The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION ELEVEN — Not to Abolish, but to Fulfill

Part Two: The People and the World · Texts: Matthew 5:17–20; Luke 16:17

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:17–20** *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill… not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished… unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*
>
> **Luke 16:17** *It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.*

The Question Everyone Eventually Asks

Sooner or later, every honest reader of the Sermon on the Mount arrives at the same question. We have heard the blessings. We have heard "you are the salt, you are the light." And somewhere in there a quieter question starts tugging at the sleeve: so — is Jesus starting a new religion? Is he tearing up the old rulebook? Did he come to cancel the Old Testament and swap it out for something newer and nicer?

A great many Christians, if we are honest, half-assume the answer is yes. We have absorbed a story in which Jesus shows up to replace the dusty old law of the Jews with the fresh new grace of Christianity — out with Moses, in with Jesus.

And Jesus, as if he can hear that misunderstanding forming across two thousand years, stops and heads it off at the pass. His answer could not be clearer, and for many of us it is the opposite of what we were taught. "Do not think," he says, "that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill."

Let's search the Scriptures together — carefully, because how the church has read this passage has done real damage, and we mean to read it better.

The Misreading Jesus Refuses

Notice how he begins: "Do not think." He is anticipating the exact misreading we just named — that he came as a wrecking ball to Israel's Scriptures — and he refuses it before it can take root. The word behind "abolish" is *katalyō*: to tear down, to demolish, the way you would raze a building to the ground. And Jesus says: that is not what I am here to do. Not to the Law. Not

to the Prophets. He is not the enemy of Israel's Scriptures. He is their defender, their lover, their faithful son.[1]

What "Fulfill" Means

So if not abolish — then what? "Fulfill." And that word matters enormously. The Greek is *plēroō*, and it does not mean "to end." It means to fill full — to fill a vessel to the brim, to bring a thing to its intended fullness, to carry something all the way to the goal it was always reaching for. A prophecy is "fulfilled" when it finally comes true. A seed is "fulfilled" when it becomes the tree it was always meant to be. Jesus is not the wrecking ball that demolishes the Torah; he is the one who completes the building it always was, who brings out its deepest intent and lives it all the way to the full.[2]

Hold those two words side by side, because everything hangs on the difference. To abolish is to cancel and replace. To fulfill is to complete and bring home. Jesus did the second, and he swore he did not do the first.

"Not One Letter, Not One Stroke"

And then, in case we still doubt how he feels about these Scriptures, he says something almost startling in its intensity: "until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law." Not one letter — the tiniest character in the alphabet, the little *yod*. Not one stroke — the smallest pen-mark, the serif that distinguishes one letter from another. Luke says the same: sooner will heaven and earth collapse than one pen-stroke of the Law drop away.[3]

Sit with that. This is not a man loosening the Scriptures. This is a man who reveres them down to the punctuation. Whatever else Jesus is doing in this Sermon, he is doing it as someone who loves the Torah so much he will not let a single mark of it fall.

A Word We Have to Get Right

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew 5:17–20 has no sustained parallel in Luke, though Luke 16:17 echoes the enduring validity of the Law.

[2]The contrast is between katalyō ("abolish"—to tear down, demolish) and plēroō ("fulfill"—to fill full, complete, bring to its intended goal). Jesus completes the Torah's trajectory rather than terminating it. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and R. T. France, on Matthew 5:17.

[3]"Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter" (5:18): the iota (the smallest Greek letter, standing for the Hebrew yod) and the keraia (the tiny serif or pen-stroke). It is the strongest possible affirmation of the Torah's enduring authority; compare Luke 16:17.

Now we come to the hard verse, and we must handle it with great care, because the church has handled it badly for a very long time, and people have been hurt. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Here is how that verse has too often been read: the Pharisees were legalistic hypocrites; the Jews trusted in cold, dead rule-keeping; and Jesus came to sweep all that away and replace it with Christian grace. Out with the law, in with love. I want to say this as plainly as I can: that reading is false, and it is not harmless. That very story — Judaism as dead legalism, Christianity as living grace — has fueled centuries of Christian contempt for Jewish people, and far worse than contempt. We do not get to keep it.[4]

So let us tell the truth about the Pharisees. They were not cartoon villains. They were devout, serious, admirable people who loved God's Law and wanted ordinary folk — not only the priests — to be able to live it faithfully in everyday life. In many ways they were the reformers of their day. And Jesus argues with them the way rabbis argued with one another: vigorously, passionately, as an insider — a member of the family disputing with the family — not as the founder of a rival religion sneering at an old one.

