

Jesus law and kingdom

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] We're going through the sermons at the Beatitudes, those blessings at the beginning of chapter 5, which form a kind of prologue to the sermon, I guess, and an important prologue.

There's a lot of important things in it. But in these first verses here, in verses 17 to 20, Jesus really sets out the theme of the Sermon on the Mount.

And as I say, if there's one verse perhaps that sums up the whole thing, it would have to be verse 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.

What are we to make of this? We know that the Pharisees kept strict rules. Surely this is a council of hopelessness. If they can't make it, nobody can. So what are we to make of it? Well, what is Jesus getting at here when he talks about the law and the prophets?

Well, it's worth referring to one of the prophets. Jeremiah, some several hundred years earlier, had written the following.

[1:15] Notice what Jeremiah said, that the law will be written on the minds and hearts of his people.

And this is where Jesus is going with the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon, in some ways, is actually kind of a part of a rabbinic debate.

We know that the Pharisees had accused Jesus of setting aside the law. And that's one issue that Jesus is dealing with here.

One or two other things here were hot topics among the Pharisees, the scribes and teachers of the time. What are the legitimate grounds for divorce was quite a hot topic at the time among the Jewish teachers.

Was it valid to divorce somebody just because you didn't like their cooking or something? Or did you have to have a really good reason for divorce? And to be honest, the scribes and the Pharisees weren't sure.

[2:40] But at the end of this passage, Matthew comments, when Jesus had finished saying these things, at the end of the sermon, sorry, this is Matthew chapter 7, 28 to 29, when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority and not as the teachers of the law.

Unlike the scribes, Jesus claims the right to speak with authority on these matters. And the central issue, as we've said, around which all else revolves is this set out in chapter 5, verses 17 to 20. Because it goes to the very heart of the covenant between God and humanity, just as Jeremiah had prophesied centuries earlier. And it raises issues.

What is the kingdom that Jesus is talking about? What kingdom was promised to King David a thousand years earlier? And what are its laws? Kind of a kingdom really without laws.

Who has the right to interpret those laws? Was it the Pharisees or was it Jesus? What does the kingdom look like? What sort of a kingdom is it?

[3:58] And perhaps the most important question of all, how can I become part of it? How can I be part of the people of God, be a part of the covenant people of God?

The Pharisees, as we know, were one of the stricter sects of the Jewish religion. And they taught that a very strict adherence to all the law of Moses, but in particular to its food laws, and other aspects which emphasise separation from the pagan world, were what you needed to do to inherit God's blessing and be part of his kingdom.

And just in case Moses had not gone far enough, they added a whole host of traditions and interpretations of their own. So what's the Sermon and the Mount about?

Obviously it's about individual ethics, but it's worth noting that its purpose is corporate. It provides a citizenship test, as it were, for the kingdom. If we want to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven, how do we do it?

What criterion do we have to have? Is there a test to pass? But it is worth noting, verse 20, Jesus isn't actually talking about individual justification. so much as admission to the covenant kingdom.

[5:17] How can I pass this citizenship test? And as I said, it's vitally important. It goes to the absolute heart of Jesus' teaching and mission. But thereby hangs a danger, because we can too easily pick odd texts out of it, latch on to something on adultery, and push our own prejudices and our own agenda.

We need it here to be a little calm and careful as we reflect on it. Find out what Jesus is really saying. And as Jesus himself will go on later to say, we need to build on the rock of Jesus' words, because if we don't, then our house, as it were, will collapse.

So, in order to reflect on this passage, I'd like to ask and hopefully answer three key questions. First of all, does Jesus undermine the law of Moses?

Is the Pharisees' charge true? Or does he in fact fulfill it? And is it actually the Pharisees who are undermining the law? And the second question, the obvious one I suppose, is that if that Pharisaiic righteousness is not the answer, what is it?

And so Jesus gives a whole host of examples to explain what he's getting at. Three of them were the ones we read, and we'll be looking at more in further on into the sermon.

[6:50] But all of these really are examples to illustrate the basic point that Jesus is making here. And then the third question, of course, is, well, if the bar is so high, if not even the Pharisees' keeping of the law is good enough, doesn't that mean nobody's going to pass?

