

“I Came Not to Abolish, but to Fulfill”  
(Matthew 5:17-20)

Introduction: Last week we saw how Christians are the salt and light of this world. We saw how Christ has made us to have a preserving effect on those around us by salting them with the salt of God’s Word. We learned that if we are to do this, we must first be salted, salted with the heavenly doctrine of the Gospel. If we don’t have any salt, how will we be able to salt others? If we don’t understand the doctrines of God’s grace and His commandments, how will we be able to teach and apply these things to others? It is only by bearing witness to the Gospel and to what God requires that we salt the world with a divine preservative. We also saw that the Lord has made us to be shining lights in this world. The world is full of darkness. But the Lord has placed us here to shine His light in the darkness. But how can we do this unless we are first filled with light? How can we do this unless we first purge ourselves of the darkness which is in us? We must cleanse ourselves and separate ourselves from all sin, so that our sin does not put out our light. And we must come to the light, spend time with the light, become like the light. The light is Jesus, and God calls us to be like Him. It is only when we spend time with Jesus that our lives will begin to shine like His. It is only by His strength that we will be able to bring forth the love and good works by which, Christ said, all men will know that we are His disciples.

But what is a good work? And how can we know whether or not the love which we show by our works is truly honoring to the Lord? I would suggest that if we are to know, we must measure them by the Law of God.

The Law of God seems to be getting a lot of bad press today. But I assure you, the Law is not bad. The Law is not evil. Rather, Paul tells us that it is righteous and holy. He writes in Romans 7:12, “So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” The Law actually tells us what is loving and what is not. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment in the Law was, He said the greatest is this, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ . . . The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37, 38-39). Jesus said that the whole Law and the Prophets depend on these two things: that you love God with all that is in you, and that you love your neighbor as yourself. Now I ask you, Is love bad? Is love an evil thing? Should we say, as the Dispensationalists and other antinomian groups say, “Away with this Law! We want grace!” No. Unless we also want to say, “Away with love! We want a grace without love!” Is that what we want: a grace without love? No. If we are born again, we want that love by which Jesus said all men would know that we are His disciples. If that is the case, then we also want the Law, for this is what the Law teaches us to do. The grace of God which is offered to us in the Gospel, is that which gives us the power to keep the Law. The Law teaches us how to salt the earth: it is a very crucial part of that salt. The Law also teaches us how to shine, how to abound with good works, for a work is good only if it is done according to the Law. This is why I believe that Jesus now turns to the Law in His Sermon on the Mount. He wants us to understand this morning that,

*He did not come to do away with the principles of holiness found in the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them.*

**I. First, I want you to see that the Law will endure forever.**

- A. Jesus says, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.”
1. Jesus did not come to abolish the standard of righteousness.
    - a. He did not come to do away with them, to tear them down, or to destroy them.
    - b. I believe that when Jesus speaks here of the Law and Prophets, what He has in mind are the moral requirements which are found in them.
    - c. It is true that Jesus came to fulfill all of the types, shadows and prophecies concerning Him at His first coming, and that He will fulfill the rest of them when He comes again in glory.
    - d. But what He has in mind here primarily are the holy requirements of both the Law and the Prophets. In other words, He did not come to do away with holiness. He did not come to do away with the righteousness which God required of man, even in the OT.
    - e. I believe that this is what Jesus means, for after He makes mention of the Law and the Prophets, He then focuses specifically on the Law and the commandments which are found in them. He says that nothing shall pass away from them. He says that those who keep and teach them shall be called great in His kingdom, and those who do not, least. He does not point to fulfilled prophecy here, as He often does in other places, as showing, or proving, that He is the Messiah.
    - f. We must never allow ourselves to forget that Christ did not come *merely* to save us from the consequences of our sin, which consequences include eternal damnation. Rather, He came to save us from our sins. He came to set us free from them. He came to reverse the effects of the Fall. He came to make us what God originally intended us to be: those who reflect the image and glory of our Creator.
    - g. This is why when the blessings of the New Covenant are prophesied by Jeremiah, they include, not the abolishing of the Law, but the establishing of it in our lives, especially in our hearts. He writes, “‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (31:33).
    - h. *Jesus did not come to take the Law away.*
  2. Instead, He tells us, He came to fulfill it.
    - a. First, He came to fulfill it by keeping it.
      - (i) I have told you many times before that Christ’s keeping of the Law, Christ’s obedience to God, is the basis upon which you and I are saved, if we are trusting in the Lord this morning.
      - (ii) God requires a perfect righteousness, if we are to enter heaven. We must do everything right, or we will not live with Him forever.

- (iii) But you and I have not done everything right. We have done everything wrong. We have done nothing right. We have even come into this world guilty of having eaten the fruit which God commanded Adam not to eat.
- (iv) This is why Jesus *had* to keep the Law. He had to fulfill all righteousness, so that He could be the perfect sin-bearer for us. But He had to fulfill it also, so that He could give to us a perfect righteousness, the only righteousness which can make us acceptable to God.

