Jesus concludes this passage with what would have been a shocking declaration: “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.” Here’s why this was so shocking. The Pharisees and teachers of the law had devoted their lives to the righteousness. They had calculated the specific number of commands and prohibitions, 248 and 365, respectively, and attempted to keep them all. They were known for their righteousness. It was on full display. You knew when they gave an offering, when they fasted, when they washed, when they did anything that had anything to do with righteousness. In fact, what gave them so much power was that they were able to make living a righteous life a full time job. They had far distanced themselves from the average person in terms of righteousness. So how in the world could Jesus say that his followers must surpass their righteousness or that they couldn’t even enter the kingdom of God?

The difference, I think, is this: it’s not that as Christians we can keep more commandments than the Pharisees, a quantitative righteousness, but that we keep them in a different way, a qualitative righteousness. So, for instance, it’s not that the Pharisees were able to keep 602 of the 613 commands, and we can keep 605 of them. It’s first that through faith, Jesus kept the law for us, so that we fulfill the law through faith, but that through the work of the Holy Spirit, who changes our hearts, we keep the moral law of God because our hearts lead us to do so and we do so because of our love for God. We don’t tithe to the Lord because anyone knows we do, but because it’s in our hearts to give. We don’t make sure others can see that we’re fasting, but we fast unto the Lord because it’s in our hearts to do so. We don’t do what we do so that others will know what we’re doing or so that God will be impressed, but because our heart has been changed by the Holy Spirit and as a result we naturally mourn our spiritual poverty and are filled with meekness. We’re naturally merciful and hungry and thirst to see the right thing done. Or to put it in Paul’s lingo, we’re naturally filled with the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit so that our loves begin to overflow with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

Unless our hearts have been changed so that we have a different kind of righteousness than the Pharisees and teachers of the law, we’ll never enter the kingdom of heaven. To quote Jesus, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 4:17).” The righteousness Jesus is talking about doesn’t reek of smug self-sufficiency. It’s not the kind of righteousness, including God. It doesn’t compare itself to anyone else, but is done for the Lord alone. It’s not arrogant, but humble. It’s the kind of righteousness we see in Jesus himself, who was willing to associate with people otherwise forgotten, or even more, deliberately shunned for their lack of external righteousness. Unless our righteousness looks something like the righteousness of Jesus, we won’t enter the kingdom of heaven. So what do we conclude from this?

Conclusion

One, Jesus fulfilled all of the requirements of God’s holy law for us through his life and death. Without the righteousness of Jesus, we would all be lost and on our way to hell. Hebrews 12:14 states it quite plainly: “without holiness [purity], no one will see the Lord.” Only the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8). Purity and righteousness weren’t Old Testament ideas that God discarded as though his immutable character had changed. That’s why he sent Jesus at all. He knew that we could never in our sinful condition be pure enough to be with him so Jesus had to make us pure through his sacrifice and to give to us the necessary righteousness to stand before him. Faith in Christ is not a supplement to our best efforts; it is the sole basis of our right relationship with God. The work has been done and the gift has been offered. All that is left for us to do is to humbly and gratefully receive it.

Two, as followers of Jesus, we must allow the Holy Spirit to continually transform our hearts so that we naturally produce the fruit of righteousness. If Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, and if we will be judged by our obedience to and teaching about that law, then obedience should be a priority. However, our obedience should flow naturally from the work of the Spirit in our lives. Our obedience should not be tailored to our personal preferences as in the case of the Pharisees, but should be in accordance with God’s will as expressed in his word.

Three, when we see a lack of righteousness in certain areas of our lives, the answer is to mourn our spiritual poverty not to strive to produce better fruit. I am going to say again this week: the sermon on the mount is not a new law. The law, Paul says, shows us our sin (Romans 7:7) and therefore brings death, not life (Romans 7:10). To try to make ourselves right with God by observing the law, we would have to keep the whole law perfectly all the time, which is impossible (Galatians 5:3). The only way to fulfill the law is to have it fulfilled for us through faith in Christ and to have our hearts changed by the Holy Spirit so that we naturally produce the fruit of righteousness. If that’s the case, then the answer to ongoing sin is not trying harder to keep the law, but coming to God with repentant hearts, mourning our spiritual poverty, and asking for the gift of godly sorrow (2Corinthians 7:10). When that happens, Paul says, it produces, “earnestness… eagerness… indignation… alarm… longing… concern…” and “a readiness to see the right thing done (2Corinthians 7:11)."
This morning is our fourth message working our way through the Sermon on the Mount. Again, if you missed any of the previous messages you can read or listen to them at wcag.org/sermons, or watch them by clicking on the button that says watch online at wcag.org. I do want to encourage you to keep up with the sermons because these topics build on each other week to week. With that, let’s jump into our text this morning, which is Matthew 5:17-20. 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. 18 Do not think that I have come to destroy the kingdom of heaven; on the contrary, I have come to fulfill it. 19 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.

