

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5:17-20

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 5:17-20 - LOVE FOR THE SCRIPTURES

The Fulfilment 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 fulfil them.

Amazingly, Jesus fulfils the Old Testament.

- When Jesus said "do not think" he was correcting a misunderstanding amongst some of his disciples. Probably, his teaching was so radical and different to previous teachings that many began to believe that he questioned whether the Scriptures really were God's Word. But in this verse Jesus makes it clear that "the Law or the Prophets" (which is code for all the Scriptures) really are God's Word. He had not come to abolish them in the sense of brushing them aside.
- Instead he came to fulfil them. This is a radical statement. It implies that he is the completion of the Old Testament, the One to whom all Scriptures point. If the Old Testament is the budding of God's revelation, Jesus is the flowering. The Old Covenant is to the New what promise is to fulfilment. He has ushered in the new era of salvation in the flow of God's plan of salvation which began in the Old Testament. All the promises of God are absorbed in Christ's life and being. He becomes the fulfilment of the Old Testament without destroying it.
- What does Jesus mean by "fulfilling" the Old Testament Scriptures? This is a rich scriptural theme. As we reflect on the entire Old Testament we see that Jesus fulfils it in a multi-faceted way:
- 1) *He fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament.* The book of Matthew is full of Old Testament prophecies that Jesus fulfils. The Old Testament promises a coming Messiah-king who would be used by God to liberate the nation of Israel and save people of all nations, restoring the whole world to justice, peace and right standing with God.
- 2) *He fulfils the people of the Old Testament.* They serve as a foreshadowing picture of Jesus. For example, he is the true and better

Adam in that he obeys God in the garden and as a result salvation, not sin, is imputed to us. He is the true and better Joseph in that he stands at the right hand of the high king, extending mercy and provision to his betrayers – and uses his power to save us in loving reconciliation. He is the true and better Moses – standing as a mediator of a covenant, he goes up the “mountain” in his ascension and as a result the law/Spirit comes down. He is the true and better Job – though innocent, tormented by Satan and suffering, he is vindicated by God in the end. He is the true and better David – slaying his enemies, he sets up and advances his unmatched kingdom. And so much more.

- 3) *He fulfils the institutions and events of the Old Testament.* He is the ultimate prophet, priest and king to whom all the great prophets, priests and kings of the Old Testament point. He is the Passover lamb. He is the fulfilment of the weekly Sabbath, the New Moons, the year of Jubilee, the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement and so much more.
- Jesus elsewhere said of the Old Testament that “these are the Scriptures that testify to me” (John 5:39). Amazingly, long before Jesus came to this earth, God prophetically signposted details and dimensions of his coming and mission in the Old Testament Scriptures. This is all the more reason for us to place our trust in Jesus.

18 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.

The Old Testament, all of it, is the Word of God.

- Jesus has just affirmed that the entire Old Testament is the Word of God, and that it finds its fulfilment in him. Now he tells us more about the Old Testament (although he says “the Law” and not “the Law or the Prophets” (v17), the whole Old Testament is implied):
- 1) The Old Testament in its entirety is God’s Word – “every stroke of a pen”, every “jot and tittle” (as some translations put it). This is the strongest endorsement Jesus can give it.
- 2) The Old Testament is binding on the disciples until “heaven and earth disappear” – until the end of the age. Interestingly, unlike the Old Testament, Jesus’ teachings will not pass away, but will extend beyond the end of the age (Matthew 24:35).
- 3) The Old Testament, however, will be “accomplished”. It will be brought to finality. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament (v17), and his death, resurrection and introduction of the kingdom, now in part, but fully at the end of this present age, all signal its completion and finality. The phrase “until everything is completed”, though difficult to understand, is probably best understood as “until everything that points to Christ in the Old Testament comes into being” (Carson, pg 26).

19 Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly 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.

The Old Testament, properly understood and applied, is binding on the disciples of Jesus.

