

The Twin Aspects of Christ's Work for Us

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Bible Text: Matthew 5:17-18

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The Scripture that I read from Matthew 5 is a fitting meditation for us as we come to the Lord's Table this evening. Jesus, in that passage, is speaking of the purpose for which he came to earth. He gives us many such statements, he says, "I did not come to be served but to serve and to give my life a ransom for many." The Son of man "has come to seek and to save that which is lost," and so there is a multi-faceted purpose in the Incarnation that we could look at from many different perspectives but here in Matthew 5 is where the Lord would draw our attention, I believe, this evening. Jesus speaks of the purpose in his coming to earth, a purpose which found its climax in the cross of Christ. He speaks broadly of the Old Testament when he says that he came to "fulfill the law and the prophets." He speaks about it broadly and he invokes it in its detail when he says, "not the smallest stroke or letter will pass away from the law until all is accomplished," and as he's referring to the Hebrew alphabet, you could think about it as the crossed t and the dotted i in the English language as being a reflection of what he's speaking about: down to the dotted i and the crossed t, everything is going to be fulfilled and he says, "That's why I am here on earth.

He had to explain that; he had to express why that was the case because his teaching and his actions were so contrary to the dominating religious environment of the day. The people were used to looking to the Pharisees as being the preeminent religious authority in the day and Jesus came and confronted all of their interpretations, confronted their conduct and it was a revolutionary idea for someone to stand against the Pharisees and speak as them, as those who are denying the law of God. It's hard to think of an immediate parallel but it would be like Jesus coming and rebuking the gospel coalition maybe as being unfit to carry the banner of his work and that's a very pale reflection. The Pharisees were so highly regarded by the people that what they said was regarded as law. So, for Jesus to confront the Pharisees would raise questions in the minds of those who heard him in that day. They would be tempted to think that Jesus was trying to overturn all of the Old Testament because the Pharisees had appointed themselves as the guardians of the Old Testament tradition.

So here in this passage that we read earlier, Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus is clarifying the purpose for which he came and he's saying, "I did not come to abolish the law," and so he's helping people to understand the purpose of his mission where they were most

subject to misunderstanding. Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees but he was not here to overturn the law, quite to the contrary, he says, "I am here to fulfill it, not to abolish," verse 17, "but to fulfill." Not to set aside but to bring it to pass, you might say. In general, the term "fulfill" has the idea of "carrying it out." Jesus was here to carry out the law, to fulfill its requirements. He was here to execute the plan which God had set in motion in the revelation given to Moses. Jesus came to accomplish all that the Old Testament had in mind.

Now, let's peel back the onion just another bit here. Jesus could not possibly have come to abolish the law. He says in verse 18, if you'll look at it with me. There in verse 18, Jesus says, "For truly I say to you," here's the explanation why I could not possibly be coming to abolish the law, here's why, it's because, "until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." There was a binding, abiding authority to the Old Testament that could not be abolished and Jesus says, "That's why I couldn't possibly be here to abolish it. I'm here to fulfill it because there is a permanent abiding authority to the Old Testament and, therefore, I'm not setting it aside. I am here to do it," and it's a grand, sweeping statement that he is making recognizing the authority of the Old Testament and it will abide until its purpose has been completely fulfilled.

As we come to the Lord's Table tonight, what I want to show you from, as we let Scripture interpret Scripture on that statement, is for you to understand and appreciate the fact that Jesus' fulfillment of the law is essential to the salvation of your soul, that Jesus was here to accomplish a dual purpose as he was fulfilling the law. There were two ways that Jesus' fulfillment of the law, there were two aspects, twin aspects, to his fulfillment that was designed for your benefit. It was designed to secure your eternal blessedness. It was designed to provide for your access to heaven. It was to provide for your justification, your perfect standing with God. That's why Jesus came. That is part of what he was doing in the multi-faceted splendor of his fulfillment of the law.

What I want to do with this tonight is to just walk you through these two aspects of his work so that you would have a greater sense of certainty and confidence in your salvation, that you would feel the sense, the joy of knowing that Christ fulfilled the law for you, that you would be free from a sense of abiding uncertainty, "Have I done enough to please God?" Listen, the one and the only one who could please God was the Lord Jesus Christ, otherwise, we all fall short of the glory of God even as Christians and so as we understand the work of Christ, we see where we are supposed to put our trust, where it is that we rest our confidence. It teaches us to abandon all confidence in our own righteousness and to trust in Christ alone and when we see these things with clarity, we see the wonder of the work of Christ on our behalf, fulfilling the law that we could never meet on our own.

