

Words affect us. The same words can cause joy and sorrow. A couple of weeks ago several hundred million people watched a football game called the Super Bowl. Late in the game the announcer proclaimed one word that caused happiness and despair. He said "Interception." All those rooting for the team that got the interception rejoiced. All those rooting for the team that gave up the interception mourned.

Or say a politician's name in a group of people. Some might moan. Some might light up. Some might scowl. Some might get excited. The same word or phrase produces different responses. So let's try this with another word today. I'd like to pay attention to your reaction when you hear this word. You might not react outwardly but inwardly you might experience a response. I'd like you to be aware of this response because it can affect how you hear this message today and your entire Christian walk.

So here's the word. "Law." How do you respond to law or a rule? Some of us might respond positively. We maybe have a cooperative nature. We might be quick to conclude that if someone came up with a law or rule, they likely put thought into it. Or we don't like confrontation so we'll just go with the rules. Or we think that laws help people get along and keep things in order. So we see value in them.

But others of us might respond quite negatively to law. We hear "law" or "rule" and conclude "that restricts me. I don't like restriction!" Or "I don't like following other people's rules." Or "rules were made to be broken."

How do you personally respond to law – Positively? Neutral? Negatively? Now each of these responses could be appropriate in certain situations. But following each response to an extreme point can lead to problems. People who are positive toward law can become legalists. They strictly adhere to a law emphasizing more its letter than the spirit or intention behind the law. They love obeying rules and like to ensure that others do the same. Christians who trend in this direction may even believe that as long as you follow the rules or laws of God, you are right with Him.

On the other hand, people who are negative towards law can go to the extreme of believing in "no law." Some label these folks "antinomian." They reject any fixed law or restriction. They believe the best way to live is to live as you want and let others live as they want. They might say less laws the better. Christians who trend in this direction might overemphasize God's grace to the point that they believe it doesn't matter how you live. God will forgive you.

Which way do you lean when it comes to law? This question is especially relevant for Christians because the Bible contains God's laws. The Old Testament has 613 laws. The most famous are the 10 commandments. How many here know all 613? Or even the 10 commandments – could you list them all? And how many do you keep? Or does it matter?

These questions come to us today because Jesus brings up the Law in the next part of the Sermon on the Mount. We've seen Him give the Beatitudes which describe qualities found in the lives of people living in the kingdom of heaven. We saw last week the call to be salt of the earth and light to the world. Jesus words today raise a lot of questions. What is the law He talks about? Is what He says bad news for those who don't pay much attention to the Law? Jesus also talks about righteous living and our need to exceed the righteousness of the most law abiding religious people of his day. We need to find out if that's even possible. I hope to wrap all these questions together with some answers that both encourage us and spur us on in the lives Christ has called us to live. Let's start by looking or hearing carefully Jesus' words.

They're found in Matthew 5:17-20. I'll be reading from the ESV. You can listen or follow on the screen or in your own Bibles.

Matthew 5:17-20 (ESV)

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. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus begins by addressing possible thoughts. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets.” Why would Jesus say that? Why wouldn't He just declare it? “I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets”. It could be that there were already questions swirling around Him and His disciples. In other Gospels we see that the disciples did not follow some laws to the very letter of them. So people criticized them and their teacher. Some legalistic oriented people might have been scandalized by Jesus' response to some of these questions. They were beginning to think that Jesus came as a rebel against the Law of God. Jesus addresses that immediately by declaring “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets.” **What are the Law and the Prophets? They are the entire**

Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament as we know it today. The first 5 books of the Old Testament are sometimes called “Torah” or law. The Prophets include the major and minor prophets later in the Old Testament. So the Law and the Prophets is a way of referring to those two collections and everything else in between like the history and poetry and wisdom.

