

Are you Righteous?

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[0 : 00] Well, I think it's true to say that people generally want to live good. Christianity is just a bunch of rules, isn't it? And it's either said by people who are opposed to Christianity and they don't like this, or it's said by people who are in fact open to Christianity and they're just trying to work out that if they do believe, then what kind of changes will they need to make in their lives?

And behind the question is the thinking that Christianity is restrictive, and it's oppressive, especially if you're going to have to keep a whole load of rules in order to be a Christian.

Now, the Bible does have a lot to say about how we should live our lives, and that's why I think we really need to understand the role of the law of God in our lives.

We need to grasp the significance of the rules, of the commands, of the commandments, of the laws that we read here in the Bible. Because it's not just an issue for those who see these things as a barrier to Christianity, or who are exploring Christianity.

The role of the law of God in our lives is an issue for those of us who call ourselves Christians.

Because very often Christians can be unsure, can be confused about the role the law of God plays in our lives.

[1 : 25] And that's why the words that Jesus speaks here in Matthew chapter 5, verse 17 to 20, are so important. Because Jesus tells us the role the law of God should play in our lives.

So here in the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus is doing is relating his teaching to the law of God. So does it simplify the law?

Does it reinterpret the law? Does it reinforce the law? Does it even dismiss the law of God? Here Jesus tells us how we should understand it.

And so the big idea of these verses is that Jesus came to fulfill the law so that we live by the law. And they're really going to be our two points this afternoon.

Two simple points. Jesus has fulfilled the law so that we live by the law. Jesus has fulfilled the law, verse 17 and 18. We are to live by the law, verse 19 and 20.

[2 : 25] So first of all, Jesus has fulfilled the law. Look at verse 17 again. 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.

So if Jesus says, do not think that, then he knows people were thinking that. What were they thinking? Well, they were thinking that Jesus was doing away with the law.

Now, why were they thinking that? Well, they were thinking that because Jesus hasn't even mentioned the law yet in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. And so the Pharisees and the teachers of the law must have been shocked.

How could Jesus miss something so fundamental to life? If he's talking about how to live life in this world, why is he not mentioned the law of God yet?

But Jesus assures them that he hasn't come to abolish the law or the prophets. Now, the law here normally refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, Torah in Hebrew.

[3 : 31] And this was in distinction to the prophets. So both the law and the prophets were essentially the whole of the Old Testament that we find in our Bibles.

And so when Jesus speaks about the law in the Sermon on the Mount, he's speaking in terms of its commands. So he says that in verse 19.

And what he does is he goes on to address some of these specific commands and the rest of what we've got here in chapter five. And so Jesus teaches how he had not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

And this fulfilling the law and the prophets is emphasized in three ways in the verses that remain.

So in verse 18, he says, truly, I tell you. By saying that, Jesus is essentially saying what I'm saying has got the strength of an oath.

Truly, I am telling you the truth here. Then in verse 19, he gives this strong warning and he says, anyone who sets aside these commands will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

[4 : 40] So that's a warning, oath and warning. And then verse 20, Jesus makes a strong demand and says, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus could not state more emphatically that he is not getting rid of the law and the prophets. And so the big question is, well, if that's the case, how does Jesus fulfill the law and the prophets? Well, it's worth just considering for a moment what this word fulfill means. Fulfill is another way of saying fill full, because it means to fill up something, to make something full, to make something complete.

Where the sense is that the thing isn't complete until it's been filled full. Now, actually, Matthew uses this word already to refer to the Old Testament prophecies that speak of Jesus.

So in the birth narrative of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1 and Matthew chapter 2, he often speaks about the Old Testament saying how it's fulfilled in Jesus. In other words, it becomes complete.

[5 : 54] It is filled full in his coming. And so, too, the law reaches its fulfillment in Jesus. So Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets by bringing everything that they pointed to to completion.

So verse 18 says, For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter nor the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

So what's Jesus saying? He's saying every detail of the law continues to be valid until two things happen. Firstly, until heaven and earth disappear, meaning until the end of time.

And then secondly, Jesus says the law continues to be valid until everything is accomplished, meaning the completion of God's great salvation plan.

And so until then, not one letter, not one stroke from the law will disappear. And so remember, the kingdom of heaven has come near in Jesus.

[7 : 05] And in Jesus, the kingdom will come in all its fullness. And so the law remains during this time. So how then does Jesus fulfill the law and the prophets?

Back to our question. Well, the short answer is in every way he fulfills them. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, For no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ. You can't get more comprehensive than that, right? Yes. And so as we consider this, I don't think we should narrow it down too much. Jesus doesn't even expand on it in these short sentences that we've got.

