

The Law and Righteousness

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[0 : 00] You know, it meant getting out of the classroom, going places to see things, you know, maybe the zoo, the science museum, even just a walkabout in the city.

But of course, the thing that I was really most excited about was the fact, you know, maybe the hope, that if we were out and about, then there would be no homework.

You know, we were expecting the teacher to say at the end, since we're having an outing today, there would be no homework. Now, of course, this was not always the case, because the teacher would still say, oh, look, you still have to write a report on the trip.

And you know, because we weren't in class, we couldn't do it in class, did we? We had to take it home to do. And of course, we would return late from the trip, you know, after the dismissal bell had gone.

And so, all in all, it ended actually taking up more time than if we had not gone on the trip. Now, excitement quickly turned to disappointment. Now, I wonder if the Jews had initially also got excited, thinking that now that Jesus had come, they didn't need to obey the law anymore, especially in the light of Jesus' radical teaching.

[1 : 23] Now, you may not understand everything that he taught, but the vibe was that he was for the little people, the poor in spirit, the meek, and the downtrodden.

So, perhaps there was hope for them now, you know. Yeah, the religious elite, they can obey the law, but us, wow, maybe now. Now, we get a chance.

Well, if that was their hope, then Jesus, in verse 17, burst their bubble. For he says, do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Now, here the law and the prophets is a reference to the Old Testament. The prophets weren't just from Isaiah to Malachi, but included a wider range of books.

So, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, those were considered prophets as well. So, law and the prophets is essentially the entire Old Testament. And so, today, if any Christian was tempted to think that the Old Testament is irrelevant or superseded by the New, then Jesus, right here, puts pay to that view.

[2 : 33] He says he hasn't come to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. So, there is actually continuity in God's word between the Old Testament to Jesus and then to the New Testament.

And because Jesus, whose words are in the New Testament, affirms the authority of the Old, then the Old Testament must remain God's word to his people.

And to the question, how long for? Well, that's in the next verse. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, that is iota, which is the Greek, you know, I, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

And so, as long as there are some things that remain unfulfilled, unaccomplished in the Old Testament, and we know there are, even though much has already been fulfilled, but if there was anything that remained unfulfilled, then in the meantime, not the smallest letter or stroke of a pen will be removed from the Old Testament.

And so, the Old Testament is not really a checklist where, you know, we just look through it and once it's been fulfilled, we just cross it out and say, okay, done, no longer relevant. Rather, we are to consider all of it to be remaining down to the last letter, Jesus says.

[3 : 56] And should anyone dare to then undermine the Old Testament, well, Jesus' warning is in verse 19. For he says, Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. So, don't get too excited if you think that you can set the law aside because it's too onerous now that Jesus has come.

Those who belong to God's kingdom still have to practice and teach these commands. So, yes, the homework still needs to be done. Now, we'll come back to the homework a bit shortly as to what that all means.

But now, I want to just go back to verse 17 and onto the outline to consider what Jesus means when he says he comes to fulfill the law and the prophets. As you see from the outline, I believe Jesus fulfills it in two ways.

First, Jesus fulfills God's plan of salvation in the Old Testament. So, whether it's the promises made to Israel or to the forefathers, whether it's the coming of the Messiah or how Israel's kingdom will be restored, every promise, every word of God in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Jesus.

[5 : 16] It points towards Jesus. Now, you know, as a parent, I often wish my words had more power and authority. And I don't just mean the instructions, you know.

Of course, when a parent says, please tidy your room or get off Netflix now, you know, those words ought to be fulfilled. But I'm also thinking of the times when I do make promises to my children. But I have no guarantee, do I, that they will come to pass. I wish they could, but I don't control everything, do I? Well, that's not the case with God's word.

Because we see in Isaiah 55, which was read earlier by Nathan, on the slide, As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth.

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. In other words, the moment God asks a word, even though it's been mediated through a human prophet, it's as good as accomplished.

[6 : 30] Consider it done, Jesus says, or God says, even though it may take years or centuries, as we see in Jesus' case, to come to pass. And not only will it come to pass, it will achieve God's purpose.

That is, it's not just predictive, but it's effective to bring about God's will. And so, this first aspect of how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament ought to motivate us to really search the scriptures so that we can actually marvel and see and join all the dots to see how God has fulfilled his plan of salvation through his son, Jesus.

And, you know, when we join the dots and we marvel, it's not like we are admiring from afar, as though, oh, this is just an interesting fact. But rather, everything that is occurring, that God says would come to pass, intimately blesses us.

We are blessed by it. We are saved by it. We belong to his kingdom because of it. It has life-changing ramifications for us who believe. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it, to know that as you open God's word, and you read it, and you find that it comes to fulfillment in Jesus, that actually, that is for you.

God planned salvation for us. Now, Jesus also fulfills the Old Testament in a second way in the outline, and that is, he fulfills God's righteous requirement of the law.

[8 : 06] You see, when God entered into relationship or covenant with Israel, there were things that he did that did not depend on what Israel did. So, being freed from slavery, being brought into the promised land, these were blessings that Israel did nothing for.

