

**The Sermon on the Mount: Surpassing Righteousness**  
**Psalm 19:7-14 and Matthew 5:17-20**  
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Why is it important that Jesus fulfills, even to the last stroke of a letter, the law and the prophets? Why must the righteousness of Jesus' disciples exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? These two questions are rooted in a larger question that runs through the long history of Israel, through their scriptures and right into the life and teaching of Jesus where it shows up here in the Sermon on the Mount. We might summarize the larger question this way: does God need a special people and if so, why and what makes them special?

The scriptures record, again and again, God's "yes" to the question about a special people, even in the face of Israel's persistent resistance to God's call and will. God did, indeed, choose a people but it is a peculiar kind of people: a people who come out of slavery and empire; who endure judgment, wandering and exile; and who repent and are redeemed. God did not need an imperial juggernaut, an unconquerable military power, or a people who outdid the surrounding nations in building cities and temples, although Israel tried at times to be and to do just that.

Instead, God wanted a people through whom mercy, love, forgiveness, and faithfulness—in short, God's own righteousness—would be evident. That was the call and the purpose of a special people, and here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus affirms the integral continuity between Israel's story and Jesus himself, and thus between Israel's vocation and that of Jesus' followers, including the place of the law.

We've done our best through the centuries to wriggle out from under Jesus' blanket affirmation of the law in these verses. Some interpreters have claimed that Jesus didn't really say that he was here to fulfill the law, that these words were added by a later editor of the gospel manuscript. Some have sought to water it down by saying that the law was only an interim measure until Jesus came, and was then rendered obsolete by grace. Others argue that Jesus affirms only the written law, not the oral traditions that had grown up around it over the centuries. Still others say that Jesus upholds the moral law but dispenses with the ceremonial and purity laws. Even then, though, we have read the "moral law" selectively, highlighting, for example, teachings on sexuality while ignoring more frequent injunctions against usury. All of these approaches attempt to narrow the reach of

Jesus' claims, which are nothing less than a sweeping, comprehensive affirmation that he fulfills the whole law, which continues to be valid in all its details, without restriction. Why does he make a claim like that?

The entire law, all 613 commandments, was meant to reveal to Israel—and to enable Israel to reveal to the world—what it means to be God's people. To a lot of folks today it seems that keeping the law is a personal, individual affair, but for Israel, and for Jesus, it was the redemptive and revelatory expression of God's presence in the life of the whole people. God's aim in giving the law and prophets to Israel was not to produce a collection of heroically righteous individuals but to shape a just and faithful society that would be salt and light to the nations. The law was meant to create a particular kind of community, a model for how to live peacefully, justly, and faithfully with others in God's good creation—which is precisely what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount, in his ministry, and especially in his death and resurrection. Jesus does not eliminate or replace the law or Israel, but redeems and fulfills the intention of both.

What does it mean, then, to practice a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees? We often think that righteousness is a matter of being a better, nicer, more ethical person: the righteous attend church regularly, give when the offering plate is passed, avoid common vices and treat others with kindness, all of which is nothing more than a pale version of what the scribes and Pharisees were devoted to. For Jesus, though, righteousness is concerned with mercy, forgiveness, and justice—exactly the practices he has already focused on in the Beatitudes. This righteousness surpasses because it seeks above all else the restoration of whole and just relationships. It surpasses because it concerns the heart, the inward righteousness of mind and motive, rather than merely external behavior, just as we saw over and over again last fall as we studied the Ten Commandments.

After calling us to this surpassing righteousness, Jesus then begins six antitheses in which he takes up and interprets anew an old, accepted teaching based on the Law of Moses. We will look at these more in depth next week, but I need to say a word about them today. They are called antitheses because they follow the form, "You have heard that it was said....but I say to you." What the antitheses don't do is set in opposition to each other Christ and Moses, the NT and the OT, the gospel and the law. Nor is Jesus replacing the older teaching with something new. He has made quite clear that the law is not the problem. He is going to cross every "t" and dot every "i" of the law. Rather, Jesus is correcting the scribes' misinterpretations. That, of course, begs the question, what were the scribes and

Pharisees doing? What was so egregious in their handling of the scriptures that Jesus so often called them on the carpet for it?

They were doing exactly what we so often do: trying to reduce the challenge of the law, to ‘relax’ the commandments to make them more manageable and less exacting. How they went about it depended on the form each law took, in particular whether it was a commandment or what we might call a “permission.” Four of the six antitheses, the ones dealing with murder, adultery, false swearing and love of neighbor fall into the category of commandments. They are clear commands of God either to do or not to do something. The remaining two, the fourth and fifth antitheses concerning divorce and retribution are best described as ‘permissions.’ They lack the prescriptive words, ‘you shall’ or ‘you shall not.’ They were permitted under certain circumstances and on certain conditions, but there were limits.

What the scribes and Pharisees were doing, in order to make obedience to the law more readily attainable, was to restrict the commandments and extend the permissions of the law, or put another way, they made the law’s demands less demanding and law’s permissions more permissive. In the examples of murder and adultery, they restricted the demands of the law by confining it to the external act alone. Jesus, of course, will have none of that. He makes the law more demanding by applying it to the internal life—angry thoughts, insulting words and lustful looks.

The religious experts restricted the command about swearing to only oaths involving the divine name and the command about love of neighbor to apply to certain people only—those of the same race and religion. Jesus said all promises must be kept and all people must be loved—no exceptions, no limitations.

But, the scribes and Pharisees were not content merely to restrict the commands of the law; they sought to extend its permissions as well. Thus, they attempted to widen the permission of divorce beyond the single ground of adultery to include a husband’s every whim, and to widen the permission of retribution beyond that imposed in the court of law to include personal revenge. Jesus, not surprisingly, wasn’t impressed by these interpretations.

In emphasizing the importance of the commandments, Jesus declares that anyone who attempts to annul one of them and teaches others to do the same “will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” It is interesting that even those who break the commandments are part of the “kingdom of heaven.” Jesus, however,

also states that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” These seem like contradictory claims.

As we’ve said before, in Matthew, the “kingdom of heaven” is synonymous with the “kingdom of God.” This kingdom is not a geographical region or a heavenly abode but a reality brought into being by Jesus and carried on by his disciples; thus it is here and also still coming. The prophets foresaw that when the kingdom of God arrived, what the Jews would have referred to as the Messianic age, heart-righteousness was to be one of its blessings. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts,” God promised through Jeremiah. (31:33) How would God do that? According to Ezekiel, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.” (36:27) Here we see God’s two promises to put the law within us and to put the Spirit within us coincide.

It is not that once we have the Spirit we can dispense with the law, for what the Spirit does in our hearts is, precisely, to write God’s law there. So, Spirit, law, righteousness and heart all belong together. The Pharisees thought an external conformity to the law would be righteousness enough. It’s not, says Jesus. What he’s after is the deep obedience that comes from righteousness of the heart—and that is possible only in those whom the Holy Spirit has made alive to Christ and now indwells. This is why entry into God’s kingdom is impossible without a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees. It is because such a righteousness is evidence of new birth, and no one enter the kingdom without being born again, as Jesus plainly told Nicodemus.

To embrace these challenging words of Jesus we need to resist the idea that Christianity creates the new and improved, replacement people of God. We are called to be God’s special people but that does not mean we are called to be super-Christians. We are called to a different kind of righteousness altogether, a righteousness that forms us into a different kind of people altogether—a people who seek to embody and express in attitude, word and action the merciful, forgiving, reconciling, just will of God that lies at the center and heart of the law. Amen.