The Torah is where we find the 613 commandments including the Big 10. Most Christians would probably agree that the 10 commandments are still in force one way or another although we’re not quite sure what it means to keep the Sabbath day holy. But “have no other God’s before me,” and “Honor Your Father and Mother” seem to be pretty good ideas. And don’t murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet are good. But do we keep the other 603 in the Old Testament? These talk about diet; sacrifices; mold in houses; skin diseases; sexual sins; blasphemy. Which if any of those commandments still have authority?

Tim Keller, in an article about Old Testament Law, addresses this problem. He talks about columnists, journalists and celebrities who dismiss Christians as inconsistent because “they pick and choose which of the rules in the Bible to obey. “What I hear most often,” he writes” is Christians ignore lots of Old Testament texts – about not eating raw meat or pork or shellfish, not executing people for breaking the Sabbath, not wearing garments woven with two kinds of material and so on. Then they condemn homosexuality. Aren’t you just picking and choosing what you want to believe from the Bible?” Do you see the problem? We’ll get back to this specific issue later in the message. But it shows the dilemma of what do we do with Old Testament Law. So we hope Jesus can help us with this dilemma.

Bad news or good news?

Yet do His words help? With respect to the Law and Prophets, **He hasn’t come to abolish but to fulfill them.** The smallest part of any law will not pass away until all has been accomplished. Until the end of time, God’s law stands. In fact in verse 19 he says “anyone who relaxes one of the least commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” But one who keeps the law and teaches others to do the same will be called great.” We might say, “Well I don’t care what people call me in the kingdom of heaven, as long as I get in. But Jesus concludes with this startling statement “**unless your righteousness EXCEEDS that of the Pharisees, you will NEVER enter the kingdom of heaven**” So law keeping is a huge deal. And if you’re righteousness is not better than Pharisees, you’ll never get into heaven’s kingdom.

Now if you know a little about the New Testament's message, this should initially raise some huge problems. I could think of three major ones.

Problem 1 - Is Jesus saying we must be meticulous rule keepers? Didn't the Pharisees scrupulously obey the law? Weren't they the guys who tithed not only a tenth of their income but a tenth of their spices? Can you imagine that? You sit down with your wife and go through the spice rack. You take the little pile of your spice and shave off a tenth of it and put it in a little bag to give to the Lord. You do that for every spice. And Jesus says our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees?

Problem 2 – Didn't Jesus condemn the Pharisees throughout His ministry? Didn't He constantly speak against their self-righteousness? He called them hypocrites, white washed tombs, blind guides, serpents and broods of vipers. And now He's commanding us to have some sort of righteousness that exceeds theirs?

Problem 3 – Doesn't this sound like good works salvation? Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. It sounds like you have to do good works to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet key parts of the New Testament speak against an earned salvation gained by good works.

It seems like there are multiple contradictions here between what Jesus said later and what He said here. There's tension between Jesus' teaching here and Paul's teaching about 20 or 30 years later. So either there are multiple contradictions or there's something much deeper that actually harmonizes these apparently opposite truths.

Fulfill

The key to reconciling this is found in the word fulfill. "Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to FULFILL them." In what way has Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets? To fulfill most obviously means to fill fully. In some way, Jesus is the filling up, the realization, the completion, the ultimate attainment of the Law and the Prophets. **Jesus is the zenith or ultimate goal or fullest sense of the Law and the Prophets.**

Commentators have described this in various ways. Don Carson – "Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets in that they point to him and he is their fulfillment." Craig Keener writes "the whole Old Testament, the law as well as the prophets, pointed forward to what Jesus has now brought into being. His ministry brings them to full measure by supplying the final revelation of the will of God. Michael Wilkins writes "Jesus interpretation of the Scriptures completes

and clarifies God's intent and meaning through it. Everything that the Old Testament intended to communicate about God's will, hopes and future for humanity finds its fullest meaning in Jesus.