Introduction

If we step back for a moment to consider how the Sermon on the Mount has unfolded thus far, we find a clear progression to it. Jesus began by focusing on the character of his followers and the need for his followers to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (v 20). In the process, Jesus helps us understand the continuity and discontinuity between the old and new testament. First, he reveals his relationship to the law, and then second, about his followers’ relationship to the law. Let’s start with Jesus’ relationship to the law in verses 17-18.

Jesus & The Law (vv 17-18)

Jesus leads off with a very strong statement: “do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets,” which to be clear is a shortened phrase for all of the books in what we call the Old Testament. Jesus’ statement presupposes that there were people who did, in fact, think he had come to destroy God’s word. To use a more modern word, they thought he came to repeal the law such that the law was given through Moses but then overturned by Jesus. Jesus assertively denies that was the case.

Instead, he says, he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. What does that mean? There are a few things to this. First, Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets by fulfilling the pictures, promises, and prophecies pointing to the messiah found scattered throughout them. He fulfilled every promise God had ever made concerning the messiah such that Paul could say that “…no matter how many promises God has made, they are “yes” in Christ (1Corinthians 1:20).” But more specifically to this context, Jesus came to fulfill the law and prophets by “bringing it to its intended meaning” as one commentator says (Hagner). “That’s going to spend a significant portion of this part of the Sermon on the Mount saying, “You have heard it said…but I say to you” on the topics of murder, adultery, divorce, keeping oaths, revenge, and loving your neighbor in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43, respectively. As the messiah, Jesus definitively interprets the Old Testament.

If there were any remaining questions about whether Jesus came to repeal the law, verse 18 answers them clearly: “until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Jesus says that not a single one of the smallest letter, iota in the Greek alphabet, will be set aside nor the smallest stroke that distinguishes one letter from another. However, it’s important to keep in mind that Jesus wouldn’t fulfill the law as the Pharisees attempted to do, by superficial obedience, but by faithfulness to the true and full meaning of the law and the prophets.

Marcionism Recidivis

Christians have long struggled with how to understand the relationship between the new and old testaments, between the law and the gospel. Early in church history, a man named Marcion, along with his followers, taught that the God of the old testament was different than the God of the new testament. Many Christians since then have functionally held the same belief. Yet Jesus leaves no room at all for such thinking. Some will point to Romans 10:4, which says, “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” They suggest that when Christ came, the law was set aside, repealed, or cut off.

However, Jesus says that he is the law’s fulfillment, that he completes the law and definitively interprets it. He completes every picture of what God’s salvation would look like. He completes every prophecy of who the messiah would be. He completes every promise God had made to rescue and redeem human kind. So to be clear, it’s not that we don’t have to fulfill the law because repealed it, it’s that Jesus died so that “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4).” It’s not that Jesus repealed the law because we couldn’t keep it, but that he kept it for us and through his Spirit helps us to submit to, and obey, God’s moral law. And that leads us to Jesus’ teaching about the relationship between his followers and the law in verses 19-20.

Jesus’ Followers & The Law (vv 19-20)

Jesus begins by telling his listeners, “Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” So, what is Jesus saying? It sounds like he’s saying that Christians should be like Pharisees, who were captivated by the minutiae of the law so that they tithed even the spic and spans in their kitchen cabinets (Matthew 23:23). However, that doesn’t square with Jesus’ other teaching. It seems then, Jesus is saying that his followers should be concerned to obey and teach the fullness of God’s law as interpreted by Jesus. It’s not that we should be consumed with literal observance of every letter of the law, but that through faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, we would fulfill all of it as Jesus interpreted it, which we’ll learn more about in subsequent weeks. So, we should not dismiss God’s moral law and teach others to do so, but neither should we think we can fulfill it without faith in Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, or a clear understanding of what it means to fulfill it, which we discover in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.