

Sermon 14, Kingdom Conscientiousness About the Law, Matthew 5:19-20

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Manuscript

Last week we examined the words of Jesus regarding His mission to fulfill the Old Testament, and His very strong testimony to the enduring permanence of the Old Testament. We saw that an understanding of the OT is mandatory for an understanding of who Jesus is and what He did. We saw that a deep reverence toward the OT and a consistent obedience to its commands is required of all Christians, of anyone who would be like Jesus Christ. Today we will continue looking at this theme, discovering the consequences Jesus Himself drew from the nature of the OT and His relationship to it. We will see that our status in the Kingdom of Heaven, which (as you may remember) is God's rule and reign exercised in our hearts and lives, over the church, and someday over the kingdoms of the earth — that status depends on how we treat the law. This, in turn, brings up an obvious question: Jesus, what about these people who take the law very seriously? What about the Pharisees? If anyone keeps the law, it's got to be them, right, Jesus? Well, our Lord emphatically deflates that notion. Instead, He insists that a righteousness far greater than that of the Pharisees is absolutely necessary for entrance into God's Kingdom.

That's a brief summary of this passage. Its message, in a nutshell, is that a very high degree of righteousness, or law-keeping, is mandatory for the Christian. If you claim to be a Christian, you must be good. Really good. That's Jesus' teaching here and through the rest of this Sermon on the Mount.

I. The Consequences of the OT's Permanence: Kingdom Status Depends on One's Attitude Toward the Law, v. 19

Again, the Kingdom of God is God's rule and reign. However, as in the kingdoms of the earth, so in the Kingdom of Heaven, we see different grades, different status, different gifts. There are those who are lesser in the Kingdom, and those who are greater. Jesus Christ is the greatest; the highest place in the palace is reserved for the King's Son. Dante pictured it as people being closer to or farther from the throne of God and the Lamb. I prefer to think of it as being a relationship. If you have a friend who lives in another state, and you call this friend every six months, you're not as close to him as you are to someone you live with and talk to every day. If you weren't particularly close to God on earth; if you didn't talk to Him all the time, delight in His word, seek communion with Him wherever and however you could; then what makes you think that you will suddenly be His bosom buddy in Heaven? The bottom line is that you will find lesser and greater in Heaven just as you do on earth. Inequality is the moral bugbear of our age. Everyone is afraid of endorsing inequality. It seems unfair that one person is a financial wizard, while another is hopeless with money and numbers. It seems unfair that one person can draw like Rembrandt, while another can't even make a stick figure. It seems unfair that one person has good parents who give him every advantage, while another has alcoholic, abusive parents who permanently cripple his chances for a decent life. But God isn't afraid of inequality. God apparently doesn't believe that it's wrong for some people to be better, smarter, faster, richer, more beautiful than others.

So with that out of the way, let's see what Jesus says about the criteria by which status in the Kingdom is determined.

A. Proven from the Penalty for Carelessness toward the Law, v. 19a

Because the Old Testament is enduring, the things that it commands are enduring. Whoever will break one of its commandments and teach others to do so will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, Heaven has greater and less within its borders. Greater and less is determined by how well you obeyed God. The reward for obedience is being closer to God, knowing God better; the punishment for disobedience is being least in the Kingdom — i.e., not knowing God as well as you would have known Him if you kept His commandments better.

This is a strong theme throughout Scripture. Jesus tells us to be His friends by keeping His commandments. He commands us to show our love for Him by keeping His commandments. He says that the Father loves Him because He keeps the Father's commandments. Brothers and sisters, no matter how you slice it, obedience to God is supremely important in the Christian faith!

Now, what does Jesus mean by the least of the commandments? Well, according to some rabbis, maybe the commandment not to carry off a mother bird with her young (Deut. 22:6) is the lightest of all the commandments.¹³ We might think that the lightest commandment is the

¹³ Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 292.

commandment not to be gluttonous. Surely taking that second donut is not a sin on the same scale as lying to your spouse or stealing from your parents. Or we might think that the lightest commandment is the one against desiring something wrong. You see, in the Biblical paradigm, it is not only a sin to sin; it is a sin to want to sin. Even if your will does not consent to the desire of your “baser nature,” you nonetheless are in sin just by having the desire.

