

A Passion To Fulfill

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Date: 29 January 2012

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[0 : 00] What we just read is the thickest, most dense part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In these words, Jesus is drawing us into the heart of the Sermon on the Mount.

And as he does, he is drawing us into the heart of his heart. Into one of the deepest passions of his heart.

Righteousness. Unless your righteousness. He's already spoken the words earlier in the Sermon. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. In this text, which many people think is the theological center or at least theological hinge of the whole sermon.

Jesus is beginning to spell out, unpack, illustrate what he means by this word. Righteousness.

Righteousness. Righteousness. It is a relational word.

[1 : 15] In both the Old Testament in the Hebrew language and in the New Testament in the Greek language, it is a relational word. Righteousness is all about relationship.

Which is why this word is often translated justice. Justice is about relationship. Yes, it's about laws and regulations and principles.

But fundamentally, justice is about relationships. Righteousness. Right relationship.

Right relatedness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right relatedness. Blessed are those who get persecuted for the sake of right relatedness.

Unless your right relatedness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. You will not experience the kingdom of heaven.

[2 : 14] You will not enjoy the kingdom of heaven on earth for the simple reason that the kingdom coming on earth in and because of Jesus of Nazareth is all about righteousness.

Righteousness. The apostle Paul realized this. And that is why he loves this word. I am not ashamed of the gospel, he says to the believers in Rome.

And we ask him, why are you not ashamed of the gospel? Because he responds, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. And we ask, why is the gospel the power of God unto salvation?

Paul says, because in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. The righteousness of God breaks through. God's way of making all relationships right is revealed.

Righteousness. This will be the burden of the rest of Jesus' sermon on the mouth. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, as you draw us further into your sermon.

[3 : 26] Please speak into each of our hearts that they may beat with your heart. Amen. You may have noticed that for the first time in his sermon, Jesus makes himself the subject of a sentence.

Four times in the text. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. Truly, I say to you until heaven and earth pass away.

For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds. Four times. I, I, I, I. It raises the question. Who does he think he is?

Who does this preacher think he is? I, I, I, I. Without any appeal to any higher authority. I have come.

He says it twice. Do not think that I have come to abolish. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. Raising the question, from where?

[4 : 35] From where have you come? I have come implies that Jesus sees himself as a man on a mission.

And I have come implies that Jesus sees himself as more than a man. You have come from where?

One scholar who does not hold a particularly high view of Jesus writes.

The words I came imply a messianic status. Indeed, of heavenly origin on the part of Jesus. For they carry the sense of I came down to earth.

I have come from heaven. I hear in Jesus words. The words he spoke to his father later in his ministry. The words in his prayer recorded in John 17.

Father, these, these first disciples of mine. These disciples have come to know that I have come forth from you. I have come.

[5 : 34] The preacher on the mount understands himself as coming out of. That's the literal meaning of the preposition for. As coming out of the God of heaven. Coming to earth to do the will of the God of heaven on earth.

I, four times, have come. Twice. Now, who is this I? Do you know the name Jacob Newsner? Newsner, sorry. Jacob Newsner. Any of that? Ring a bell for anyone? He's the world-renowned rabbi who wrote the book, A Rabbi Talks with Jesus. Newsner is a brave truth seeker. He's carried on an extensive interpersonal dialogue with the present pope, Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. And the pope shares some of that dialogue in his really excellent book, Jesus of Nazareth.

In the rabbis, a rabbi speaks with Jesus. Newsner imagines taking his place in the crowd the day that Jesus preached his sermon on the mount.

[6 : 42] As a rabbi, he likes a lot of what he's hearing Jesus say. It rings true with the Old Testament and with rabbinic tradition. He's taken by Jesus' depth and purity.

Yet, as a rabbi, he is deeply troubled. Later in the book, he imagines spending a whole day with Jesus and then returning to his village to share what he learned with the other rabbis.

One of the rabbis in the village quotes the Babylonian Talmud, where it says that Moses was given 613 commands. The rabbi goes on and says, King David reduced them to 11.

I don't know what was in the rabbi's mind. And then he says, Isaiah reduced them to six and then to two. And then Habakkuk reduces it to one. The righteous shall live by faith. And the rabbi then asked Newsner, is this what the sage Jesus had to say?

Newsner. Not exactly, but close. The rabbi, what did he leave out? Newsner. Nothing. The rabbi, then what did he add?

[7 : 50] Newsner. Himself. He added himself. Isn't that insightful on the part of that Jewish rabbi?