Doesn't that mean there's going to be a kingdom that has a king but no citizens? Well, that would seem to be the implication at first sight of what Jesus is saying. We have to think about that a little bit.

So let's look, first of all, at this question of, does Jesus undermine the law of Moses or does he fulfill it? Well, as Jesus is very keen to point out, the law was and is God's word.

And therefore it can't pass away until it's accomplished what it set out to do. God does not make mistakes. If Jesus was sort of setting forth God's plan B because plan A had not worked, then the Pharisees' charge would be a valid one because Jesus will be accusing God himself of inconsistency.

But no, Jesus is saying, this is what God had intended all along. The law of Moses was about to achieve what it had set out to do.

[8:16] The kingdom of heaven, Jesus has announced, as John the Baptist announced, is near, at hand, it's here. So we can break down this question a little bit further.

First of all, in what sense has Jesus fulfilled the law? And secondly, in what sense is the law still valid?

Because Jesus clearly says that it is in these passages. He says you can't. Anyone who deletes anything from the law will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

And the Greek scholars say that these commands almost certainly does refer to the law, not to Jesus' own teaching, but actually to the law.

It seems to be the meaning of the Greek, as the commentators tell us. So in what sense has Jesus fulfilled the law and how is the law still relevant?

[9:17] Because we need to note that on several occasions, Jesus does appear to be changing the law. In fact, at the very end of this sermon, the sort of parallel verse that matches this one in chapter 7, verse 12, and you might want to just look over to that, what we call the golden rule, which says, so in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets.

that does seem as though he's somehow changing the law, doesn't it? Saying that most of the, you know, almost saying that a lot of it's irrelevant, this is the only bit that matters, but Jesus can't be saying that.

And Jesus had commented elsewhere on the food laws. So in Luke, sorry, in Mark, 7, 8, to 9, 18 and 19, we read the following.

Are you so dull? He asked. Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it doesn't go into his heart, but into his stomach and then out of his body.

And then Mark adds the comment to this in saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. So it does seem indeed that Jesus is changing the law.

[10:39] They can eat pigs now. Of course, all foods are clean. And Jesus was frequently accused of Sabbath breaking. Did all sorts of things on the Sabbath.

Healed people. Taught and so on. His disciples picked corn on the Sabbath when they were hungry during the day. And Jesus said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. So either Jesus is contradicting what he says in Matthew 5.18, as being inconsistent, or Jesus means something different when he says that the law cannot be set aside.

Excuse me. So how are we to understand this? Well, I think to get a real understanding, to get a handle on it, as it were, it's worth looking at what Jesus said at the Last Supper.

This is kind of crucial. Luke 22, verse 20, I think I meant to say there. I could put a comma instead of a colon. All the Gospels record the Last Supper, but this is the phrase that it is in Luke.

[11:57] In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. I've read the Luke version because that text does have the word new covenant.

The other text I miss out the word new. But this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. Well, where was this said?

It was said, wasn't it, at a Passover supper. What had just gone on? Well, a sheep had been killed, a lamb had been killed. Its blood was drained off to remind them of the blood that had put on the lintels of the doors at the Exodus.

And then Jesus says, right, no more sheep. Now this blood of the sheep is fulfilled.

The sheep, the lamb, didn't have much choice in the matter. It died an involuntary death. But Jesus is dying a voluntary death. And he says, this is what that sheep's blood was pointing to.

[13:13] I mean, the gospel is going to be preached to the Gentiles, and how can the Gentiles celebrate a Jewish national day, a Jewish escape from slavery.

But this is the true freedom. This is the true blood. And this is the blood for which Moses' law only pointed to.

The death of the lamb pointed forward to the voluntary death of Jesus himself. This is a new covenant, as Jeremiah had said, but it's also the old covenant renewed and fulfilled.

Jesus' death would actually accomplish what the death of a sheep could only point to. And so, instead of the Passover, we don't celebrate the Passover.

In a sense, that was the last supper. Of course, the Jews continue to celebrate the Passover after that. But really, they shouldn't have done. Because that really was the last Passover.

[14:24] When the old covenant was fulfilled and the new covenant would be established that the old covenant pointed to. So now, we don't celebrate the Passover, we celebrate the communion.

