

# Come To Fulfill

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[ 0 : 00 ] When the gospel of God, when God's good news for the world grabs hold of an individual or a community, something happens. Something always happens.

God's good news is a name and a fact. The name, Jesus of Nazareth. The fact, in Jesus of Nazareth, history has reached a major crisis point.

The time is fulfilled, he says. In Jesus of Nazareth, a whole new order of existence is breaking in upon the world. The kingdom of God has come near, he says.

Heaven is invading earth. When God's gospel, when this name and this fact grab hold of an individual or a community, something happens.

That something is what Jesus is describing in the collection of sayings we call the Sermon on the Mount. That something is a new kind of humanity with new character traits, new values, new lifestyle, new passions.

[ 1 : 04 ] In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is painting a portrait of gospelized humanity, the new humanity brought into being by the power of his good news. Our text today is Matthew 5, 17 to 20.

I like to think of this text as the theological hinge of the Sermon on the Mount. The whole sermon pivots around the great claim that Jesus makes in this text.

Through this text, Jesus, so to speak, shifts gears from the be attitudes to what we might call the do attitudes. Through this text, Jesus shifts gears from kingdomized character traits to kingdomized behavior patterns.

If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of the gospel? Matthew 5, 17 to 20.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.

[ 2 : 16 ] 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. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments and so teaches others to do so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever keeps and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

You may be seated. Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago you inspired Matthew the tax collector to write down these words.

I pray now in your mercy and grace that you take these words off the page and cause them to come alive in our hearts and minds and wills as never before.

For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. For the first time in his sermon, Jesus makes himself the subject of a sentence.

[ 3 : 35 ] Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. What a sentence it is. One of the most significant sentences he ever uttered.

I have come. He says it twice. I have come. The words reveal Jesus' own self-conception. He knows himself to be a man with a mission.

And, more importantly, he knows himself to be more than a man. I have come raises the question, from where? You have come from where?

One scholar who does not hold a particularly high view of Jesus writes this. The words, I come, imply a messianic status, indeed of heavenly origin on the part of Jesus.

They carry the sense of, I came down to earth. I have come from heaven. I hear in Jesus' words in this text the words he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

[ 4 : 37 ] Father, I gave the disciples the words you gave me, and they accepted them. They know with certainty that I have come from you. On the mountain that day is the one who understands himself as coming out of.

That is the way the preposition ought to be translated. Coming out of the living God from heaven to earth. And he says, do not think that I have come out of heaven to earth to abolish the law and the prophets.

I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. In that one sentence, Jesus reveals his whole approach to life. Not to abolish, but to fulfill.

Not to destroy, but to complete. You must never think, that's the way to translate those words. You must never think that I have come down from heaven to earth to abolish the law and the prophets. After preaching the opening section of his sermon, after announcing the Beatitudes, Jesus would need to say something like this. For the fact of the matter is, many who heard him preach his Beatitudes would have wondered if anything of the old and present order was still left standing.

[ 5 : 54 ] In his Beatitudes, Jesus turns everything upside down. His eight Beatitudes are the ultimate revaluation of values. The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, to those who know they do not have it together and cannot get it together.

The earth is going to be given to the meek, to those who resist the temptation to grab and push. In his Beatitudes, Jesus has switched all the price tags. The new order breaking into the world in him is subverting the old order.

But you must never think that I have come from heaven to earth to abolish. I have not come to abolish.

I have come to fulfill. Now, we can readily grasp this not but with regard to the prophets. Of course, Jesus would not come to abolish the prophets.

Through the prophets, the living God has laid out the grand plan to act in human history in such a way as to bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

[ 6 : 58 ] Through the prophets, the living God has announced that someone would come and bring that great plan to completion. I have come. The great longings of the prophets are being fulfilled.

The new covenant is being inaugurated. We therefore hear Jesus, I have come to fulfill with regard to the prophets as good news. But when it comes to Jesus' reference to the law, that's another matter.

