



Sermon on the Mount: An Invitation to New Creation

Session 3 “Bearing Good Fruit”

Matthew 5:17-20

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.

If your first response after reading this week's scripture passage is, "Huh?" know that you are in good company. Understanding the role of the law now that Christ has come, has been one of the greatest theological challenges that I've wrestled with personally. These words of Jesus confront us—what does it mean that Jesus has fulfilled the law? Why then does he also give such a strict warning against setting aside even one of the least of the commands? Why are there parts of the law that Christians obey today and others that they ignore? While there are no easy answers to these questions, we hope that this week you will wrestle with some of them together.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets a new standard for what it means to be righteous by telling people that their righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees. Pharisees were the rule keepers, the ones who not only enforced the rules but did their best to show off how well they kept them. You remember that annoying kid in elementary school who tried really hard to be the teacher's pet, and also tattled on all the other kids who were not doing the right thing? That's kind of how the Pharisees were. They wanted everyone else to see how good they were, but also went around pointing out what was wrong with everyone else. But Jesus reveals that their whole act is a façade. Matthew 23:27-28 also gives us a glimpse of what was really going on—Jesus calls the teachers of the law and the Pharisees “whitewashed tombs,” basically saying that just because you paint the outside of a tomb doesn't mean it isn't full of dead stuff on the inside. Jesus is reminding people that righteousness is not found in external obedience—it flows from a changed heart. Jesus came to heal and restore our hearts, to change us from the inside out, so that the things we do for him flow not from a desire to earn approval (God's or anyone else's), but rather they are an overflow of the very love that God has poured into our hearts.

If Jesus did not come to abolish the law, does that mean all of the Old Testament laws still apply to us today? In the Old Testament, there were three categories of law; ceremonial, civil, and moral.

(1) The ceremonial law related specifically to Israel's worship (see Lev. 1:2, 3, for example). Its primary purpose was to point forward to Jesus Christ; these laws, therefore, were no longer necessary after Jesus' death and resurrection. While we are no longer bound by ceremonial laws, the principles behind them—to worship and love a holy God—still apply. Jesus was often accused by the Pharisees of violating ceremonial law.

(2) The civil law applied to daily living in Israel (see Deut. 24:10, 11, for example). Because modern society and culture are so radically different from that time and setting, all of these guidelines cannot be followed specifically. But the principles behind the commands are timeless and should guide our conduct. Jesus demonstrated these principles by example.

(3) The moral law (such as the Ten Commandments) is the direct command of God, and it requires strict obedience (see Ex. 20:13, for example). The moral law reveals the nature and will of God, and it still applies today. Jesus obeyed the moral law completely.

--NIV Life Application Bible, Matthew 5:17-20.

Questions for Discussion

1. What stood out to you, encouraged you or challenged you from this past week's sermon?
2. Have you ever struggled with the tension between the Old Testament law and the teachings of Jesus? How would you articulate this tension?
3. What do you think Jesus means by saying, "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them?" What is the difference between abolishing and fulfilling?
4. In verse 19, Jesus poses a strong warning to those who attempt to set aside God's commands. In what ways do people attempt to minimize God's commands today?
5. Read Matthew 5:20 and the following commentary: "Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the law; Jesus teaches us that God's demands are far more radical than this. The righteousness which is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive. For 'The Lord looks on the heart.' (John Stott, *The Message of Matthew*, 75) How would you explain in your own words what Jesus is saying about righteousness in verse 20?
6. As Jesus raises the standard from "works righteousness" (your actions demonstrating that you are righteous) to a righteousness that flows from a transformed heart, does this feel like less of a burden to you? Why or why not?
7. In Drew's sermon, he mentions that one of the ways we begin to delight in God's commands is to meditate upon them, to allow them to take root in our hearts. Share with your group a command or a passage of scripture that you would like to take time to meditate upon more deeply this week.