- b. But that is not all. In the fulfilling of the Law, He also left for us an example to follow. He established for us the code of our conduct.
  - (i) God intends for us *to be* like His Son. Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:4 that God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.” Paul also wrote in Romans 8:29, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren.”
  - (ii) The Lord desired in eternity that we would be like His Son, so that Jesus would be the head of a race of men who are like Him. But God’s plan was not that He would make us perfect in Jesus, only to leave us imperfect and wicked in this world. His plan included changing us, to make us reflect, *in some measure now*, the image of His Son. He intended that our lives reflect *in some measure* that same holiness here. To be holy and blameless is to be like Christ. To be unholy and blameworthy is not to be like Christ. No one here, I hope, would argue that it is not God’s will for us to be like His Son!
  - (iii) And so what Jesus is saying here is that He has not come to do away with the standard of holiness which God gave in the Old Covenant. So that we won’t misunderstand, He says this twice: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” The Greek is even stronger, where literally translated, it says, “Don’t even begin to think that I came to tear down the Law or the Prophets.” He did not come to destroy, but to establish them.

- B. Now notice what follows. Notice how Jesus strengthens His statement. He says, “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (v. 18).
  - 1. Jesus first draws our attention to the seriousness of what He is saying by adding the word “truly.”
    - a. Now don’t misunderstand. Everything Jesus says is important.
    - b. But when He wants to draw a particular importance to something, He uses the word “truly,” or He uses it twice, “Truly, truly.”
    - c. This is a solemn affirmation that what He is going to say is true and that we should place special importance on it.
  - 2. What is it that He is drawing our attention to? It is to the fact that nothing which is written in the Law shall fail to come to pass, as long as heaven and earth endure.
    - a. Jesus is saying that everything written will be upheld. God’s character, His

- truthfulness depend upon it.
- b. Not even the smallest matters of the Law shall fail. Jesus, here, uses the strongest language available in the Greek to tell us this. Not the smallest letter, which is literally, a yod, or the smallest stroke of a letter in any of the Hebrew letters which make up the Law, shall by any means fail of its mark, as long as the creation endures.
  - c. Heaven and earth were looked upon by the Jews as being that which would last forever. Jesus is saying here that the Law will endure forever. Though our relationship to the Law will change in some respects in the eternal state, in the New Heavens and the New Earth, yet we will never fail to continue to live by it, as the Lord gives to us the power by His Spirit to live a perfectly holy life forever.
  - d. Some have argued that even the ceremonial laws continue forever. They continue into the present time, in the sense that sin still requires an atonement if it is to be forgiven and cleansed. But the only atonement which can do this is that which has already been given in Christ. When we sin, we still need an atonement. But we don't need to bring one anymore. All we need to do is to trust in the one which was already made for us.
  - e. And so all we need is in Christ. Christ has fulfilled the righteousness of the Law, by keeping it perfectly. Christ has established the Law as the standard by which we are to live, through His own example of keeping it. Christ has even fulfilled the Ceremonial Law, by offering Himself on the cross once and for all for our sins, so that all we need to do now is come to Him and confess our sins, in order to receive forgiveness.
  - f. This morning, if you are trusting in Jesus, your sins are removed and you are clothed with His perfect righteousness which will pass the infinitely strict judgment of God.

**II. But the last thing we need to consider is how this teaching that the Law has been established forever should affect the way we live now.**

- A. Jesus says, "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, 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" (v. 19).
  1. I believe that Jesus is here addressing those who are specifically set apart in His church to teach. But I believe that what He says also has application to all of us.
    - a. Those who are set aside by the Lord to be teachers in His church are the elders. This is a part of their calling in their office. They are to declare to you the Word of God and minister that Word to you. Their authority to do this does not come from themselves, but from Christ. And this is why it is to be taken very very seriously.
    - b. But this is also why the men who fill this office are to be mature men. They must not be novices in their Christian experience or in the Word of God, because they cannot afford to be mistaken about what it says. The Lord says that those who teach will receive a stricter judgment. This is why James writes, "Let not many of you become teachers, brethren" (3:1).
    - c. They shall receive a stricter judgment because they will have a much greater

influence over the Lord's sheep than anyone else. And if they should abuse their office, or fail to teach Christ's sheep the truth, they will be more severely condemned.