I take the word law in this text to refer to the ethical law. Not the Levitical ceremonial law, but to the ethical law. And more particularly, to the summary of the ethical law as we have it in the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any graven image or idol. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. You shall keep the Sabbath. You shall honor your father and mother.

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet anything your neighbor has. I have come not to abolish the commandments, but to fulfill.

[ 8 : 12 ] Many Christians read the rest of the New Testament, especially the letters of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians and the Romans, and conclude wrongly that the old law is no longer operative in the new age of grace.

We read statements like Romans 10.4. Christ is the end of the law. Christ is the end of the law. And we take that to mean that the coming of Christ means that the law has ended. But is that what the Apostle Paul wants us to know? No. We have to read the whole sentence, Romans 10.4. However, Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to those who believe. That is, now that Jesus Christ has come and paid for our sins on the cross, no one need work up a relationship with God by first keeping the commandments.

We enter into a right relationship with the Holy One solely on the basis of grace, unmerited grace, through faith. But that does not mean that the law has no place in the life of grace.

[ 9 : 23 ] The Lord of grace, who justifies us by grace, says, you must never think that I have come to abolish the law. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.

Now, I'm emphasizing this so strongly because there seems to be within each of us a tendency to read Jesus' words the way the second-century preacher Marcion read them.

In his first edition of the New Testament, Marcion omitted all references to the Old Testament. He read through the New Testament, and any time it had any reference to the Old Testament, he scissored it out.

Marcion accused the Jewish Christians of actually distorting Jesus' words. Marcion claimed that what Jesus really said was, do you think I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets?

I did not come to fulfill, but to destroy. Human nature, apart from the grace of God, would rather have Jesus speak that way about the commandments.

[10:26] Human nature, apart from the grace of God, would love to have Jesus throw off the yoke of the law. It was Adolf Hitler who took this tendency to the extreme.

Adolf Hitler once said, This stupid thou shalt not, it must be eliminated from our blood, this curse from Mount Sinai, this poison with which both Jews and Christians have spoiled and defiled the free, wonderful instincts of humans.

What we are battling in our time is the so-called law. The spirit of lawlessness is not the spirit of Jesus the good newsizer.

I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. Fulfill. Literally, it means to fill up to the full.

In what sense? In what sense does Jesus of Nazareth fill up to the full this ancient law? Well, for one thing, he fulfills it by confirming it.

[11:35] He says yes to the Torah. Consistently says yes to the Torah. The law is for Jesus the way to live. Furthermore, Jesus fulfills the law by embodying it.

He lives it. He is, in fact, the one and only human being who has consistently, in word and deed, lived out the Torah. The scribes and Pharisees of his day didn't see it that way, of course.

As far as they were concerned, Jesus did not teach and live out the law. But that's because, as Jesus tried to help them understand, they had distorted the law. They had missed the point of the law. They were all obsessed with rulemaking and rulekeeping and missed the relationship with the living God.

Jesus fulfills the law by confirming it, by embodying it, and he fulfills the law by broadening it. He goes beyond the mere words and expands them and deepens them.

I like how the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber put it. Sinai, Mount Sinai, is not enough for Jesus. Jesus seeks the clouds above the mountains from where the voice comes.

[12:46] Jesus would penetrate God's original intent in order to fulfill the Torah, to invoke and actualize its fullness. Isn't that a marvelous way to put it? Jesus seeks the clouds above the mountains from which the voice came to Moses.

Is that not because Jesus was in the clouds above the mountains? Is that not because he is the voice himself now come in the flesh?

Six times in the Sermon on the Mount that is to follow this section, we'll hear Jesus say, You have heard it was said, but I say unto you. You have heard it was said, but I say unto you.

You have heard it was said, you shall not murder, but I say unto you. You have heard it was said, you shall not commit adultery, but I say unto you. You have heard it was said, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but I say unto you. It sounds there as though Jesus is setting himself up against the law.