So, what are these two ways? First of all, Jesus fulfilled the law with his obedience to the law. He fulfilled the law with his obedience to the law. Scripture teaches us that Jesus was born as a Jew who had the responsibility to obey the law in his own life. If you would turn with me to the book of Galatians for a moment, Galatians 4:4, it says that

“When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” He was under the law in the sense that he was under the authority of the law; he was responsible to fulfill it, to obey it. And throughout his life, the point is repeatedly made that Jesus obeyed the law with utter perfection, without one slip, without one mark against his name. In John 8:46, when he was being challenged, he asked his enemies, “Which one of you convicts Me of sin?” and there was dead silence in response because there was no crime of which he could be convicted. His own enemies, who had every motivation to point something out, could point to nothing that Jesus had failed in with regard to the responsibilities of the law. They had no answer. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” So Scripture is abundant in its testimony that Christ fulfilled the law, he obeyed it to perfection and there was no defect in his obedience to the law.

Now, why does that matter to you and me tonight? It matters profoundly to you and me because you and I, without exception, have not kept his law. We have not obeyed perfectly, in fact, we have violated it with every manner of sin: in our flesh; in our desires; and with our minds. We are a shattered pottery vessel with no way of putting it back together and God holds us accountable for our disobedience. There will be a reckoning for sin to every man on earth. Scripture makes this clear. Turn back to Romans 3. I want you to see this in relationship to Scripture's teaching on the law as we will pull all of this together in a moment. In Romans 3:9, the Apostle Paul says, “What then? Are we better than they?” and he says, “Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.'” Skip down to verse 19. There in verses 10-18, he's just making extensive quotations from the Old Testament and after making those extensive quotations, he says in verse 19, “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.”

You must have a record of perfect obedience to the law if you are going to satisfy the standard of God. It is only on the record of perfect obedience without fail that the doors of heaven can be opened to anyone, otherwise, we are all shut-up under sin and will be held accountable for our lack. You've broken the law, I have too and there is an account to be made for that. An eternal God who gave an eternal law requires an eternal punishment for the violation of that law. The things that are at stake here are immense, they're great and so how do we solve that dilemma? How can it be that we're here tonight gathered together as Christians? How can we have a peace of conscience, a security of soul knowing that it is well with us and with God? Turn back to Galatians 4:5. Christ, as we saw earlier in verse 4, was born under the law. Why? It wasn't because he needed to achieve obedience for his own sake, he was already perfectly righteous in the righteousness of God so why was he born under the law? Verse 5 explains, “so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” Christ brought himself under the authority of the law in his Incarnation, he obeyed it perfectly so that he might be able to accomplish our redemption.

The obedience of Christ is what is necessary to fulfill the demands of the law. Theologians sometimes refer to this as Christ's active obedience. His life was a living obedience to the law and he fulfilled its demands to perfection: without defect; without fail; without omission; without commission of a violation. Just mentioning that reminds me that we think so superficially of sin. We think that if we haven't done x, y, or z that we're okay and we forget that God's word requires obedience in a, b and c and so it's not just that we avoid certain things, the word of God requires us to do certain things as well as avoid certain things and the weight of that on our souls is immense because we fall short of the glory of God. Well, Jesus Christ in his earthly life, in his obedience to the law, met the demands of the law and Scripture says that he did that for us. When you put your faith in Christ, God looks at you and says, "I receive you based on the perfect obedience of my Son." The fulfillment of the law of Christ is put on your account and the significance of that is very far-reaching. There is nothing that you have to do, there is nothing that you can do to add to that obedience and increase your perfect standing with God. Christ has already met the demands of the law and when we put our faith in him, his righteousness, his obedience, is credited to our account and God treats us as though we had lived the perfect life of Christ. That is the basis on which he accepts us. It is not Christ plus your Bible reading; it is not Christ plus your church attendance; it is not Christ plus your good deeds; Christ plus your prayers; Christ plus your love to others. It is Christ plus nothing. It is Christ in his perfection. Anything that we would add to that would only diminish it and degrade it because there is no obedience like Christ's. There is no Son like him and in Christ, everything has already been done on our behalf.