Well, Jesus says that if you break one of these little commandments — if you share a little juicy tidbit of gossip, if you carry off a mother bird and her chicks, if you take the second donut when you don’t need it — then you are thereby sabotaging your walk with God. Already you are hurting your relationship with Him. You will be less in the Kingdom than someone who doesn’t do those things.

Yet Jesus goes on to say that you exacerbate your sin by teaching other people that it’s not really sin. Brothers and sisters, have you ever done this? Have you given wrong advice to someone? Have you unwittingly validated someone’s sin? I hope not. If you have, though, I’m sure your conscience bothers you about it. But sadly, many teachers are abroad in our world who openly teach that certain commands are no longer binding. The tricky part, of course, is that certain commands from the permanently valid OT *are* no longer binding. No longer do we need to circumcise our sons or abstain from shellfish. No longer is it necessary to establish cities of refuge or keep the year of Jubilee.

What then? Do we say, “Well, it’s impossible to know what’s binding?” Not at all. The word of God is clear about what commands are still binding. If you read it attentively, and study it as an interconnected whole, it is easy to determine what commands are still binding. One popular approach is to say “Well, the Bible contains a lot of commands. We’re going to proceed on the assumption that whatever the Old Testament said is no longer binding unless it’s repeated in the New Testament.” And of course, in this way these people find 9 of the 10 commandments, plus commands to work and marry and give money to God’s work and so on. Now, following the commands of the New Testament is not bad. I highly applaud it. But I want to ask you: does that sound like what Jesus is teaching here? Based on these three verses, Matthew 5:17-19, would you think that Jesus is saying, “Truly I say to you, not one serif or apostrophe will pass from the Old Testament, but all of its commands are non-binding until proven otherwise”? Can you really harmonize the two halves of that statement with each other? When Jesus says that the OT endures as long as heaven and earth, do you think He was trying to imply that its statements are obsolete from A.D. 30 onward? Again, while I heartily applaud obeying all the commands of the New Testament, I just don’t see any Biblical reason to say that the OT is guilty until proven innocent, invalid until proven valid, obsolete until proven relevant. In fact, Jesus says just the opposite, as you heard last Sunday and as you can see for yourself in the previous verses.

And thus, rather than saying that the only binding laws in the Bible are the ones repeated in the New Testament, it makes a whole lot more sense to me to assume that everything in the OT is valid until proven otherwise. Now, this gets us into the distinction between moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws, which I think is a valid distinction and helpful for interpreting the

Old Testament. We don't have time in this message to cover all of that in detail. We just want to say that according to Jesus' teaching here, any teacher that tells you a law is no longer binding needs to be able to show you where God changed His mind. We know that God has changed His mind on the entire Mosaic administration of worship. He conclusively showed that when He sent the Romans to demolish the Temple and when He had Paul tell us that circumcision is not mandatory. So we know that the Mosaic kind of worship is abrogated, because its purpose has been met. It existed to provide access to God; now we have a better access to God through a greater High Priest. But everything else in the OT, every law that's not ceremonial, has a presumption attached to it that it's still binding.

If someone teaches otherwise, then this text says that he is disagreeing with Jesus. If someone tells you that you don't need to keep the Sabbath day, or that you don't need to teach God's law to children, or that you don't need to place the seal of God's covenant on your children, then that person is directly challenging Jesus' words here. That person is departing from the truth, and he is making himself least in the kingdom of heaven.

Don't break the law. Don't teach others to break the law. It destroys your fellowship with God.

B. Proven from the Reward for Conscientiousness about the Law, v. 19b

But second, Jesus promises a great reward for the one who obeys and teaches the commandments. He will be called great in the Kingdom. Now, if conscientiousness about the law earns you status in the Kingdom, then surely how you treat the law determines your status in the kingdom!

Again, the connection here is that keeping the commandments shows you love God. It brings you closer to Him to obey Him. Your heart is more in tune with His when you keep His commandments. You will be closer to Him in the life to come if you have been conscientious about His law in this life.

