

## B. The King of the Kingdom (5:17-20)

Jesus introduced His discourse on the gospel of the kingdom by identifying and describing its subjects. Having done so, He immediately turned His attention to Himself as the kingdom's King. The fact that the Sermon on the Mount begins with a preamble identifying the two parties – subjects and ruler – associated with the kingdom of heaven suggests a quasi-covenantal form to the sermon. In the first place, all covenant instruments begin in this way for the simple reason that covenants are *relational agreements* and therefore have as their first concern identifying and defining the parties to the agreement. This can be seen in the examples of the Sinai and Davidic Covenants (cf. Exodus 19:1-8 and 20:1-2; also 2 Samuel 7:4-9).

This suggestion is further reinforced by the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most complete articulation of the gospel of His kingdom. Its message presupposes and addresses the in-breaking of the long-promised kingdom of God, and this kingdom stands as the fulfillment of the Israelite kingdom. That kingdom was governed by a covenant between the Great King and His subjects, and so it was to be with the fulfilled kingdom (cf. Jeremiah 31:31ff; Luke 22:20).

In this passage Jesus introduced Himself to His audience, but in a way that is foundational and profoundly important to His overall message in the sermon: *This brief self-introduction provides the critical framework for understanding the balance of the discourse.* These four verses are the lens through which the Sermon on the Mount must be read and understood, and yet they are arguably the most difficult in the entire discourse.

- Over the centuries – especially among those who embrace divergent theological systems – there has been much dispute concerning how to interpret and apply Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Classical Dispensationalism has generally understood Jesus to be articulating the “kingdom ethic” that is to govern His future millennial kingdom after His return at the end of the age.
- For its part, Covenant (Reformed) Theology has also tended to closely connect Jesus' instruction with Israel and the Law of Moses. But unlike those dispensationalists who regard the Sermon on the Mount as “law teaching” for *Israel* in the future millennium, Reformed people commonly view it as “law teaching” for the *Church*. Fundamental to this is Reformed Theology's tripartite conception of law (moral, civil, ceremonial). In the Sermon on the Mount in general – and these four verses in particular – Jesus is said to be concerned with “moral law” (which, by definition, refers to God's unchanging righteous standard to which all men are accountable and by which all will be judged). As such, the moral law is regarded as the marrow of God's law: It transcends every historical and salvation-historical context; it governed Israel as the essence of the Law of Moses and it continues on in the New Testament age, informing and directing Christ's Church.

This understanding is grounded in a “flat theology” that sees uniformity of the “one covenant of grace.” That is, the Old Testament Israelite “church” and the New Testament Church are both governed by essentially the same covenant. Once this framework is embraced, it follows naturally that the Sermon on the Mount will be perceived as Jesus' attempt to purge the Law of its rabbinical and traditional colorations and corruptions.

Viewed through the lens of Reformed Theology, Jesus' kingdom is, in important ways, indistinguishable from its Israelite predecessor: Both are the kingdom of God's "church" consisting of believing and unbelieving members governed by and accountable to His law. Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus' "*You have heard... but I say to you*" is so often regarded as His attempt to lead His followers back to the pure and unadulterated "moral law" as received by Moses on Mount Sinai? Is it at all surprising that Jesus' *fulfillment* language with respect to the law is understood in terms of *confirmation*, and that the righteousness associated with "keeping" versus "annulling" the commandments is viewed as Jesus' personal reaffirmation of mankind's enduring obligation to God's moral law?

Premise and presupposition are the "world" in which interpretation "lives." Two people ingesting and processing exactly the same content will reach very different – sometimes even contradictory – conclusions depending on the frame of reference they bring to the process. So it is for those who start with the differing premises of divergent theological systems, and so it was for the sons of Israel. Jesus knew that putting the proper "glasses" on His audience was the necessary foundation to His words being correctly perceived and understood.

The Lord prefaced the larger sermon with this particular self-introduction precisely because He knew His Jewish audience had an erroneous messianic conception and expectation. What they had been taught to believe about Messiah and His kingdom was radically and fatally flawed, and Jesus was fully aware of the effect His forthcoming instruction would have on them. When confronted with information that conflicts with their preconceptions and presumptions, all people instinctively reject as false what it is they are hearing. Only as an afterthought – and sometimes not even then – does it occur to them that the error may reside in their own preconceived notions.

So it was with Jesus' listeners: He knew that their conception of the Messiah and His kingdom was going to lead them to conclude that He was a false teacher whose words were directing them away from the truth revealed in the Scriptures. Believing that their own understanding was synonymous with divine truth, their immediate response to His contrary instruction would be to reject it as unbiblical and even blasphemous.