So, when you put your faith in Christ for salvation, God credits the perfect righteousness of Christ to your account. He imputes that righteousness to you. That is the basis of your justification. That is the basis upon which God can look at you and say, "The demands of the law are satisfied." Look at 2 Corinthians 5:21. Again, as we were saying this morning, this is very humbling to us and this magnifies Christ immensely when we realize that he paid the full price for us and that we don't contribute to that, we don't add to that. We abandon all trust in everything of our own and rely solely on him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, as I said earlier, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." We receive a righteousness in Christ that we could never have attained on our own.

Look also at the book of Philippians 3. Paul was explaining earlier in chapter 3 at the early part of it, that if ever there was a human Jew who had done it all it was him. He says in verse 4, "I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh," that is, for their righteousness before God, he says, "I far more," I was the perfect Jew. Verse 5, "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." But then he goes on in verse 7, he says elsewhere that the law eventually revealed that coveting was sin and he saw all of his seeming righteousness was undone under the way that the law applied even to the desires of his heart and so in verse 7, he says, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the

sake of Christ.” He says, “I discount, I disregard, I put away all of that righteousness of my Jewish heritage. I don't count that. I don't rely on that. That was simply that which actually separated me from Christ because it was all in my own self-confidence.” He goes on in verse 8 and says, “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” To know Christ was far better, exceedingly, infinitely better than being the perfect Jew. He says it's for Christ that “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.” What I used to boast in, I now regard as unspeakable dung. Then look at what he says in verse 9, I count it that way so that I may gain Christ “and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” Look what he's saying there: he is completely discounting any righteousness of his own and says, “I rely solely on the righteousness of Christ and I receive that by faith, not by an accomplishment in my flesh, not by the deeds of my hands.” He says, “It's not my righteousness which gives me standing before God, it is the righteousness of Christ on which I rely.”

So God, in light of his eternal law, in light of our sin, sent his Son to be under the law, to fulfill it so that our lack of righteousness could be fulfilled and now God looks on us in his grace, through the perfect merit of Christ, and looks on us as if we had obeyed the law like Christ did. Wow. You say, “But I didn't do that. I haven't done that.” That's the whole point, it's that we have received a righteousness that is outside us, sometimes called an alien righteousness because it's not our own. We receive a righteousness attributed to our account that is from someone else and that someone else is Christ. Beloved, it is not your obedience that God accepts, it is the obedience of your Savior on your behalf. We're humbled under that recognition that there was nothing that I did that motivated God to accept me except for his grace and except for the merit of Christ, not the merit of me.

So it humbles us that we gladly accept that humiliation because out of that humiliation rises the glory of Christ and he becomes ever so sweet to the redeemed soul. Yet there is more as we contemplate this fulfillment of the law by Christ. He fulfilled the law with his life, with his obedience but Jesus also fulfilled the law in his death for us. You see, the law requires more than obedience in one sense; there is more to the law than its positive and negative demands on us. The law curses disobedience. Look at Deuteronomy 28:15. Moses is preaching to the people of Israel and he says, “But it shall come about, if you do not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.” Then, if you've never read the rest of Deuteronomy 28, I invite you to do that at your leisure. The curses are profound; they are frightening; they are severe. And the ultimate fulfillment of the curse of disobedience is eternal hell on those who reject Christ and never come to faith in him. Curses the law requires; curses on disobedience. Here you and I are declared and judged by Scripture as those who are guilty and accountable under the law as we read earlier under Romans 3. You just step back from it and realize the desperate condition in which we found ourselves, in which we existed apart from Christ. No obedience to offer; no way to improve our standing and the curse of God

aligning upon our head. Jesus said, “Those who do not obey, the wrath of God abides upon them,” John 3:36.