But he is not. According to another Jewish scholar, this phrase, you have heard it was said, but I say unto you, is a technical expression that comes from the vocabulary of rabbinic rhetoric.

[13:54] And it is never used to introduce a contradiction to the Torah. It's always used to introduce an elucidation of the Torah. Jesus takes up that standard.

You have heard it was said, but I say unto you, to now draw out the original intent of the law. But in his case, we hear more than a Jewish rabbi. In his case, we hear the voice of the lawgiver himself. On the lips of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who has come from heaven to earth, the formula means you have heard all the experts of the law give their interpretation of the law, but I, the lawgiver, am now going to tell you what it means.

Jesus fulfills the ancient law by confirming it, by embodying it, by broadening it, by carrying out its original intent.

My friend Earl Palmer, who's the pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, helps us here. Palmer suggests that Jesus treats the law as a great ark, as an ark, and that what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount is extend the line of the ark all the way around to fulfill it, to complete the circle for which the ark was originally intended.

[15:09] Therefore, we should not, as many do, call Jesus six, you have heard it was said, but I say unto you, antitheses. They are not antitheses. Rather, what Jesus is doing there is fulfilling.

Call them fulfillers. In them, he draws the ark into a full circle. He goes beyond the external code. He goes beyond mere verbalization. He goes on to actualize the original intention that God had for us.

And that is what he comes to do in me, in you, in your family, and in human societies. Do not think, you must never think, that I have come to abolish the law.

I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. Now, after making this claim, Jesus then goes on to give a justification for the claim and an implication of the claim.

A justification and an implication. Consider the justification first. Truly, I say to you, amen, I say to you. Whenever you hear Jesus say, amen, we need to listen.

[16:13] It's Jesus' way of saying, look, this is solid stuff, folks. You can build your life on it. Amen, then I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away. Not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of the pen, will pass away from the law until all is accomplished.

Jesus does not abolish the law because the law is as permanent as the heavens and the earth. The law is as enduring as the universe itself.

Why? Why the permanence of a law written on stone tablets centuries ago? We'll go back to the law.

How does it begin? What is the first line of God's law? The first line is, I am Yahweh. I am Yahweh, your God.

The point? Because I am who I am, you shall and shall not. The law emerges out of the character and being of God.

[17:17] God did not just spin these commandments out of thin air, so to speak. You know, these poor folks need some rules to live by. Let me see. No. The commandments flow out of God's very being.

You shall not commit adultery. Why? Because I, Yahweh, do not. I am faithful to my relationships and my commitments. You shall not bear false witness.

Why? Because I, Yahweh, do not. I am utterly truthful. I mean what I say, and I say what I mean.

You shall not steal. Why? Because I, Yahweh, will not take what is not mine.

You shall not make for yourself an idol or a graven image. Why? Because I cannot be captured in any man-made form, and because I want to know you as I really am, not by your distorted imaginings and reimaginings of me.

The law emerges out of the character of God, and therefore, the law partakes of the permanence of the character of God, the same permanence as God Himself.

[18:26] Now, since we are created in the image of God, that is, since we are formed by and stamped with the character of God, God's law is not something imposed on human nature from outside.

It is not an arbitrary or alien ethic into which God is trying to squeeze the human species. God's law fits the human species. As I've said before, in the law, we have the manufacturer's specifications.

In the law, God is telling us who we are and how we best live in the created order. Yahweh does not give the law to confine us. He gives the law so that we can truly live human lives, which explains why we always suffer in some way when we ignore or violate God's law.

When we ignore or violate God's law, we are going against the grain of life. We are bucking up against reality, which explains why our society is where it is today.

We have been bucking against reality now for too long. You can't do it without suffering some consequences. Richard Halverson, who is retiring from the chaplaincy of the U.S. Senate, put it so succinctly in a recent letter.

[19:50] He wrote, If the last quarter century has taught us anything, it is the devastation which results from indifference to moral law. Slowly, we are picking up the broken pieces of an amoral era.

