

Concerning the Scriptures – Matthew 5:17-20

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:25-27; 44-45

Introduction

As we begin the sermon this morning I want you to consider the following question: How do you view the Bible?

That might seem to be an odd question but, it's really no secret that people view the Bible quite differently and there really is no true agreement even among Christians regarding the Bible

Many people tend to view the Bible as a rather mysterious and largely incomprehensible book where each "book" of the Bible has very little to do with the whole Bible

And that's largely, I think, because of the way most people approach the Bible when they first pick one up – they treat the Bible like it was a novel

When we read a novel what do we do? We start at page one and we read through to the end, right?

Well, Genesis makes for a pretty good story when read that way and Exodus, likewise, continues the flow

But then you hit Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and most people are confused and derailed before they get to Joshua which is another really good narrative

So, people begin to flip around to see if they can find the "good parts" hoping that it might reveal something to them

And when we approach the Bible in that manner it becomes only natural to see it as a collection of wise sayings or truisms – or as theologian D.A. Carson [**Carson**] put it, a "sourcebook of 'precious thoughts'"

Most people know the Bible has something to do with God and that it's somehow valuable and to be revered but they really don't know how to handle it or what to make of it for themselves

So many Bibles sit idly on shelves collecting dust just in case they're needed for some bit of wisdom some day when they will typically be opened at random and scanned before going back onto the shelf accompanied by a confused shrug

Well, this morning we are going to see what Jesus revealed to his listeners on the mountainside about his view of the Bible

In the Beatitudes found in verses 1-12 Jesus revealed the character of those who dwell in the kingdom of heaven and how the world will react to the person who has those characteristics

And then, in verses 13-16, we saw Jesus use the two metaphors of salt and light to describe the effect that each of his followers should have in the world

What we have seen thus far in our series should have caused each of us to consider ourselves in light of what Jesus taught – to consider how we measure up to the standard he put forth

Now, beginning in Matthew 5:17 we find that we are entering the body of the sermon and the remainder of Chapter 5 will be given over to Jesus showing how his teaching relates to the Old Testament

As we delve into this section of the sermon we need to recognize that Jesus' teaching was meant to be understood by those first-century Jews arrayed before him and that his intent was, at least in part, designed to correct erroneous beliefs that they had regarding the Law and righteousness

And what Jesus had to say about righteousness would have sounded quite radical to his listeners

That's why he takes care to make certain they understood that the righteousness he was describing was perfectly in line with Old Testament Law and, in fact, that it was the continuation of the Law even as it superseded it

So let me encourage you to open your Bible to Matthew chapter 5 and follow along as I read **Matthew 5:17-20**

“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. 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 Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

If you're taking notes, we are going to have four major headings this week

First, we will look at what Jesus says about his relationship to Scripture

Second, we will look at what Jesus says about the perfection of Scripture

Then we will look at our responsibility to Scripture

And, lastly, we will see how Jesus redefines righteousness

So, as we dig in, let's look at verse 17 [**Matthew 5:17**] and what Jesus says about his relationship to Scripture

I. Jesus' Relationship to Scripture

The Law of Moses had been the law of the land for Israel for around 1,400 years when Jesus began his ministry

So, for generations, any righteous Jew had given the Law their utmost respect and reverence

And Jesus knew that what he was about to tell his audience would come as quite a shock

So he hastened to make sure they understood his intention was not to do violence to the Law but to fulfill it completely

When Jesus used the phrase “the Law and the Prophets” that was the common way of referring to what we know as the Old Testament

The original Greek word translated for us as “abolish” means “to destroy completely by tearing down and dismantling” and it brings to my mind the picture of a building being systematically torn down piece-by-piece

But as we read through the Bible we see that Jesus had a high view of Scripture

He believed Scripture absolutely, he submitted himself to it, he taught according to it, and he showed that anyone who believed on him could only do so to the same degree they also believed Scripture

And Jesus didn't see his life and ministry in terms of opposition to the Old Testament; rather he saw them in terms of bringing the aim of the Old Testament to fruition

So we are logically left to answer how exactly Jesus “fulfills” the Old Testament

Probably the first thing we think of is that Jesus perfectly fulfilled all of the messianic predictions

It's difficult to come up with a completely satisfactory answer to the number of messianic prophecies we find in the Old Testament because everyone counts them differently

For instance, do we count the prophecies that are repeated once or multiple times?

