

Sermon Transcript
October 14, 2012



Kingdom Life
Jesus: Rabbi, Redeemer, Regenerator
Matthew 5:17-20

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 14, 2012, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286.

Scripture Text
Matthew 5:17-30

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. 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. 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, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Introduction

Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*” “*All Scripture*” is “ALL” Scripture. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are “*profitable*” for equipping us to serve God.

As Christians, I think sometimes we neglect the Old Testament and fail to see its importance to us. With the coming of Jesus and the events of the cross and the resurrection and with the establishment of the church, we are far more comfortable with the New Testament. Understandably, we find the New Testament to be easier to relate to and better able to speak to our situation and our lives, than we do the Old Testament. And yet, “ALL” of Scripture is profitable.

Perhaps we complicate things by over simplifying how we distinguish between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is not uncommon to hear someone summarize the Bible by saying, “The Old Testament is about law and the New Testament is about grace.” Or others put it this way, “The Old Testament presents to us a God of wrath and judgment, and the New Testament presents to us a God of love and grace.” Well if that were the case, where would you want to spend most of your time? You would probably want to hang out more with the God of love and grace than the God of law and wrath. And yet, we are not talking about two different “Gods” here. There is not a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New Testament. Nor are we talking about a God who has evolved or matured over time. God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

So while I understand and fully recognize some of the distinctions that exist between the Old Testament and the New Testament, we can’t over simplify these distinctions to the point where we conclude that the Old Testament doesn’t speak to our understanding of God and his call on our lives. With a careful reading of the Old Testament and the New Testament, here is what you will find. You will find great continuity between these two major sections of Scripture. In the Old Testament you will find love and grace in the way God lovingly deals with the people of Israel and this fallen world. And in the New Testament, in the midst of the context of the grace and love of God demonstrated to us through Jesus, you will find commandment after commandment. In the New Testament, you will discover that grace does not mean that God softens his call for obedience. In fact, you will discover that Jesus does not merely call us to a way of belief. He calls us to a way of life.

You see this call to obedience at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24-27. Listen to what distinguishes the wise man from the foolish man. Both of them hear

the words of Jesus, but the wise man is the one who “does them.” The wise man is obedient. You see this call to obedience at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. We noted a few weeks ago that Matthew includes five sermons Rabbi Jesus gave his disciples as he trained them to carry on the task of making disciples. And so when Jesus commissions them, he reminds them of the goal of all of his teaching. He told them to make disciples by *“teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”*

God has not changed. He is the same today as he was when he created the world. Do you want to get the most out of life? Do you want to live as you were designed to live? Do you long for stability that transcends circumstance? Do you want to live with a sense of purpose? Do you want to know joy in life? The message has not changed. If you want to get the most out of this life, you need to learn how to live with God in your life. Contrary to what some may say to you, God is not opposed to your freedom and your happiness. He is passionately interested in your freedom and happiness. But you will never experience true freedom and happiness if you try to live life apart from God and his good rule in your life. Life lived apart from God keeps coming up empty.

It is with this in mind we read the words of Jesus starting in Matthew 5:17. He begins by saying, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.”* The phrase “Law and Prophets” is a Jewish way of referring to the Old Testament in its totality. So what Jesus is saying here is that his teaching is not opposed to what we read in the Old Testament. That was probably the rumor that was going around town at the time. The rumor about Jesus at the time was that whatever he was saying was new and contrary to what God had revealed up to this point through the Old Testament. Jesus says that nothing could be further from the truth.

“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. 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. 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, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Ultimately, what Jesus is saying here is that he has made a way for us to live with God in our lives. The whole Bible is God’s revelation to us of his will for our lives. The Bible tells us what it looks like to live with God in our lives. Jesus is the one who makes it possible for you to live with God in your life. Here is how Jesus makes it possible. He is our Rabbi. He is our Redeemer. He is our Regenerator.

Our Rabbi

In order to understand what Jesus is saying here in these four verses, you need to understand that Jesus is talking like a rabbi in these verses. When Jesus says, *“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,”* he is talking like a rabbi.

