible for God to ever judge us or condemn us for sin, because Jesus has fully paid of it. "*The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death*". Now, as we live in the power of the Spirit, we cannot fulfil the desires of our body or mind. So if we are sin since coming to Christ it is entirely due to the fact that we are not 'walking in the Spirit'; we are not being continually filled with the Spirit and living by his power. Every moment that we are being filled with the Spirit we will live righteously. We cannot do otherwise. So it is so important to put to death the deeds of the flesh and live every day in the power of the Spirit who had written God's law in our hearts and gives us the power to keep it. This is how our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

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