

Christ fulfils the Law

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[0 : 0 0] So if you can turn with me to Matthew chapter 5, verse 17. We're reading up to verse 32. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who's angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

[1 : 2 2] Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. And whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of fire.

So, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there, remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First, be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison.

Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you've paid the last penny. You've heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

[2 : 3 6] For it's better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery.

And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Good morning. I'm not sure if you know this or not, but the Tour de France finished a couple of weeks ago.

I know we're all probably swept up in Olympic fever, but a couple of weeks ago I was swept up in cycling fever. It was won by a 22-year-old called Tadej Podjaka, who also won it last year.

And it was a really good race. It was very interesting, lots of different things going on. But unfortunately, because the sport is cycling, and Tadej Podjaka was very impressive, now the whole cycling world is busy questioning just how he could be that impressive.

[4 : 07] No one can trust who he is. And the reason that no one can trust who he is is because of this guy, the most famous cyclist ever. If you don't recognise him, his name is Lance Armstrong.

And in the 2000s, he was not just the biggest name in cycling, he was also one of the biggest names in world sport. He overcame cancer and went on to win a record seven Tour de France's in a row.

It's a story that seemed almost too good to be true. And that's kind of the problem, because it turns out it was too good to be true. We know now that even though Lance Armstrong said he was an incredible athlete who triumphed against all odds, he was actually taking illegal performance-enhancing drugs to gain an unfair advantage over the other cyclists he was riding against.

To him, the laws of cycling were just there to be seen to be obeyed. And he didn't care about things like sportsmanship or an even playing field, the things that those laws were put in place to try and create.

He only saw the need to create a facade of following them so that he could have the image of being a heroic athlete that he wished to portray.

[5 : 28] And the reason that I bring up Lance Armstrong today is not just because I like cycling, but because today we're talking about the law of God and how the people at the time that Jesus was talking had misinterpreted it, had misunderstood it, and improperly used it.

And before I get into the Sermon on the Mount this morning, I want you to ask yourselves, what does God's law mean to you? How do you follow it? And what place does it have in your life?

Do you think that it's just like a good guide to living a moral life? Do you think it's a list of rules that doesn't have any application in your life?

Do you not think you need it because you have Jesus? What do you think God's opinion on the law of God is today? Because we're going to see today in the Sermon on the Mount that the law is not dead in God's kingdom, but it has been misunderstood and that Jesus is ultimately here to fulfill it.

And Jesus doesn't mess about. So in the first line in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, he gets into it straight away. He isn't here to get rid of the law.

[6 : 49] He's here to fulfill it. Verse 17, the start of what we're looking at. Do not think that I have come to abolish the laws of the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

Up to this point in the Sermon on the Mount, it would have been very easy for the people that were listening at the time to get the wrong idea about it. The one thing that the majority of those people would have had in common is the understanding that Israel is the kingdom of God, that God had chosen to be his people and that God had chosen to live under his law.

Israel was meant to be the salt and the light in the world and they were meant to be the one that was receiving God's blessings. And all of a sudden, in his first sermon, and that's what we looked at for the last two weeks, Jesus is turning the understanding of that on its head, saying that those blessings and those titles could be extended to other people just by the attitudes that they had.

And this would have been pretty worrying, really, for the people that were listening because they had built their life and the position in the community following what they believed was the law of God.

They may well have been sitting there at this point thinking that Jesus was doing away with everything. So Jesus, he talks directly to them about the law, laying it out plainly.

[8 : 13] He isn't here to abolish it. The law is not gone. But Jesus, he's almost like a boxer at this point, I think. He kind of lulls his opponent into a false sense of security.

And then the next second, he slips something in behind their defences. He isn't, the law isn't gone, but he's come here to fulfill it.

I didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. That's a whole different kettle of fish to what they would have been thinking he was talking about. What does that mean? And the answer comes when we ask the question, what is this law that Jesus is referring to?

Is it the Ten Commandments? Like, that's the most obvious answer, right? The list of ten rules that God laid out at Mount Sinai. That would be probably the most obvious answer.

Is it something else? Is it the extended list of laws that's laid out in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers? But Jesus says in verse 18 that not one iota of the law will pass away.

[9 : 27] But later on in the New Testament, in Acts chapter 10, those old food laws are abolished. So, you know, I can have a bacon and egg roll for breakfast. And we don't have an altar here at church for taking sacrifices.

