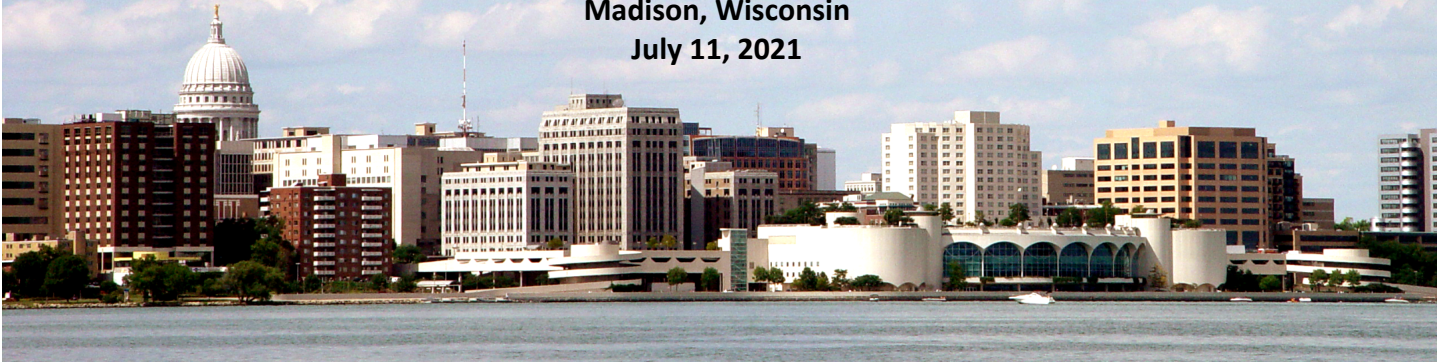


Jesus on the Law

PART 1: THE LAW FULFILLED • MATTHEW 5:17-20

Baxter T. Exum (#1603)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
July 11, 2021



It is good to see all of you here this morning! As usual, I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway, as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning, and then Michael/John will be leading us in our songs before we dismiss today.

Here at the beginning, we'd like to invite you to obey the gospel if you haven't done so already. The gospel is the good news about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. He died for our sins, and we are saved by his blood as we are baptized into his death (according to Romans 6). We hear and understand the gospel, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and then we make the actual appeal to God for a good conscience through the act of baptism (according to 1 Peter 3:21). If we can help you with this in any way, if there's something we can clarify, we hope you will get in touch.

By way of encouragement, we have several examples of baptisms that have taken place this week. The first two come to us from the Faith Village congregation in Wichita Falls, Texas. They posted online a few days ago and said, "The angels are celebrating two souls being added to the Kingdom. Grateful for Steven and Jaci being baptized this evening. Special thanks to the Owens family and McCoy family for studying with them. After leaving Sheppard AFB, they will return to Arizona and be at Luke AFB. We pray God's blessings on them." We obviously rejoice with these two as they begin their Christian lives together.

The next one also comes from the Faith Village congregation, this one from this past Thursday, as they say that "Hunter Sims was baptized by Zachary Waugh at QMCC last night." It looks like this might be a reference to Quartz Mountain Christian Camp, a youth camp in Oklahoma. But they say that, "Hunter has been studying with his sister Taylor and his brother-in-law Zachary." I'm guessing we have Hunter in the middle with his sister, Taylor, on the right, and his brother-in-law, Zachary, on the left. So, good news from Oklahoma via Texas this week.

And the last one today comes from Brandon Edwards, a friend and the grandson of one of my favorite professors at Freed-Hardeman. Brandon (on the right) lives in Nashville right now and has just finished up a master's degree from Harvard. This week, Brandon has been speaking at a series of lectures at a church in Washington State. One of the sponsoring congregations is the church in Puyallup, a church we visited a couple of years ago, a great

congregation (just south of the Seattle airport), and the preacher at that time was Mark Jamieson, also a friend of mine, someone I met at Polishing the Pulpit a few years ago. Anyway, this is Brandon's post from a few days ago. He says, "What a story! Earlier this year, in March, Aaron Gallagher (who works with the Gospel Broadcasting Network) asked if anyone new of a church or preacher in Puyallup, Washington - I happened to know Mark Jamieson was in the area so I tagged him on Facebook - I had been to the area two years ago and was happy to connect them. Aaron knew a guy who wanted to be baptized - and this is him! Tyler Rex is now a member of the church here - what an incredible thing to meet Tyler, my brother in Christ! God is incredible and social media can be a wonderful thing." Facebook has actually caused something good to happen! We are thankful for Tyler's decision to obey the gospel. And we share all of this by way of encouragement. What these four people have done over the past few weeks, you can do this morning. Pull me aside after worship, and I would love to get together to study the word of God together.