1. Thus Jesus' constructed His self-introduction so as to prepare His audience to receive what was to follow, and He did so by directly addressing the relationship between Him and His message and the promises set forth in the Scriptures: "*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill*" (5:17).
  - a. That Jesus was providing a preface to His forthcoming instruction is evident in Matthew's grammar: "*Do not **begin** to think...*" The Lord was well aware that His words were going to be interpreted as casting aside the teaching of the Scriptures and He wanted to intercept that false conclusion before His hearers had the chance to reach it.
  - b. It is also noteworthy that Jesus referred to "*the Law or the Prophets.*" The Hebrew Scriptures consist of the Law, Prophets, and Writings, but the gospel accounts frequently mention only the first two components when referring to the entire Old Testament (ref. 7:12, 11:13, 22:40; cf. Luke 16:16, 24:44; John 1:45).

That is clearly Jesus' meaning in this context, and His use of the disjunctive ("or") emphasized to His hearers that He was not abrogating any part of the Scripture (cf. vv. 18-19). Far from overthrowing the whole of the Old Testament ("Law *and* Prophets"), He wasn't setting aside even the smallest part of it.

- c. From what they were about to hear, Jesus' audience was going to suppose that He was setting Himself against the Scripture; what they should conclude from His words is that He is the *fulfillment* of the Scripture as Eve's promised Seed, the Son of Abraham, the Servant of the Lord and royal Son of David sent into the world to usher in Yahweh's everlasting kingdom. In the face of this initial declaration, Jesus' subsequent instruction would force the multitude to decide between two options: Either this One who stood before them was delusional or a deceiver, or they had misunderstood what God had promised in His word. If the former were true, this man was to be rejected and opposed as a false prophet; if the latter were true, they were in danger of missing the kingdom of heaven.
2. Having proclaimed that He had not come to abolish the Scriptures but to fulfill them, Jesus explained to His audience why that must necessarily be the case: *The Scripture is God's prophetic and promissory revelation to men, and therefore everything it reveals and declares will come to pass* (5:18). Given what it is, even if Jesus wanted to overthrow the Scripture, He could not.
    - a. Notably, Jesus mentions only the Law in v. 18, and this shift has encouraged those who understand Him to be affirming the perpetuity of God's moral law. But if *law* in 5:17 refers to the Pentateuch (as in Law, Prophets, and Writings), it would be unnatural for Jesus to switch meanings in His very next statement. *It seems apparent that He singled out the Law in order to emphasize its own prophetic and promissory role.* It went without saying that the words of the prophets needed to be fulfilled, but Jesus wanted His hearers to understand that fulfillment also applied to the Law – the Law of Moses as well as the Pentateuch of which it was the focal point. Just like the prophets, the Law had prophesied until the time of fulfillment (ref. Matthew 11:13; cf. also Galatians 4:21-31).
    - b. Jesus' assertions in this passage highlight a crucial point that is often missed: The Scripture – and Jesus is referring to the Old Testament – isn't a body of theological, religious and ethical content; *it is the inspired account of the progressive outworking of God's singular promise first issued in its germinal form in Eden* (Genesis 3:15).

The Scripture is God's promise of creational redemption, renewal, and restoration; in its totality, it sets forth the process and interpretation of God's work in accomplishing that eternal, unchanging purpose. And because God's purpose cannot fail, it is impossible that even the smallest detail of the Scripture that reveals it can go unfulfilled. Heaven and earth themselves will pass away before such a thing will happen.

3. Because the Scripture is God's word of promise regarding His creation, and because God is true, nothing in it can fall short of fulfillment; all the Scripture "prophesies" and all will be fulfilled. No one can abrogate it (5:18), and those who attempt to do so will be brought to account (5:19).
- a. Taken in context, it is obvious that by "commandments" Jesus wasn't referring to the obligations imposed by the so-called "moral law" (as supposed by many Reformed Christians). This sense is entirely foreign to the passage and can only result from imposing an a priori theological framework upon it.
  - b. It is clear Jesus was speaking of scriptural commandments, but ones that implicate the kingdom of heaven: *How one stands in relation to these commandments determines his standing in relation to the kingdom of heaven.* For this reason many others have concluded that Jesus was speaking of the commandments associated with His New Covenant kingdom (and so also the "righteousness" of conformity to them). Thus Jesus is said to be calling His Jewish audience to see their obligation to submit to *His* law that was supplanting the Law of Moses.
  - c. But Jesus' meaning is more subtle and much more profound. He was indeed speaking of commandments that are scriptural and implicate His kingdom, but in the sense that the Scriptures – the Law and Prophets – are prophetic and look toward fulfillment.
    - Israel's Scriptures revealed and promised the coming messianic kingdom, and the presence of the Messiah meant the arrival of His kingdom.
    - But the presence of the kingdom implied new obligations. *The kingdom of heaven brought with it its own commandments summarized by the obligation of faith:* The kingdom was at hand, and all were commanded to enter into it by embracing its King, thereafter wholly devoting themselves to His service and the cause of His gospel (cf. Matthew 4:12-23 with Mark 1:14-15; also Matthew 5:14-16; John 6:22-29).

