

The Law Fulfilled

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0 : 00] Jesus draws a contrast between himself and himself.

Jesus' meekness, humility, gentleness, and love marked him out in great contrast to the proud, selfish, and arrogant scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests.

His call to repentance and his proclamation for the gospel of the kingdom made people listen, even if they didn't understand or agree with him. They wondered if he was just another prophet, a special prophet, or maybe a false prophet.

They wondered if he was a political or military revolutionary who might be the Messiah they anxiously awaited, who would break the yoke of Rome. He talked like nobody they had ever heard or seen.

He identified himself with none of the religious schools or scribal schools, and none of the sects or movements of the day, and even none of the political rulers. Instead, Jesus openly identified himself and lovingly dealt with the outcast, the sick, the sinful, and the needy.

[1 : 32] He proclaimed grace, and he dispensed mercy. And all the other rabbis and religious leaders talked only about externals. Jesus taught about the heart. The rabbis and other religious leaders focused on ceremonies, rituals, and outward acts of every kind they could think of.

Jesus instead focused on the heart again. And the rabbis and religious leaders set themselves above other men and demanded service from those men. Jesus set himself below other men and became their servant.

The rabbis and the religious leaders taught from the law and the prophets, and that's what we now know as the Old Testament. So, whenever you see the law and the prophets in tonight's lesson, we're talking about the Old Testament.

The people naturally begin to wonder what Jesus thought about the Old Testament. He answers those questions in tonight's passage. He affirms the Old Testament, but he does more than that. Jesus actually elevates the importance of the Old Testament beyond what the rabbis and other religious leaders taught. Let's read verses 17 through 20 of Matthew 5.

[2 : 42] And, of course, Jesus is continuing his sermon. And remember, this is a continuation of one sermon. Starting in verse 17, he said, 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. The Old Testament represented the only written scripture at the time that Jesus preached this sermon.

Everything Jesus taught came directly from the Old Testament. And we see that everything he taught through the apostles is based upon the Old Testament.

[3 : 51] We can't understand or accept the New Testament apart from the Old. Jesus began his sermon with Beatitudes in the third person. Remember, he started with blessed are the poor in spirit.

He then continued in the second person. We saw that last week when we looked at things like, you are the salt of the earth. Now he changes to an authoritative first person. For the first time, we see a formula that we're going to see throughout the rest of the sermon.

He says, I say to you, or sometimes he says, I tell you. What Jesus taught in tonight's passage follows directly from what he's just said.

Verses 3-12 depict the character of believers who are kingdom citizens and children of God. Then verses 13-16 taught the function of believers as spiritual salt and light in the corrupt and dark world. In tonight's passage, we see the foundation for the inner qualities of the Beatitudes and for how we function as that salt and light. And that foundation is God's word, the only standard of righteousness and truth.

[4 : 59] The proper interpretation and applications of scripture set the standard for righteous belief, righteous behavior, and even eternal reward. That's the main idea for tonight.

The proper interpretation and applications of scripture set the standard for righteous belief, righteous behavior, and eternal reward. We'll break tonight's passage into three sections, starting with verses 17 and 18.

And in those verses, we have the clarification stated. The clarification stated. Jesus clarifies the priority of the Old Testament and the permanence of it.

Listen to verses 17 and 18 again. 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. In the introduction, we touched on how the people of Jesus' day were confused about him.

[6 : 08] Let's go a little deeper on that. His preaching was so entirely different from that of the Pharisees and Sadducees that the people were inclined to imagine his intention was to subvert the authority of God's word and substitute his own authority in its place.

Because Christ despised the traditions of the elders, the religious leaders thought he was a deceiver going about to destroy the very foundation of piety. And because he threw far more emphasis on great moral principles than upon ceremonial institutions, many were ready to imagine that he repudiated the entire Levitical system.

Because he was the proclaimer of grace and the dispenser of mercy, known as the friend of tax collectors and sinners, the idea became current that he was opposed to the law.

And because Jesus did not echo the prevailing theology of the day, he was regarded as a heretic. Jesus refused to identify himself with any of the sects of the time, and because he was outside them all, people wondered what his real attitude was about the law and the prophets.

The common belief about what the promised Messiah would do added to the confusion. Many expected the Messiah to introduce radical changes and possibly even overthrow the entire religious system.

[7 : 29] Jesus did introduce radical changes, and he effectively did overthrow the religious system, but he did that by elevating the importance of Scripture. Jesus had a higher view of Scripture than the religious leaders of the day did, and we'll get into that a little bit more as we get deeper in tonight's lesson.

Jesus' warning of do not think there in verse 17 indicates that most, if not all, of his hearers had a wrong understanding of his teaching.

