

Lesson 4: The Law and the Heart: Fulfillment of the Law

Lesson Theme: Emphasis on righteousness (what is morally right); compares the external law and internal attitude; murder, adultery, divorce, oaths

Text: Matthew 5:19-37

The Fulfillment of the Law

¹⁷ “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 I tell you the truth, 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.

Murder

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Adultery

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Divorce

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Oaths

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

Scripture cited/referenced by Jesus

Exodus 20:13: “You shall not murder.”

Exodus 20:14: “You shall not commit adultery.”

Deut. 24:1-4: “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

Deut 23:21-23: “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.”

Introduction

There is a lot here. A primary goal with this lesson will be to understand the relationship between the Old Law and Jesus' teaching, with reference to the specific scripture cited, and the people's relationship with the Pharisees.

The previous section of the sermon reflects themes found in the Psalms, Isaiah, and other places in the Old Testament. Listeners would have heard familiar themes in Jesus' teaching. Beginning with Matthew 5:17, Jesus teaches the fulfillment of the Old Law in ways that would appear radical to the people hearing it for the first time. Jesus turns the wisdom of the Pharisees upside down.

Matthew 5:17-20

For those in His audience looking for a wholesale rejection of Jewish teachings and a license to indulge in sin without eternal consequences, Jesus had bad news – those who teach that will be least in the kingdom. Instead, He says He has come to fulfill the Law. So what Law is he talking about? As described later in Matthew 19, when a wealthy young man asks Jesus “What must I do to gain eternal life?”, Jesus says, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.” (Quoting Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus.) “In essence, He says, “You know what the Law says...”

Jesus teases listeners with what we already know – He is the son of God. He is the one to whom the entire Old Testament is pointing. He's the one the prophets were writing about. He is the one John the Baptizer was preparing the people for. He's the one – and the only one – who offers eternal life. Second, for those who want to know and understand the heart of God and seek to please Him, Jesus tells us we already have a window into that. The Law gives us a view into what it looks like to honor God and do his will. As Paul said, following the law doesn't buy us the redemption we need and the eternal life we want. But when we follow Jesus, when we “clothe ourselves” in Him, as Paul described it, and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit, our lives are transformed. Our temptations and evil desires don't go away, but, aided by the Spirit of God, and motivated by our love for Jesus, we live holy lives in which our righteousness “surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.”

Discussion Questions

- In 20, we are told that our righteousness must surpass the Pharisees. What would listeners have understood that to mean? What is the relationship between outward actions versus inward attitudes? How is this different from legalism, which is obeying God to win His favor?
- How does Jesus understand his relationship to “the law and the prophets”? What is Jesus' attitude toward the Old Testament?
- How are we to understand these commands to obedience? Why do we obey?

Resources

Trevethan writes: "Look ahead to 7:12, where Jesus again mentions "the law and the prophets." Many think of these two verses as forming an *inclusio*, a bracketing statement for the body of the sermon. If this is so, what do they tell you about the theme of the whole sermon?"

Siburt writes: "For Matthew, the word of God fulfilled is Jesus Christ. He will enact the promises of God. He will confirm the intentions of God. He will fulfill the law of God. But he will not do it without a fight. At each step of the way Jesus is opposed by religious people who choose to live according to a different understanding of God's law" (p. 100).

Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus begins to tell His listeners just what that means that He came to fulfill the law, not abolish it.

Murder/Anger

Jesus tells His followers to watch out for the dangers inherent in emotion that often goes unchecked. Lashing out at people – those we know and those we don't – endangers our very soul, He says. Several decades later, James, the brother of Jesus, warns his readers of the danger of anger and grudges in the same way, writing:

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

A theme throughout Jesus's teachings and those of his followers is that the Law was external, the good news is internal. So, sure, it doesn't take much change of heart to avoid murder. But getting rid of malice and bitterness – and making ourselves slow to anger and quick to listen to others – takes a lot, Jesus says. But the more our hearts change, the less self-control we need.