So at least some part of that ceremonial law that's laid out in those parts of the Bible has gone away today. How does that not create some sort of contradiction with what Jesus is saying here?

When Jesus says that he will fulfill the law of the prophets, he is referring to the entire Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, not just one part of it.

In the Old Testament, God lays out not just those laws, he lays out what his kingdom will look like and how he will bring that about.

And Jesus is saying that he is the one that will do it. He is the one who lives according to the laws laid out in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. He fulfills the prophecy spoken by the prophets.

[10 : 34] And he fulfills the sacrificial obligations of the law that lay out how people who sin can become right with God. And that's the part that the Jewish leaders who were listening didn't get right.

See, they would have been nodding along when Jesus was saying he didn't come to abolish the law, but ultimately misunderstood it because they didn't see how it points to Jesus.

They see the law as a list of things to do, a checklist of what makes them Jewish, but not as an expression of who God is and what God's perfect kingdom will look like.

Now, I should mention here that Jesus doesn't say all of this right here and now in the Sermon on the Mount. But I think it's important for us reading today to understand that Jesus is emphasizing here that the law is not dead and he is not abolishing it.

When Jesus says not one iota will change, he means that God's character and God's plan will not change. A show that I love watching on YouTube is Antiques Roadshow.

[11 : 50] You may have heard of that. I don't think I've ever actually watched a full episode of it on TV, but I love watching the moment where someone brings a family heirloom on the show and finds out that it's just an incredible piece of art or history.

To me, it just seems like such a wholesome moment. Take a case. This was in 2001. This guy had this gold camera.

It looks pretty nice, right? And he thought that it might be slightly valuable. Well, turns out it's a gold Lexica 2 Lexus camera. It's one of four ever made worth hundreds and thousands of pounds.

So he thought he had something that looked pretty nice and may have had a little bit of value. What he had was something of infinitely more value. And I want to ask you now, how do you value the Old Testament?

How do you treat the law of the prophets and what it has to say? I don't think there's anyone here at Grace who dismisses the Old Testament.

[13 : 01] Right? I don't think anyone would say out loud that it's not important. But do you place the same value on it that you do the New Testament? In your own study of the Bible, do you ever skip or skim over the Old Testament?

Have you ever thought that there's an Old Testament God and a New Testament God and that somehow he's different between the two? Have you ever looked at some of the principles and values of the Old Testament and thought that you don't need to worry about those anymore?

We're going to get specifically to some of those in a moment but I think that while I've been wrestling with this in my head as part of preparing for this sermon, I've realised that I need to know my Old Testament better.

It's where God lays out who he is, it's where God points us to Jesus and it's a signpost for what his kingdom is going to look like. Jesus here isn't saying that the law just contains some truth.

He's saying that the law is the truth. If Jesus was to abolish it, it would be a fundamental betrayal of who he is as God and I don't want to make a similar mistake to what the Jewish leaders did at the time by not seeing the law in its fullness and with its full value.

[14 : 27] And if like me, that's already something that you sort of weighed down by a little bit and buckle up because we're about to get to some of Jesus' toughest words on sin.

So the second point that Jesus is making to the audience is that they don't take sin seriously because sin comes from the heart. It's not just your outside actions.

What does it mean that someone's a good person? As I've said a couple of times, I watch a bit of sport. Lately, I've been watching a bit of rugby league as well and there's some pretty rough characters in it to be frank.

But you constantly hear the phrase, oh, but he's a good bloke. What is that standard? What's the good bloke standard? What do you think the average person on the streets thinks that a Christian's standard is?

What do they think that we think we should be doing or following? What do they think God's standard for behaviour is? When Jesus was talking, there was a pretty clear standard that was set in the community and that was the laws, the Pharisees, the law as the Pharisees saw, taught and modelled them.

[15 : 47] But just like they didn't understand what the law pointed to, they didn't understand the fundamental nature of sin and Jesus confronts that attitude directly in verse 20.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. He's saying here that to enter the kingdom of heaven, you actually need to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees.

And to the scribes and Pharisees listening right now, that would have been like a complete slap in the face, right? They dedicated themselves to following that law and they derived power and standing in the community from that.

But what they had actually done and what Jesus is going to expose here is that over many years, possibly over generations, without even realising they were doing it maybe, they cherry-picked different parts of the law.

They'd bent it and interpreted it to suit their own needs. Jesus is saying here that the law reveals God's perfect standard and he's calling his people to live in his image and share that perfect standard.