In our Sunday morning class, we have been looking at the book of Hebrews, and as we have discussed, it seems that the major theme of Hebrews is, "Jesus is Better." He is better than the angels, better than Moses, he provides a better rest, he is the architect of a better covenant, he is a better priest, and so on. And in any discussion of Hebrews, we might obviously start to ask: If Jesus is so much better, then why do we pay attention to the Old Testament at all? Some of you know that I love UW SWAP. UW SWAP is a surplus program operated by the University of Wisconsin, and before the pandemic they held weekly sales out of their warehouse down in Verona. They would sell old desks, and lab supplies, and athletic equipment – anything the UW or state government had that they needed to get rid of, they would sell on a weekly basis. Half of this church building is furnished with items from SWAP – the pews in the back room from the Dane County Courthouse (you can still see the handcuff marks on those pews), the whiteboards in our classrooms downstairs, tables, a number of chairs (including the comfortable chairs in the back, from the Kohl Center), the bulletin board in back, the countertop in the A/V room, the bookcases in the A/V room, and so on. On my weekly trips down to SWAP, I will occasionally come across various pre-inked rubber stampers. They're usually a quarter apiece, and I've actually been collecting these through the years. Some are marked "COPY," others are marked "DRAFT," or "AIR MAIL," or "ATTENTION," or "PRIORITY." You never know when you might need to stamp something "PRIORITY"! I found one that says "APPROVED," so, if anyone ever needs my approval for something, I am ready to go! Well, on one of my trips down there, I found a stamp marked "OBSOLETE." And I immediately thought of the book of Hebrews and our relationship with what is usually referred to as the "Old Testament." The word "obsolete" refers to something that is no longer practiced or used, out of date, gone out of use, going back to a Latin word referring to something that is "grown old," or "worn out." And truly, this is how many people view the Old Testament. Many would love to take this stamp and stamp it on everything from Genesis to Malachi.

Years ago, I told you about a friend of mine who preaches in another state. He called for advice, asking what he should do about a member of his congregation who was saying that my friend really shouldn't be wasting his time or the church's time preaching anything from the Old Testament. The man said, in fact, that it would be fine with him if we just ripped the Old Testament out of our Bibles and threw it away. And my friend wanted to know: How would you handle this situation? I said, "You probably shouldn't take my advice, but I would probably launch a 13-week series of sermons from the book of Leviticus!" Again, that might not be wise, but we also need to value and respect the "Bible" that Jesus grew up with, the "Bible" Jesus lived by.

And there is a balance. It's a challenge sometimes. Personally, when you read your Bible, do you read more of the Old or more of the New? Personally, I read more of the New. And yet, the Old makes up probably 75% of the Bible. We can't ignore it, but there is so much more of it, and we know we should probably pay more attention to the New. It's a challenge for preachers. When it comes to preaching, 75% of the material I need to

cover comes from a source seen by many as being “obsolete.” And we do have some challenging passages scattered throughout the New. We think of what Paul said in Romans 10:4, when he said that, **“Christ is the end of the law.”** We think of Hebrews 8:13. The author makes the point that when Jesus mentions, **“A new covenant,”** **“He has made the first obsolete.”** And then he says, **“But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.”** These are some challenging passages. What, then, should be our attitude toward the “Old Testament”? Is it truly **“obsolete”** in every way? Should we rip it out of our Bibles?