What Jesus does here is he paints in big brush strokes, which are then given some finer detail in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, and then in the rest of the New Testament.

It all explains how we are to live out the law, how Jesus fulfills it, and then how it's relevant for us. But it's worth it about how Jesus fulfills the law of God in relation to which particular bits we are to obey.

[8 : 22] Because you're probably thinking, there's a whole load of weird stuff in the Old Testament. I mean, surely we're not meant to live by everything that is written down there.

Aren't there some strange laws that just don't apply to Christians anymore? Well, Sinclair Ferguson, the theologian, has used the illustration of an egg to think about the law of God in the Old Testament.

And so what I'd like to do is blatantly steal his illustration. He's a friend, so he won't mind. But if you think of an egg, an egg's got three parts, hasn't it? It's got the yolk, it's got the white, and it's got the shell.

And there are three dimensions to the law in the Old Testament. So firstly, there's the Ten Commandments, the very foundation or the core of the law.

So that's the egg yolk. And it's often known as the moral law of God. And then surrounding the Ten Commandments, there's all the ceremonial laws.

[9 : 32] And that's like the egg white. And then surrounding both of these, the yolk and the egg white, there's the shell. But that is the civil law of God, the civil laws that define God's people as a state, as a nation, as Israel.

And so that's the egg shell. And you can actually read about this threefold division of the law in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 19, on the law of God.

So there's the moral law, the ceremonial laws, and the civil laws. And I think it's a helpful way of grouping all the different laws that you find in the Old Testament.

Because these three dimensions of the law are intended to function in different ways. So first of all, there's the Ten Commandments, the moral law of God.

That's the core. They're the foundation for everything. And we get a clue of this in the Bible because they are the commands that God spoke directly.

[10:38] Remember, they were written by his finger, the only part of the law that was. And they were preserved in stone, indicating their permanent nature and the unique role that they have to play in God's purposes.

The Ten Commandments are also the only part of the law of God that was placed in the Ark of the Covenant that the people were to carry with them as they wandered around.

And so all of this is simply emphasizing for us that this is core, this is foundational, this law of God is so important. It is to be obeyed.

And yet we know that we fail to obey the Ten Commandments, don't we? And that's why Jesus came. He came to fulfill the requirement of the law for us.

He did it through his perfect life. Jesus obeyed where we have disobeyed God's law. And he did it through his death, where Jesus takes the punishment on the cross for our failure to obey and for our disobedience.

[11:48] And so while the moral law of God in the Ten Commandments was always intended to be permanent, the ceremonial laws were always intended to be temporal, temporary, impermanent.

And by ceremonial laws, what we're talking about are all the ceremonies, all the sacrifices that you read about in the Old Testament, all these things that were repeated again and again and again, ceremonial laws.

And the people of Israel were required to perform them in their worship. Why? Well, because they demonstrated the need for forgiveness for the people's sins.

And so this word pattern, pattern is frequently used in Exodus and in Leviticus where you get all of these ceremonial laws. This word pattern comes up again in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament.

And it's indicating that these laws would eventually give way to the realities. They were a pattern for something that would come and be the real, the whole thing.

[12:56] And so Hebrews chapter 10 says that these laws were just a shadow of what to come. So they weren't the realities themselves. Why? Well, because it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

And so all of these ceremonial laws in the Old Testament were there pointing towards what only Jesus can do. And that's why all of these ceremonies, all of these sacrifices are fulfilled in him, fulfilled through the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for sin.

And that's why the ceremonial laws are no longer needed. That's why we're not slaughtering bulls and goats and lambs here in church today.

Well, maybe you have done that in preparation for the potluck supper and some of it is in the kitchen, but in terms of our worship, we don't need to do that anymore. So those are the ceremonial laws, the moral law, the ceremonial laws, but then there's also the civil laws of God.

And they also were intended to be temporary because they were specifically for the nation of Israel. And they were given through Moses to the people for their life in the land.

[14:16] And this phrase in the land is one you hear often in reference to these civil laws that come to Israel. Israel. And so this phrase in the land indicates that these laws were for a specific time, the time when they were in the land.

They weren't binding on them or God's people forevermore. Never meant to be permanent, but to preserve the nation of Israel until the Messiah came.

And now the Messiah has come. These civil laws are fulfilled in Jesus. And so while the moral law is permanent, the ceremonial laws and the civil laws in the Old Testament were never meant to be permanent.

And so the threefold division of the law, remember the egg, the shell, the egg white and the yolk, it helps us understand how the law of God is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Jesus brings the law to completion and to its intended goal. And that's why nothing in the law has passed away. Because all of the law should be understood in relation to Jesus.

