

RIGHTEOUSNESS & THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

As we saw last week, Jesus fulfilled the Law in every aspect: moral, judicial, and ceremonial. He fulfilled it by never violating the prohibitions of the Law. He fulfilled it by always keeping the commands of the Law. He fulfilled it by becoming the King of kings and Lord of lords. He fulfilled it through His crucifixion, so that every Old Testament sacrifice was completed for all time in Him, and their effects eternally granted to His elect.

But the fact that Jesus fulfilled the Law of God doesn't end there. It does free us from the burden of the Law's requirements, but it does not disconnect us from the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) or the Scriptures given by Jesus to His apostles (the New Testament).

Here's a summary of today's message: The Word of God is eternal, just as God Himself is eternal, and therefore what WE do with it is of the highest importance, and in fact determines our eternal destiny.

THE WORD IS ETERNAL

So to begin with, the Word of God is eternal. Jesus says

Matthew 5:18 (ESV) – 18 For 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.

What did Jesus mean by *iota* and dot? Very simply, an *iota* is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, and the dot – the Greek word is *keraiá* – is any small mark used within the language, like a punctuation mark, a breathing mark, and so on. I love studying the Scriptures for a lot of reasons; one reason is that I am constantly learning. Here's something that I realized just this week. Jesus says not an *iota*, not a *keraiá*, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Both of these words refer to the **written** Scriptures. The Word of God is not a vague, insubstantial concept, but the words written on the page, words that you and I can read, study, memorize,

and trust will remain the same throughout time.

Jesus' meaning here, clearly, is that the Word of God, identified by the written Scriptures, are eternal.

That is exactly what Psalm 119:89 says:

Psalm 119:89 (ESV) – 89 Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

But the Word isn't just eternal; it bears quite a few of God's own attributes.

God is righteous. Psalm 119:7 says,

Psalm 119:7 (ESV) – 7 I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your **righteous** rules.

God is faithful. Psalm 119:86 says,

Psalm 119:86 (ESV) – 86 All your commandments are **faithful**; they persecute me with falsehood; help me!

God is wonderful. Psalm 119:129 says,

Psalm 119:129 (ESV) – 129 Your testimonies are **wonderful**; therefore my soul keeps them.

God is omnipotent. Isaiah 55:10-11 says,

Isaiah 55:10-11 (ESV) – 10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, **11** so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, **but it shall accomplish that which I purpose**, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent

it.

God is omniscient. Hebrews 4:12-13 says,

Hebrews 4:12-13 (ESV) – 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and **discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13** And **no creature is hidden** from his sight, but **all are naked and exposed** to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

God is perfect. Psalm 19:7 says,

Psalm 19:7 (ESV) – 7 The law of the Lord is **perfect**, reviving the soul ...

God is deserving of worship. Psalm 56:4 says,

Psalm 56:4 (ESV) – 4 In God, **whose word I praise**, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

God is powerful. Romans 1:16 says,

Romans 1:16 (ESV) – 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for **it is the power of God for salvation** to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

GOD'S WORD HAS GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

Because the Word of God is the speech of God in written form, the voice of God in written form, it deserves the same honor, respect, submission, and faith as God Himself. Disobey the Word, and you disobey God. Trust the Word of God, and you trust God Himself. Love the Word, and you love God. Despise the Word, and you despise God. Long for more than the Word, and you long for more than God. Consider the Word of God powerless, and you consider God Himself powerless.

I probably don't need to say this, but I will. It is not the PRINTED BOOK that we can hold in our hands that is equal in attributes to God Himself; that's idolatry. It is the MEANING OF THE WORDS printed in this book. THEY are equal to God in so many ways, because they are His Word. MY words are just sounds in the air or marks on a page. But GOD'S Word is living, active, piercing, discerning, exposing. It is the power of God for salvation, Why isn't Paul ashamed of the Word of God? Because he's not ashamed of God Himself!

TRANSITION: As the iota and the dot remind us, it is not merely the major themes of Scripture that are important, but every last detail. How does this work out in practical terms?

THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE STANDARD

Practically speaking, we see that the way we treat the Word, and teach others to treat it, has eternal consequences.

THOSE WHO TAKE THE WORD LIGHTLY

Matthew 5:19 (ESV) – 19 Therefore 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 ...

There are some, Jesus says, who relax the Word. Other translations say annul, or set aside, or break, or ignore. In other contexts this word is translated divorce or to send someone away.

The first king of Israel was a man from the tribe of Benjamin, whose name was Saul. First Samuel 15 tells us how Saul lost the throne of Israel. God commanded Saul, through the prophet Samuel, to go to battle against the Amalekites. Saul was to ensure that the Amalekites were completely wiped out; Israel was to kill every man, woman, child, and infant, along with all the oxen, sheep, camels, and donkeys.

Saul decided that God really didn't know what He wanted. So he spared the life of the Amalekite king, a man named Agag. He also spared the best of the sheep and oxen and fattened calves and lambs, and all that he considered good. When Samuel came to confront him over his disobedience, Saul insisted, several times, that he HAD obeyed; it was the people who kept the animals, not him, and besides, they kept the animals to sacrifice to God.

Doesn't God just love animal sacrifices?

1 Samuel 15:22-23 (ESV) – 22 And Samuel said, “Has the Lord as great delight in BURNT OFFERINGS and SACRIFICES, as in OBEYING the voice of the Lord? Behold, to OBEY is better than SACRIFICE, and TO LISTEN than THE FAT OF RAMS. **23** For REBELLION is as the sin of DIVINATION, and PRESUMPTION is as INIQUITY and IDOLATRY. **Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.”**

What a dangerous thing it is for us to read the Bible, see the words clearly, and then say, “Well, what God REALLY means is something opposite of this.” People do this with divorce, with homosexuality, with predestination and election, with all sorts of biblical teachings. We DO need to study in context, understanding the historical setting and the language of Scripture. But those who say, “No, God is fine with remarriage regardless of why divorce took place” or “No, modern day prophecy doesn't have to meet biblical standards” are rebelling against His Word. They presume to know the mind of God better than He knows Himself. That, the Scripture says, is iniquity and idolatry. Those who do such things, and teach others to do them, Jesus says, are least in the Kingdom of heaven.

