

"Introduction to Kingdom Living"

Matthew 5:17-20

November 18, 2001

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Jesus said, in Matthew 5:20, "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."

Unless you have no regard for Jesus, you have to admit that is a very significant statement!

Hear it again carefully, "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."

What do you make of that statement – what do you understand Jesus to be saying?

Immediately after that statement listen to what Jesus says.

Matthew 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said..., 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

Matthew 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And four more times, in chapter 5, Jesus illustrates his point by taking what the people had heard was God's law and raising the standard.

Now hear his introductory words again:

Matthew 5:20 "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."

What does Jesus mean?

Let me suggest some possibilities:

1. Unless you are better than the Pharisees you won't go to heaven.

2. Unless you are covered by Jesus' goodness you won't go to heaven.

Both of these answers are partially correct but woefully insufficient!

Before looking at this issue more closely, I want to give some context for Jesus' remark.

Jesus Sermon on the Mount starts in Matthew 5:3-10 with what we call the "beatitudes", the blessings, the congratulations, Jesus pronounces on these people.

Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It is the good news of the kingdom – God has come to you as you are in your helpless, hopeless condition.

This is a very important truth: simply by embracing the person Jesus, you now belong to the kingdom of heaven.

The sermon continues in verses 11-16 with two results of being part of the kingdom – persecution and witness.

Your new relationship with Jesus will result in some people hating you but that new relationship is at the same time the very best demonstration of what is possible for others.

You are salt and light to those around you.

In the first two sermons in this series I have attempted to establish that the "good news" Jesus brought was that we can have a relationship with God through him.

In fact when we recognize our own need and inability, and we accept Jesus in his sufficiency, we are brought into relationship with Jesus by his grace not by anything we have done.

But beginning in verse 17 Jesus anticipates the same misunderstanding that Paul echoes in his letters to the Romans and the Ephesians.

We might call it the problem of grace.

If God brings us into his kingdom by grace and not based on what we do, won't that give people license to break God's laws and say obedience doesn't matter?

So Jesus says in Matthew 5:17

"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.

Referring to the "Law or the Prophets" was the common way to refer to the entire OT Scriptures.

Another way was to simple refer to it as the "Law".

In other words Jesus says, don't misunderstand – I didn't come to set aside God's commands and prophecies but to fulfill them.

In this, Jesus addresses two issues:

1. Grace doesn't mean obedience doesn't matter.

The people listening to Jesus that day had long lived under a religious system that said they had to measure up to belong to God.

Very much like many today, they thought that if they did what God commanded and didn't do what he forbid, they would be judged worthy of the kingdom of heaven.

But they knew full well they couldn't live up to the standard and so they lived in fear of God and especially what might happen at death.

Then Jesus came powerfully demonstrating that he was from God.

And he even broke some of the Pharisees laws while proclaiming that a relationship with God was made available through him.

Does accepting Jesus mean we no longer have to obey the law?

Does grace mean obedience is nice but not essential?

No, grace doesn't mean obedience doesn't matter.

And that point Jesus is going to emphasize in spades in the coming verses.

2. But there is a second point Jesus makes in this 17th verse:
 Matthew 5:17 "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.

Jesus came to fulfill the Scriptures.

What does he mean?

We are tempted to treat the OT as if it is simply a rather random collection of history, poems, obscure prophecies, elaborate religious rituals, and hundreds of dos and don'ts.

But God says that the OT Scriptures all point to Jesus.

- The history of the people of Israel is a picture of the condition of all God's people: sin, captivity and then deliverance by God's grace.
- The sacrifices of the OT and the way they were offered all point to Jesus' final sacrifice of himself for us.
- The ceremonies of Passover and Pentecost point to Jesus.
- The prophecies find their fulfillment in Jesus and his kingdom.
- And all the righteous demands of the law were met in Jesus – he, and he alone, lived the law perfectly.

Here is the way Luke says it:

Luke 24:27 "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

One of the disciples said it this way:

John 1:45 "Philip found Nathaniel and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth..."

Everything about the sacrifices, the ceremonies, the holy days, the prophecies and even the history of the people of Israel pointed toward a Messiah.

Jesus said rightly that he is the fulfillment of all it presaged.

For over 2000 years God was preparing his people for the coming of the kingdom of heaven and in Jesus, it comes.

And John said, John 1:12 "to all who received him...he gave the right to become children of God."

Or as Paul put it, Colossians 1:13 “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves...”

2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

So two things Jesus means:

1. Grace doesn't mean obedience doesn't matter.
2. And that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament pointed toward the kingdom and Jesus brings it in.