Most traditionalistic Jews had considered the rabbinic instructions to be the proper interpretation of the law of Moses. And because Jesus swept away the traditions of watching, special tithes, extreme Sabbath observance, and things like that, the people thought he was overthrowing God's law.

Instead, he wanted to remove misconceptions about his view of Scripture, and he did that as he continued on tonight. The word translated as abolish means to utterly overthrow and destroy, and it's the same word used about the destruction of the temple in the New Testament.

It's also used in the New Testament about the destruction of the physical body. The basic idea is to tear down and smash to the ground or to obliterate completely. Doing that to God's law is the opposite of the work and the teaching of Jesus.

[8 : 52] And Jesus warned his listeners against thinking that he came to abolish the words of the law or the prophets. Let's look at what Jesus means by each of those terms. The law, as given to the children of Israel, had three parts to it.

The moral law, the judicial law, and the ceremonial law. Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers show that this was how God gave it. When we talk about the moral law, that consisted of the Ten Commandments and the great moral principles that were laid down once and forever.

The judicial law means the legislative law given for the nation of Israel in its peculiar circumstances at the time. The judicial law indicated how people were to behave in relationship to others, and it listed various things that they were to do or things that they were not to do.

The ceremonial law dealt with burnt offerings and sacrifices and all the ritual and ceremonial things connected with worship in the temple and elsewhere. Here, Jesus is referring to everything that the law taught directly about life, conduct, and behavior.

Notice that Jesus refers to the law and the prophets, and by including the definite article before each of them when he says the law and the prophets, Jesus made clear to his audience that what law he was talking about was the law of God.

[10:15] It was the specific law. And the same thing happens on the prophets. He's referring to specific prophets. Also notice that Jesus joined the law and the prophets together using the word or instead of and whenever he said he did not come to overthrow them.

The law and the prophets each represented a distinct idea familiar to the Jews, and so he's telling them he didn't come to overthrow either one of them. The prophets reiterated and reinforced the law.

All of their warnings, admonitions, and predictions were directly or indirectly based upon the Mosaic law. God's revelation to the prophets then could be considered an extension of his law, and the prophets expanded the moral, judicial, and ceremonial law.

They spoke about idolatry, adultery, lying, stealing, and all the other Ten Commandments. They warned the kings, the nobles, and the people in general about keeping the laws that God had given them for government, their lifestyle, and their worship.

So instead of abolishing the teachers and the teachings of either the law or the prophets, Jesus said he came to fulfill them. Jesus came with the express design of meeting the law's holy demands to offer unto God what the law justly required, and he came to magnify it by rendering it to perfect obedience, and he was perfectly obedient to it in thought, word, and deed.

[11:47] Regarding the prophets, his mission was to make good their predictions concerning himself by performing the very work that the prophets announced that the Messiah would do. Jesus' statement that he came to fulfill both the law and the prophets is a definite declaration that he had entered this world to bring in a perfect righteousness, which would be imputed to all of his believing people.

The Old Testament contains various kinds of teaching, and the relation of Jesus to all of these types of teaching differs, but the word fulfillment covers all of them.

The Old Testament first contains doctrinal teaching. The Jews refer to the Torah, which is usually translated law, and that means revealed instruction.

All the great biblical doctrines are in the Old Testament, but the Old Testament was only a partial revelation of those doctrines. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament in the sense of bringing it to completion when he came in person, and he did that through his teaching and his work.

The second type of teaching in the Old Testament was predictive prophecy. Much of that prophecy looks forward to the days of the Messiah and either foretells the Messiah in word or foreshadows the Messiah in type.

[13:09] But this was only old anticipation in the Old Testament. Jesus fulfilled that all again in the sense that what was predicted came to pass through him.

Again and again, Jesus claimed that the scriptures bore witness to him, and Matthew emphasizes this more than any other gospel writer. Remember how we talked in the very first lesson how Matthew continually says all of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet.

He always is tying back major events to what the prophets say and what they said. The climax, of course, was Jesus' death on the cross where the whole ceremonial system of the Old Testament, both priesthood and sacrifice, found its perfect fulfillment.

After that, the ceremony ceased. John Calvin said, It was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed.

They were but a shadow of what was to come. The subjects, or the substance, belonged to Christ. So listen to that again. Calvin said, It was only the use of the ceremonies that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed.

[14:23] They were but a shadow of what was to come. The substance belonged to Christ. The third type of teaching in the Old Testament contained ethical precepts, or the moral law of God.