*Thus Jesus was observing that the kingdom of heaven – being itself the fulfillment of the Scriptures – judges, by its mere existence, those who oppose it in word or deed:* It regards as "least" – of no account – those who annul its commandments and teach others to do likewise, **and this "annulment" consists in refusing its claims and obligations, whether by redefinition, obviation, or outright rejection.**

Conversely, the kingdom pronounces its verdict of "greatness" upon those who keep and promote its commandments – not those who obey a set of laws, but those who "obey" the Scripture by affirming with it that it has found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth and heeding its call to embrace Him in faith (ref. again Galatians 4:21-28; cf. also John 5:37-47). And these who in this way obey the kingdom's commandments will inevitably instruct others to do the same as they promote the kingdom's gospel and its King by being salt and light in the dark and unsavory world.

4. Though perhaps unwittingly, Israel's religious leaders would prove guilty of the very thing Jesus was warning about. They and their disciples would soon be accusing Jesus of abrogating the Scriptures, but the exact opposite was true: *In the name of affirming and promoting God's holy word, the Pharisees who interpreted it and the scribes who instructed the people in the pharisaic interpretation were themselves setting the Scripture aside by misunderstanding it and propagating their error among the sons of Israel.* Such persons were the disobedient ones of whom Jesus spoke; the ones whom the kingdom would reckon as of no account. This truth, in turn, provides the framework for rightly interpreting Jesus' summary statement in 5:20.

a. First of all, the "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees consisted in their fastidious doctrinal and practical commitment to what they believed the Scripture taught and prescribed. But Jesus would have the multitude understand from the very outset of His ministry that the highly regarded righteousness of Israel's holy men (Matthew 23:27-28) was no righteousness at all: In their zeal for God, the scribes and Pharisees were actually opposing Him, effectively annulling His word of promise by misinterpreting it (cf. Galatians 1:13-14 and Philippians 3:4b-6 with Acts 9:1-5; also 1 Timothy 1:12-13). And misunderstanding the promise, they also misjudged the obligation of faith it imposed; while believing themselves to be obedient to God's commandments, they were in reality "lawless ones," disobedient to the truth (7:21-23; cf. Romans 10:11-21, 15:30-31; 1 Peter 2:4-8).

b. Moreover, the reason for this misunderstanding and misappropriation wasn't a lack of divine disclosure or a shortfall in human intellect or knowledge. Neither was it obscurity in the Scripture itself; *Israel – epitomized in its religious leaders – was annulling the Scripture by its resolute insistence upon establishing its own righteousness rather than receiving God's renewing, transforming righteousness through faith as the Scripture commands* (Romans 9:30-10:21; John 5:37-47).

c. This is the sense in which a person's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if he is to enter the kingdom of heaven. Missing Jesus' point, many interpret Him as calling His followers to authentic uprightness in contrast to the hypocritical pretense that marked Israel's leaders. Only this "righteousness," they insist, will secure entrance into the heavenly kingdom. But misinterpreting Jesus at this point insures that the meaning of the entire sermon will be lost.

Ironically, such individuals find themselves (whether or not they know it) being in exactly the same boat as unbelieving Israel: *They, too, are missing the kingdom of heaven because of insisting upon establishing their own righteousness.* And even if their pursuit of righteousness has the best of intentions, such ones have disannulled the Scripture; in the name of obedience they perpetuate their disobedience, opposing the Scripture's promise (cf. Isaiah 51:1-11; Habakkuk 2:4) and denying its fulfillment in the Righteous One (Acts 2:14-36, 3:12-18, 7:51-53). These are the ones to whom Jesus will declare in that great day: *"Depart from Me you who practice lawlessness; I never knew you."*