But, anyway, it's estimated that there are between 200 and 400 specific instances of prophecy that point directly to Jesus

We readily think of the really big ones like **Micah 5:2** where Jesus' birthplace was foretold

Or **Psalms 22** [**Psalms 22:16**] which foretold of his death by crucifixion which wasn't even a form or execution when the psalm was written

And we can't help but look at **Isaiah 53** which portrays Jesus as the predicted suffering servant

He was born under the Law as we see in **Galatians 4:4** to fulfill all righteousness as we see in **Matthew 3:15** and he perfectly kept all the commands of the Law as we see in **1 Peter 2:22** – so in that way Jesus fulfilled the Law and was able to be the perfect sacrifice God required to atone for the sin of mankind

And when Jesus went to the cross he satisfied the demands of the Law against anyone who would believe on him

The entire sacrificial system pointed to Jesus and Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice that fulfilled and negated the need for continual sacrifices

Those are some of the ways we can say that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets but really, the entire Old Testament points us to Jesus and as such it found its complete, holistic fulfillment in the arrival of that toward which it had pointed

Jesus didn't come to destroy or to repudiate the Old Testament – in fact; he said it was perfect even as he expanded upon our understanding of it

II. The Perfection of Scripture

Look with me at verse 18 [**Matthew 5:18**] where Jesus says, *“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.”*

First of all, we need to note that Jesus goes further in his denial that he has come to abolish the Law and the Prophets by saying that the Old Testament is **permanent**

When speaking of the Old Testament, Jesus repeatedly used the present perfect tense when he says, “It is written...” which means “It was written, it is written, and it will always be written”

In fact, it will outlast the universe itself as we see here and in **Matthew 24:35**

By extension we know that even as Jesus was speaking in Matthew 5 specifically of the Old Testament that the same is true of the New Testament

It would be beyond our study this morning but Jesus taught in **John 14:26** that the Holy Spirit would give his apostles further revelation and in **John 10:35** that Scripture is a unit that cannot be broken

In spite of people's continued efforts to discredit it and to destroy it, Jesus assures us that the Bible will endure until the end of the age

Then Jesus also declares in **Matthew 5:18** that Scripture is perfect in its content

When theologians set out to define what they believe about different doctrinal matters they strive to make a complete statement that takes into account all variables and to completely describe their belief

We did that here at Brick Church in our Statement of Beliefs that is a part of our church constitution

And in that statement we attest to our belief in the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible which simply means that we believe that the Bible is not only true in what it teaches but in the very words and forms of expression that make it up

That's what Jesus is saying here when he says that “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished”

An “iota” is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet called a *yod*

A *yod* looks like our apostrophe, just a small pen stroke like a comma but at the top of the line of text and there are over 66,000 of them in the Hebrew Old Testament

And a “dot” would equate to a serif or the little extensions that distinguish a G from a C or a Q from an O

Better yet, let's look at three pairs of Hebrew characters that are distinguished by what Jesus refers to here as a “dot”

Here is an example of two Hebrew letters [**Zayin-Vav**] and here's the pen stroke that makes them different [**Zayin-Vav2**]

And here are two more pairs of letters [**Dalet-Resh**] and [**Bet-Kaf**] those tiny projections make all the difference

Jesus claims here that the Bible is authoritative, not just in what it teaches or even how it teaches it, but also down to the smallest letter and the very pen strokes that make up its characters

And in so doing, Jesus affirms the reliability, truthfulness, and permanence of the Bible in the strongest possible terms

Next, in verse 19, Jesus turns to the authority of the Bible and the responsibility his followers have to it

III. Our Responsibility to Scripture

Look at **Matthew 5:19** with me where Jesus says –

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.

The question we have to answer, and the point where many people get tripped up when reading this passage is what exactly Jesus meant by “these commandments”

Jesus did not mean the commandments of the Old Testament but rather the commandments of the kingdom of heaven which he mentions three times in verses 19 and 20

Jesus is referring to the command he has already given and the ones still to come in the Sermon on the Mount

These commands are predicated on the Old Testament Law but they expand upon it and give new understanding to it

This will become clear in the remainder of Chapter 5 as Jesus repeatedly uses the formula, “You have heard it said, but I say” as he gives a clearer understanding of various points of the Law

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament as we have already seen and though the Law is not abolished and while it still plays an important role in instructing us as to the righteous demands of God Jesus has shown a better, more perfect way of understanding the Law

Let me give you an example:

The Old Testament Law command sacrifice – in fact it contains an elaborate system of sacrifices

But, the sacrifices prescribed in the Law were fulfilled in Jesus by his death on the cross as we see clearly spelled out in **Hebrews 10**

Therefore, we are not in danger of being called the least in the kingdom of heaven for not observing the animal and other sacrifices detailed in the Law – they have been fulfilled by a better sacrifice

The Mosaic Law is still valuable and worthy of being taught because it reveals God’s ethical standard and our inability to live up to it thereby revealing our need of a Savior and pointing us to Jesus

And then after we are saved, Jesus points us back to the Law and his further explanation of it to show us the heart of God and to teach us how we might live so as to please him

It only makes sense; if we want to be called great in the kingdom of heaven we must live so as to please God

So, while we live under grace and not law, the Old Testament continues to teach us about the righteous demands of God and what he desires of us so we can strive to please him –

As Christ-followers, we are responsible to the entirety of Scripture

Up to this point, Jesus has been issuing a preemptive to the accusation that people are going to level at him that he is speaking against the Law

