

Jesus, the Law and the Christian

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[0 : 00] Thanks Fiona, good evening everyone. Some of you will know that I used to quite often do talks on pensions and I want you to imagine to begin with that you've had the great privilege of coming along to hear me and as I start up you strangely find your mind wandering and on to all sorts of other things and within a few seconds you're having a really nice snooze.

Halfway through my talk you wake up and you just share one sentence and what I say is I'm definitely not telling you that government pension policy has failed. And then you doze off again and hear nothing more.

With just that one sentence you could deduce two things. One was that I sound to people as I thought the government really messed up on pensions and the other is that that wasn't really what I meant you to take away from it.

It's a little story but it might help us to understand and put into context what I think is on first sight quite an obscure and difficult passage within the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus is essentially saying two things. He's saying you might think it might look as if I've said that I've come to abolish the law and the Old Testament.

[1 : 11] He's also saying that is definitely not what I'm doing. In fact he's very emphatic about it. Start at verse 17 he says do not think that I have come. And then verse 18 truly I tell you truly I tell you is a kind of favorite phrase of Jesus when there's something he particularly wanted to emphasize and the authorized version would be verily I say unto you.

It's something that comes up again and again in the Gospels and it's when the Lord particularly wants to emphasize something and say this is important. So the Lord in this passage is trying to correct a possible misapprehension that he is trying to do away with the Old Testament and say it's irrelevant and he's brought something new and different and is saying that is definitely not the case. Why would he be saying that? Well when the Lord Jesus came and indeed before him through John the Baptist the message was of the kingdom of heaven. John said repent the kingdom of heaven is near.

Jesus took that up and he taught about the kingdom. And it was very different teaching from what the people would have got from the teachers of the law, the scribes and so on.

They would be looking at the Old Testament and trying to explain that and how they interpreted it. But this teaching about a kingdom and a kingdom which had very different values and priorities from those the people had been taught, that seemed something new and different.

[2 : 36] And Jesus is saying right up front here, it's not new. It is actually the proper fulfillment and interpretation of the Old Testament. That will become particularly important as we go through the following verses when Jesus is saying you've heard this, the teachers of law have told you this, but here's what I say to you.

It wasn't that in what he said he was trying to replace anything that had gone before, rather he was explaining, expanding on it and bringing out its full meaning. So although this seems a slightly obscure passage, it actually is a very important one both in the Constance of the Sermon and the Mount and in Matthew's Gospel as a whole.

And actually quite important to us as well, because it does two things for us. One is it helps us to understand what the relevance of the Old Testament is to us today and what our attitude should be towards the Old Testament.

And the other is it helps us to understand what it is that God wants from us if we are to be considered righteous in the way we live. Now obviously we have no righteousness of our own. Our righteousness comes through the Lord Jesus and through his sacrifice for us.

But we are called to live holy and righteous lives having accepted the Lord. What does that mean in practice? So the passage divides quite neatly into two sections. Verses 17 and 18 are about Jesus and the law.

[3 : 56] And verses 19 and 20 are about the Christian and the law. Hence the title that was given to it, Jesus, the law and the Christian. So let's just go through the four verses and briefly see what they have to tell us.

So verse 17 is about Jesus fulfilling the law. Jesus says, Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. First thing we have to understand in this verse is what does Jesus mean by the law and the prophets. And quite simply, he means the Old Testament.

The Old Testament includes the law and the prophets, also historical books and wisdom books. But the law and the prophets is a shorthand for the whole of the Old Testament. So Jesus is saying, I have not come to do away with the Old Testament.

I have not come to do away with the Bible that the Jews of that time had. Rather, I have come to fulfill the Old Testament. So the next question then is what does Jesus mean when he says, I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets.

[5 : 04] And there are a number of nuances in that. I don't think I will bring out everything here, but just to give you an idea of what Jesus is thinking about. So the first way in which Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets was in his obedience to the law.

The law was given to Moses. It was an extremely high standard that God was setting for his people. And no one from Moses to the day of the Lord Jesus had been able to meet that standard.

Some had tried very hard. Some hadn't tried very hard at all. But no one had been able to match the standards that were set down in the law. But when Jesus came as the sinless son of God, he was able in his fullness to obey every aspect of the law.

There was no sin in him. There was nothing in him that went against God's law. And so Jesus fulfilled the law by obeying it. And in doing so, he gives the example to us of how we should live, of how we should obey the law.

And of course, in his teaching, he helps us to understand what the law is, what it means, and how we should seek to obey it. So Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets first by obeying the law.

[6 : 21] He then fulfilled them because as we look at the life of Jesus, again and again, we see the prophecies of the Old Testament being realized in practice.

Matthew is particularly good at identifying situations where the Lord takes an action or something happens to him or he says something. And Matthew would say this fulfills what was written in the prophets.

