

Epiphany: Wk 5

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[0:00] Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Well, it is great to be back. Thank you. So, what Jesus says in this morning's Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 5. Something I think that the contemporary church has often forgotten. What do I mean by that? Well, I remember when I was a young guy about to go to seminary. Someone told me they really liked the New Testament. But they think that the Old Testament God is kind of a jerk. You ever heard anything like that?

[1:07] Huh. Seems to be a common thing, doesn't it? Or maybe you've heard something like, Well, the Old Testament God is angry and wrathful. But the New Testament God is loving and merciful.

Or maybe you've heard someone say, Well, the Old Testament might say something about this particular topic, whatever it is.

But Jesus never said anything about that. I once saw a satire article alleging that since Jesus didn't say anything directly about felony home invasion, it must be alright.

And to say otherwise is simply judgmental. That was the Babylon Bee, for those who are familiar. Kind of an absurd example, but it does illustrate a problem with this kind of thinking.

Have you heard these things said? Not too long ago, a fairly well-known preacher drew attention through suggesting that the church should unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament.

[2:16] Have to say, this problem is nothing new. These ideas have plagued the church since the early centuries of our history.

And they're truly and they're seriously wrong. Jesus clearly disproves these common assumptions and makes it clear that much is at stake.

You cannot throw out any portion of the Holy Scriptures, which are the inerrant Word of God, without running into some kind of serious trouble.

And ultimately, this kind of error distorts the very Gospel itself. That's what I want us to think about this morning. So Jesus says, Matthew chapter 5, verse 17, if you want to look there with me.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. So the phrase law and the prophets refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, as well as the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament.

[3:29] Basically what Jesus is saying here is that he and his message are not at odds with the Old Testament, nor is he at odds in any way with the law that God gave his people in the Old Testament.

And why would he be at odds with the Old Testament? Think about it. It's a serious mistake to drive a wedge between the Old Testament and Jesus.

To say, well, the Old Testament may have said this, but Jesus didn't say that. If the Bible, including the Old Testament, is inspired by God, and the Son of God from all eternity has been a person of the Holy Trinity, what conclusion must we draw?

If the triune God inspired the Holy Scriptures, if it is indeed God's Word, then we would have to say that the Son acted in union with the other persons of the Trinity to inspire the Holy Scriptures.

Where the Scriptures speak, then we hear Jesus speak, saying, well, Jesus didn't say that, is so incredibly misleading when we are talking about the Scriptures.

[4:50] Not only that, the Old Testament is about Jesus. The Old Testament is about Jesus. He is the point. What God reveals in the Old Testament, in the history of God's covenant with His people, in the giving of the law, in God's words to the prophets, it all points to Jesus.

Example. What was the ultimate purpose of the sacrificial system, of the sacrifice of animals that we see in the Old Testament? Isn't it there to point us to the sacrifice of Christ?

To point us forward to His blood that, unlike the blood of bulls and goats, can take away our sin completely? Example.

The prophet Isaiah talked about a suffering servant of God who would justify many by His wounds and by His suffering. Well, who might that be?

And contrary to those who would claim that the Bible is just a human document, Jesus is clear that it carries divine authority.

[6:10] He drives the point home. He says, 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.

And you may be thinking, Wait, what does that mean? I eat shellfish. Am I going to be least in the kingdom of heaven? I haven't slaughtered an animal as a sacrifice in ages.

As far as I know, we've never practiced animal sacrifice in our church. Is that a problem? Will we be least in the kingdom of heaven? As Anglicans, our 39 articles of religion help us out with this question.

We just wrapped up our Sunday school series on the 39 articles earlier this morning. The articles say, Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth, yet notwithstanding no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.

[7:47] Well, what in the world does that mean? That's a lot of Elizabethan English. First of all, we need to be clear that Christ in his perfect life has fulfilled the law on our behalf. As the article that I just quoted points out, the next thing we need to keep in mind is that there are different kinds of law given from God to Moses.

So, we have the ceremonial law, the sacrificial system, the accompanying code of ritual purity that went along with it. It served to point to Christ and its purpose was accomplished when Christ came, died, and rose again.

And then there's the judicial law. So, Christians these days live all over the world, but none of those nations we live in are Old Testament Israel. So, that being the case, if I get gored by my neighbor's ox, the legal arrangements that deal with that situation will inevitably look different than what is prescribed to that situation in the Old Testament.