This is a very good time to make certain we understand what Jesus means by the “kingdom of heaven”.

Jesus does not simply mean the place where you go when you die.

In Webster's dictionary “kingdom” is defined as a place over which a king rules – e.g. “The United Kingdom”

It is also defined as the people over which a king rules.

But it is also defined as the position or rank or power of a king.

Or as I would say it, “The king's reign and authority.”

In Daniel 5:26 we read of King Belshazzar, “God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.”

Obviously the geography didn't cease to exist and the people didn't all die.

What changed was that Belshazzar's authority, his reign, was ended and given to another king.

Belshazzars's kingdom ended.

So the “Kingdom of heaven” is not first of all a place but is God's authority, his right to rule.

In Mark 10:15 Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

What is he asking us to receive? Heaven?

No, he is asking us to receive God's rule and authority in our lives.

In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says, "Seek first his (God's) kingdom."

Are we being asked to seek heaven?

No, we are being asked to desire God's sovereign rule in our lives.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," are we asking for heaven to come?

No. As the prayer goes on, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

We see that his kingdom is his rule, his authority, as sovereign king.

So when Jesus speaks of the "kingdom", the "kingdom of heaven", or the "Kingdom of God" he is speaking of God's authority and rule.

So when he says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" he is saying that by God's grace they are brought under the sovereign authority and loving protection of God.

Here's another way of understanding it:

The Bible refers to "this age" and "the age to come".

We understand "this age" to mean the one in which we presently live and "the age to come" as the one ushered in when Jesus comes again.

We also think of "this age" as being ruled by sin and death (the kingdom of this world) and "the age to come" as being ruled by God – the "kingdom of heaven".

But what Jesus came announcing was the good news that God's kingdom has reached back into this age.

Jesus said the "kingdom of heaven is near" not meaning near in time, but near in availability – it is right here available to us in Jesus.

If we are in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of God is in us, it means that we are in God's loving presence and under his sovereign rule now.

It is true that a day is coming, at the return of Jesus, when God's kingdom will reign in all places and over all people but now he has reached down to us and offered his presence and rule to those who will receive Jesus.

That is why for the Apostle Paul, death had lost its sting.

Since we are already in the kingdom of God, death simply means a change of location – from the presence of God here to the presence of God in heaven.

Now what has all that to do with the law?

God's kingdom is God's sovereign rule, God's authority.

To ask if God reigns in your life is to ask if God is boss.

Jesus is saying, I didn't come to abolish God's rule, God's law, I came to fulfill it.

In fact, in verse 18 he says in essence, I want you to understand that the Law is absolutely trustworthy – everything about it, from the “smallest letter” to the “least stroke of a pen,” will be accomplished.

Everything it foreshadows or points toward will be accomplished.

Then lest they miss his point about how important God's word and commandments are, he again in verse 19 says,

Matthew 5:19 “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.

It seems rather evident that the “commandments” to which Jesus is referring are those in the Old Testament.

Those who are now in the “kingdom” must understand that the King's standards have not been relaxed.

Jesus is the author of the OT (Jesus' Bible) and He is the fulfillment of it.

He is the King of the Kingdom.

Just as you can't have the kingdom without the king, so you can't have the king without his rule and authority, his laws.

Here's the way the Apostle John said it:

1 John 2:3-6 "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."

Now if you have been following all this you might think I have completely contradicted myself.

I began by saying that a relationship with God was available by grace alone and I've ended by saying we have to obey the King's commands.

I actually started the sermon with verse 20 where I asked what Jesus means when he says, "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."

I think we are now ready for an answer.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law (the scribes) were the good guys in Israel.

They were the best of the best.

Everyone looked up to the Pharisees as the truly spiritual ones.

Surely if God was going to accept anyone it would be the Pharisees who so meticulously lived by the law.

But Jesus says that you won't even **become** part of the kingdom of heaven)and remember "kingdom of heaven" means God's presence and rule in your life here and now) -

you won't even become a Christian, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees.

But look at the King's interpretation of the Law in what follows in this chapter.

It is not enough that we don't commit adultery, we aren't even supposed to lust.

It is not enough that we don't murder, we aren't even supposed to hate.

Jesus says the righteousness of the kingdom is higher than even what the Pharisees practiced.

In these words Jesus lays claim not only to our actions but even to our thoughts and motives.

These serious, severe, demands of the law of God cut down to the bone of my being – it exposes my innermost thoughts for the evil they are.

When I see the depth of what God intended by his law, I see myself as further from him, less capable of ever measuring up.