Adultery/Sex

Sex is powerful and dangerous – which is why Jesus discusses it so early in his sermon, right after murder, anger and bitterness. And Jesus is clear that adultery, lust and sexual immorality are deathly serious. Paul tells the Corinthian church that sexual immorality is unique:

"All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body."

That's why Jesus says it's better to gouge out your eye and cut off your hand than to succumb to sexual sin. If Jesus were speaking today, he might say: "If that party will

cause you to stumble, don't go. If that book causes you to stumble, put it down. If that app causes you to stumble, delete it from your phone.”

Divorce

We can all agree this is hard teaching, especially in the context of our modern culture, which treats marriage as an arrangement of convenience that is easily dissolved and often casually entered into. But make no mistake, this was hard teaching in Jesus's day, as well. At that time, Jewish men relied on Deuteronomic Law to justify their divorces just as people today justify it. Yes, 2000 years before Jesus was speaking, writing a certificate of divorce was better than the alternative fates faced by wives who had fallen out of their husbands' favor; but Jesus says that was not the way things were meant to be. Marriage is a permanent union, He says, unless the husband or wife breaks the marriage through infidelity.

Later in Jesus's ministry, the Pharisees come back to test him by asking “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” What's remarkable about the exchange is that Jesus doesn't respond, as He typically does in cases when the religious leaders try to trap him, with cleverness that brutally exposes their duplicity. Instead He launches into a full-fledged, impassioned assault on the very notion of marriage as simply a temporary association or a legal union. Quoting Genesis 1 and 2, He doubles down on the bold teaching in his sermon on the mount and says:

“Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (Matt. 19)

Oaths

Jesus is referencing Deuteronomy 23, which was interpreted at the time as justifying multiple levels of truth – or at least sincerity. If someone wanted to intensify their statement or a commitment, they'd swear by the temple, for example, or Jerusalem itself. But the obvious point is this, when some things you say carry intensifying oaths, everything else you say has little meaning. At the same time, you cheapen God's creation, over which you have zero control.

Of course, our language often seduces us into this mindset. How often have you heard “to tell you the truth” or “I'm going to be completely honest with you”? The

truth is: Truth is truth. There are no levels, as Jesus notes. “Let your yes be yes and your no be no,” as other translations have put it, means your character should be such that when you make a commitment or make a statement, people believe it, without the intensifiers. Then we won't need to find the right object or place or person to swear by so that people actually accept our word, which is good news.

Discussion Questions

- Focus on the repetition in vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43 (you have heard/it has been said). What does this tell you about what Jesus is doing in these sayings? Who is he correcting? What errors is he correcting? How do you see these sorts of errors being repeated today? Which errors do you personally feel most liable to repeat? Why?
- Now focus on the repetition in vv. 22, 28, 32, 24, 39, 44 (but I tell you). What does this tell you about what Jesus is doing in these sayings? What alternative is he offering to the errors we looked at above?
- How is Jesus' teaching call for stricter obedience than the old law? In what ways does obedience to Jesus' teaching in vs 3-12 make obeying these teachings easier to obey?
- Under what circumstances are angry feelings (and actions) proper and righteous? When are they wrong and dangerous?
- Why does the passage on Anger precede the other teachings? In what ways is it fundamental to teachings on Adultery, Divorce, and Oaths?
- How do the teachings in vs 7-12 prepare us for the teachings on Anger, Adultery, Divorce, and Oaths? Make specific links between the beatitudes and these teachings.
 - Anger—peacemakers
 - Adultery—pure in heart, merciful
 - Divorce—pure in heart, merciful, peacemaker
 - Oaths—peacemakers, persecution

For Further Reading

Siburt, John. “Fulfilling the Law.” In David Fler and Dave Bland, eds. *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007.

Hughes, Richard. “Dare We Live the World Imagined in The Sermon on the Mount?” In David Fler and Dave Bland, eds. *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007.

Trevethan, Tom. “Studies in The Sermon on the Mount.” Web.