We are discovering that the moral law is just as final, just as inexorable as the physical law.

Halverson goes on to say, Some have thought they were getting away with moral relativity because the breakdown is long-term rather than instantaneous, like the man who jumped off the Empire State Building and was heard to say as he fell past the third floor, So far, so good.

Or the man who got away with immorality all of his life, even prospered through his immorality, only to discover moral retribution showing up in his weak and delinquent son.

We are paying a horrific price for the spirit of lawlessness set free in the 1960s. But thankfully, people across the political and religious spectrum are becoming aware of this grave error that we have made.

In a recent lecture, Cal Thomas, who was a syndicated columnist for the Los Angeles Times, spoke of the diverse group of people who, quote, have found company at the end of the same tether, close quote.

[ 21 : 18 ] Thomas spoke of the growing consensus in our country, thank God for the growing consensus, that one, we cannot build an orderly society when there is disorder in our souls.

You cannot build an orderly society when there is disorder in our souls. Or as someone else has put it, public policy is always private morality writ large.

Of course, the private morality of our leaders is relevant. Public policy is always private morality writ large. You cannot have an orderly society if there is disorder in the soul.

And the other consensus we are reaching is that a political culture cannot survive apart from a moral culture. We are learning the hard way, but at least we're learning it now, that democracy cannot survive without a moral foundation.

In fact, what we are learning is that democracy is moral before it is political. And when that moral foundation is ignored or violated, a society, says Kel Thomas, always discovers the revenge of offended absolutes.

[ 22 : 35 ] society always discovers the revenge of offended absolutes. That's what's happening. An editorial in the Wall Street Journal put it this way, it now appears that many wrecked people could have used a road map.

And the editorial goes on to say this, none of this wreckage will go away. None of this wreckage will go away until more people in positions of responsibility are willing to come forward and explain, in frankly moral terms, that some of the things that people do nowadays are wrong.

Thank you. Praise God for His good law.

Praise God for His good law. The law emerges out of the character of God, revealing the structure of reality, telling us who God is and telling us who we are.

Which is why the psalmist sang the way he did in Psalm 19. Psalm 19, the law of Yahweh is perfect, restoring the soul. The statutes of Yahweh are sure, making wise the simple.

[ 23 : 57 ] The precepts of Yahweh are right, giving joy to the heart. The commandments of Yahweh are radiant, giving light to the eyes. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

Now, what is important to realize is that Psalm 19 begins with the affirmation that heaven and earth reveal and praise the character of God.

The psalm begins, the heavens are telling the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands. And then right in the middle of the psalm, there seems to be this abrupt change from creation to the law.

But is it an abrupt change? No, it's not. The psalmist is contemplating the character of the good God as reflected in creation. And then his mind remembers there's another place where you can see the character of the good God and it is in the good commandments of the good God.

The law of God is as enduring as the universe of God. That's why Jesus says, I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. This arc has to become a circle.

[ 25 : 09 ] Now consider the implication of Jesus' claim. He says to us, for I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Exceeds. Exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. This is grace. On first reading, this is oppressive and impossible.

Does this not teach salvation by works? And so, therefore, contradict the first beatitude, which says that the kingdom is given to the poor in spirit, to those who don't have righteousness. Supposedly, the scribes and Pharisees were excelling in this matter of righteousness.

They had come up with 631 additional regulations. Can you imagine that? 631 additional regulations. Presbyterians only have about 25 additional ones.

631. And it was thought, well, 26, it was thought that if you could keep these 631 additional regulations, you would end up keeping the Ten Commandments.

[ 26 : 20 ] Oppressive. 631. 248 were commandments. 365 were prohibitions. How in heaven's name are the gospelized supposed to surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees by

realizing that the scribes and Pharisees missed the point?

By realizing that the righteousness of the kingdom is not a matter of degree. It's a matter of direction. Where are you moving? For the scribes and Pharisees, righteousness involves external conformity to the letter of the law and was measured in terms of externals only, completely ignoring what was going on in the heart.