So what does "greater righteousness" mean? Not righteousness that is less Jewish, and not righteousness that is different from theirs. Deeper. Righteousness driven all the way down to the root — past the surface of the rule to the heart it was always protecting. Not a lower bar than the Pharisees kept. Not even a different bar. A deeper one.

How Jesus Fulfills It — Love All the Way Down

And this is exactly how Jesus fulfills the Law: he drives it down to its own beating heart. Later, when someone asks him for the single greatest commandment, he gives two, and — hear this — both of them come straight out of the Torah itself. Love the Lord your God with all your heart (that is Deuteronomy). Love your neighbor as yourself (that is Leviticus). "On these two," he says, "hang all the Law and the Prophets." He has not imported a new ethic from outside to replace the old one. He has reached into the Torah and lifted up the heart that was beating inside it all along. To fulfill the Law is to love — God and neighbor — all the way down. Paul would later put it in five words: "love is the fulfilling of the law." So the "greater righteousness" is not more rules stacked higher. It is deeper love: the love that reaches past "don't murder" to the anger underneath, past "don't commit adultery" to the way we look at

[4]On the "scribes and Pharisees" (5:20): the Pharisees were devout, reform-minded lay teachers, not the legalistic hypocrites of later Christian caricature. The centuries-old reading of Judaism as dead "works-righteousness" set against Christian "grace" is both historically false and morally harmful, having fueled real contempt and violence. See Amy-Jill Levine, The Misunderstood Jew, and E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Judaism as covenantal grace). Jesus disputes with the Pharisees as an insider, in the manner of rabbinic debate.

each other, past the ritual to the reconciliation. Which, as it happens, is exactly where Jesus goes next.[5]

Why This Matters for The Confluence

This is why, from our very first session, we said we would read this Sermon as the words of a Jewish teacher opening the heart of the Scriptures he loved — not as the founding charter of a religion set against his own people. That is not a small technical point. It guards us from a lie that has done terrible harm; it keeps us honest and humble before the tradition that gave us Jesus; and it lets us hear the Sermon the way its first hearers did — not as the abolition of Moses, but as Moses brought home.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread. The "greater righteousness" is love driven to the root — and love driven to the root is always love for others; a righteousness measured only by how many rules I keep curves back on myself, but a righteousness measured by how deeply I love bends outward, toward God and neighbor. And there is a second, quieter freedom-for-others here: the way we read this very passage is itself an act of love, or of harm. To read it in a way that honors and protects Jesus' own people, rather than one that has been used to wound them, is part of what it means to love our neighbor. Reading well is a way of loving. So ask with me: where is my righteousness all surface and no root — and where have I inherited a way of reading that quietly dishonors someone God loves? *Freedom for others may cost us a comfortable, flattering story about ourselves — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Before today, did you assume Jesus came to cancel the "old" law and replace it with something better? Where did that story come from?
- "Fulfill" means to fill full, to complete — not to end. How does that change the way you read Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament?
- The Pharisees were devout reformers, not cartoon villains. Why do you think the church has so often needed them to be the bad guys — and what harm has that done?
- Jesus fulfills the Law by driving it to its heart: love God, love neighbor — both from the Torah. Where in your life is a "rule" being kept on the surface while its heart goes missing?

[5] Jesus fulfills the Law by driving it to its own heart: love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), on which "all the law and the prophets hang" (Matthew 22:40). "Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10). The "greater righteousness" is thus not more rules but deeper love.

- Freedom for others may cost us something. What flattering story about "us versus them" might you need to lay down?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, go for the root. Find one "rule" you keep on the surface — a religious habit, a moral line you are proud not to cross — and ask what heart it was meant to protect. Then tend the heart, not just the rule: let the love underneath it actually reach a person this week. Second, examine an inheritance. Notice where you have absorbed the idea that the "Old Testament God" or "Jewish law" was lesser than the "Christian" way — and gently repent of it. Read Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, and give thanks for the tradition that formed your Lord. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, everything we have just said becomes concrete. Jesus begins a series of six great contrasts — "you have heard that it was said… but I say to you" — in which he takes the commands everyone knew and drives them straight to the root. He starts with the sixth commandment: "you shall not murder." And he says, in effect, let us go deeper than the corpse — let us talk about the anger and the contempt that get there first. That is the "greater righteousness" in action, and it begins next time.

Benediction

So go this week and love the Scriptures the way Jesus did — all of them, down to the last pen-stroke, the whole long story of God and his people that Jesus came not to erase but to complete. Refuse the old, harmful lie that pits his grace against his people's Law. And chase the greater righteousness — not more rules kept on the surface, but love driven all the way down to the root, toward God and toward every neighbor he gives you. Jesus did not come to abolish. He came to fill it full. So can we.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION ELEVEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. Sooner or later, every honest reader of the Sermon on the Mount hits the same question. We've heard the blessings. We've heard "you are salt, you are light." And a quieter question starts tugging at the sleeve: so — is Jesus starting a new religion here? Is he tearing up the old rulebook? Did he come to cancel the Old Testament and swap it for something newer and nicer?