Without a doubt, Jesus spoke out against the contemporary interpretation of the Law held and promoted by the Scribes and Pharisees but he wasn’t criticizing the Law he was supporting the Law and restoring its original integrity

In reality, Jesus established the Law and the Prophets by fulfilling them and by rescuing them from the incremental perversion of the scribes and Pharisees

In the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount we are going to see how Jesus returned the Law to its true, undefiled nature through his expanded explanation which allowed his followers the opportunity to please God through a true understanding of what God requires – and what he has said up to now is designed to head off the criticism that portion of the sermon and the entirety of his ministry is sure to generate

But what Jesus says next was quite shocking to his original audience as he redefined righteousness

IV. Righteousness Redefined

Look with me again at verse 20 [Matthew 5:20] – *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Today we tend to view the Scribes and Pharisees as bad guys largely because Jesus bumped heads with them on so many occasions

But that wasn't the case in the first century – the scribes and the Pharisees were like religious rock stars back then

To be recognized as a Pharisee was high praise because of their meticulous obedience to God's Law

And the scribes were the religious intellectuals – they were the great masters of interpreting and applying the Law

Most scribes began their training as children and continued their education until they were formally ordained at age 40

People honored them when they walked down the street by standing as they passed by

The Pharisees were said to have calculated the Law to contain 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions and they scrupulously tried to keep them all

And here we have Jesus telling his audience that unless their righteousness exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees they could not enter the kingdom of heaven!

How could anyone hope to enter the kingdom with that condition?

Jesus seemed to be saying, in effect, "Hey, don't think that I came to make things easier on you by reducing the demands of the Law. No way. As a matter of fact, if you don't keep the Law better than the scribes and Pharisees you'll never make it!"

At least that's the way we tend to read that verse

We read Matthew 5:20 and we understand it to show Jesus saying that unless a person has a bit more of the same kind of righteousness that the scribes and Pharisees had, they cannot get to heaven

But in reality we know that a person cannot earn heaven by any measure of righteous living – no one comes to the Father except through the Son

And that's the key to what Jesus taught in verse 20 – in order for someone to get to heaven they have to have a different and better righteousness – one that exceeds – the righteousness practiced by the scribes and Pharisees

A person must forsake human goodness and accept the only righteousness that saves – the freely offered righteousness of Christ

The problem with the religious leaders of Jesus' day is the same as many people struggle under today

They are trying to conform outwardly to some standard; to some list of do's and don'ts while remaining inwardly unchanged

And that's understandable because the only righteousness we can generate on our own is external, outward righteousness that is shown through our behavior

So the scribes and Pharisees piled rule upon rule hoping to please God through their obedience when in reality their rules only served to obscure and keep them from the true standard of the Law making it of no effect in their lives

But God requires a transformation of the heart and only God can transform our heart and then only through Christ

I suppose we could boil down the difference to one of quality, which God requires, or quantity, which the scribes and Pharisees were trying to provide through their obedience to myriad little rules and regulations

But it's only when we come to the end of ourselves and recognize that we have nothing to commend ourselves to God that we are able to be saved and to have the righteousness we need imputed to our account

We can try as we might to work our way to heaven by refining and polishing our behavior and by faithfully adhering to a human standard of goodness

But the goodness of God is of a different type altogether

For that reason, God makes clear that he can't work with the good deeds that we generate however lofty we may think them to be – after all even our best deeds are like a polluted garment to God as we see in **Isaiah 64:6**

Jesus radically redefined righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount and, I would imagine, his hearers saw his statement as being rather harsh and unyielding when he was in fact being kind in explaining that the only way to be saved was through grace leading us right back to the first Beatitude in **Matthew 5:3** – *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*

Conclusion

This week, as I was studying for this sermon, it came to me that the problem we tend to have with the Bible as a whole is the same problem we have with the Sermon on the Mount – we have the tendency to look at it as fragments rather than as one unified whole

But with the Sermon on the Mount serving as a microcosm of the whole Bible we see the necessity of reading each of its parts in relation to the whole

So far in our study we've seen Jesus spell out the character that God requires for his kingdom and the impact that living out that character will have on the world around us and this week we have seen how a proper understanding of the Old Testament Law points us back to the character of the kingdom and the recognition of our moral bankruptcy it requires

And as we have also seen today, Jesus makes it very clear that the entirety of the Bible is about him

The Old Testament points to him and the New Testament tells us of his ministry on the earth, first in person and then through his church as well as foretelling of his glorious return and victorious reign forever

It is all tied together as one cohesive account and we must understand and interpret all of Scripture in light of Christ

By his life and ministry, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament and that fulfillment resulted in a changed way of viewing and applying the Law just as his coming again will conclude the church age and change the way we interact with him forever

Next week, we will begin to look at the topics that Jesus chose to highlight the new way of looking at the Law that he was revealing as the high bar of internal righteousness that God requires by studying Matthew 5:21-26 on the topic of anger

Let's pray