

Matthew 5:17-20

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Jesus tells His disciples that He is not abolishing the law, but fulfilling what Moses and the prophets taught. However, He makes clear that professional law-keepers have insufficient righteousness to enter the kingdom of heaven.

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus further connects His teachings with the teachings of Moses and the Old Testament, here described as *the Law* and *the Prophets*. In Jesus's time, only the Old Testament had been written. The first five books were considered to be written by Moses, and much of the rest was written by prophets.

Even though Jesus's message is radically different than the system being taught by the religious leaders of that time, the *scribes and Pharisees*, He *has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets*. The *scribes and Pharisees* were the recognized religious leaders. They had created a long list of rules to follow that they taught would achieve righteousness, and Jesus isn't really speaking about any of them. So it is reasonable for Jesus to explain to His *disciples* why His teaching is so different.

Jesus did not *come to abolish* the law, but rather *to fulfill* it. Jesus is not speaking about keeping the long list of rules made by the *scribes and Pharisees*; His message is about how to *fulfill the Law*. The implication is that the approach being advocated by the *scribes and Pharisees* isn't working, and won't work to achieve righteousness. Jesus is forging a new path to *fulfill the Law and the Prophets*. The *Pharisees* were consumed with the *Law*, but Jesus likely adds *the Prophets* because they often spoke of Him (the Messiah) as the path to fulfill all righteousness.

Jesus came to *fulfill* the *Law* and *the Prophets* in three ways.

First, Jesus is the promised Messiah foretold in *the Law* and by *the Prophets* who “will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). We have already seen several instances of Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies in Matthew's gospel narrative. Here Jesus makes a general statement about how He fulfills what was prophesied of Him.

Second, Jesus perfectly kept (fulfilled) *the Law* and its *commandments*. He was blameless and without sin. Even His enemies—whether His adversaries (John 8:46); His betrayer (Matthew 27:4); His accusers (Mark 14:55-59); or His judge (Luke 23:4)—could not find fault in Him.

Third, Jesus *came to fulfill the Law* within the hearts of His disciples. Moses's *Law* told people how to live, but they were unable to do it. Jesus came not only to tell and show us how to live righteously (in harmony with Him), but He came to give us a new heart and the power of His Spirit so that we can live like He wants us to.

Romans 10:4 says, “For Christ is the end (fulfillment) of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Romans 8:4 says believers in Jesus fulfill the Law when they walk in the Spirit instead of walking in the flesh. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul sets forth an argument that the Law is our tutor, and walking by faith leads believers to grow up to be sons and heirs. Paul also states:

“For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'”
(Galatians 5:14)

Paul goes on to describe walking in the Spirit as the path to fulfill the Law. All this is consistent with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is teaching His disciples to walk by faith, following the spirit behind the Law, focusing on the inner attitude of the heart, walking in dependence on God and in service to others.

After affirming His support for *the Law* and *the Prophets*, Jesus then makes an astonishing claim with His next statement: *For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.* Jesus is saying that there is 100% certainty that everything written within *the Law* and *the Prophets* will happen. All of it. *Not the smallest letter or stroke* will go unfulfilled. The very existence of the current universe is assured until all that God has written in His scriptures has come to pass fully and completely. It is noteworthy that Jesus boldly makes this assertion on His own authority: *for truly I say to you.*

In the rabbinic tradition, a teacher’s thoughts were not greater than his authority. Rabbis would often provide lengthy rabbinic genealogies to support what they taught. “This was taught by Rabbi so-and-so who was the student of Rabbi such-and-such, who was the student of Rabbi...” and so on. But Jesus does not teach in this manner. He does not defer or appeal to a rabbinic tradition. He does not appeal to any authority higher than Himself in making this claim. And the reason He does not do so, is simple—there is no higher authority than Jesus. As God, there is no name above His name.

Throughout the Gospels many who encountered Jesus wanted to know the source of His authority (Luke 4:31-32, Mark 2:6-11, John 8:13-14, Matthew 21:23). In the minds of the Jews, there was no higher human authority than Moses because Moses saw the face of God and received God’s *Law*, which he then delivered to the nation of Israel. But Jesus was God. As John 1:17 says, “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized (literally ‘came into existence’) through Jesus Christ.” As God who made heaven and earth and wrote the Law that was given to Moses, Jesus was the source of the Law and the ultimate authority.