[15:31] He makes sense of it all. His person and work fulfills the law. And so that's the first point. Jesus has fulfilled the law.

Secondly, we are to live by the law. Verse 19 says, Therefore 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. So now Jesus teaches people about the role of the law in their lives.

And so now that Jesus has fulfilled the law, our question should be, okay, he's fulfilled it, then how do I relate to it? What's it got to do with me and how I live my life?

Well, Jesus makes it clear here that we are to live by the law. And we live by the law by obeying Jesus because he's the one who fulfills the law for us.

[16:33] And so we obey the law not in order to be saved, but we obey it when we are saved by Jesus. Because the law, first of all, leads us to Jesus.

It drives us to Christ to be saved because it shows up our failure, our weakness, and our sin, and our need for a savior. But when we are saved, what Jesus does here in these verses is essentially drive us back to the law.

Because obeying it is how we live out our saved life, how we live out our salvation. And the fact that we want to live by God's law is a surefire sign that we belong to God's kingdom, to the kingdom of heaven.

We'll have this new desire in our hearts to keep the law and want others to keep the law because it has a continuing relevance for our lives.

We need it. That's why Paul asks in Romans chapter 3, do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law.

[17:46] And so when we grasp what Jesus is saying here, we regard the law as a necessary guide, a necessary rule for our lives.

And that's why Jesus says here, the law should never be relaxed. Not even one of the least of the commands should be set aside. And Jesus warns that if we do this, then we will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

Because relaxing any of God's commands is dangerous. Now our son Matthew is learning to drive right now. And he drove us actually to church this afternoon.

So he's passed his driving theory test, but he's still got to pass his driving practical test. And he's got a date coming up. Now, the theory test is all about the highway code, isn't it?

And it says this in the introduction to the highway code, knowing and applying the rules contained in the highway code could significantly reduce road casualties. Cutting the number of deaths and injuries that occur on our roads every day is a responsibility we all share.

[18:57] The highway code can help us discharge that responsibility. Basically saying, if you don't keep the highway code, people will die. People will be injured on the roads.

And so you should be a responsible citizen and stick to the highway code. Basically saying, the highway code is good for everybody. You're meant to obey it.

You're meant to obey it before you've passed your test. And you're meant to obey it after you've passed your test. Because even when you've got your driving license, obeying the highway code will help you and help everybody else.

Your driving will be of great enjoyment to you and other people will be safe. And so we would never dream of thinking that you can somehow just set aside some of the highway code, some of the speed regulations, for example, or that you can relax some of what it says and say, well, that applies to some people, but it doesn't apply to me.

You just can't do that. And yet, if we apply Jesus' teaching here, churches and Christians can so easily set aside the law of God in the Bible.

[20:16] And I think the most obvious example is probably the way that the institutional church has relaxed God's law when it comes to human sexuality.

Saying things like, well, the Bible's teaching is out of date. We don't need to follow those commands anymore. They've got nothing to do with the kind of world we live in today.

Or even, well, the Holy Spirit is leading us into new revelation. So all that's been revealed in the past and before, we can disregard that and set that aside and relax it because we've got new, fresh revelation for how we should live today.

That's exactly the kind of thing that Jesus is warning against here. And it's easily done by Christians too because we can so easily sit loosely on God's law, on what God demands of us.

We can so easily think, well, my sin isn't really that big of a deal. It doesn't really matter what I do because, I mean, I'll be forgiven anyway, surely, right?

[21 : 22] But Jesus in no way says God's law doesn't matter for our lives, does he? In fact, what he does is he actually intensifies the law's demands.

So verse 20 is saying, 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.

So for those who thought Jesus wasn't emphasizing the law enough, this is a mic drop moment because the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were famous for their righteousness.

And Jesus is saying the law demands a kind of righteousness that tops theirs, that is better than what they can do. And that must have shocked his listeners to the core.

They'd be thinking, how can this even be possible? The Pharisees are up there, the teachers of the law are up there, look at the way they live, look at the way they practice the law of God.

[22 : 26] And me, well, I'm way down here at the bottom of the heap. You see, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law devoted their lives zealously to obeying the law of God.

They were literally the most law-abiding citizens you could ever find. So much so that they even made up their own rules in an attempt to keep the law of God.

And yet by doing so, they weren't raising the bar of God's law too high for people to get over. No, instead, what they were actually doing was bringing the bar of God's law low enough down so they could jump over it, relaxing it to a level that they could reach.