Isn't that good? Jesus does not change the law or the prophets. He adds himself. And when he adds himself, the law and the prophets come alive in a way they never had before.

I have come. Not to abolish, but to fulfill. Jesus here is revealing his overall approach to life. Not to abolish, but to fulfill.

Not to destroy, but to complete. You must never think. That's the way to render Jesus' words. You must never think that I have come down from heaven to earth to abolish the law and the prophets. Now, given what Jesus says in the opening section of his sermon, in his Beatitudes, Jesus needed to say something like this. Because after hearing Jesus ate, blessed are, his ate right on, we wonder if anything in the present or past order is still valid to Jesus.

[9 : 08] In his Beatitudes, Jesus switches the price tags. His Beatitudes are the ultimate reevaluation of values. The kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit.

To those who do not have the ability to live it. The earth belongs to the meek. To those who resist the urge to grab and grasp and push and demand.

Jesus' new world order is upsetting the old order at very fundamental levels. But, says Jesus, in light of all of that, but you must never think that I came to abolish the law and the prophets.

I came to fulfill. Now, I think I can readily get what Jesus means by, I am not going to abolish the prophets.

I came to fulfill the prophets. I mean, who would not want Jesus to fulfill the prophets? The prophets revealed God's great plan to act in history through the coming one.

[10 : 12] The prophets announced God's great plan to send someone who would bring the plan to fulfillment, to completion. I have come. The promised one has come.

The longings of the prophets are now going to be fulfilled. The new covenant is being inaugurated. The kingdom of heaven is breaking into the earth. Thirteen times in his gospel, Matthew sees or hears something in Jesus' ministry and says, This was to fulfill.

Matthew sees Jesus fulfilling text after text after text of the prophets. So, I have no problem hearing Jesus say, I did not come to abolish the prophets but to fulfill.

But fulfill the law? That's not as easy to understand. What does Jesus mean? That he came to, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law.

For people in the first century, this word law would point to at least three different kinds of law. There is the so-called sacrificial law.

[11 : 19] All of the laws about the sacrifices that are to be offered in the Jerusalem temple. There is the ceremonial law. All of the laws that make a distinction between the clean and the unclean.

And then there is the ethical law. All of the laws about how human society runs justly and redemptively. It is clear how Jesus fulfills the sacrificial law.

He fulfills the purpose for the sacrificial system. He is the one great sacrifice that fulfills the purpose of all the other sacrifices.

No other sacrifice is needed. Everything that needs to be sacrificed has been sacrificed in his once for all offering himself on the cross.

Amen? Read the book of Hebrews. All the sacrifices done. Once for all, he's given the one.

[12 : 20] Sacrificial law fulfilled. It is finished, he says, from the cross. I think it's also clear how Jesus fulfills the ceremonial law.

He comes and he cleanses us by his word and his spirit. We do not cleanse ourselves. We do not cleanse ourselves by offering all these sacrifices.

He comes and cleanses us by his own effort. And Jesus comes and declares all foods clean. No longer are there clean and unclean foods.

As it was in the beginning, all foods are now good. Read Acts chapters 10 and 11. Now, this does not mean that all foods are good for all peoples.

I think our Seventh-day Adventist friends are on to something when they still take some guidance from the ceremonial laws. You might know that our Seventh-day Adventist friends tend to live longer than we do, and they get less sicknesses than we do.

[13 : 28] Which is why, you may have read this week, that Loma Linda, California, which is the center for Adventist medical centers. Loma Linda, the Adventists are appealing to Loma Linda, California, not to allow fast food restaurants in the city.

But the fact is, Jesus, it has fulfilled the ceremonial law. He has overcome and he's removed the barriers between clean and unclean.

Bless his name. I take the word law in the Sermon on the Mount to refer to the ethical law. More specifically, to the summary of the law as we have it in the Ten Commandments, which were given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Okay, it's time for a quiz. Take out a piece of paper and write in order the Ten Commandments. I gave you 60 seconds. Just kidding.

You shall have no other gods between you and me. You shall make no images of me. You shall not use my name in vain.

[14 : 43] Remember the Sabbath to keep it. Honor your father and your mother. Do not steal. Do not, sorry, do not murder.

Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not bear false witness. Do not covet your neighbor's condo or vacation. Or mini Cooper.

Or your neighbor's retirement funds. Do not kill. Do not play. Do not. Do not. I have not come. To abolish the law.

But to fulfill it. What does he mean? How? How does he fulfill the law? I think in three ways. First, he affirms the law.