Therefore, Jesus did not need to teach like the scribes and Pharisees did. He could, with a straight face, say, “*I say to you.*” And He did. (Jesus uses the phrase *I say to you* no less than fourteen times in this sermon). But this likely made it no less shocking to His disciples or the crowds who heard Him teach. We will see this clearly in His disciples’ reaction when Jesus concludes His sermon, “the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority” (Matthew 7:28-29).

In order to demonstrate the importance of *the Law*, Jesus demonstrates its endurance. *Not (even) the smallest letter (literally 'iota' the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet) or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Heaven and earth will pass away first.* In other words, *the Law* is to be honored and upheld and it will remain in effect *until* it has *accomplished all* of its purposes. Jesus's remark echoes Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever." Jesus will later comment in Matthew 24:35, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." When we consider these three passages together the conclusion is that Jesus is God—the same God who delivered every letter and stroke of the Law to Moses. This make sense, since the Apostle John clearly states that Jesus is the Living Word of God (John 1:1-5).

Jesus then gives the consequences of keeping and not keeping *the Law*. Anyone who tries to nullify or rewrite even *one of the least significant commandments*, or who *teaches others* that any commandment is not important shall be called *least in the kingdom of heaven*. It is worth pointing out that Jesus does not say that *whoever annuls the commandments or teaches others to do the same* will be barred from *the kingdom of heaven*—only that they will be called *least* once they are there. *Least* in this case likely means the *least* notable or distinguished, someone who has the *least* amount of authority in *the kingdom*. This is the consequence for delegitimizing God's *Law*.

The consequence for anyone who *keeps the commandments and teaches them* is a reward. The reward is that this person *shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven*. Their greatness likely refers to their influence, authority, and distinction throughout *the kingdom*.

Jesus concludes His preliminary remarks to His disciples regarding His *kingdom* and its platforms with yet another startling statement. He tells His disciples that they *will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless their righteousness surpasses* the professional teachers and guardians of the law—the *scribes and Pharisees*. In the eyes of Jesus's disciples and their Jewish communities, it is probable that no one was considered more righteous than the *Pharisees*. No one understood the Law more than they. No one appeared to focus on keeping the Law more than they did. No one taught the Law and its applications better than the Pharisees.

When it came to *righteousness* under the Law, the *Pharisees* were generally considered cultural heroes. This can be inferred from Matthew 15:12 when the disciples inform Jesus that the Pharisees were offended at something He said. They had credibility, so you'd generally want to take their criticisms seriously. Their *righteousness* under the law was something to aspire to. This can also be seen in Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in Mathew 23. The mischief Jesus points out, such as "devouring widow's houses," would only have been possible if the *Pharisees* had great credibility among the people. The immediate reaction in everyone's mind would likely have been, "If the *Pharisees* are not righteous enough to enter *the kingdom of heaven*, then who can ever get in?"

What then did Jesus mean by this stunning statement?

The requirement Jesus was describing for entering His kingdom was not so much a matter of 'degree' or 'amount' of *righteousness* as it was a matter of 'kind' of *righteousness*. What kind of

righteousness allows a person to enter God's Kingdom? Is it the legalistic outward performance of the Law or the inward *righteousness* overflowing from the heart?

Jesus taught that it was the latter. The *righteousness* that was required to *enter the kingdom of heaven* came from the heart. It was not a showy external *righteousness* (the kind *the Pharisees* had abundantly), but an internal *righteousness* that came from loving God. This becomes even more evident as we consider the teachings that immediately follow Jesus's remark.

In the teachings that follow, Jesus describes a half-dozen or more scenarios that contrast external adherence to the Law with the inward keeping of it (Murder and Anger—Matthew 5:21-22; Making Peace with God while Resenting a Brother—Matthew 5:23-24; Adultery and Lust—Matthew 5:27-32; Public Vows and Plain Honesty—Matthew 5:34-37; Payback vs. Mercy—Matthew 5:38-47; Public Shows of Charity, Prayer, and Fasting—Matthew 6:1-21).

In every one of these examples Jesus teaches that an individual's inward obedience was at least as important as their external obedience. This distinction is often described as keeping the letter of the law vs. keeping the spirit of the law. Jesus taught that we should keep both.

The upshot of this seemingly impossible feat of *surpassing the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees* is that it is actually very doable. We are not trying to outdo them in external displays. This we will likely never achieve. But the Pharisees' inward righteousness was extremely bankrupt. Jesus scolded them "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28). *We will never enter the kingdom of heaven* if our *righteousness* does not surpass hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Biblical Text

5:17-20 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.