Therefore, a man could say to himself, I'm righteous toward my neighbor. After all, I've not caused his blood to flow. Ignoring the fact that his words of insult and his unresolved anger is just as damaging to the relationship.

For Jesus, the law is all about right relatedness and in his sermon, he calls us to that deeper right relatedness. You have heard it was said, but I say unto you. Six times, you have heard it was said, but I say unto you.

Each time, he's developing a heart dynamic of the law. You have heard it was said, you shall not murder, but I say to you, and pushes us to this issue of anger. You have heard it was said, you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you, and then pushes the issue of lust.

[ 27 : 45 ] You have heard it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, and then pushes us to examine our heart toward the enemy and to love the enemy. Again, in these six sayings, he is not contradicting the law.

For one thing, some of the things he quotes in, you have heard it was said, is not found in the law. And for another, when Jesus quotes Scripture, he uses the phrase, it is written, or have you not read?

What Jesus is doing is setting himself against the scribal mishandling of the letter and spirit of the law. John R. W. Stott, I think, summarizes the problem best.

He writes, what the scribes and Pharisees were doing in order to make obedience more readily attainable, say that again, what the scribes and Pharisees were doing in order to make obedience more readily attainable was to restrict the commands and extend the permissions of the law.

They made the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. Sounds very contemporary, doesn't it? Make the demands of the law less demanding, make the permissions of the law more permissive.

[ 28 : 54 ] And what Jesus does is he reverses both of those tendencies. The law's demand just as demanding and the law's permission more guarded. Reversing them for the sake of righteousness, for the sake of right relatedness.

So the surpassing righteousness of the gospelized is that which does not make the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. Rather, the exceeding righteousness of the gospelized is the righteousness of the gospelizer, letting God's will stand as it is, demanding, inexorably demanding, and wonderfully liberating.

The gospelizers will refuse to accommodate the will of God to the condition in this world. They say, this is the way and we will walk in it. Now here's where the gospel comes to play.

The gospel is the announcement of a new fact. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. In the preacher on the mount, the kingdom of heaven is breaking in upon the earth.

In the preacher on the mount, there are new resources available for living the abiding will of God. Were it not for this new fact, the surpassing righteousness would be impossible and oppressive.

[ 30 : 14 ] It is the nearness. It is the at-handness. It is the presence of the kingdom of God that makes the seemingly impossible now possible. To put it in other words, Jesus has now inaugurated the new covenant.

The new covenant, wherein the law is etched on the human heart. The new covenant, wherein the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in the heart, writing the law inside the heart and empowering the heart to obey.

I quote the New Testament scholar Donald Hagner of Fuller Seminary. The dawning of the kingdom in the person of Jesus makes possible a new order of life and a new relationship with the Father. Jesus' ethical teachings are not followed in order to have that new relationship with the Father or in order for the kingdom to come. Instead, disciples begin with that relationship. They begin with the kingdom, wherein they receive a transformed nature, which, though not enabling them fully to arrive at the ideal in this age, nevertheless enables them to achieve more than had been possible before. In the light of the new fact, in the light of the new situation created by the coming of Jesus Christ, his words, unless your righteousness exceeds, turns out not to be a command, but a promise.

[ 31 : 35 ] When kingdom power breaks into human lives, this ark cannot but become a completed circle in our lives. And that's what being the church is all about.

We are the fellowship of the gospelized, people who know they've missed the mark. People who also recognize they don't have what it takes to hit the mark.

They're spiritually impotent. People who nevertheless refuse to erase or alter the target. They leave it there as the demanding will of God.

People who then help each other open up to the resources of the in-breaking kingdom. People who help each other yield to the power of the Spirit who brings obedience. people who therefore Jesus can use to heal a lawless nation.

You must never think. You must never think that I came from heaven to earth to abolish the law. I did not come to abolish.

[ 32 : 44 ] I came to fulfill the law in you and in the world. Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.