Jesus affirms the ethical law. He says his great yes to the law. To the Torah. As a righteous way to live. This is important to grasp in our time. Many people read the rest of the New Testament, especially Paul and especially his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians.

[15 : 51] And they conclude that the old ethical law no longer has any role in this age of grace. People look to texts like Romans 10, 14.

Christ is the end of the law. And then conclude that what Paul is saying is that since Christ came, the law ended. But is that what Paul wants us to think? No.

We have to read the whole sentence. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for those who believe. That is, now that Jesus Christ has come and given his life on a cross, no one need earn relationship, earn righteousness with God by keeping the law.

We enter into right relationship with the living God by grace, unmerited grace, by grace alone. By the way, that has been that has been the rule from the very beginning.

What's the first line of the law? It is not. You shall have no other gods before me. What's the first line of the law? The first line of the law is I am Yahweh, your God.

[16:56] We've already got a relationship. I've already made this relationship solid. I am your God now in order to live with me. Here is the law.

But was never, ever intended that someone kept the law in order to have a relationship. And that's what Paul is saying. Christ is the end of the law for making relationship with God.

We enter into that right relationship through grace. Grace. Now. Grace does not mean that the law has no place in our lives. It seems to me that there is this tendency in the human heart to read Jesus words the way the second century preacher Marcion read them.

In his edition of the New Testament, Marcion removed all references to the Old Testament, which means he's got a very small New Testament.

Marcion accused Jewish believers of tampering with Jesus words. Marcion said, here's what Jesus really said. He said, do you think that I've come to fulfill the law and the prophets?

[18:07] I did not come to fulfill. I came to abolish the law and the prophets. Human nature, apart from grace, would rather hear Jesus say, I'm abolishing the law.

That's because human nature, apart from grace, thinks of the law as stifling our humanity, as an impediment to life.

Now, this tendency is taken to the extreme by Adolf Hitler. Hitler 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 is the so-called law.

But the law cannot be removed from our lives, from human life.

[19:05] It's built into the very fabric of our being. It's in our blood. Truly, truly, I say to you, says Jesus, that until heaven and earth pass away, not the slightest stroke or word of the law will pass away until all is accomplished.

Jesus is saying that this ethical law is as durable and is enduring as creation itself. Why? Because the law emerges from the heart and mind of the creator.

Indeed, the law reveals the heart and mind of the creator. As I've said in other contexts, the law is not an imposition. It's an exposition.

The law is not the creator's imposition on the creature. The law is the exposition of who the creator is. And what the creator has created us to live.

You shall not murder because I do not murder. You shall not commit adultery because I do not commit adultery. You shall not steal because I do not steal.

[20:15] You shall not bear false witness because I do not bear false witness. And on it goes. So, of course, Jesus affirms the law. He, the creator, come down from heaven to earth.

More to the point, he is the lawgiver. Come down from heaven to earth to say his great yes to his own law. Now, second, Jesus fulfills the law by embodying it.

By actually living it. He's the first and only person who ever has. Oh, the scribes who are the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who are the supposed keepers of the law didn't see it that way.

As far as they were concerned, Jesus was not teaching and not keeping the law. But that was because, as Jesus tried to show them, they had distorted the law. They had twisted the purpose of the law.

The law was all about relationships. And the scribes and Pharisees missed the point and became obsessed with rules and regulations and missed the relationships. Not hard to imagine.

[21:19] And I'll come back to that in a moment. And third, Jesus fulfills the ethical law by filling it full. By filling it full.

Jesus draws out the intention of the law. Given who he is, he's the only one who can. Draw out the inherent intention of the law. I like how the way the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber expressed Jesus and the law and their relationship.

This is what Buber says. Listen. Sinai is not enough for Jesus. He seeks the clouds above the mountain from which the voice comes.

Jesus would penetrate God's original intent in order to fulfill Torah. That is to invoke and actualize its fullness. What a thing for a Jewish philosopher to say to Jesus of Nazareth.

Isn't that a marvelous way to say that? He seeks the clouds above the mountain from which the voice comes. And he can do that because he was not in the clouds above the mountain when the law was given?

[22 : 33] Is he not the voice itself come into our flesh? Six times in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount or in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount following not abolished but to fulfill.

Jesus says, you have heard it was said, but I say to you. You have heard it was said, you shall not murder, but I say to you. You have heard it was said, you should not commit adultery, but I say to you. You have heard it was said, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but I say to you.