The Lord Jesus is many, many times looked forward to explicitly in the Old Testament. And the New Testament writer can look back and they can say, when this happened in the life of the Lord Jesus, when he did this or when he said this, that was a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. So if we filled the prophecies in part by these very explicit things which are prophesied, they came about when the Lord Jesus was on the earth. But there's a third and I think a fuller meaning to when it says that the Lord Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets.

A lot of the Old Testament in context is quite difficult to understand how it fits into the big picture. The prophets, for instance, what we said was relevant in their time and in their culture, and they had very strong messages to give to the people as the enforcers of the law and to help them to understand what it was that God was saying to them.

[7 : 50] But there were obscure bits in the prophets that the prophets themselves didn't really understand what they were saying. The people certainly didn't. They had been given by God's Spirit as a message which would look forward to the Lord Jesus.

It was not an explicit prophecy, but something that would be fulfilled and brought out to a complete understanding when the Lord Jesus came. And as we read the Old Testament today, we could read it as the Jews did and see it as their book of laws and of history and of the prophets, and there's value in that.

But how much more value there is that we can read the Old Testament and we can see how it points forward to the Lord Jesus and how it has given its full meaning by who the Lord Jesus is and what he came to do.

The whole Bible points towards the Lord Jesus, and although it's not explicit often, in the Old Testament. We, looking through the lens of the New Testament and understanding what the Lord has done and who he is, we can see that passages in the Old Testament, the full meaning is brought out as we see the Lord Jesus.

He fulfills the law and the prophets by giving full meaning to something that only had partial meaning before he came. There was meaning there that people who read it could understand and could benefit from it, but the full meaning comes out through the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 19] So Jesus says, this is not something different, something new that I'm bringing to you. This is actually the fulfillment of what the Old Testament was all about.

What you've learned from the scribes and the teachers of the law, that may have some value for you, but actually it is only in me that the Old Testament is fully fulfilled, that you can fully understand God's plan of salvation for mankind.

Jesus says, I've not come to abolish the law or the prophets, I've come to fulfill them. So we move on to verse 18, and I've called this Jesus and the law permanent.

So Jesus says, truly I tell you, 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.

So let's start with the same question as we asked before, what is the law? It's not the law and the prophets now, Jesus just says the law. Now I might be using that as shorthand rather than say the law and prophets again, but I think probably not.

[10 : 27] So what did he mean by the law? So the people who he was speaking to would have some understanding of what they thought he meant by the law. They had the teachers of the law who would explain to them in great detail what the law was and how they should obey it.

And for all the commands in the Old Testament, there were lots of extra commands that would have said, this is how you have to obey the commands God has given you. So commands on the Sabbath day, for instance.

The principle is stated in the Old Testament, the commandments, that you're not to work on the Sabbath day. And then there were all sorts of detailed rules and regulations built up over centuries, which said, well, here's what it means to work and not to work on the Sabbath day.

And for the people who are listening to Jesus, when he talked about the law, they might instinctively think he meant the law as explained to them by the teachers of the law.

And that very definitely isn't what Jesus is saying, because you're going to make that very clear in the following verses that we'll be looking at next week. He would say, you've heard this, and that was the interpretation of the commandment you thought you had, but here is what it really means, and here is how you have to go beyond what the command was.

[11 : 48] So it's not the law as set out in Jesus' day by the teachers of the law. Two things I think it could be, and you could argue for both. One is that the law is the books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, which contain the law that God gave to Israel, the law that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai on the tablets of stone, and then the very detailed regulations that were laid out for the people of Israel to obey.

Regulations about sacrifices, regulations about the tabernacle, regulations about clothing even, all sorts of things that God passed on to this, saying, if you are treating me as your God, if you are my holy people, these are the things that I expect you to do and to obey.

Or the Lord might be thinking very specifically of what we call the Ten Commandments, the kind of heart of the law in the Old Testament. It might be thinking particularly of these moral precepts that God has given, some to our relationship with God, some to our relationship with each other, and thinking about how important they are.

It probably doesn't matter too much which of the two it is. What does matter is that Jesus says, they still stand and they're not going away.

Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not any stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law. There's the smallest letter.

[13 : 15] In Hebrew it's called, I believe, Yod. I'm not a Hebrew scholar. I believe it's called Yod. It's just a wee squiggle. And the stroke of the pen, the stroke of the pen, is the wee bit I've circled there. It's what we might call a serif in English.

You know, you get serif texts like Time of New Romans that have wee twiddles at the end of letters. Jesus is saying, the smallest of these will not disappear from the law.

Now that might create a problem for us. We were looking last few weeks, a few weeks ago in Romans, and in Romans Paul tells us, you've died to the law. So the law no longer has a hold over us.

But here's Jesus saying, the law is permanent. It's going to be there until heaven and earth disappear. And how can we then reconcile the two?