- Jesus has already established that the entire Old Testament is God's Word and is binding on his disciples (v18). Now he urges them to take the Old Testament very seriously, and to commend it as God's Word to others. We are not to set aside any part of it. We are to practice and teach it.
- Does this mean that we must all become Jews, who literally obey all 613 commands in the law of Moses – those 2000 or so verses that were given to regulate the nation of Israel with regard to their behaviour, beliefs, rituals, holy days and more? The answer is no. Here are three reasons I say this:
- 1) The law of Moses was originally given to the nation of Israel not to all nations. This is important to realize, since people often misunderstand Jesus to mean that he wants all people everywhere to come under the law of Moses.
- 2) As we will see in the rest of the book of Matthew, especially in the immediate section of teaching to come (5:21-48), Jesus doesn't want his disciples from all nations to come under the authority of the law of Moses, but rather to come under his own teaching (see Matthew 28:20), which included a specific interpretation of the law of Moses (see verses 21-48, for example). Jesus is the new Moses, one who is higher than Moses. Moses merely foreshadowed the coming of Christ, the true Moses.
- 3) The early church did not take Jesus to mean this. The council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and the book of Galatians make it clear that the law, literally taken, is neither the means of salvation nor the way of discipleship. Since Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament (v17), the early church sought to find Christ in the Old Testament, and embrace Christ's own interpretation of the Old Testament. Once Christ was crucified and resurrection, and the Spirit was poured out, they understood and applied the Old Testament in a new way.
- So the Old Testament is binding on Jesus' disciples, even non-Jewish disciples. But it needs to be understood and applied through the lens of Christ, who is the fulfilment of the Old Testament and whose teachings outstrip and supersede the Old Testament. This is precisely what the early apostles did when introducing Gentiles to Christ – they also introduced them to the Old Testament (see 2 Timothy 3:15-17 for example), but through the lens of Christ, its fulfilment.

Jesus honours the disciple who honours the Old Testament.

- Although all Christians are equally accepted and loved by God on the basis of Christ's death, not all Christians are equally rewarded and honoured. Verse 19 makes it clear that Christ honours some disciples more highly than others. One major criteria of evaluation Christ uses is

our attitude and approach to the Old Testament. If we minimize the importance of the Old Testament, and encourage others to do the same, we receive very little honour. But if we seek to properly understand and apply the Old Testament, and teach others to do the same, we receive great honour from Christ.

- Interestingly this verse answers in part the question: What is the reward that a Christian receives for their faithfulness? It is Christ publicly honouring us, partly in this life, but ultimately in the new heavens and the new earth.

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.

Be transformed and you will richly experience the blessings of the kingdom.

- What does Jesus mean by “enter the kingdom of heaven?” The phrase doesn’t usually mean “go to heaven” or “get saved” as some wrongly interpret it to mean (although it is used in this way in John 3:3,5). After all, Jesus is speaking to his disciples who have already trusted him, and who he has already affirmed as “salt and light”. Rather, “enter the kingdom” means to experience the blessings and power of the kingdom. Jesus is telling his disciples what is required of a Christian to have a rich experience of the kingdom’s power and blessings.
- What is meant by “surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law”? It means two things:
- *First, it means to be transformed internally not just in one’s outward behaviour.* The Pharisees and the scribes were the people most devoted to being good in Jewish society. But they defined society by obedience to the 613 laws of Moses. These laws all had to do with outward behaviour and not inward transformation or motive of heart. Theirs was a righteousness-by-behaviour-modification. Sadly, they lacked a deep love for God, and a deep love and compassion for people. They were concerned with their religious reputation. They were therefore inconsistent and hypocritical. Jesus called them white-washed tombs and urged them to cleanse the inside of their lives (Matthew 23:26-27). Jesus was calling his disciples not to obey more rules than the Pharisees did, but to a deep transformation of heart. Wonderfully, this transformation of heart would be the result of an act of God’s transforming grace in their hearts, which would change their very spiritual genetic (see 7:18). This transformation would enable them to deeply love God and each other. This love for God and people would evidence itself in a much deeper righteousness than the Pharisees ever evidenced.
- *Secondly, it means that Jesus was making available a righteousness that exceeded the righteousness available in the law of Moses.* The Pharisees did their best to reach the heights of what was available to them through the law of Moses. But this could only take them so far. For example, only twice in the law of Moses is there reference to the heart: the tenth

commandment, and Leviticus 19:18 which calls people to love each other. It is true that the book of Deuteronomy has more reference to the heart, but Deuteronomy is a re-presentation of the law given 40 years later. Eaton writes: “The law was a step in the direction of holiness. It took into account the hardness of heart found in ancient Israel. But it was no more than a shadow of what God was soon to do through sending a saviour, a king of righteousness, into the world. Even the more moral components of the law of Moses are only a shadow of the righteousness of heart which Jesus would bring” (pg 66). Interestingly, Romans 8:3-4 teaches that the Christian who seeks to intentionally live in the Spirit accidentally fulfils the law of Moses anyway. The righteousness Jesus offers, and calls us to, includes but also outclasses the righteousness that the law of Moses offers, and calls us to.

- This verse teaches that if we’ll be transformed by Christ into people who truly and deeply love God and others, then we will experience the blessings of the kingdom of God.

Sources used - Much reference will be made to these sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.

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