As we answer this question, perhaps the best way to go about it is to think about how Jesus viewed the “Old Testament.” And this is what I would like for us to do for the next several weeks as we study a series of verses in what is usually referred to as being the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5. So, I hope you will meet me today in Matthew 5. This is a passage I have never preached on before. In context, the Lord is on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, he is surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands, of people. He gives the Beatitudes, he talks about salt and light, he talks about putting your light on a lampstand (not under a basket), and then he continues with Matthew 5:17-20, the word of the Living God. Jesus says,

17 “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

As we look this passage, and as we ask ourselves how Jesus viewed the Law, I’d like to make four observations...

I. ...starting with verse 17, where we find that Jesus came not to DELETE, but to COMPLETE the Law.

He came, not to **“abolish”** the Law and the Prophets, but he came to **“fulfill.”** And thinking about it this week: If Jesus had wanted to make the Law and the Prophets completely disappear, he could have done that! Poof! Jesus could have “disappeared” everything from Genesis to Malachi. But, he did not. Instead, Jesus came to **“fulfill”** all of that, and now we have it to study and appreciate. The Law and the Prophets are still inspired. They came from God.

Why, then, do we not offer sacrifices today? Why is it still not a sin to wear clothing made out of two different kinds of thread? Why is it no longer an actual sin to trim my beard? We need to realize that the Law was always meant to be temporary; it was always meant to be fulfilled. It had a purpose, and its purpose was Jesus. The Law pointed to the coming of Jesus. We might think of the Law as some of those rules we had for our kids as they were growing up. When we set bedtimes and gave them an allowance and had them take out the trash every Monday night, those “rules” were never intended to be permanent, but they were intended to teach and to bring them to a place where they could hopefully launch out on their own.

Jesus, then, came, not to erase all of that, not to make the Law and the Prophets disappear, not to violate it in some way, but he came to **“fulfill”** it. He came to finish it, just as an artist might finish a painting. And this is what we find, in Jesus. The tabernacle (and then the temple), pointed to Jesus. Outside, they had the basin of water for purification; Jesus introduces himself as the **“living water.”** Then they had the altar; Jesus is introduced in John as **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”** (John 1:29). Inside the tabernacle, they had

the lampstand on the left; Jesus described himself as ***“the light of the world.”*** On the right, they had the Table of Showbread; Jesus describes himself as ***“the bread of life.”*** Then, behind the next curtain, they had the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat; Jesus is described as the “Great High Priest” who makes intercession for his people, and on and on. The Law is a ***“shadow”*** of what was coming (Hebrews 10:1-4).

And because of this, Jesus constantly uses the Law and the Prophets to show who he is. In his first public appearance, he reads from the prophet Isaiah and says, ***“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”*** (Luke 4:21). In John 5:39, he speaks to the religious leaders of the day and says, ***“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me.”*** He uses what happened to Jonah to describe his own death, burial and resurrection (Matthew 12:40), and so on. So, Jesus came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. Jesus is the Law and the Prophets in the flesh. He is the ***“Word.”***

II. **This leads us to verse 18, where we find that the Law and the Prophets (as Scripture) are HERE TO STAY: ALL SCRIPTURE IS PERMANENT.**

“For truly I say to you,” Jesus says, ***“until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”*** The ***“truly”*** (in verse 18) is the word ***“AMEN.”*** This is a true statement, Jesus says. Heaven and earth passing away is something these people could hardly imagine, and until that happens, ***“not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law.”*** The ***“smallest letter”*** is how we translate the word “iota.” Maybe you’ve heard somebody say, “I don’t trust that man, not one IOTA.” The iota was the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet, and like our letter “I,” the iota was the smallest of the letters, consisting of one very small stroke. The equivalent in Hebrew is very similar. Some of our English translations even show us the actual Hebrew letters in Psalm 119. As some of you might know, Psalm 119 is arranged as an acrostic, arranged around the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section starts with a successive letter. And some of our translations actually use those letters as headings. *****PPT***** You might want to look this up in your own copy of the scriptures to see if they do this, but I found one of mine that did. And as you can see, this letter (in Hebrew) is tiny! To me, it almost looks like an apostrophe. It is a tiny letter.