The Hebrew word for “the Law” is “Torah.” The job of the rabbi was to interpret the Torah. They had the task, much like a pastor has today, to explain the meaning of the Old Testament Law and how it applies to everyday life. So when a rabbi talked about “fulfilling the Law” and “abolishing the Law” he was talking about having the right interpretation of the Law.¹ If one rabbi disagreed with another rabbi over an interpretation of the Law, he would accuse that rabbi of “nullifying” or “abolishing” the Law.² It would be like a pastor coming to town and teaching that it is alright to cheat on your taxes as long as you give that money to the church. We would say of this teaching that his misinterpretation of God’s Word nullifies the command of God to render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

This is what Jesus claimed of the Pharisees in Mark 7:10-13. Their tradition of dedicating funds to the temple, freed them up from using their funds and resources to care for their parents in their old age. And so Jesus leveled this judgment upon the Pharisees. He said to them, *“Then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”* In essence Jesus was saying to them, “you are nullifying the Law of God by misinterpreting it.” Their traditions, their interpretation of the Law, kept them from keeping God’s command of honoring their father and their mother. Consequently, they “nullified” and they “abolished” the Law of God by their misinterpretation. The same accusation was leveled against Jesus, by the Pharisees, when the disciples of Jesus failed to observe the traditions passed down by the religious leaders of the day.

So when Jesus comes along and says, *“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,”* he is talking like a rabbi. Jesus is making the claim here that he has the knowledge and the authority to clarify the meaning of God’s Law and he has the insight to enlighten us as to how to live the way God wants us to live. He is showing us what life looks like when God is in your life.

D. A. Carson says of these four verses in Matthew that “they are among the most difficult verses in all the Bible.”³ After spending time in them this week, I would agree.

At the same time, Michael Wilkins says of these verses that they are “the key to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount.”⁴ They are key in this regard. These verses set the scene for what Jesus is doing with the Sermon on the Mount. He is interpreting for us how to live with God at the center of our lives. He is telling us how to understand the laws of God and the intent God had in giving us his commands. This is what life in God’s kingdom looks like.

Here is what you are going to find in the rest of Matthew 5. You will hear Jesus say six times, “*You have heard that it was saidBut I say to you.*” You see this formula introduced in Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43. What is Jesus doing with this formula? He is “fulfilling” the Law of God. He is interpreting for us how to live with God at the center of your life. Here is what we will discover. These words of Jesus are quite radical. They are counter-cultural. They are sobering. These words are invasive.

I can get my head and my heart around the command “You shall not murder.” But Jesus says to us, “let me tell you what that really means.” If you are angry with your brother, or if you defame your brother, or fail to seek reconciliation with your brother, you are guilty of breaking this command. Do you find that sobering? I do. I think this is what led one author to write in the preface of a commentary he wrote on the Sermon on the Mount, “I covet each reader’s prayer for my own growth in godliness. For I recognize that if my life is not as apt a commentary on Jesus’ sermon as this book, I have failed to hear the true voice of the Teacher on the mountain and this book is an expression of the hypocrisy that Jesus so despised.”⁵ I covet that same prayer as I preach through this sermon and process through the ideals of this sermon.

So here is what I want you to see with this first point. Having God in your life impacts how you live. Jesus offers us not just a way of belief, but he offers us a way of life. I think that is a challenge to the way our culture thinks inside the church and outside the church. Inside the church we work really hard to get people to a point of belief. While belief is important, the ultimate goal is for that belief to impact your way of life. And so Jesus is saying to us, “this is what your life begins to look like when God is in it.” This is what discipleship is all about. It is responding to the teaching of our rabbi who has come to fulfill the law of God by rightly interpreting for us what it looks like when God is in your life.

I think outside of the church, our culture wants to connect with God, but wants to make this connection on their own terms. That is why a recent study on religious life in America shows that the number of those who are unaffiliated with a religious group rose from 15% to 20% in the last five years. Many of these people claim interest in God, but not necessarily with the demands that come from God. We want to connect with God

on our own terms. But you can't. With a tone of authority, Jesus comes to us and shows us what life looks like when God is in it. Jesus is inviting us to a way of life. That is what he does as our "rabbi." In the Sermon on the Mount, he is showing us the way of life when God is in your life. We need to take note of what Jesus says.

Our Redeemer

Now here is our dilemma, especially if we were to stop here. One pastor gave this title to his series on the Sermon on the Mount: "The Glorious Impossibility." It is the recognition that when we read through the Sermon on the Mount we will discover that there will be no shortage of things and attitudes in our lives that come up short of what God wants from us. If you are struggling with finding sins to confess or things to repent of, spend some time thoughtfully reading through the Sermon on the Mount. It will cure you of any proud thought or self-righteous spirit. This leaves us with the realization that in order to have God in our lives, we need more than just Jesus teaching us his way of life as our rabbi. Because the reality is that none of us live up to it. So Jesus is not just our Rabbi who shows us the way of life when God is in our lives, but he is also our Redeemer who enables God to come into our lives.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 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.*" Jesus is saying that everything in the Old Testament, down to the smallest letter and most insignificant mark in the Hebrew alphabet will be fulfilled. How? How will God fulfill what is written in the Law and the Prophets? How will God fulfill every word that is written in the Old Testament? Listen to how Jesus answers that question in Luke 24:44, "*These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.*" The entire Bible points us to Jesus. That little phrase in our verse "*until all is accomplished*" sounds awfully familiar to a phrase we heard uttered from the cross, "*It is finished!*" Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:20, "*All the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him we utter our Amen to God for his glory.*"