Well, I don't think there's any contradiction at all between Jesus and Paul. So Jesus is not saying here that for every generation to come, we will have to make the sacrifices that were prescribed for Moses, and we will have to obey the Old Testament law to the letter and effectively continue to live as if we were Jews.

[14 : 30] I don't believe that that is what he's saying. But he is saying the law will still have relevance to us. It is still there. The moral precepts haven't gone away.

The Ten Commandments are almost all repeated in the New Testament as being principles that Christians should obey. And it also will continue to be helpful to us in understanding the holiness of our God and understanding to the greatness of the Lord Jesus as we see things fulfilled in him. So three things I think we can take from it. One is that every letter matters. Now Jesus here, I think, is very clearly presenting to us that the Old Testament scripture, as it was given, was very literally God's word.

And every word was inspired by God. It's not just that there's truth in it. It's not just even that the whole thing is true. It's actually every word. Indeed, Jesus says every letter is the word of God, and it is there forever.

We must hold as Christians to the truth that the Bible is God's word. It's inherent, and it has all that we need for living for God.

[15 : 47] It is then still relevant. It's relevant in some ways because some of the moral precepts that are there still apply to us today. It's relevant also, as I said, because it teaches us about our God, and it teaches us about our salvation through Jesus.

But it does need to be viewed in the light of what Jesus has done. We're not looking through the law, through the books of Moses, for instance, and looking for things that we should do in terms of winning favor with God and making sacrifices and so on.

One sacrifice has now been made forever in the Lord Jesus, and that is all that is needed. The Old Testament sacrifices have been superseded. So that's what the Lord Jesus means when he says at the end of the verse, until everything is accomplished.

The Lord Jesus has accomplished the requirements of the law. So in the sense that Paul says, we are dead to the law, we're not bound to it, we're not restricted by it, but it is still there, and it is still important for us.

The question then arises, and we're going to look at it in our groups in a few minutes, how should we look at the Old Testament? Should we look at this as something that is of historic interest, but actually we don't pay that much attention to it?

[17 : 04] Or do we treat it as something that's really important, and the Word of God, and almost give it the same priority in our teaching and our study as the New Testament? I'll explain the question in a few minutes.

Let's move on though, and think about the Christian and the law. Very briefly on verse 19, the Lord Jesus talking about greatness in the kingdom.

And what he says quite simply, he's talking to people who are his followers, so nowadays he's talking to Christians, and he's saying one of the tests of greatness for you is how you treat God's Word, and in particular how you treat the Old Testament.

If you say, no, this is old hat, it's irrelevant stuff, all we need is Jesus, let's just focus on the New Testament and Paul's epistles, Jesus said, well then, you're the least in the kingdom of heaven. You're not really grasping what God has for you, and if you teach that, then you're misleading others as well. Rather, he says, we should treat the Old Testament with the same reverence that we treat the New Testament and the same desire to learn from it.

[18 : 17] And then verse 20 talks about righteousness. Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now notice there's a difference between verse 19 and verse 20. Verse 19, the Lord Jesus is talking to people who are in the kingdom. He's talking, if you like, to Christians. Verse 20, he's talking about potentially people not being in the kingdom.

He's referring particularly to the Pharisees and teachers of the law and saying, actually, these aren't part of the kingdom of God because of their actions and because of their attitudes.

So how can it be that our righteousness can surpass the righteousness of Pharisees and teachers of the law? Well, at one level, we can say that is the case because we have Jesus.

Because we have the righteousness of Jesus given to us when we put our trust in him, when we gain salvation through him, God looks at us and sees the righteousness of Jesus, and clearly that is greater than the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

[19 : 26] But actually, I think the Lord means a lot more than that. He's not just talking about the positional righteousness that we have through the Lord Jesus. He's talking about what does it mean for us to live righteous lives?

And he's saying, your righteousness, the way you live, must be better than the way the Pharisees and teachers of the law live. Now, that was amazing, remarkable for those who heard it because the Pharisees and teachers of the law, they were the people who put themselves on a pedestal and they said, we're the ones who obey the law.

They had all these nitpicking regulations. They said, this is what you need to do if you want to be obedient to the law, if you want to be righteous. And Jesus said, actually, they have no righteousness at all.

So what does Jesus mean? Let me draw a little picture. So we're going to have a circle or oval, actually four ovals, and to think about what might our righteousness mean.

So at one level, righteousness, apparent righteousness, can come through appearances. We're going to be looking at chapter six in a couple of weeks' time. And in chapter six, the Lord Jesus talks about people he calls hypocrites and how they love to win the praise of others.

[20 : 41] So when they pray, they shout it from the rooftop for everyone to hear. When they fast, they make themselves look really miserable and ugly so people can see that they're not eating properly. When they give money, they do it in a very showy way.