Really hoping not to get gored by my neighbor's ox, but... But as the article points out, and I think it's following Jesus on this, the moral law, the basic biblical teaching on what is right and what is wrong will never change because the moral law is a reflection of God's holy character.

So, what are some examples of the moral law in the Old Testament? Well, the Ten Commandments come to mind pretty quickly. Don't they? I would venture to say that they still apply.

[9:35] Murder is still wrong. Adultery is still wrong. Bearing false witness is still wrong. Worshipping false idols is still wrong.

Indeed, we see the principles at work in the Ten Commandments reiterated in the New Testament. Take Ephesians 5, for instance, and this is just one example.

I chose it because it was the shortest. Where the Apostle Paul writes, for you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or who is covetous, that is, an idolater, has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

And if we were to go on in our Matthew reading, looking at the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, we would see that Jesus does not nullify the moral law that we find in the Old Testament.

He actually presents it in an even more demanding way than we would find in the Old Testament.

So, right about now, you might be wondering what the point of all this talk about law and sin is really getting at.

[10:59] Thus far, it might not have been the Sunday morning inspiration you were hoping for. And you might be wondering if your preacher is laying the groundwork to start fussing at you.

But I can assure you that's not what is going on. Matthew 5, verse 20, Jesus says this, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the

kingdom of heaven.

We might wonder how in the world is that supposed to sound like good news. But it is. And you might say, but wait, the scribes and the Pharisees were the super-religious and the super-holy people.

If they didn't make it, what chance do I have? And that's just the thing, isn't it? The scribes and the Pharisees, they looked at the law of God and they examined themselves and the conclusion that they drew was that they were doing pretty good.

That they were pretty good people who had mostly kept the rules. Here's the thing, that is not the way to eternal life.

[12 : 26] Don't get me wrong, we should seek to obey God out of gratitude for his goodness to us. That's what we mean when we say that the moral law still applies to Christians.

But we do not and cannot earn God's favor and earn eternal life by keeping the law. We cannot earn salvation by what we do.

There are many reasons we should not take the attitude of wanting to throw out the law of God. But I don't think there is any reason more important than this. It is the law of God, it is his perfect holiness, it is his perfect standard that reveals to us that we are sinners.

And until we come to know that we are sinners, we will not be saved. Because entering the kingdom of heaven is not a matter of being good.

[13 : 40] It is not a matter of our own righteousness. forgiveness. The kingdom of heaven is not the place for good people, it is the place for forgiven sinners.

So those who enter the kingdom of heaven are not perfect. Often those who enter the kingdom of heaven are not even terribly respectable from our perspective.

those who enter the kingdom of heaven are those who know that they are sinners and know that they need a savior.

Why do we need God's law? Until God's law convicts us of our sin, we will never see our need for Christ.

we won't see that we need a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. How do we get such a righteousness?

[14 : 53] We obviously need it because if we've ever sinned, we have already dropped the ball on obtaining it ourselves. The answer is in the obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I dropped the ball on keeping God's law perfectly a long time ago, and I suspect you did too. But my savior Jesus never dropped the ball.

He kept God's law perfectly, he was perfectly righteous, righteous, and then he paid the penalty for our failure to obey God's law with his death on the cross in our place.

Those who trust in Christ as savior, those who repent and believe the gospel, benefit from what theologians call the great exchange.

change. Because of what Christ has done for us, it means that he has given us his own perfect righteousness as a gift, so that we, even though we have sinned, can enter the kingdom of heaven.

[16 : 18] Believers, we do have a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us.

And he has taken the penalty of our sins upon his own shoulders so that we as believers are free and are no longer under condemnation.

No wonder they call it the great exchange, right? It is great. So, brothers and sisters, here's a question.

Should we unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament? Should we toss it out and say all of this law stuff doesn't matter? Absolutely not.

Never. First of all, we need every word that God has revealed. God has revealed it to us.

[17 : 25] Is there any of it that you want to miss out on? The other thing is this. God's law shows us our sin.

Seeing our sin brings us to the realization of just how much we need Christ. Seeing God's law rightly actually doesn't bring us to the conclusion that God is an angry, wrathful task master who is just waiting for us to slip up.

No. Looking at God's law and looking at how Jesus has fulfilled it for us brings us to the amazing conclusion that our God is a God who loves the unworthy, who saves sinners, who saves those who have done nothing to deserve their rescue and their pardon.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is why all of our hope is in Christ and in Christ alone. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.