Furthermore, you are required to teach others this. That doesn't mean that you call out everyone you see breaking God's law, but certainly confrontation will be necessary sometimes. If someone asks to you participate with him in something unlawful, you will have to say not only that you can't do that, but explain why you can't do it. Above all, Jesus is saying that you must not countenance others in their sins. If someone tells you, "I just can't move out from living with my girlfriend," you are tacitly endorsing that sin by saying, "Man, I understand. Sometimes you just can't afford to do the right thing." If someone tells you, "I just have to work on Sundays. I can't afford to lose my job," and you say, "Yeah, I hear you. Better keep that job" then you are endorsing their sin. You are the person Jesus is describing, and your reward in the Kingdom is being lessened. That is, you are hurting your capacity to know God!

II. Great Righteousness Is Mandatory for Kingdom Membership, v. 20

But Jesus does not only describe the consequences of the OT's continuing validity; He also says that great righteousness is mandatory for Kingdom Membership. Just as the previous verse emphasized the necessity of obeying Jesus by obeying the commands of the Old Testament, so

this verse emphasizes the necessity of obeying Jesus in general. Notice that the declaration here is a declaration made by Jesus Himself. He doesn't appeal to anyone else or use anyone else's authority to back Him up. This verse is a declaration made by Jesus on His own authority.

A. The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

What was the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees? Well, our picture of them is of very wicked people, hopelessly nasty hypocrites. Our picture of them is formed from the NT, and it is certainly accurate. But we must remember that the way Jesus saw the Pharisees is not the way their contemporaries saw them. Of all the major parties in Judaism in that day, they were the largest and the most orthodox. They were blameless, touching the righteousness that is in the law, as Paul says. You would never see a Pharisee committing adultery, hear him using a curse word, or find out that he had stolen something. He was in synagogue every Sabbath, and he looked very pious and acted very righteous. In terms of external conformity to the law, these scribes and Pharisees likely put us to shame. They knew the law and they carefully guarded it so that they would not break it. They were the religious and moral conservatives; they were the ones who were dedicated to keeping the law. They were professionals at being righteous. To Joe Israelite, a Pharisee was the acme of religiosity. If he couldn't go to heaven, nobody could! A scribe was the same thing; he was paid to copy Scripture. Surely he was on his way to heaven!

B. Pharisaical Righteousness Insufficient for Salvation

But Jesus says that great as the Pharisees' performance was, it was totally insufficient. They were very obedient to the law as they saw it, in their outward life. They weren't drunkards, orgiasts, thieves, or liars. But because their righteousness was one of external conformity rather than heart reality, they didn't measure up. Because they were more interested in impressing the people around them than they were in actually walking with God, they were denounced by Jesus. Ultimately, they missed the point. Why does the law exist? So that we can commune with God. So that we can know Him personally and walk with Him. The law is a means of knowing God, not a substitute for knowing God. Maybe you could call the Pharisees "nomolaters," law-worshippers. They missed the point. Of course, the law told them to walk with God. But they missed that part; they used it to make themselves look good. They pursued it for some purpose other than knowing God — maybe to buy His favor, maybe to get men's admiration, maybe to feel good inside, maybe to get their conscience off their back. It doesn't really matter; because they had missed the point, their law-keeping was all wrong.

Plus, even if they had done everything the law required, it still couldn't save them. They needed forgiveness as well as obedience. They might have used the law lawfully, and tried to make it a means of communion with God — but without forgiveness of their pre-existing sins, it was of no avail.

Brothers and sisters, you need to get your focus away from the 1st-century Jewish sect that sought to be righteous by being good. Instead, you need to think about the same phenomenon in today's world. Do you seek to impress God with your good works? Like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son, do you use your good works as a way of *avoiding*

God? You see, if you're good, you don't have to endure the pain of confessing your sins. You don't have to have the misery of admitting that you can't do it on your own. You don't have to be a failure in everyone's eyes, including your own.

This temptation affects us all. We all want to be working our way to heaven. But Jesus says something different. He says the Pharisees had done the utmost in that line that could possibly be done, yet it was nowhere near enough. Our hope lies in a different quarter.