Their concern is mainly for appearances. And if we have any doubt who those hypocrites are, the Lord Jesus explains it later in Matthew's Gospel, because in chapter 23, again and again, he talks about the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you hypocrites.

So he's thinking very much about particularly the Pharisees and saying their righteousness is largely show. It is what people can see and often goes no further than that.

And our righteousness, sadly at times, might not go much beyond appearances. But for some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, I'm sure they weren't all hypocrites in that sense.

For some of them, it was their actions that counted. It's all these rules and regulations that they took great care to try and obey and to make sure that they, in their eyes, were totally blameless.

[21 : 50] And that's what the Lord is talking about in the rest of chapter 5 of Matthew when he talks about the commandments, not do not murder, do not commit a doubt. And the Pharisees would look at these and the teachers of law and would say, yes, we obey these commands.

We are righteous because the things we do are things that we believe are in accordance with the law. So we have the right appearance. Some of them probably say also our actions are right.

And Jesus says, if that's your righteousness, then it's not good enough. That's the righteousness of the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the hypocrites. You need to be more righteous than that.

And so the third layer in our picture up there is our thoughts. And Jesus is going to be focusing in the rest of the chapter on the thoughts, on the angry thoughts, on the lustful thoughts, and so on.

And Jesus says, it's not just what people see. It's not even just what you do that counts. You have to guard your minds.

[22 : 57] I think that's a key message as we go through, particularly the letters of Paul, that what we think is vitally important. We may think that we're okay because we do certain things and people see us doing certain things and we appear to be righteous.

But if in our minds we've got things wrong and we're sinful in our thoughts, then we haven't got a real righteousness at all. And Jesus says, you need to have your thoughts right.

to be truly righteous. But it goes beyond that as well. And it's about attitude. It's about our hearts.

And ultimately, the righteousness, any righteousness that we have, has to come from within.

You don't start at the outside and try to look good and be good and you suddenly are good. Rather, you have to have your heart right before God, have salvation through the Lord Jesus, and in your hearts, have a love for God that transcends everything else in your life and have a love for your

neighbor as yourself.

And when you have that, then you'll find your thoughts will be on the right things, your actions will be good because you have the right motives, the right attitudes, and actually, the appearances won't matter too much to you because what you'll be doing will be for the good of your brothers and sisters and those who don't yet know the Lord Jesus and if they notice well and good, but you're not doing it for show.

[24 : 28] Our righteousness needs to be inside out and not outside in. I challenge myself and challenge you to what extent is our righteousness actually outside in?

That we look first at how we appear to other people, perhaps we pay some attention to what we do, a bit less to our thoughts, and perhaps our attitudes can be totally wrong.

If there's a challenge to take away this evening, it is to examine our attitudes and our thoughts and to think, are these really driving my righteousness or is it being driven by external things and by what people see me doing?

My 20 minutes is fully up, so I'll stop at that point. We're going to have a break in a minute, but a couple of questions that we'll look at in our groups afterwards. So the first one is, what part should the Old Testament and the law in particular play in our personal devotions and our church teaching?

Let me throw out a couple of statistics. About 80%, almost 80% of the Bible is the Old Testament. It's much, much longer than the New Testament. In our church teaching, approximately 40% is on the Old Testament or the planned teaching, so about half of what it would be if we were spreading it evenly across Scripture.

[25 : 50] Now, I think actually, compared with some churches, that's relatively high. I wouldn't feel too bad about it. Within that 40%, though, and this is very common in churches, a much lower percentage proportionally is devoted to the books of the law, and almost everything we study in the books of the law actually is the narrative sections on Abraham and Joseph and Moses and so on.

So the question is, and it's an open-ended question, I'm not going to write a wrong answer. In the church, in our personal devotions, what should the balance be between Old and New Testament? At one extreme, you could do what you do if you read through the Bible in a year, then by definition, then you're attributing equal weight to every part of it. So should we spend most of our time in the Old Testament?

At the other extreme, you could say, well, the Old Testament's interesting, but it's really the New Testament that we're interested in that concerns us most. We should spend almost all our time in the New Testament. And try not to just think about church teaching, about your own devotional times as well.

Second question, much more practical. What steps can we take to ensure our righteousness is driven by right attitudes and thoughts, not just by appearances and actions?

[27 : 06] How can we avoid being hypocrites, to put it bluntly? What things can we do that will help us to have the right attitudes and the right thoughts? Right, so that's all I'm going to say.

I'll have a word of prayer now and then we'll have just a few minutes break for coffee. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this very deep and practical teaching of the Lord Jesus. We pray that you will help us to value your word, all of it, and to particularly value the Old Testament and not to ignore it or to think it's irrelevant. And help us to be those whose attitudes and thoughts are righteous and who are not just driven by what other people may see. Help us in our discussions as we pray together later on, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.