[17 : 01] And using three examples, anger, lust and divorce, he shows how the Pharisees have made the law about their outer actions instead of the orientation of their heart. And in the process, they've made it so they don't take sin seriously enough.

You can see it in the first example here, verse 21 to 22, anger. You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder and whomever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable for judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says you fool will be liable to the hell of fire.

It's pretty clear here, really. You've been told that the outward action is what condemns you, but it's the inner action, the inner attitude that Jesus condemns, because that's how someone truly feels.

It's more or less the same ideal in verse 27 for lust. You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

[18 : 17] The heart of the law is not that someone's cheated on their wife or committed an improper sexual act. It's the lustful intent that creates those acts and from which those acts come that Jesus condemns.

And it's the same again with divorce. You've created a tradition within your interpretation of the law, but God's standard is higher. What's important to God is not what someone looks like from the outside.

It's where their heart truly lies. And there's two very good reasons for this to be the case. Firstly, very practically, we're guided, how we act is guided by our desires.

If we harbour anger or lust towards someone, it will change the way we act towards them. Sometimes in ways that we might not even be conscious of. Take anger.

So you might not outright attack someone or get in a fight with them. But the hatred in your heart may see us exclude them, undermine them, go behind their back on things, and over a long period of time, that anger, if not dealt with, will destroy that relationship.

[19 : 30] It will murder that relationship. Or lust. Lust. It's lustful thoughts that start the slide into further sin.

The kind of sin that will affect those around us, maybe in small ways. Maybe it's making someone feel very uncomfortable to be around you. Maybe it's making someone be really self-conscious of their bodies and how they're feeling.

To actions that can completely destroy relationships, ruin lives, and traumatise people for years. This is why the heart is important in God's kingdom.

Because the heart affects how we treat others. Secondly, it's also a matter of justice for a God who is perfectly just. If the standard is what is in your heart, then there's no excuse and no ability to hide or obscure your actions.

In society, we know that people will try and get away with things they should be called to account for. And when that doesn't happen, we can't stand that sense of injustice. Just as an example, like a week ago, I went to a pub with some colleagues from work for lunch on a Friday.

[20 : 44] Of course, we all had our masks on. But at the pub, they were handing people a glass of water at the door so people could take off their masks and claim they were drinking the entire time they were in the pub.

So by the letter of the law, that's okay because you're allowed to remove your mask to drink. But I think everyone here in this congregation would agree that it completely misses the point and the reason that that law is in place.

And I know that there's probably at least a few people here, by the murmurs I just heard, they'll probably email me afterwards asking what pub it is so they could go and tell the authorities about it. It's that sense of injustice that drives the cycling world to distrust every cyclist that stands out from the pack.

You shouldn't be able to get out of God's perfect law with a good lawyer. And Jesus uses the three examples of hate, lust and divorce to show that society at the time that claimed to be following God's law had moved away from the intention for it.

And moving away from the intention of the law is moving away from the character of God, the heart of who God is. And given that, I think it's important to ask ourselves the same question.

[22 : 10] What do you think our society would say the standard for those three acts is? With anger. I think most people in society would say that anger can be justified if you've been wronged.

I think anger is something our society even glorifies sometimes. When our society sees someone doing something wrong, I don't think people just say it's okay for people to be angry at them and hate them.

I think people cheer them on for it. With lust, the standard our society sets is that everything's okay as long as it's consensual. Pornography, sexual fantasy, sex before marriage, having multiple sexual partners, it's all on the table.

And divorce. We live in a society of no-fault divorce. And there's actually a very good reason for having an easy way out of marriage, particularly in abusive relationships. But the point is that God's perfect standard of marriage just does not fit with the society we've created.

And you guys might be sitting there a little smugly at this point because we don't do these things, right? Because, you know, we're all good little Christian boys and girls. But what are the standards that we set at our church here?

[23 : 27] Because I think that we can be a lot like the very people that Jesus was talking to in the Sermon on the Mount. Not outwardly and obviously living a life of sin, but moulding God's standards to suit our needs and thinking that we can get away with it.

For anger, do you let yourself be bitter with others that you know? Do you vent about people behind their backs? You know, it might not necessarily be a person.

It might be something at the workplace, a career, a situation in your life that you feel stuck in. Do you let resentment and anger build up about that?