C. The Exceeding Righteousness of the Christian

1. Perfect Righteousness Is Necessary for Salvation

You see, to be saved you must have a perfect righteousness. The good news of Christianity is not that God has lowered the standard, but rather that God in Christ has *met the standard*, and that He offers to you the same privilege of meeting the standard in the person of your Head. The good news is that God has done what the law could not do for sinners. God has satisfied the righteous requirement of the law, and He offers the status of "Child of God" to whoever is united to Christ by faith. The good news is not that God allows you to be wicked and still go to heaven; no, the good news is that you can go to heaven on someone else's righteousness, credited to you.

2. Justification: Righteousness as Prerequisite

We've talked about prerequisites and postrequisites. Well, we are right to sense that God cannot save someone who's wicked. That's why He supplies you the righteousness of Jesus Christ before you ever get in the door. You become a Christian by having His righteousness given to you. You have a perfect righteousness, a righteousness greater than any Pharisee ever had, the instant that God in His heavenly ledger credits the righteousness of Christ to your account. God punished sin in the flesh of Christ, who took the punishment you deserved. That's what Jesus is talking about when you consider the Kingdom of Heaven as the state of being right with God, as the state of submitting to God. You must have a perfect righteousness before you can enter the Kingdom. You must be born again before you can even see the Kingdom.

3. Sanctification: Righteousness as Postrequisite

But if you take the Kingdom of Heaven as a reference to Heaven itself, then the reference here is to the righteousness of sanctification. Think about it this way: If Jesus had said, "Your righteousness must be *other than* that of the scribes and Pharisees," He would have been talking strictly about the righteousness of justification. But since He says it must be greater, we can assume that in some sense it is a righteousness of the same kind — viz., a righteousness achieved by our personal obedience to God. This kind of righteousness is mandatory for salvation too. You must do good works if you have been saved! You must be obeying God's law better and better, by His grace. Are you more holy than you were five years ago, or ten years ago? If not, that's a problem. That's a huge problem. That is *prima facie* evidence that you have never entered the Kingdom of Heaven. That is a sign that you have not submitted to Christ.

You must obey the law of God. That's all there is to it.

III. Conclusion: The Prerequisite and the Postrequisite Are both Requisite!

In other words, both justification and sanctification are mandatory. You must have your sins forgiven by God, and you must be getting holier.

A. Do You Possess this Righteousness?

The most basic question that I want to leave you with this morning is this: do you possess this righteousness? Are you conscientious about the law to the point where you can honestly say that you are more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees? Remember how Paul said that when he was a Pharisee, he was blameless with regard to the law. If someone followed you around for 24 hours, would they see you do anything that outwardly breaks the law of God? Would they see you yell at your kids, waste company time surfing the web, let your eyes linger on that passing girl a little too long, or slip a candy bar into your pocket at Wal-mart? If someone would see you doing these things, or others like them, you aren't even at the level the Pharisees were at. Your righteousness doesn't even equal that of the scribes and Pharisees. But you must surpass it. You must have the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, and you must have an actual holiness of your own whereby you obey the law of God, personally, because it is the law of God!

B. What's Your Attitude Toward the Law of God?

What's your attitude toward the law? Do you wish you could break it and tell others to break it? Do you disagree with God's commands? Do you think that you are more righteous, holy, kind and merciful than God Himself? Do you agree with the law, or disagree with it? Do you love it, or do you regard it as a burden?

C. What About when you Don't Measure up?

Well, this question is a live question for me as well as you. What do you do when you do something so bad even a Pharisee wouldn't do it? Do you give up? No! God has done what the law could not do. God has provided a way of forgiveness and reconciliation. Yes, law-keeping is still mandatory. It will always be mandatory, even in heaven. But for those who break the law, which is all of us, God has provided a way of forgiveness. Your righteousness is a gift from God. He made you righteous, and He will keep you righteous. If you believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, His righteousness is credited to you. Already you are holier than the Pharisees. So live like it! Act like it! Obey like it! And I promise — Jesus promises — that you will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you want that greatness? Then pursue it by faith. Seek it by trusting Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. Seek it by trusting Jesus Christ for strength to obey and seek it by trusting Him for the reward of greatness in the Kingdom. By His Spirit, armed with His word, fed by His sacrament, your righteousness can and will exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Salvation isn't a reward for those who are good; no, being good is the privilege of those whom God has saved. If you're saved today, then use that privilege: be good, for His glory. Amen.