Where all their rules and regulations made God's law manageable for them. It was like a tick box exercise. You do all these things, then you've obeyed the commandments.

It was all external. They could be satisfied that if they kept the rules they made, then they had done enough. And they could be proud of what they'd managed to achieve.

[23 : 36] And yet what they'd done instead was they had watered down the radical nature of God's commands. Turning them into a bunch of stuff that you could do.

And then be proud that you'd done it. And so the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law was nothing more than just an outward show, a facade.

And it was an attempt at some kind of external conformity rather than the inner obedience of the heart. Where they'd managed to keep the letter of the law, but they'd failed to actually keep the spirit of the law.

And you know the kind of thing I'm talking about if you've got children. You can tell them to do something important, and so they do it, but they do it grudgingly.

And so you know outwardly, well, yes, outwardly they have obeyed. They've done what has been asked of them. They have ticked the box. But you also know that inwardly, in their hearts, there's just been no desire to do it whatsoever.

[24 : 47] So the outward conformity has been there, but with no inner desire to do that important thing themselves. And that's the kind of difference that Jesus seems to be getting at here.

Jesus is calling for a deeper obedience to the law than that shown by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Because their focus on outward obedience meant that they had managed to dodge the deeper purpose of the law, which demanded a heart obedience.

And so when it comes to obeying the law of God, Jesus cares about the heart's desire and not just the outward deed. And that's why Jesus will go on to emphasize, he'll emphasize this with some clear and specific examples.

So if you just glance down at the rest of chapter five, Jesus repeats the same words again and again. So when it comes to murder, you have heard that it was said, but I say to you.

Or when it comes to adultery, you have heard that it was said, but I tell you. So Jesus is not contradicting the law. Instead, he is deepening the original intention of the law.

[25 : 59] Because God's law demands this radical obedience from our hearts. And now, because Jesus has fulfilled the law for us, he is the one who enables us to live by the law at this deeper level.

Not just outward external conformity, but inner heart obedience. Well, how does that happen? It happens through God's gift of righteousness in Christ, where by faith in Jesus, his righteousness, his perfect life of obedience to God's law is transferred to us.

Because Jesus not only kept the law for us in his life, Jesus has taken the punishment for our failure to keep the law in his death.

And so that now God sees us as clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Because that is the only way possible for our righteousness to surpass that of the Pharisees.

We are righteous because Jesus has fulfilled the law for us. And so we put our faith in the one who was always obedient so that his obedience comes to us.

[27 : 21] Because there's no way we could attain this righteousness by anything that we do. Even our best attempts at trying to obey God's law are never good enough, are they?

And so when we understand that Jesus came to fulfill the law, we realize just how far short we fall. And we're forced to recognize our complete and utter spiritual bankruptcy.

And so it causes us to mourn for our sin, to hunger and to thirst for righteousness, and to seek God's mercy. But we're not just declared righteous by faith in Jesus, justified.

We're also sanctified. In other words, Jesus transforms us to live more righteous lives. Well, how does it happen?

Well, it happens by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who then empowers us to live by the law of God. The desire in our hearts is different because God the Spirit lives in us.

[28 : 34] And this is what God promised through the prophet Jeremiah, who said, I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. And then through the prophet Ezekiel, and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

So God promised he would write his law in our hearts and put his spirit within us. And that's how we are able to live by the law.

And God does this because Jesus came to fulfill the law for us so that we now live by the law with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Not the temporary laws. Jesus has fulfilled those. But the permanent moral law of God, his ten commandments. When I was a minister through in Edinburgh, I can remember one time going to visit an elderly woman in hospital.

She was nearing the end of her life and was about to die. She must have been in her late 80s or early 90s. And I said to her, as she was lying there dying, I said, all that really matters right now for you in your life is that you know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

[30 : 00] Do you know him? And do you know what her response was? She said, I've been going to church ever since I was a little girl. And the implication was, I think I've done enough.

I kind of hope I've done enough and I've been good enough. And that will count enough for God.

And she was only articulating, I think, what many people believe when it comes to God.

that if you're good enough and if you've done enough, then surely God will accept you. And yet, can you see what it does?

It turns the grace of God on its head, upside down. Because it's not about what you do, it is all about what Jesus has done for you.

And so out of gratitude for that grace that God has shown towards us, we'll want to obey the law of God.

[31 : 02] Not to earn our salvation, but because it's already ours as a gift. It comes to us from our loving Father in heaven. And it comes to us with his law, his will for our lives.

And as a loving Father, where he knows what is best for us, his law is his perfect will for my life to guide me in all my ways.

And so as his child, then I want to please him all my days. Let's pray. Amen.