How do you deal with conflict? What do you do when something doesn't go your way? Do you vent? Do you blow your lid? Do you harbour resentment to authority and people in power?

What about lust? What person here today would let their internet search history unfiltered go up on that screen? What person here today would volunteer their unadulterated thoughts about other men and women?

[24 : 42] And as I said, Jesus isn't specifically talking about these sins because they're any better or worse than other sins. He's just using them to make a broader point about the nature of sin.

They're just things that the people listening at the time would have instantly related to. What are the sins that you tolerate in your heart that you shouldn't? What are your blind spots?

In what ways have you moved God's standard so that you feel acceptable? Is it trying to gain popularity and attention? Is it how you spend your time and money?

Is it your own pride? Your feelings of your own sense of accomplishment? I don't know what your heart is like.

That's something you know. That's kind of the point here. But by the way that Jesus goes through sin after sin in his sermon, not just this week but he'll do it next week too, I feel convicted.

[25 : 44] I can just hear Jesus saying that he doesn't want his followers to just look like good little Christian boys and girls who seem to be following a list of instructions but actually have corrupt hearts.

Because for God to bring about his radical kingdom, the kingdom that he outlined at the start of this sermon, it needs to start with people's hearts being oriented correctly.

And that brings me to my third point. Because while it's a good thing that God's standard is perfection because it means he is properly truthful to what he says and it means that he is perfectly just, we can't completely reach that standard no matter how much we try to do so.

Which is why Jesus needs to fulfill the law, not us. And the key verse here once again, verse 17 and 18. Do not think that I have come to abolish the laws of the prophets.

I have come to fulfill them. For truly I say to you until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

[27 : 02] As I said before, Jesus doesn't explicitly lay all this out in this passage. But the reason he is dwelling on the law, the reason he is dwelling on the standard is to show that that standard is not going away.

And while we should be living like we're trying to be in his kingdom, no one truly does. No one truly can. We don't fulfill the law. We need someone else to fulfill the law for us.

And that someone, he says, is going to be him. As it says later in the Bible, in Romans 3, 21 to 24. But now the righteousness of God has been manifest apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Jesus is setting up the groundwork in the Sermon on the Mount that even though we can't be right with God by our own actions, he lived the life we couldn't.

[28 : 14] With a heart perfectly oriented towards God and through Jesus' death on the cross fulfilling the law, being the perfect sacrifice for our sins, that perfect life, that perfect heart becomes our perfect heart, our perfect life.

We have access to the righteousness that Jesus earned through trusting in him. And that isn't a contradiction. As it says, the law and the prophets bear witness to this all.

They set up the salvation for all who believe. As Jesus even says at the start of the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are the poor in spirit, who don't rely on themselves but look to God.

So what does Jesus want that to look like for us? What does trying to follow Jesus but trusting him look like? I think that even though we have the righteousness through faith, that Jesus is alluding to here in the Sermon on the Mount, you can't read what he has here to say and conclude that God's law, Jesus' standard isn't important to how he wants his people, the people in his kingdom, to live.

While we trust in Jesus, we need to try and orient our heart to the things he values, the things he blesses at the start of the Sermon on the Mount.

[29 : 39] We need to orient our hearts away from the things our society values. From this sermon, two pretty clear ones are anger and lust.

Ultimately, we need to have a heart of love. As 1 John 4 says, God is love and that is where those blessings come from. A God of love, a God of justice.

As Matt said last week, we're ambassadors and God doesn't just put this high standard in place because he wants to be harsh. He puts it in place because he knows what humans are like.

He knows that if people don't fix how they feel in their heart, they'll never be able to properly fix how they live outwardly. And while we trust in Jesus, he says that by his spirit, he is renewing our hearts.

He is helping us as we struggle to orient ourselves towards what his kingdom will be. However, when we fail, and we will, we can live safe in the knowledge that Christ has fulfilled that law for us.

[30 : 48] We can be freed from that guilt and freed of the ultimate judgment that is due to us by God at the end of time because Jesus has paid that price for us.

The law is not dead, but Jesus fulfills it. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for your words many, many years ago.

Thank you for how you are a God that loves us. And thank you that you are a God of justice. Lord, we thank you for the standard that you set and how it creates a perfect kingdom.

And we ask for your forgiveness for the times when we don't do that. We don't follow that standard. And Lord, we thank you that Jesus, your son, did and that he does fulfill the law so that we can one day live with you and be in a relationship with you.

Amen. Amen.