But those precepts often were misunderstood, and even more often those precepts were disobeyed. Jesus fulfilled them all in the first instance by obeying them, because he was born under the law, and was determined, as he told John the Baptist, to fulfill all righteousness.

He does more than obey the commandments of God, though. Jesus explains what obedience will involve for his disciples. He rejected the superficial interpretation of the law given by the scribe, and he supplied the true interpretation of the law.

Jesus' purpose is to reveal the full depth of meaning that the law was intended to hold. So he fulfills it by declaring the radical demands of the righteousness of God.

And we'll see that even more as we go through later sections of the Sermon on the Mount. This is what he stresses in later sections of Matthew chapter 5, and we'll start seeing those next week.

[15:35] For now, though, look at verse 18. Jesus reinforces his point about the importance of the law. He said, Jesus considered each part of the Bible inspired.

What he's saying here is that the Bible is authoritative, even in its smallest part. What the ESV calls an iota and a dot are also called a jot or a tittle.

The phrase, one jot or one tittle, was a common expression referring to the most minute parts of the law. In reality, the jot was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the tittle was what we would call a serif.

It was a tiny protrusion on some of the letters. According to Jesus then, even an iota or a serif, which is what we call protrusions today, would not be lost until the whole law was fulfilled.

The New American Standards translation of verse 18 is easier to understand here. Listen to how the New American Standard translates verse 18. It says, Before Jesus gets into detail teaching about what the Old Testament scriptures really mean, he affirmed the accuracy of those scriptures, and he confirmed their authority.

[17:18] J.I. Packer put it best when he said, The fact we have to face is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, who claimed divine authority for all that he did and taught, both confirmed the absolute authority of the Old Testament for others and submitted to it unreservedly himself.

Jesus says that everything he's going to teach is in absolute harmony with the entire teaching of Old Testament scriptures. There's nothing in his teaching which in any way contradicts those Old Testament scriptures.

Every time Jesus referred to people and events in the Old Testament, he referred to those things as straightforward historical facts. Because the Old Testament scriptures are so important, somebody's view of those scriptures has either positive or negative consequences.

Jesus explains that in the second part of our lesson. Verse 19 is that second part of the lesson. Jesus has the consequences summarized in that section.

The consequences summarized. Verse 19 tells us about the consequences. As we look at this verse, we have to remember that Jesus is giving this sermon to his disciples.

[18:55] So he's talking to people who believe in him. The word, therefore, introduces the deduction which Jesus draws for his disciples. And this deduction comes from the enduring validity of the law and Jesus' own attitude about that law.

It reveals a vital connection between the law of God and the kingdom of God. Because Jesus has come to fulfill the law, and because neither an iota nor a dot will pass from the law until all has been fulfilled, greatness in the kingdom of God will be measured by conformity to that law.

Nor is personal obedience enough, Christian disciples must also teach others the permanently binding nature of the law's commandments. The law is still pertinent to those who trust in God because it's God's word and is exalted by the prophets and accomplished by the Messiah himself. Because the Bible is God's revelation of divine truth, the Bible's teaching are truths to be believed, its commands are requirements to be followed. And because Scripture is given by God for man, nothing could be more relevant to man than the Scripture's revelation.

Scripture is the standard of relevance by which all other things are measured. The consequences of the law depend on a person's response to it, and whoever responds positively will receive a positive result.

[20:24] Whoever responds negatively will receive a negative result. And we see the negative consequence in the first part of the verse. Jesus said, 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.

The word translated relaxes in the ESV is a common word in the New Testament. It can mean to break, to set loose, to release, to dissolve, or even to melt.

The idea here is that annulling God's law by making it void or by exempting ourselves from its requirements and standards is what we have to avoid.

Think about human nature. Fallen human nature resents prohibitions and demands. Even Christians are tempted to modify and weaken God's standards. Because of ignorance, misunderstanding, or outright disregard, believers find reasons to make God's commands less demanding.

But when a Christian ceases to revere and obey God's word in even its slightest degree, he is being un-Christ-like because that is something that Christ refused to do.

[21 : 39] We know, though, that Jesus himself indicated that some commands are more important than others. Listen to what he said in Matthew 22, verses 34 through 40.

But when the Pharisees heard that he, talking about Jesus, had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

Jesus acknowledged that one commandment is supreme above all others and that another is second in importance. All the other commandments fall somewhere below those two and, like them, they vary in importance as well.

[22 : 43] Jesus' point here in our text tonight, though, is that it's unacceptable to relax even one of the least of these commandments. Some commands are greater than others, but none of them is to be disregarded.