A lot of us, if we're honest, half-assume the answer is yes. We've absorbed a story where Jesus shows up to replace the dusty old law of the Jews with the fresh new grace of Christianity. Out with Moses, in with Jesus.

And Jesus — almost like he can hear that misunderstanding forming across two thousand years — stops and heads it off. And his answer is the opposite of what a lot of us were taught. "Do not think," he says, "that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill." We're going to read this one carefully today — because how the church has handled it has done real damage, and we mean to do better.

[The refusal.]

Notice how he starts — "do not think." He's anticipating the exact misreading we just named, and he refuses it before it can take root. The word behind "abolish" is katalyō — to tear down, to demolish, like razing a building. And Jesus says: that is not what I'm here to do. Not to the Law, not to the Prophets. He is not the enemy of Israel's Scriptures. He's their defender. Their faithful son.

[Fulfill.]

So if not abolish — then what? "Fulfill." And that word matters enormously. The Greek is plēroō, and it does not mean "to end." It means to fill full — to fill a cup to the brim, to bring something to its intended fullness, to carry it all the way to the goal it was always reaching for. A prophecy is fulfilled when it comes true. A seed is fulfilled when it becomes the tree it was always meant to be. Jesus isn't the wrecking ball. He's the one who completes the building. To abolish is to cancel and replace. To fulfill is to complete and bring home — and he swore he came to do the second, not the first.

And then, in case we doubt how he feels about these Scriptures, he says something almost fierce: until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter — not one pen-stroke — will drop from the Law. The tiniest letter, the smallest mark. This isn't a man loosening the Scriptures. This is a man who reveres them down to the punctuation.

[The careful part — slow down.]

Now the hard verse, and we have to handle it with great care, because the church has handled it badly for a long time and people have been hurt. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom."

Here's how that's too often been read: the Pharisees were legalistic hypocrites, the Jews trusted in cold dead rule-keeping, and Jesus swept it all away and replaced it with Christian grace. I want to say this plainly: that reading is false, and it is not harmless. That story — Judaism as dead legalism, Christianity as living grace — has fueled centuries of Christian contempt for Jewish people, and far worse than contempt. We don't get to keep it.

So let's tell the truth. The Pharisees weren't cartoon villains. They were devout, serious people who loved God's Law and wanted ordinary folks — not just the priests — to be able to live it every day. They were the reformers of their time. And Jesus argues with them the way rabbis argued with each other — vigorously, as an insider, family disputing with family, not as the founder of a rival religion sneering at an old one. So "greater righteousness" doesn't mean less Jewish, and it doesn't mean different from theirs. It means deeper — all the way down to the root, past the surface of the rule to the heart it was always protecting.

[How he fulfills it.]

And that's exactly how Jesus fulfills the Law — he drives it down to its own beating heart. When someone asks him the single greatest commandment, he gives two, and both come straight out of the Torah: love God with all you are — that's Deuteronomy. Love your neighbor as yourself — that's Leviticus. "On these two hang all the Law and the Prophets." He didn't import a new ethic from outside. He reached into the Torah and lifted up the heart that was beating inside it the whole time. To fulfill the Law is to love — God and neighbor — all the way down. So the greater righteousness isn't more rules stacked higher. It's deeper love — the love that reaches past "don't murder" to the anger underneath, which, as it happens, is exactly where Jesus goes next.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: where is my righteousness all surface and no root? And where have I inherited a way of reading the Bible that quietly dishonors someone God loves — because reading well is itself a way of loving our neighbor.

Two things to practice. First, go for the root — take one rule you keep on the surface, ask what heart it was meant to protect, then tend the heart and let the love underneath it actually reach a person. Second, examine an inheritance — notice where you've absorbed the idea that the "Old Testament" or "Jewish law" was lesser, and gently let it go. Read Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, and give thanks for the tradition that formed your Lord.

Next time, all of this gets concrete — Jesus begins the six great contrasts, "you have heard it said… but I say to you," starting with "you shall not murder," and going deeper than the corpse, to the anger and contempt that get there first.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and love the Scriptures the way Jesus did — all of them, down to the last pen-stroke, the whole long story of God and his people that Jesus came not to erase but to complete. Refuse the old lie that pits his grace against his people's Law. And chase the greater righteousness — not more rules on the surface, but love driven all the way to the root. Jesus didn't come to abolish. He came to fill it full. So can we.

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Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.