Wilkins also points out that Matthew has already led us down the fulfillment path. Matthew 1:22-23 "All this took place to FULFILL what had been spoken by the prophet: Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Matthew 2:14-15 – Joseph rose and took the child and mother by night to Egypt. This was to FULFILL what the Lord had spoken by the prophet – "Out of Egypt I called my son." Matthew 2:17 – Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah – a voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation. Matthew 2:23 – And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken by the prophets might be FULFILLED that he would be called a Nazarene. Matthew 4:13-14 – And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum – so that what was spoken by the prophet might be FULFILLED. Jesus fulfills the prophet's prophecies. And now Jesus fulfills the law and the whole Hebrew Scripture.

So in this sense God's Word stands. Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets now and forever. So we gain a major clue in our interpretation and relationship to Old Testament Law by looking at Jesus. He fulfills the law by giving us a fuller interpretation of it. We are going to see 6 examples of that over the next weeks in the areas of anger, lust, divorce, double talk, retaliation and love for enemies.

We also can address the issue that Tim Keller addresses in his article. Remember the charge – "Christians are inconsistent because they select Old Testament laws they want to follow and ones they want to ignore. He writes "*let's be clear that it's not only the Old Testament that has proscriptions about homosexuality. The New Testament has plenty to say about it as well. Even Jesus says in his discussion of divorce in Matthew 19:3-12 that the original design of God was for one man and one woman to be united as one flesh, and failing that, persons should abstain from marriage and sex.*

*But from a bigger picture the New Testament gives us further guidance about how to read the Old Testament. Paul makes it clear in places like Romans 13:8 and following that the apostles understood the Old Testament moral law to still be binding us. (How Jesus changed our relationship to the Old Testament Law) In short, **the coming of Christ changed how we worship but not how we live.** The moral law outlines God's own character – his integrity, love and faithfulness. And so all the Old Testament says about loving our neighbor, caring for the poor, generosity, social*

relationships and commitment to family is still in force. The New Testament continues to forbid killing or committing adultery. All the sex ethic of the Old Testament is restated through the New Testament.

*It also explains another change between testaments. Sins continue to be sins but the penalties change. In the Old Testament sins were punishable by civil sanctions like execution. Why? At that time God's people existed in the form of a nation state. But today, God's people exist in multiple nations. The church is not a civil government. Sins are dealt with by exhortation and at worst exclusion from membership. Once you grasp the main premise of the Bible – the surpassing significance of Christ and his salvation – then all the various parts make sense. If you remember nothing else from all of that remember his statement *Christ's coming changed the way we worship but not the way we live*. We no longer have to submit to dietary laws out of personal worship for the Lord. We no longer have to offer sacrifices because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. But the moral law still applies. It is explained and interpreted by Jesus and the apostles throughout the New Testament. Hopefully the Word fulfill helps us address concern and maybe a little confusion. But now we see that understanding Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets gives us a major piece in relating to God's Law. But now we must address Jesus' final statement about our righteousness needing to surpass that of the Pharisees.*

Who were the Pharisees? They were groups of Jews who divided into three schools under the teacher Shammai or Hillel or Gamaliel. They lived primarily in Jerusalem but they sent out disciples to teach their interpretations of the law to the people. In fact ancient Jewish historian Josephus records that a disciple of Hillel, Zakkai, taught in Galilee at the same time Jesus did. Pharisees were especially concerned to maintain a righteous status before God. They believed you did that by keeping the law. So they tithed not only their income but their garden spices. While other Jews fasted occasionally, they fasted twice a week. They maintained purity at their meals even straining gnats (really small insects) out of their cups. They would avoid sharing their table with sinners like tax collectors out of fear of defilement. But they forgot weightier matters of the law like justice, mercy and faithfulness. They had a commitment to Scripture but no heart changed by the Lord. So they became legalist and judgmental.