And it initially sounds as though Jesus is setting himself up against the law. But that's not the case. According to the Jewish Old New Testament scholar, Pinchas Lapide, the phrase you have heard it said, but I say to you.

It's a technical term in the vocabulary of rabbinic rhetoric. It is never used to contradict the law. It's always used to elucidate the law.

And Jesus uses this standard formula to draw out the original intent of the law. But in Jesus case, we're hearing more than the voice of a rabbi.

[23 : 35] We are hearing the voice of the lawgiver himself on Jesus lifts. The one who has come down from heaven to earth. The formula means you have heard all the experts tell you about the law.

Now, I who spoke the law, I'm going to tell you about the law. I who wrote the law and now going to interpret it for you.

Jesus fulfills the law by affirming it. By embodying it. By drawing out its inherent meaning. By filling it full.

Now, my longtime friend Earl Palmer helps us at this point. Earl suggests that Jesus is treating the law as an ark.

As an ark. And what Jesus does is he comes along and he takes this ark and draws it all the way around into a circle.

[24 : 33] I have come means I have come to take this ark, planet in the soul of humanity, take this ark and draw it out into the full circle for which it was intended.

Which means that we should not, as is often done, call his six. You have heard it said, but I say to you antitheses. They're not antitheses. We should call them fulfillers.

In each of these six cases, Jesus is drawing the ark into the circle. He goes beyond mere words and mere codes and external rules and draws out the circle of this inherent relationality.

He goes beyond codes and commands and prohibitions and actualizes and evokes the original relational intention. Jesus is completing.

He's completing the circle for which we were created. Jesus is drawing out true and full humanity.

And now I think we can understand what Jesus is saying in the theological center of his sermon.

[25 : 45] Matthew chapter five, verse 20. It's the center of his sermon. For I say to you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Holy moly. Exceed. Exceed. Surpass. The scribes and the Pharisees. In the first century, the scribes and the Pharisees were thought to be way out there, way ahead of the ordinary folk, or at least the scribes and the Pharisees thought themselves to be way out there and way ahead of the ordinary folk.

But that's not the case. Not at all. For the scribes and the Pharisees were only living the ark, not the full circle. In fact, when you read the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, you discover they were even living the ark.

Nowhere in this ark does it say, hate your enemies. They were living the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law.

And they thought they were righteous as long as there was this external conformity to the rules. And what Jesus tries to show them, especially in Matthew 23, in his woe to you sayings, Jesus tries to show them that one can exercise external conformity to the rules and regulations and not keep the law.

[27 : 11] For the law has more to do with the inner workings of the human heart. Again, in these six, you have heard it said that I say to you, Jesus is not setting himself up against the law to do so would mean he be setting himself up against himself.

He's setting himself up against the scribal and pharisaical misunderstanding, misinterpreting, misappropriating of the law. And he's moving us beyond mere rules and regulations to relationship. He's moving us into kingdom justice. We may never murder anyone. But the anger we nurse inside that spills over in insults and sarcasm damages relationships.

I know about that. We may never commit adultery. But the lust we nurture inside, whereby we use another person's body for our own pleasure, damages relationship.

We may never take literally eye for eye, tooth for tooth or insult for insult. But the desire for revenge that we harbor in our heart damages relationship. The righteousness that exceeds, the righteousness that surpasses is the righteousness that takes relationships seriously.

[28 : 31] It's the right relatedness that involves the deeper movement of the heart. And Jesus is telling us that when we attend to this deeper movement of the heart, it's then that we enter the kingdom of heaven on earth.

It's when we attend to those deeper movements that we begin to experience and actually enjoy the kingdom of heaven on earth. You must never, ever think that I came to abolish the law and the prophets.

I did not come to abolish. I came to fulfill. I came to move you into the fulfillment of the prophets.

Bless his name. And I came to move you into the fulfillment of the law.

Bless his name. Follow me, he says. Follow me into my sermon. And I will lead you into this healing righteousness of the kingdom of God.

Follow me into my sermon. And I will teach you a whole new way of relating. Follow me into my sermon. And I will introduce you into this full orb relatedness.

[29 : 49] The Father and I plan for you when we created you in our image. I love Jesus of Nazareth. Boy, I love him.

Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.

I invite you to lay those relationships before Jesus. Just lay them out.

I tell you, he doesn't condemn you for that. Just put them out there. And then I invite you to invite Jesus into those relationships one at a time.

Let him take hold of those relationships. Give them up. Give them over to him.

[31 : 24] And trust all this relationality to him whose passion it is to bring shalom in every relationship.

Ezra Ezra