So we have the ***“smallest letter,”*** but Jesus also refers to the ***“stroke.”*** In Greek, this word is defined as “little horn,” and it refers to a tiny mark that distinguishes one letter from another. We have letters like this in English, don’t we? We might think of the capital letter “Q.” What separates a “Q” from an “O”? It’s that tiny little tail. Some of you who teach reading I’m sure know the technical names for all of these little pieces (we have some highly educated educators with us this morning). But the reference here is to a tiny mark. And going back to Psalm 119, we can see this in Hebrew with two Hebrew letters that are almost identical, except for one tiny little “tail” (like the difference between Q and O in English). I can hardly tell the difference here, but do you see it? It is tiny (not even a letter on its own), but it is important. One tiny mark can completely change the meaning of a sentence; in this case, it’s the difference between a “B” and a “K.” Is that important? In English, it’s the difference between “bite” and “kite,” the difference between “bin” and “kin,” the difference between “beep” and “keep.” Yes, one small ***“stroke”*** can be incredibly important.

So, Jesus is saying: As Scripture, as the word of God, even the smallest letters and marks in the Law are permanent. The Law itself is here to stay. All of it. And Peter affirms this later (in 1 Peter 1:23-25) as he quotes from Isaiah 40. He says that we have been ***“...born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, 25 BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD***

ENDURES FOREVER.’ And this is the word which was preached to you.” The word of God is permanent, even down to the tiniest letters and smallest of marks.

III. As we come to verse 19, and as we continue looking for Jesus’ attitude toward the Law, we have the reminder that God has promised A BLESSING ON THOSE WHO KEEP AND TEACH HIS COMMANDMENTS.

And it seems to me as if Jesus is aiming this very specifically at the Pharisees (we will get to them in verse 20). As we know, the Pharisees were really good at dismissing some commands while emphasizing others and even adding quite a few “bonus” commands along the way. Jesus, though, has some strong words for those who would “*annul*” or “*relax*” certain commandments (either in their own lives or in teaching these commandments to others): They will be called “*least*” in the kingdom of heaven. We might think of the Pharisees (in Matthew 15:1-9), who concocted those rules about “*korban*,” and thus ignored the actual commandment that they were to honor their parents. That kind of thing is what will get you called “*least*” in the kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, those who keep and teach the commandments will be called “*great*” in the kingdom of heaven. Does this mean that all commandments in the Old and the New are equally binding on us today? No, but instead, we need to let the Bible interpret the Bible. Even in this passage, we need to remember that Jesus is living under the Law of Moses at this time. Not only that, but (as we will see over the next several weeks) there is a huge difference between what people THOUGHT the Law said as opposed to what God actually intended. Again, in the next few verses, Jesus will go on to clarify, “*You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you,*” and so on.

The big thought in verse 19, though, seems to come in the form of this blessing on those who faithfully obey and teach God’s Law. Just last week, for example, we studied Psalm 62, didn’t we? Yes, it’s in what we might commonly refer to as being the “Old Testament,” but we took some lessons from that Psalm, understanding that it is the word of God. We taught it, and in a sense, I hope we “kept” it. We learned that people will disappoint, but God is our rock. And we applied it by using that passage to encourage each other to wait in silence for God alone and we are to pour out our hearts before him. Right? We learned that from the Psalms last week, and hopefully we are obeying it. That passage is scripture, and it has value for us. And that seems to be what Jesus is saying here.

Someone has said, “If we belittle scripture, we will ourselves become little in the kingdom.” But what about those passages about the temple, and all of those sacrifices and regulations? I believe we need to look at those (as we just noted a few minutes ago) as being fulfilled in Jesus. And so, with Jesus as our sacrifice, with Jesus as our great High Priest, we actually honor those regulations. Those regulations help us appreciate what we have today. And in that sense, even those commands have lasting significance.

Not only that, but over and over again, we have teaching under the New Covenant that is heavily anchored to the Old. We think of Paul’s command to not accept an accusation against an elder, unless we have multiple witnesses. That goes back to Deuteronomy 17 and 19. In the same passage, he actually quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4 to prove that the elders of a congregation have a right to be paid. He makes the same argument concerning preachers in 1 Corinthians 9. We think of the meeting in Jerusalem in Acts 15 when the church, and the apostles, and the elders take some principles from the Law of Moses, and they apply those principles to the crisis they were facing at the time. Many times, the Old is clarified and repeated in the New, and in this sense we “*keep*” and “*teach*” the commandments. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:8, “*But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully.*” That’s the key: The Law must be applied lawfully (as we did here, last week, I believe).