The gospel is serious, beloved. The gospel matters. The gospel declares things that are found nowhere else and so how did Jesus fulfill that part of the law regarding the curses? Scripture teaches us that Jesus took the curse in his own body when he was crucified at the cross of Calvary. He received that curse himself. Theologians sometimes call this his passive obedience as he submitted himself to the punishment of God and received it at Calvary. Look at Galatians 3 now. Galatians 3:10 where it says, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform.'” Verse 11, “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'The righteous man shall live by faith.' However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'He who practices them shall live by them.’” If you are relying on your own obedience, that is the standard by which you will be judged and you don't meet it. The law shuts everyone out from its fulfillment except Christ and so what did Christ do? How did he fulfill this aspect of the law? Look at verse 13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law.” He bought us out from under that curse. How did he do that? “Having become a curse for us,” on our behalf, “for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” That's Deuteronomy 21:23 that's being quoted there. He redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' – in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,” that's almost all of us, not many Jews in here if any, “in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

So, Christ went to the cross in order to be the substitute of the curse that was upon you. It's as if he said, “Here I am. Put his curse, put her curse, on me so that they may go free from the demands of the law.” And he fulfilled the law by taking the curse pronounced on sinners. The curse that was on you, the damnation that was assigned to your account, God took that and applied it to Christ and punished him on the cross, poured out his wrath in fullest measure upon Christ so that the wrath would have been spent and would not have to be expended on you. Your hand would not have to pay and so God forgives us based on his suffering. He accepts us, in a manner of speaking, he accepts us on the basis of Christ's obedience. He forgives us on the basis of Christ's suffering. This is the crux of the eternal blessedness of everyone who believes in Christ. All of the demands of the law have been satisfied on your behalf by a willing Lamb, by a glad and voluntary Savior. He says, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down on my own initiative.”

What a wonderful Savior! What a perfect salvation! So that when we put our faith in Christ, all of the demands of the law, both positive and negative, what you must do, what you must suffer punishment for, all of it is taken care of by the perfect merit of Christ. You know, we come and we rely not on anything that we do. Our standing with God is perfect. God has declared it so. God has declared it to be absolutely perfect and the only way that he could do that is based on a perfect substitute who did it on our behalf because we have no obedience of our own to offer to him.

That is the substance of what we remember tonight at communion. We remember a perfect Savior, one who was utterly obedient to the uttermost, who laid down his life on the cross having fulfilled every aspect of the law that would ever be placed upon us. There is no place else that the law could be fulfilled and in Christ, it has been met for us. He did it on our behalf.

So, beloved, when Jesus talks about fulfilling the law, what I want you to understand is that this is no abstract theological discussion that we're having here. This is why he can be your Savior. This is why he is qualified to intercede on your behalf. This is why you can have perfect assurance of salvation when your trust is in Christ because it depends on him, not on you. He is perfect and, therefore, it is all taken care of. It is a great exchange.

I've probably used this illustration before, I use it from time-to-time. Suppose you were a person in great debt with no means to repay and in that condition, a man of fantastic wealth befriends you and he says, "Give me all of your debts so that I may pay them," and he pays them. But then he goes further. That would be wonderful to have someone pay off your debts and just be restored to zero when you're under the weight of an incalculable obligation that you cannot pay. That would be wonderful but then that man, that wealthy man, goes another step further and he puts your name as joint owner on all of his accounts. He shares his immense wealth with you so that you are entitled to all of the benefits of all that he has. He took away your debt and then he gave you his riches. He shared his riches with you. That's what Christ has done for us. He took your debt and paid it but he didn't stop there. He went further and he has shared his perfect righteousness, his infinite righteousness with you, put your name on the account and it belongs to you through faith in him. Therefore, that is why we can approach God with confidence, not because we kept our quiet time today, because we have a perfect Savior, a perfect representative who has done it all on our behalf and now the doors of heaven are flung open wide and we come in grateful acknowledgment of that.

Indeed, I want to expand on this but Christ went even further than that and sent his Spirit to indwell us, to sustain us and to empower our Christian lives. We are on the receiving end of truly unspeakable grace. We are on the receiving end of a gift so vast in its significance, so profound in its value, so eternal in its ramifications that all we can do is shrivel in pride and just bow before God in worship and adore him for his greatness and gaze, as it were, in speechless wonder at our great and perfect Savior.

Here at the Lord's Table tonight, we remember this comprehensive substitution on our behalf. You're not saved by the works of your hands, you never could be. It's not your obedience, your prayers, your church attendance, it is not your baptism. Your baptism got you wet but it did not earn you righteousness with God. You and I are completely saved by the work of someone else. Our reliance is on another, the Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law just as he said he would.

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