And we think to ourselves, "If the Pharisees couldn't make it by keeping a lower standard, I have no chance of making it with the higher standard Jesus sets."

But understand it this way, our righteousness must surpass the Pharisee's righteousness not in degree but in kind.

It is not that we must get a higher score on a law-keeping test but that we must have a different kind of righteousness.

The Pharisee's righteousness was an outward conformity to a manipulated standard.

But Jesus calls for an inward change of heart.

Righteousness doesn't start with effort or keeping laws.

Righteousness starts with faith.

Paul wrote in Romans 3:21 “But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify.”

The Old Testament, that great book of the law, says we don’t start with effort or keeping the law, we start with faith.

Genesis 15:6 “Abram believed the LORD (had faith), and he (God) credited it to him as righteousness.”

By trusting in Jesus, we are granted his righteousness.

And only by having Jesus’ righteousness imputed to us can we have a right relationship with a holy God.

But that is exactly what the King of the Kingdom does, he grants us his righteousness.

By faith then, our newly acquired righteousness (the righteousness of Jesus) far surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees.

By reiterating the high standard of the law Jesus adequately demonstrates how wholly incapable anyone is to keep it on his/her own.

The law drives us to grace – our only hope.

But if we go back to verse 19 we see **that is not all** Jesus means when he sets forth the law in the following verses.

Jesus means for us live it.

Matthew 5:19 “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.”

It is not just a matter of trusting Jesus and having his righteousness and then whether we ever obey him is nice but not essential.

As I said earlier, there is no kingdom without a King and there is no King without rule and authority.

To be part of the kingdom of heaven is to be in the loving presence and under the sovereign rule of the King.

So what Jesus does with the law is two things:

1. He drives us to grace.

2. And then he shows us the awesome possibilities of kingdom living.

In Jeremiah 31:31 we read, "after that time," declares the LORD.
"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

And in Ezekiel 36:27 God said this change and the power to obey would happen by his Spirit.

Ezekiel 36:27 "And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

Being made righteous by God's Spirit, it is now possible for Kingdom people to live in a whole new way – a kingdom lifestyle.

That is what the rest of the Sermon on the Mount will do – it will show us the awesome possibilities of kingdom living.

We must never pit grace against obedience to the law.

But we must understand the distinction.

Obedience doesn't earn grace.

Grace empowers obedience.

Yes, Jesus expects his kingdom people to live kingdom lifestyles.

And it is possible by his grace.

Our great propensity is to lower the standard of the law so that the most disciplined or self-righteous can think they measure up to it.

And then those same people keep shouting that law to everyone else thinking they can threaten people into obedience.

We fear that if we don't enforce law-keeping, everyone will slip away into lawlessness.

And we can at least for a while threaten and cajole people into outward conformity to giving, serving, evangelism, attendance in worship, sexual abstinence outside of marriage, not divorcing, etc.

But no amount of threat can enforce an inner conformity of the heart with the real standards of God's law for kingdom living.

Law won't motivate and Law won't empower

A real change happens only by grace and in response to grace.

When the law does its job properly, it shows us how desperate we truly are.

It shows me that by my own actions, words and motives, I stand condemned before a holy God.

And it shows me a standard of holiness that I can never hope to attain on my own.

It is only when I know how desperate I am that I am willing to cry out to a Savior.

And the Savior is the very same King who made the laws.

Luther said God is at first our accuser and then he is our defender.

I may at first look at my own interpretation of the law and try to convince myself that I'm not all that bad.

But then Jesus accuses me by his accurate interpretation of his law.

When God finally overcomes me, convincing me that I am as bad as he says I am, then in grace he defends me saying he will not let my actions, words and motives stand between us. (paraphrased from Thielicke)

The law shows me how wounded, sin-sick and desperate I truly am.

But I cannot love or obey by being commanded to love or obey.

“I can only give my whole heart when another whole heart gives itself to me. I can only love if love is shown to me. And this is precisely the miracle that occurs when I stand before Jesus Christ. For there I see the Father’s heart, the heart that tore itself away from that which it most loved, the only begotten son; the heart that bled for my sake; the heart that beats for a man who stands in the lowest place and dares not even to lift his eyes. And that man is me. Now I can love the One who suddenly stands beside me in the lowest place, instead of remaining in the glory of heaven.

“What the thunders of Sinai (the law) could not accomplish – the liberating of my heart to make it free to love, to be a child, and to feel at home in my Father’s house – this is accomplished by the One who comes to me as my brother.” (Thielicke 48)

The King's law shows me how much I need His grace
and His grace shows me how much I want to obey the King's law.