Instead, we celebrate a greater escape and a more powerful covenant. And so, similarly, Jesus fulfilled other old covenant rules, which we don't have time to go into it all here.

But, it does mean that some of the rituals of the old covenant are no longer required because what they've been pointed to has been achieved and has been written now on the hearts rather than just on the external activities.

So it is what is inside that makes a man clean. It is the circumcision of the heart, as Paul puts it, that makes us truly God's people.

so, Jesus does indeed say that all foods are clean. We don't no longer have to keep all those complicated rules because they've actually been fulfilled.

[15:36] That's not to say we don't have rituals at all, of course, we do. I mean, baptism and the Lord's Supper are, of course, rituals. They're things that remind us of something. But, the old ones have been fulfilled in the death of Christ, so we no longer have to have them as reminders.

But does this mean the law is no longer relevant at all? He says, no, I've not come to abolish the law. He points this out very clearly, chapter 5, verse 19.

The message is not, the kingdom of heaven is near, so do what you like. The message is repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.

And we can't understand the New Testament without a knowledge of the Old Testament. If we didn't understand what the Passover was about, we wouldn't really understand how the death of the Lord, the blood of the covenant, takes us from death into life, from captivity into freedom.

that's why we study the Old Testament, that's why we've been going through Isaiah in the mornings, because the New Covenant is the Old Covenant as it flowers and reaches its fulfilment, what it's intended to be.

[17:08] So, yes, Jesus did abolish a few rules, but he did it by fulfilling them, by making them have their real meaning. not deleting them.

The law and the prophets are still essential and any kingdom must have a high view of law. You can't have a kingdom that doesn't have laws. So, the second question we might consider then is if Pharisaic righteousness is not the answer, if keeping all those rules and laws that the Pharisees did is not what gets us into the kingdom of heaven, the obvious question is well, what is then?

And if we look at the examples Jesus gives, we can begin to understand. If we look at verse 22, a human court can judge the act of abuse, abuse, but he can only do it on the testimony of witnesses to prove the case.

The person is innocent until proven guilty. The judge doesn't have insight into the absolute truth, doesn't have a full knowledge of what is going on inside the charged person, so he can only judge by the outside.

But God, we're told, judges by what's in the heart. And so it means he judges not just the act, but the intent of the act.

[18:49] Now, Jesus is careful to point out, that doesn't mean to say there's no difference between the act and the intent, because obviously there is. Between the intent and the act, you have a chance to repent, you have a chance to change your mind and carry out what you were planning.

The intent, as we might say, only puts us in danger of the fire of hell, and you still have a chance to put things right, to be reconciled in verse 24, to settle the case in verse 25.

But the greater truth is that it is the intent that gives rise to the action. Anger leads to murder. And if it's only the fear of retribution that stays your hand, then the intention is as bad as the act.

You're as guilty. If the only reason you didn't carry out the murder is because you were afraid you might get caught, then the intention is as bad as the act.

and even if you've not quite gone that far, the anger that you keep in your heart, the condemnation of your brothers and sisters, of your fellow citizens, is the germ of murder, just as the jealousy of Cain against Abel.

[20:12] and he then goes on to talk about sexual ethics. We could look at verse 28.

It seems a bit one-sided in one sense, as if only men can commit adultery, and of course women can commit adultery too.

What is Jesus talking about here? And I think it is worth again being a little bit careful. He's not just talking about what is a natural and superficial sexual attraction, because to admire the beauty of a woman or a man, might not be sinful in itself, any more than it's wrong to admire the beauty of a painting in a museum.

After all, we have feminine beauty described in the Bible, in the Song of Solomon. But it's if that admiration leads to covetousness, and then the command, you shall not be covered, you shall not covet, is already broken.

If you desire that which is not lawful for you to have, if you are jealous of another person, then, rather than rejoicing in what they have, then the command is already broken, you've already coveted that which is wrong.

[21:46] It's not wrong to admire a painting in a museum, but of course, if you can't see the painting without desiring it, coveting it for yourself and trying to steal it, then you're already a thief, aren't you, in your heart?

God. And in that case, you might say, okay, well, if you can't admire the painting without wanting to possess it, then probably you'd best stay out of the gallery.