So how does Jesus fulfill "every iota and dot" found in the Law of God? In one sense he fulfills it by his obedience. Jesus was tempted as we are and yet was without sin. The way of life he taught is the way of life he lived. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus obeyed. Unlike the nation of Israel, Jesus obeyed. Unlike you and me, Jesus obeyed. I find it interesting that Jesus prays this prayer in John 17:4. Praying to the Father, Jesus says, "*I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work you gave me to do.*" What did he accomplish before the cross? I thought that was "the work" Jesus had come to do. Well it is. But before the cross and before Jesus died for you, he lived for you.

Jesus was obedient to the law of God. Jesus was a righteous sacrifice for our sins.

This brings us to the cross of Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament, down to the “iota and dot” by dying on the cross for us because the penalty for sin and the curse of not keeping the law was death. When you read through the Old Testament you encounter a sophisticated system of blood sacrifices for all kinds of sins. And so Jesus comes along, the perfect lamb of God, and we read in Hebrews 9:11-14, *“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”*

As Jesus invites us to a way of life and as we read about that way of life in the Sermon on the Mount, you must keep this thought before you as you think of living life with God in your life. Jesus is not just your rabbi. Jesus is also your “redeemer.” You are going to read things in the Sermon on the Mount that are so challenging to our souls and where we live in the realities of life and you are going to feel as though you do not measure up to God’s standard for you. It doesn’t diminish the call to obey. But your standing with God is not measured by your performance. It is secured because of the performance of Jesus, our Redeemer, who fulfilled all the requirements of the law. So now through faith, he passes his righteousness onto us.

I read something this week that challenged my thinking and made me think of things a little differently. The idea of looking at Jesus as a rabbi is a field of study that has really gained traction in the last few years. In one of the two books I have on this topic, I read this week that the Pharisees and the rabbis of Jesus day, “contrary to popular misconception were not teaching ‘works righteousness’ - that you need to earn your salvation by observing laws. They assumed that Jews would be saved, not because of anything they did, but because of their election as God’s chosen people.”⁶ That is the point we made when we worked through Exodus. The Ten Commandments were given to Israel after they had been “redeemed” from slavery and made God’s people.

I was going through some more training this week under the person from whom I am passing InFusion onto to you. He shed further light on this when he said that the four basic teaching pillars of the rabbis were as follows. Get this, number one was God’s loving kindness. The second pillar that flowed from God’s loving kindness was mission

and that mission was justice. By justice the rabbi was speaking to the extension of mercy and kindness to the one in need. (The second pillar of their teaching was “Crossing the Bridge”) The third pillar was Torah, or the Law of God. And then the final pillar was on the people of God, the people of Israel. I found that very fascinating because it seems to follow the outline of Christian thought. The foundation of all we do is rooted in the loving kindness of God to us through Jesus.

We are going to look at the Pharisees in a moment and see that the way they went about trying to “live the way” led to legalism and consequently they became very judgmental. But lets be honest, that happens in the church as well. You can’t lose sight of the first pillar of teaching. The foundation that guards us as we make our way through the Sermon on the Mount is the love of God for us through Jesus our Redeemer.

Tom asked us this question this week. When you envision yourself standing before the judgment seat of God and hearing God declare that you are righteous, what kind of a scene do you picture? Is it a cold and sterile courtroom with God the judge simply proclaiming you righteous? Then the bailiff says, “All rise” as the judge exits the courtroom leaving you standing there in your innocence. The word “righteous” ultimately means “right relationship” not just “right standing.” It is more than just a legal term. It is a term of relationship. So Tom invited us to see God the Judge, not just declaring us righteous in Jesus, but he is standing there celebrating us, clapping over us, coming to us and embracing us. Like the father who ran after the prodigal son and embraced him, so does God with us through Jesus our Redeemer. God’s love is the foundation for the Sermon on the Mount. As we move forward in “living the way of life” that invites God to walk with us, we do so girded by the first pillar of rabbinical teaching. We walk with a God who has extended his loving kindness to us through Jesus, the one who has accomplished the requirements of the law and who extends to us his righteousness because of his life, his death and his resurrection. You can’t live with God in your life if Jesus is not your Redeemer.