Nor could they. They were just provisions of grace, which they could not earn. But as they prepared to enter the land, God's covenant with them also required a reciprocal response.

God needed them to be faithful to him, not to worship other gods, to obey his commands. If they did that, then God said, they will continue to enjoy blessing in the land.

And sadly, we know, Israel did not fulfill their end of the covenant. They could not maintain their righteousness before God. And so, as a result, just as God also promised, discipline and judgment fell on them.

And yet, despite their failure, God was determined to fulfill his promises to bless Israel, and indeed to bless the whole world, notwithstanding what they did. And so, for God to remain faithful to himself, he could only achieve this by sending Jesus to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf.

[9 : 26] And so, this is how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament in a second way, by being obedient to it. He fulfilled it to the very last letter of the law. He did everything right, whereas Israel and all of us failed.

And so, the homework that we couldn't do, Jesus did for us. And this is the only time when somebody else doing your homework for you is a good thing.

So, chat, GPT, all that kind of stuff. And now that God is actually willing to accept us because of what Jesus has done for us, then, actually, if you think about it, why would we want the law and the Old Testament to be abolished?

We don't, do we? We actually want all the blessings that God promised to be unlocked by Jesus' work. We actually want God's word to continue to remain so that it can be fulfilled in Christ and then flowing to us as blessing.

And that only happens, Jesus has already said in his sermon, when we belong to his kingdom. When we read the Beatitudes, that was the thrust of it.

[10 : 38] How do we belong to the kingdom of heaven? How are we in the kingdom of heaven? And in those words, he talked about being poor in spirit. Well, Jesus here in verse 20, he reiterates it again, but this time, point two of the outline, he explains it in comparison with how the Pharisees themselves tried to attain their righteousness.

So in verse 20, he says, 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. Now today as Christians, we kind of look down on the Pharisees with disdain, don't we?

And we have Jesus to thank for that because in part, he preached against them and what they did. And because of that, they don't have a good name among us. But that wasn't actually the case in Jesus' day.

On the contrary, the Pharisees during Jesus' time was looked up to as model citizens. They were the righteous members of society, the religious elites that I talked about much earlier.

You know, if they were giving out knighthoods, the Pharisees would get them. If they were giving out Australia Day medals, the teachers of the law would get them. And so if anyone qualified to be in the kingdom of heaven, then it was actually the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

[12 : 01] If you wanted to be assured of being in God's kingdom, then you would look to them as a model for your piety. And so imagine now how shocking it would be for Jesus to say this and people to hear that their righteousness had to exceed that of the Pharisees.

What? It's hard enough just to be like them. Is Jesus telling us we have to be better than them? Well, yes, actually.

He does. But not in the way that we expect or think. And if having thought about that, we come to the conclusion that, you know what? I can't do it.

It's impossible. Then actually, that is the truth of it. No one can really enter God's kingdom by their own effort. But Jesus puts it this way to help us to realize that we're not good enough for it.

He sets the standard so as to show us that actually no one humanly can meet it. And if doing that makes us realize our poverty of spirit, causes us to hunger for righteousness, which we don't have and can't attain, then that's a good thing.

[13 : 13] Because you see, the righteousness of the Pharisees is really just actually self-righteousness. It's righteousness that they think they can achieve by being obedient to the law in their own efforts, with their own self.

But of course, the problem is that because of the condition of the human heart, not just them, but all of us, fallen, what the Pharisees often settled for was obedience to the letter of the law.

And they did it so well that they even created extra rules, you know, to say, in order to obey this part of the law, here's another extra ten things, that if we did all that, then we would obey that law.

Now you might think, well, you know, isn't that exactly what Jesus was saying after all? Didn't he just say not a letter or stroke would disappear? And isn't that what the Pharisees are trying to do, obey to the letter of the law?

Well, yes. But while they may have complied with the letter of the law, what they missed was the spirit of the law. And in the next coming weeks, we will, as we move on in the sermon, we will see examples of what it means to obey the spirit of the law.

[14 : 26] So, for example, you know, when Jesus talked about murder, it's not just about physically killing someone, but if you have hate in your heart, that's as good as murder. Committing adultery is

not just physically sleeping with someone who's not your wife or husband, but having lust in your heart or with your eyes.

what Jesus is talking about is what's going on in our hearts, not just what's external. And, you know, while we rightly criticize the Pharisees, I have to say, in honesty, that I'm not that much better. You know, outwardly, I think I do look quite presentable. I hope you think so, too. People even say to me from time to time, oh, Mark, you're such a godly person.

Well, if only they knew. But inwardly, I know that I fall well short of God's standards, I can tell you. Why? Because, you see, I find myself asking, what is the bare minimum I can get away with in terms of the law?

Instead of really saying, what does God really want of me in this situation? So, when it comes to loving my enemy, let's say, you know, rather than being truly sacrificial, I opt for just being civil.