So you need to be careful. Jesus makes this same point in a rather more graphic way, doesn't he? Almost a rather more gruesome way. He says, if your eye causes you to sin, then tear it out.

I don't think he's meaning it literally. I think he's saying, God, watch your eyes, look at. If, you know, it might be fine to go and see a painting or a statue or something.

It might be fine indeed to, you know, watch the cheerleaders on the IPL or whatever. But if that causes you to sin, then you better be extra careful and it's better, you know, not to even look at something that may not be evil in itself if it's going to cause you to sin.

[23:13] And of course, sexual sins provide extra strong temptations, don't they? And so we need to be extra careful. And let me reiterate, of course, this doesn't only apply to men, it applies to women as well.

And Jesus then goes on to talk about divorce. Divorce was allowed under the Mosaic Law. The scribes argued about it, as I said.

Some of them said, well, it's acceptable to divorce your wife for pretty much any reason. If you didn't like her cooking or something, you could divorce her. But Jesus says marriage is a covenant. Indeed, marriage is a picture of the covenant. of the covenant between man and God. And the marriage covenant can be set aside only if it's irretrievably broken.

And even then, it's not a satisfactory solution. You're still guilty. The word translated unfaithfulness is porneia, which more literally can mean almost any form of sexual immorality.

[24:32] Clearly, the main intention here is adultery. But I don't think Jesus is laying down a definitive divorce law here.

What matters is that the covenant is important and that if you break the covenant, that is a serious thing.

Only when it's irretrievably broken should divorce be permitted and even then, as he says, it's not a satisfactory solution because it still makes that person an adulterer or an adulteress.

But this is impossible, isn't it? This is an impossible standard. Jesus sets a higher standard than the Pharisees ever attempted.

God looks on the heart who said human law can only deal with a provable offence, but the kingdom of heaven deals with motives and intents and religious activity is no substitute for heartfelt intention to honour the covenant requirements.

[25:48] So as Jeremiah pointed out, the true covenant is written not on tablets of stone, but not in dusty law books. It's not even written on panels at the front of the church.

Some Anglican churches have the Ten Commandments written on panels at the front, which is probably not a bad thing to do, but that's not really where the law of God needs to be written.

It needs to be written on the hearts of men and women. But oh dear, well nobody's going to make it then, are they?

There's nobody who can achieve this standard, nobody who can say, we've always been loving, we've always been pure, we've never been angry with our brothers and sisters, that we've never been covetous, we've never been jealous, we've never looked on someone with lust, we've never been tempted to steal, even if we've not literally murdered anyone or committed adultery, if we've not literally divorced our wife and our husband, it's clear that not one of us can meet the standard that Jesus requires because our hearts are just too easily turned aside, our hearts are too simply pointed in the wrong direction.

So what is Jesus getting at here? We can't meet the standard, we can't pass the citizenship test. Pharisees can't pass it, however hard they try, the scribes can't pass it, however much they studied, you can't pass it and I can't pass it.

[27:46] Not one of us can say that we've never been angry or covetous or lustful. The bar is too high, in fact the bar is 100%.

I think even on the citizenship test to become a UK citizen you're allowed a few errors, there is a pass mark, but as far as the law of the kingdom of heaven is concerned, the pass mark is 100% and none of us can meet that standard.

We just can't possibly get in. And there's no point, is there, in John the Baptist saying repent for the kingdom of heaven is near because nobody's going to be able to do it.

Nobody is going to be able to maintain the standard that is required. So what is Jesus getting at here? Is he really saying that, well actually, it's just going to be me here guys, none of you are going to make it.

But Jeremiah said that God himself will write the law on the hearts of men and women. And Jesus has already made a promise, hasn't he, that we've looked at in the previous couple of weeks, where he said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[29:11] There are those who are going to get in. There are those whose righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. But how is it going to work?

How is it going to happen? Well there's another beatitude that tells us that, isn't it? Because he says, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled.

Perhaps we could put it this way, just as the intent to sin can stand for the act, so that God implanted hunger for righteousness can stand for the substance.

Because this is a promise, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. They will get what they're hungry and thirsty for. It's a promise, but of course it's a promise that requires faith to be carried out.