With this in mind, we can now look at what Jesus aims for in His call to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees. The diagram provided by commentator Michael Wilkins helps us see how this is possible. Wilkins describes every person as having four layers. Heart, Mind, Body and Social Relationships. He writes - *Our outermost*

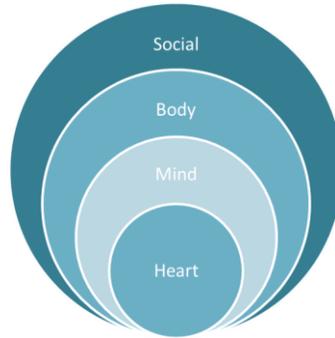
layer consists of **social relations**. What I know first about a person are the relationships I share with or see the person engaged in, whether in a class, or at work, or in a family, or on the street. The next inward layer is the **body**, including what the person wears, how she carries herself, the way she talks, what she looks like, and so on. The next inward layer is the **mind** of the person where they reason, consider emotion, and experience spiritual realities. Then the innermost core of the person is the heart, which includes the person's will and spirit.

The Pharisees were more concerned about their body and social relationships. They lived or tried to live an externally righteous life. So they would learn and think about the laws. Then they would act on the laws with their bodies and mouths. They would gain approval and status in their social relationships because they were known as "the righteous". But their minds may not have agreed with what their bodies were doing. Their minds and hearts still wanted to do the sins. Many just restrained themselves for the sake of social relationship and status. Jesus unmasked this by pointing out how they treated other people. We can try to live the same way. We read about the laws of God and we try really hard to obey them. We may even have some success when we're feeling strong. But then we get weak or tired and we fall back into it. Or we do obey the law externally but internally we burn. This is basically an attempt to do righteousness from the outside in. "If I do right things externally then no matter what goes on internally, I am right with God. If I participate in an external religious ritual or rite, I am acceptable to God even if my heart is far from Him".

But when Jesus came, He introduced the possibility of righteousness from the inside out. When He comes into our lives He changes our heart. A transformed heart affects a person's will. Our desires begin to change and we value honoring God more than doing whatever we want. So we begin to desire a renewal of our minds. We begin to hunger after God and His Word. The more we discover God's Word, the more we realize our sins. We recognize we can't overcome them on our own. So we ask for the Spirit's help. He changes our minds and desires. We begin to act out our new heart in our bodies and with our words. This begins the purification of our social relationships. We recognize some of these relationships are really bad for us. We need to change them or change our approach to them. This inside transformation dramatically impacts our lives.

Then the righteousness in our lives exceeds that of the Pharisees. It's not that we're morally superior to them or better than them. But our righteousness comes from the inside out and that by definition exceeds any attempt at righteousness from the outside in. **An Inside Out righteousness always exceeds an Outside In righteousness.** That is

how what seems initially to be bad news in Jesus' words becomes good news. Jesus fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets enables us to live lives that exceed the Pharisees righteousness.



This is good news. Some of you here today don't have to keep living life like a legalist. You've maybe lived under the tyranny of someone else's rules for decades. You need to start living by the Spirit. Some of you have lived under the devastation of license – no restrictions. You can stop the runaway cart of your life. If only you will turn to Christ and let him change your heart and renew your mind.

Some of you have never received Christ. You may think you have received Christ because of your social connections at church. You attend church services. You think that makes you a Christian. You do good works with your body or say nice things with your mouth. But those alone do not make a person a Christian. You must invite Christ in so He can do a heart transplant. You must receive Christ so He changes you from the inside out.

You may have received Christ in your mind – you agree that Jesus is God's Son. But you have never actually received Him into your heart where you actually trust Him with your life and accept Him as your Lord. Will you do that today?

Or maybe you need to confess a legalistic lifestyle or an out of control anything goes lifestyle? Or maybe you just want to commit yourself to live in Christ's power according to His commandments?

If you want to receive Christ today; if you want to confess today and commit to cooperating with Jesus' work in your heart, if you want to continue to grow in having your desires shaped and changed by Jesus, I want to invite you to come forward today and acknowledge this before your brothers and sisters and the Lord.