Our Regenerator

So Jesus goes onto say, “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, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The rabbis would often talk about “fencing in” the Torah, or the Law. What they meant by that is that small sins lead to big sins and so if you can work on obeying the small

sins it will keep you from breaking the big ones. So if you fail to love your neighbor, you will be tempted to hate your neighbor. And if you hate your neighbor, you may be tempted to retaliate when he wrongs you. And if you are tempted to retaliate, you might actually get to the point where you murder him. So before you ever get to “thou shall not kill” how do you “fence in this command” with other commands so that you don’t break the commandment? It is not a bad thought. But the problem was that as the Pharisees sought to “fence in the law” they built traditions that led to legalism and self-righteousness and oddly enough led to actually breaking the heart of the Law, which is love God and love your neighbor.

This was a constant tension between Jesus and the Pharisees when it came to the Sabbath laws and traditions. Because they worked so hard at “fencing in” the law of keeping the Sabbath day holy by all their traditions, they in turn made it impossible to honor the day by extending mercy to the one in need. So when Jesus says that “*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,*” he is not saying that your “list” has to be bigger than their “list.” He is not saying that if they keep 490 traditions and commands you have to do 492.

See, here was the problem with the way the rabbis and the religious leaders went about “fencing in” the Law. In essence, they wanted to establish the minimum of what they needed to do to keep the Law of God. Do you remember the question Jesus was asked when it came to forgiving others. The question was, “How many times am I legally bound to forgive someone who offends me?” The suggestion was, “is seven times enough?” The teaching of the day was that after three or four times, you have forgiven enough and you need not forgive anymore. So the offering of “seven times” seemed rather generous and it “extended the fence.” See, what is the minimum I need to do to keep the Law of God? That is really what Jesus is being asked. So what does Jesus do? He tears down the fence to the Law! What did Jesus say, “Not seven times but 70 times 7!” Can you imagine the shock on their faces when they heard Jesus say that. That is an awfully big fence. But it is not a fence. Jesus was taking down the fence and was saying in essence to them the question here is not “what is the minimum I need to do to keep the Law,” but what is the “maximum” I can do to please God. And so keeping the commandments of God, no longer becomes a burden bound by fences, but it is simply an expression of constantly responding with love.

So when Jesus calls for a “*righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees*” he is not calling for “fences.” Rather, he is calling for the dismantling of fences and is calling for us to live a life of love. So he is going to tell us to not get angry with our brother and to reconcile with one another and to love our enemy and not retaliate and so on. The bottom line is that this way of life that Jesus invites us to is a way of love. But

here is the deal. You can't do that on your own. You don't have the capacity for it. It is born out of a relationship with Jesus and knowing that through Jesus God loves you. The reason we need a "*righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees*" is because it is not measured by lists that are kept, but it comes from a heart that is being regenerated by the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us. The fruit of the Spirit is what? It is singular! It is not plural: "fruits." It is love! Which by the way is manifested through: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Jesus is the "Regenerator" of our hearts through the Holy Spirit and as he invites us into a way of life, a life of obedience, we are being called to a life of love that comes from the power of the Holy Spirit. It is internal. It is looking for the maximum I can do to demonstrate love.

So the question I ask as a husband is not, "what is the least I have to do to love Bonnie." Can you imagine how our relationship would look like if that is what guided me in our relationship? But when I live the way of life with God in my life, the question becomes, "what else can I do to express love to Bonnie." The question is not, "what is the bare minimum I need to do to be a good neighbor?" Rather, the question is, "what else can I do to express love to my neighbor." Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is inviting us to way of life and it is the way of love and he is challenging us to push down the fences and extend God's love beyond the boundaries that hem God in and actually keeps God from others.

When this finally sinks in, it is liberating! "By changing our aim we are released from the burden of paying attention to infinitesimal rules designed to keep us out of trouble so that we can use our energy to love God passionately."⁷

Conclusion

I began this morning by telling you that you need God in your life. I think, even though the statistics tell us that 20% of our country is unaffiliated with any religious group, that there is a longing to connect with God. Sadly though, the very thing they are rejecting is the very thing that can make the connection for them. So how can we be part of the solution for our country? If they want to "walk away" from God, how can we bring God to them? We do so by "living the way of our Rabbi Jesus." He is interpreting for us the way of life that God intended for us. In order to live that way, we need to rest in the foundation of God's love for us through Jesus our Redeemer. From the fountain of God's love, we need an internal righteousness that is turned outward and pulls down the fences and is free to simply love those around us.

¹Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) Chp. 12

²Ibid

³D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1982)

⁴Michael J. Wilkins *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 227

⁵Charles L. Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church*, *NAC Studies in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), xv.

⁶Spangler and Tverberg