[15:45] Maybe don't spend so much time with that person. You know, don't say anything nasty because you're not spending time with that person. You know, it can't go wrong, right? Then, you know, I'm loving my enemy.

Or, when it comes to generosity, I find myself working out what's the acceptable gift I can get away with rather than being lavish with it. You know, and even as I'm saying this, you know, I am already rationalizing in my own mind because surely, surely God's not going to want me to give everything all the time.

You know, if I do that, then what's really left for me? Now, that's probably the case. I'm pretty sure that God's not saying every time someone asks you for something, you give everything that you have to them.

God's not saying you have to give more than you can afford. But, the point is, I'm gravitating, aren't I, to doing what's required, the least that's required, rather than working out, what more can I do? What more could I do that God wants me? And so, sadly, my righteousness doesn't exceed the Pharisees either, does it? And so, where does that leave me?

[16:52] Well, the fact that I can't enter the kingdom in my own right is where it leaves me. And that's where Jesus' righteousness comes in because his righteousness, the only one, his righteousness does exceed those of the Pharisees.

His is totally blameless and pure. And because, as I've said already, he fulfilled God's law for us, it is when I recognize my own poverty of righteousness and hunger for his that he fills me with his. So that, yes, I'm able to enter the kingdom on the basis of Christ's righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees. And so, friends, if there's anyone among us today that you're still trying to please God or prove your righteousness to God with your own good deeds, then, please, can I urge you, stop.

You cannot enter the kingdom that way. That sort of attempt at righteousness only mimics the righteousness of the Pharisees. And Jesus says, it's not the way into the kingdom.

It cannot exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. But when we claim Christ's righteousness for our own, then, in that sense, we do exceed it, don't we?

[18:11] Even though we're not the ones who have done it, Christ has done it for us, but because we claim it and take credit for it because God allows us to, then, yes, our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and we enter into the kingdom on Christ's merits and not our own.

Now, I know many of you already know that and if that's what you already know, then, I want to then ask you to think about not going into the other extreme and have that tendency that thinks, well, because of Christ's righteousness and we're saved by grace, therefore, how we live is no longer important.

Righteousness, righteous living, we don't need to worry about that because it's Christ's righteousness that matters. If you think like that, then that is to defeat the very purpose for which God has brought you into his kingdom.

You know, why else do we enter God's kingdom except to live it out, isn't it, to be true to the king so that not one letter or stroke of the pen will pass away, that we will practice and teach God's kingdom.

It's a bit like trying to audition to be a wiggle, let's say. I'm sure many of you remember that part of your life, you know, fruit salad, yummy, yummy, all that kind of stuff.

[19:28] I know you're ashamed of it now, but yes, you used to dance to that. But let's say you wanted to be a purple wiggle. Have we got a purple wiggle? Yeah, there you go.

And you've tried time and time again to audition for that role. But they tell you you're not good enough. You know, maybe you don't look Asian enough. Or maybe you can't snore like Jeff can. But then one day, Jeff comes along. That Jeff, by the way, not our Jeff. And he auditions for you. And lo and behold, you're accepted as a purple wiggle.

You're now going to be the next purple wiggle. Now imagine then, what would you do? Would you turn up the next day for work and say, you know, sorry, but I don't wear purple.

I hate doing this silly hand gesture. I don't do that. I don't want to snore like Jeff. No, no. Would you say that? Of course not, right?

[20 : 29] Because now that you've got the role, you want to be the best purple wiggle there is, isn't it? Snore better than Jeff. All right? Wear that purple everywhere you go.

Well, that's the way with the kingdom, isn't it? That once you've been gifted entry into it, you want to be the best you can be in the kingdom. And actually, God knows that and he gives you the power to do that.

Because Christ did not just die to save you, his life was also given to you by his spirit to allow you to live for him, to enable you to live for him and like him.

Now it's not to say that we will do it perfectly or that if we don't do it perfectly, we get kicked out of the kingdom. That's not about entering or staying in the kingdom. But it's about our motivation, isn't it?

That once we're in the kingdom because of what Christ has done for us, we want to live out the kingdom, don't we? We do not want to do the bare minimum. We do not just want to look good on the outside when God says it's the heart that counts.

[21 : 34] We want to joyfully and wholeheartedly live for the kingdom. Well, that will be our challenge in the coming weeks when Jesus will push us really to examine our hearts to see if we are really giving our best for him.

But today, what he would like us to do is to be thankful. Thankful that he's done the homework for us so that we're not righteous on our own account but on his account.

to take God's word seriously. Not to treat it lightly as though it's been abolished by God's grace but to continue to see it as reflecting God's holy character.

Something that he wants us to live up to and that by God's power, by Christ's power, we will. So that when we live, we will live in excess or exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that Christ has fulfilled the law and the prophets. He has come to live the perfect obedient life so that he can be God's promised Messiah and our Savior.

[22 : 45] we claim his righteousness for ourselves so that we may be saved. And being saved, help us now to humbly and wholeheartedly live our lives in righteousness so that many, including ourselves, will bring praise to your name and the name of your Son in whom we pray.

Amen.