We need to believe that Jesus will do what he said he will do, that he will satisfy that thirst. First, we need to believe that if we build our lives on his words, then the edifice will not fall down, the house will not fall down, because that's what he promised.

[30:45] Paul would later talk about justification by faith, but it's the faith that is required, is the faith that Jesus will do what he said he will do, that that promise that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be met.

That's what Abraham did, wasn't it? He believed the Lord, and it was counted to him as righteousness. So perhaps we need to say a little bit more about how this works.

Top Lady's Hymn sums it up well, that's why I sung that hymn, he says, be of sin the double cure, save me from its guilt and power. And we can sum up what Jesus is saying here in this way, the legal requirement of citizenship has been met, not by us, but by the death of Jesus, because he has fulfilled the law's demands.

His blood seals the covenant, his blood marks our freedom, his body was broken for and instead of us.

Jesus' obedience takes our penalty. When Jesus, when we apply, as it were, at the throne of grace and say, I want to be in the kingdom of heaven, and God says, well, you can't, you obviously don't meet the standard, then we can say, yes, but Jesus has promised, Jesus has said that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled, those who are poor in spirit will have the kingdom of heaven.

[32:34] It's Jesus' obedience to the law that takes our penalty. And this is a glorious thing in itself. God's just anger against us is turned aside.

God's judgment of guilty is taken voluntarily by his own son, the only one who could do it. Of course, he was the only one who was truly innocent. But the gospel achieves even more than that. Otherwise, repentance would actually have no meaning, would it? What does the promise say? Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This isn't just some legal fiction by which a criminal might get off on some technicality. The new covenant carries with it the law written on the hearts of men and women.

And that law must and will change our behaviour if it is written there in truth. And in this present life, we struggle against our own natures, don't we?

[33:43] Because that sinful nature is not yet dead. And yet, it is dead. It is dead in Christ. And so, we just put to death the deeds of the flesh.

The lethal injection, as it were, has been administered. And if the corpse has not yet stopped breathing, then certainly, its death is certain.

But we are actively involved in it. The analogy doesn't go quite that far, because scripture tells us ourselves to put to death the deeds of the sinful nature.

And so, the kingdom is both now and to come. The kingdom of heaven is near. It's at hand. But we also are told to pray that the kingdom will come.

In chapter 6, verse 10, in that well-known verse of the Lord's Prayer. We're told in chapter 7, verse 13, to enter by the narrow gate. But we're also told that's just the entrance to the upward road.

[34:59] So, what is the gospel we preach? what did John the Baptist mean when he said repent for the kingdom of heaven is near? What was it Jesus meant when he took up the same words, word for word?

God. So, we don't preach a pharisaic gospel of mere outward obedience to rules. Just do the best you can and maybe God will let you in.

Because that won't wash at all. That's not good news at all. because we know in our hearts that we're not good enough. Or if we don't know that it's because we've deceived ourselves like the Pharisees had.

And this righteousness that is required is not some hypocritical holier than thou practice is it? because Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Instead, it's what Jeremiah says, a heart dedicated to love and faithfulness. So, anyone who preaches hate or anyone who preaches moral superiority is not preaching Christianity.

[36:21] This is not a true gospel. it is the righteousness of Jesus that we proclaim. And neither do we preach a gospel of easy believism, though, trust in Christ and do what you like, because that wouldn't make us model citizens of the kingdom.

The gospel is repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. We have to have that hungering and thirsting after righteousness in our hearts.

We need a change of mind and a change of heart. And we certainly don't preach a prosperity gospel. Trust in Christ and you'll live wealthy and comfortable, because we're told, aren't we, that the road to life is narrow, chapter 7 and 14.

And I think the narrow means here it's steep and dangerous. Not even Victoria Pendleton managed to get up Everest.

Climbing a mountain is hard. And Jesus has told us that it's those who suffer for righteousness that are blessed, isn't it?

[37:36] Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, but not persecuted because we go around making ourselves unpleasant and saying how much better we are than everybody else, but rather that we preach the kingdom and the law of God and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what John the Baptist said was quite right. He had got the right message and this is still the same message today and we can't preach anything else ultimately. The gospel is still the same. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. So for our final hymn I've chosen what is actually we think of as a gospel hymn.