- d. But realize as well that all of us are called upon to teach one another in a limited sense. We may not all have the office of teaching in Christ's church, but all of us are called upon to exhort and admonish one another to holiness and the service of Christ.
  - e. We should therefore be careful what we say, that it is according to God's truth, and not merely our own opinions, or the opinions which we have received from others.
2. The danger Jesus speaks of here is that of annulling any of God's commandments, of removing the obligation to keep them, where the Lord has not removed it.
    - a. Jesus says that if you set aside even one of the least of His commandments, and you teach others to do the same, you shall be called least in God's kingdom.
    - b. Now, we all know that all of God's commandments are important. Jesus is not talking here about a commandment which is not important.
    - c. But there are degrees of importance. To break one can be worse than to break another. For instance, to murder someone is far worse than to covet their possessions.
    - d. What is more difficult to understand is what Jesus means here by such a person being the least in the kingdom of heaven. Surely, someone who knows what God's commands, and who breaks that commandment willfully, and teaches others to do so, cannot be saved. At least he can't if he continues to do so. John tells us in 1 John 3:9, "No one who is born of God practices sin."
    - e. Undoubtedly, Jesus is referring here to the Jews who were nullifying the commandments by their additions and false interpretations. Jesus will next refute their teachings which drag the Law down, and bring it back up to all its pristine grandeur.
    - f. But when Jesus says here that they shall be called least in the kingdom, what He means is that by their lowering the commandments, so as to annul any of them, they are lowering themselves accordingly. And if they go so far as to actually abolish the commandment, their position in the kingdom will be abolished along with it. This is, in fact, what happened to those who rejected God's will for their lives.
    - g. This should stand as a warning to us that we would not do the same, lest we share in their same judgment.
  3. But on the other hand, Jesus says, "Whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."
    - a. Far from giving God glory by dragging down the importance of His commandments, as many do today, the way to honor and greatness in God's kingdom is by keeping the commandments of the Lord and by seeking to help others do the same. To the degree that you keep His holy standards and exalt them in the eyes of others, to that degree you will be exalted in His kingdom.

- b. Can you think of anything that would be more pleasing to God? To keep the commandments is to reflect the image of your Lord, who also kept His Father's commandments. To help others to do so is to do the very thing Jesus did, when He went around teaching and preaching the kingdom of God. Remember what I already said, Jesus did not come merely to remove our guilt of not keeping the commandments, He came to give us the power to keep them, from the heart. Do you want to be great in God's kingdom? You must not only be the servant of all, but you must serve others in the way God commands you.
- B. But now lastly, Jesus gives us a warning, a warning to take these things to heart, if we are ever to enter His kingdom. He says, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."
- 1. Now very quickly, I do not believe that what Jesus has in mind here is the righteousness which He gives us through faith.
    - a. Of course this righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. It is greater than any human righteousness, for it is perfect.
    - b. I do not believe that this is a challenge to clothe ourselves with the righteousness of Christ, although we would all admit that we need that righteousness to enter into His kingdom.
  - 2. But I believe that He is speaking here about our personal obedience to the Law.
    - a. Remember that the Bible says without personal holiness we will not enter heaven. The author to the Hebrews writes, "Pursue peace with all men, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Jesus said earlier in His sermon, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (5:8). We must be personally pure, we must be personally holy, if we are to enter into God's eternal kingdom. Even the Sheep and Goat Judgment shows us that heaven is only for those who obey God (Matt. 25).
    - b. Is Jesus speaking here of a works salvation? No. For your works earn absolutely nothing in the sight of God. You cannot therefore be saved by them.
    - c. What I believe He is saying is this, the scribes and Pharisees at best had only the outward shell of obedience. And even in this they failed in many ways. What they did not have was the heart of obedience. They did not have a love for God or a true desire for His glory. Therefore everything they did was worthless in the sight of God. It amounted, as Luther put it, to a hill of dung.
    - d. But we must have more than this, if we are to enter God's kingdom. We must have a true obedience which comes from the heart. But this is exactly what God's Spirit gives to every one whom He regenerates: He gives them a love for God and for His Law, so that they will willingly submit to it.
    - e. So you see, this is not a salvation by works, but this is the true evidence of a salvation by the grace of God. A person that has truly been born again from above will love God's Law and keep it from the heart. He will show the work of the Law written in his heart. In other words, His life will reflect more and

- more the character of His Lord.
- f. People of God, this passage teaches us several things this morning. It teaches us that the Law of God is not irrelevant to the Christian; it is our code of conduct, it is our school-master, not to lead us to Christ, but to teach us how to be like Him. We should daily be coming to the throne of grace, not only to ask for God's forgiveness, but also to ask Him for the power to live the life which He calls us to live according to His Law. And we should also be coming for one another, and be encouraging one another to keep that standard, for it is in this way that we show our thankfulness to God, and it is in this way that we shine as lights in this world.
  - g. But there is one more way in which we can apply this teaching to our lives this morning, and it is by way of examination. Does your righteousness surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees? Are you zealously seeking to glorify and honor the Lord out of obedience to His Word and from your heart? If so, then rejoice, for the kingdom of heaven has been opened to you by Christ.
  - h. But if you find that you have no taste for Christ's Law, and you are not seeking to obey it, and you are also lessening it in the eyes of others, then beware. Jesus says that such are least in His kingdom. Christ says that such shall not enter into the eternal kingdom of God. If that is the case with you this morning, then repent, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, ask Him to take away your rebellious heart and to give you a heart of flesh. Don't deceive yourself into thinking that all is well, when there is strong evidence that you don't even know the Lord. Your pride will be your own undoing on the day of God's judgment. Humble yourself now and come to Christ. Believe on Him for eternal life. And then begin to live the life of obedience that He calls you to live.
  - i. May the Lord apply His Word to each of us here this morning in the way that we need to hear it. Amen.