THOSE WHO TAKE THE WORD SERIOUSLY

On the other hand, Jesus says,

Matthew 5:19 (ESV) – 19 ... but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

This isn't about legalism. Legalism is the belief that salvation depends on complete obedience to the letter of the law. The Pharisees were obsessed with practicing the tiniest details of the Law, but ignored true faith in God, and the actual purpose of the Law.

This is about true faith, the kind of faith that results in obedience. In James 2, James says that true faith results in godly works, whereas false faith produces no works. There is a big difference between SAYING to a starving man, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," and actually GIVING that man what he needs. The WORDS are worthless without the ACTION.

That's why the Bible says,

James 2:17 (ESV) – 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

And

James 2:26 (ESV) – 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

So now Jesus is talking about those who take the Word of God seriously, living by the precepts of the Word, and teaching others to do the same thing. 700 years before Christ, the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar invaded the kingdom of Judah. They took the majority of the people captive and brought them to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar decided to bring back young men, teenagers really, probably to use later on as liaisons with the people of Israel living in captivity. They were to live in the king's palace, be provided a portion of the king's own food and wine, and be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. After three years they would stand before the king and receive their assignments.

Well, one of those young men was Daniel. He was determined not to defile himself with the king's food or wine, which meant that he intended to observe the dietary laws. He respectfully asked their overseer permission for himself and his three friends to eat nothing but vegetables and water for ten days; the overseer could

then compare the four to the rest of the Hebrew youths, and decide for himself what was best for them to eat. The overseer realized that Daniel and his friends were in much better shape and appearance than the rest, so ALL of them received vegetables and water for three years.

Daniel obeyed a fairly small part of the Law, one that had nothing to do with morality. This small act of faithfulness, as the rest of his book reveals, led to greater and greater use by the Lord. I think we could safely say that during the years of Daniel's adult life, there was no one greater in the nation Israel.

TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

But I don't want you to miss this.

Matthew 5:17 (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.

Ultimately, Jesus Christ Himself is the one who observed the Law in its fullness, and taught others to do so as well, and without question HE is the greatest Man in the Kingdom of heaven. He IS holy as God; He PROVED Himself holy as Man.

Now, some might be thinking at this point that in order to be saved we have to live with exact precision, perfectly obeying every last point of the Law of God. Jesus even seems to encourage that thinking in Matthew 5:20:

Matthew 5:20 (ESV) – 20 For I tell you, unless **your** righteousness exceeds that of the **scribes** and **Pharisees**, you will NEVER enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Pharisees had self-righteousness down to a science. They followed an incredibly complex system of rules and regulations. No one in Israel could out-Pharisee the Pharisees. They prided themselves in being rigorously exact in their obedience to the commandments of the Law.

And rather than telling His disciples that the Pharisees were way too rigid and

upright, and that they should just take it easy and enjoy life, Jesus told them that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not righteous enough. He said that OUR righteousness must exceed, go far beyond, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, or we will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Let's bring this home.

What are we to think about this?

We must admit what it says. Jesus does not say that the scribes and the Pharisees took the Law the wrong way, and God really wants us to just coast through life and have a good time. He says that the most righteous people known in Israel were not nearly righteous enough. Jesus doesn't flatter our self-image, but drives home our sinfulness, our depravity, our inability.

In order to drive this point home, the rest of Matthew 5 is aimed at demonstrating just how far our sin goes. Jesus calls us to a radical obedience to the spirit of the Law, which does not reduce the impact of the Law, but magnifies it beyond our ability. The next two verses reveal this clearly:

Matthew 5:21-22 (ESV) – 21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not **murder**; and whoever **murders** will be liable to judgment.’ **22** But I say to you that everyone who is **angry** with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever **insults** his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘**You fool!**’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

This is not an easier Law to obey, but a much harder one. I have never murdered anyone, but I have been angry and insulting and demeaning countless times.

Why did Jesus do this? He wants us to stop trusting in our own ideas of righteousness and goodness, and instead turn to Him in humility and faith. The most hopeless thing we can do is to hope in ourselves, but if we hope in Jesus alone, then we will have nothing BUT hope all our lives.

Paul addressed this in Romans 10:2-4,

Romans 10:2-4 (ESV) – 2 For I bear them [the Jews] witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. **3** For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, **they did not submit to God's righteousness.** **4** For CHRIST is the END of the law for righteousness to **everyone who believes.**

If you seek a righteousness of your own, you will fail. That is guaranteed by the Word of God, which is, remember, equal to God Himself in authority and power. But by faith in Jesus Christ, the Law is fulfilled as far as righteousness is concerned. If our faith is in Christ, then our hope is not that WE will become better and better, and impress God with how good we are, but that we are declared righteous already, with the righteousness of Jesus Himself, the righteousness that cannot be improved, the righteousness which comes by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

If you have not yet come to end of yourself, then I pray that the Lord will open your eyes to your desperate state. You might impress yourself, or your kids, or your momma, but you cannot impress God with your self-righteousness. He won't even look at it; He rejects it out of hand.

But if you have given up hope in yourself, and put your hope in Jesus Christ, who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, then you have forgiveness of sin, the righteousness of Christ, eternal life, true and lasting peace with God, and every other blessing of the Gospel as well.