Someone who teaches others to relax parts of the law is an even worse offender. The apostle Paul understood the importance of teaching all of Scripture, and he told the Ephesian elders that in Acts 20, verse 27, he said, For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Then James said in James 3, 1, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. Jesus' words in Matthew 5, 19 apply to more than just teachers in the formal sense, because we know that in one way or another, every person teaches, and we teach by our example.

Through that example, we continually help those around us either to be more obedient or more disobedient to God's law, and we also teach that by what we say. When we speak lovingly and respectfully of God's word, we teach love and respect for God's word, and when we speak disparagingly or slighly of God's word, we teach disregard and disrespect for God's word.

And when we ignore the demands of God's word, we give loud testimony to its unimportance to us. The consequence of practicing or teaching disobedience of any of God's word is to be called least in the kingdom of heaven, and this refers to what God says about us.

[24 : 29] Our reputation among other people, including other Christians, may or not be adversely affected, but it's only what we are called by God that is of any ultimate importance.

Listen to what John MacArthur has to say. Determining rank in the kingdom of heaven is entirely God's prerogative. Jesus declares that he will hold those in lowest esteem who hold his word in lowest esteem.

There is no impunity for those who disobey, discredit, or belittle God's law. Though offenders will be called least, they still will be in the kingdom of heaven. But blessing, reward, fruitfulness, joy, and usefulness will all be sacrificed to the extent that we are disobedient.

John taught the same thing in 2 John 8. 2 John 8 says, Watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

So let's move to the positive consequences in Matthew 5.19 now. Jesus said in the whole verse, Therefore who relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.

[25 : 50] But here's the positive part. Whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. In the last half of the verse, Jesus mentions two aspects of doing and teaching.

Kingdom citizens are to uphold every part of God's law, both in their living and in their teaching. Greatness is determined by a believer's view of Scripture as revealed in his life and his teaching. Jesus' promise here applies to more than just the great teachers like Paul or Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, or Spurgeon. Jesus' promise applies to every believer who teaches others to obey God's Word.

And we do that by faithfully, carefully, and lovingly living and speaking God's Word. Not every believer has the gift of teaching the deep doctrines of Scripture, but every believer is called to teach and is able to teach the right attitude about that Scripture.

We know from the theme of the New Testament epistles that Jesus is speaking about the permanent moral law we talked about earlier. The Sermon on the Mount is just as valid for believers today as it was of those to whom Jesus preached it directly.

[27 : 05] Every principle and standard taught here is also taught in the epistles. The other writers make absolutely clear that believers have an obligation to obey God's moral law.

And this was reaffirmed by Christ and it still remains in effect today. And we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to do that throughout the entire church age. Remember what we said earlier about the three types of law.

The moral law consisted of the Ten Commandments and the moral principles that were laid down once and forever. The judicial law was the legislative law given for the nation of Israel in its peculiar circumstances at the time.

And the ceremonial law dealt with burnt offerings, sacrifices, and the ritual and ceremonial things connected with worship. In God's eyes, Israel was temporarily set aside as a nation at the cross when she crucified her king and rejected his kingdom.

In the world's eyes, Israel ceased to exist as a nation in AD 70 when all of Jerusalem, including the temple, was torn down to the ground by the Romans under Titus.

[28 : 12] And those events ended the judicial law. Israel's current restoration nationally is just a preparation for her restoration spiritually. And we know that is taught in Romans 9-11.

The ceremonial law came to an end. Also, while Jesus was hanging on the cross, remember that the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The temple worship and sacrifices were no longer valid, even symbolically.

And that part of the law was finished, accomplished, and done away with by Christ. The moral law, though, still remains. And our regard for and obedience to that moral law determines our rank in the kingdom of heaven.

You'll often hear people say that we are no longer under the law. We are under grace. That statement is biblical, but quoting that scripture alone takes the words out of context.

We have to let scripture interpret scripture. Turn over to Romans 6 so that you can see what I'm telling you is true. We're going to look at Romans 6, verse 14.

[29 : 22] Romans 6, verse 14 is the verse that talks about us no longer being under the law. And in that verse, Paul wrote, For sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law, but under grace.

Taken out of context by itself, the last part of that verse seems to contradict what Jesus said in our lesson text. But look up to verse 12 of Romans 6.

And when you look at Romans 6, verse 12, all the way through verse 18, you'll hear a much different message. So again, this is Romans 6, verses 12 through 18, this time.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

For sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under the law, but under grace. In verse 15, Paul even anticipates the question we're asking. He says, What then?

[30 : 36] Are we to sin because we are not under the law, but under grace? By no means. Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

But thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Do you hear the difference there when we look at the whole passage together? Just because we do have grace, that actually is what should enable us and motivate us to live according to what Jesus says we should do here in tonight's text.