IV. **As we come to the end of this little paragraph, we find that SCRIPTURE MUST BE ALLOWED TO TRULY SHAPE OUR HEARTS AND MINDS.**

As Jesus says (in verse 20), *“For...unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* A few things here: First of all, we learn here that not all righteousness is pleasing to God. The Lord admits here that the Pharisees do have some level of righteousness, because he says that our righteousness needs to *“surpass”* theirs. To most people back then, this probably seemed impossible. The Pharisees were seen as being super-duper righteous. They were righteous beyond righteous. The problem was: Their righteousness was primarily external. They did quite a bit to be noticed by others: long robes and even longer prayers. Unfortunately, they were hypocrites. In fact, in Matthew 23:27, Jesus compares them to whitewashed tombs: Looking great on the outside, but on the inside full of dead men’s bones. Our righteousness, then, must go beyond being merely external. Our righteousness must *“surpass”* theirs.

When I think of meeting a standard, I think of how we sometimes refer to “raising the bar” or “lowering the bar.” There’s not a lot out there on this, but I’m assuming this might go back to events like the high jump. To me, that was one of the worst parts of P.E. in middle and high school. They have this bar with a huge mat behind it in the middle of the track, we walk up to it, and I think to myself, “There is no possible way.” The bar is chest high, and they want me to run up to it kind of sideways, almost backwards, and flop over it? This cannot happen. And yet, we do some research, and the world record high jump was made by Javier Sotomayor, in Spain, back in July 1993 (that’s 28 years ago, the year we got married). His jump was 8-feet, ½ inch. I measured this morning, and the ceiling in here is half an inch short of 8 feet. Javier, if he were here with us today, could jump higher than this ceiling. Of course, he is 53 years old now, so maybe not. But he remains the only human who has ever cleared 8 feet in the high jump. Well, when it comes to righteousness, this is the way most people back then looked at the Pharisees. They had a saying back then, “If only two people get into heaven, one would be a scribe, and the other would be a Pharisee.” In the eyes of most people, the Pharisees were doing the impossible. They were the superstars. But, instead of lowering the bar, we find in this passage that Jesus raises it! In fact, Jesus basically says: You can do better than that! In fact, you **MUST** do better than that, *“...unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Thankfully, the Lord goes on to explain, and this what we hope to study over the next several weeks, as he takes what people have HEARD about the Law, and he reveals what it really MEANS and what the Lord truly expects of us.

So, I hope you can be with us over the next few weeks, but I think we will learn that the word of God needs to change us from the inside out. It’s not just the externals that matter, but our hearts need to be right. And that’s what Jesus seems to be saying here. Our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees. He doesn’t lower the bar, but he raises it.

Conclusion:

This morning we have looked at Jesus’ opinion of the Law. If we believe in Jesus, then we also believe what he taught about the Law, and we’ve learned this morning that,

- He came not to DELETE it, but to COMPLETE it.
- He lets us know in this passage that the Law (as Scripture) is HERE TO STAY, in a sense.
- He reminds us that the Law must be FAITHFULLY KEPT AND TAUGHT, properly applied, we might say.
- And finally, scripture needs to CHANGE US from the inside, even to the point where our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Hopefully we can come back next week as we start looking at a series of examples, some contrast between what people were told about the Law and what God actually intended. So, let's not toss it out as being completely obsolete, but let's study with the goal of handling it accurately, as we should.

Before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the God of all Scripture, and we know that this book we've assembled to study is from you. Thank you, Father, for speaking to us through the written word. We are thankful for how it has been preserved through the years. We are thankful that it has been translated into languages all of us here today can understand. We pray we would appreciate this tremendous blessing, and we pray for wisdom and courage as we share it with others.

Thank you for Jesus, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. We pray that as we follow his perfect example, we will become more and more like you every day. This is our hope and our prayer. We come to you today in Jesus' name, AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com