We've heard Jesus state the clarification regarding his view of the law and the prophets and his relationship to them. We've heard him summarize how believers' ranks in the kingdom will be determined as a consequence of how they regard the law.

And in the last section of tonight's study, Jesus reminds his hearers and us about the requirement for reaching the kingdom of heaven in the first place. So in Matthew 5:20, we see the condition specified.

[31 : 53] The condition specified is your last fill in. Jesus said in verse 20, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Because we have the entire Bible and know what happened after Jesus said this, we view the scribes and Pharisees much differently than Jesus' original audience did. Before Jesus set the new standard of conduct, the scribes and Pharisees set the standard.

They really did more than set the standard. The scribes and Pharisees were the standard that everybody looked to. When Jesus spoke the words in verse 20, some of his listeners probably turned to each other and said, What did he say?

And perhaps others wondered, Did I hear that correctly? Let's consider what we already know about the Sermon on the Mount and how this verse fits with that. So far in the sermon, Jesus has talked about a Christian's character and the influence that that character will have in the world if the Christian exhibits this character and bears fruit in good works.

In verse 20, Jesus further defines this, and he defines the good works in terms of righteousness. Before verse 20, he's already talked about righteousness twice.

[33 : 17] Remember, we talked about the need to hunger and thirst for righteousness in the Beatitudes. That came from verse 6. And then in verse 10, we talked about the righteousness that his disciples suffer for.

That came from verse 10. And the righteousness for which believers suffer is for conformity to God's moral law. And now he's saying here in verse 20 that the righteousness has to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees if we want to get into heaven.

So think about what the original audience was probably thinking then. Once they realized they heard him correctly, they probably started thinking, I could never keep the law as well as the scribes and Pharisees do.

And Jesus just said that I have to be better than the scribes and the Pharisees to get into heaven. Obviously, that leads to the next question that must have been on their minds. And that would be, well, what hope do I have?

Is it just a hopeless case for me then? Even the scribes and the Pharisees realized that God's revealed standards of righteousness were impossible to keep. And that's one reason why they invented traditions that were easier to keep than the law.

[34 : 28] For traditions were more involved, complicated, and detailed than God's law. But for the most part, they stayed within the bounds of human accomplishment, things that man could do in his own power and in his own resources.

And because of that, the traditions invariably and inevitably lowered the standards of God's scriptural teaching. The whole system of self-righteousness is built on God's standards being lowered and elevating our own.

Keeping the traditions demanded a great deal of effort, but it demanded no heart obedience and no faith in God. John MacArthur said, the rabbis looked through scripture to find various commands and regulations, and to those they would add supplemental requirements.

And he gives a few examples. To the command to avoid work on the Sabbath, they added the idea that carrying a burden was a form of work. Then they faced the question of what exactly constituted a burden.

They decided that a burden is food equal to the weight of a fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put on a single wound, oil enough to anoint a small part of the body, and water enough to moisten eye salve.

[35 : 50] And then he continues, a burden was considered paper enough to write a customs notice, ink enough to write just two letters of the alphabet, a read enough to make a pen, and so on.

To carry anything more than those things constituted carrying a burden, and it made you a lawbreaker if you did it on the Sabbath. And if you think that's bad, the added requirements were more strict than the ones we just heard, because some strict interpreters of the law believed that even wearing an artificial leg or using a crutch on the Sabbath constituted work.

And they argued about whether or not even a parent could lift up a child on the Sabbath, because the child could be considered a burden. Of course, we know that they also decided that to heal on the Sabbath was work, but they made exceptions for grave situations.

That exception had a condition, though, and you only could provide enough treatment to keep the patient from getting worse. You couldn't actually fully treat him until after the Sabbath ended. So when you think about it, here we have an explanation for all the antagonism towards Jesus, which was displayed by the Pharisees, the scribes, the doctors of the law, and various other traditional religious people.

Here's an explanation of all the troubles that Jesus had to endure and the misunderstanding to which he was constantly subjected. They hated him because he said that the righteousness of those religious leaders was insufficient to get them into heaven.

[37 : 24] We've talked about the crowd's reaction already, but we need to understand that to his original audience who had grown up in this legalistic religious system, this was the most radical thing that Jesus had taught so far.

And to put it in today's terms, Jesus' comment about the scribes and Pharisees blew their minds. We'll see that in more detail next week, and we'll see that Jesus is just getting started with this introductory comment.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, more than any of the other Gospels, Jesus repeatedly uses Scripture to contradict and indict the superficial and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.

He doesn't always identify his teaching as such, but it's primarily the beliefs of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus exposes all the way now in the Sermon on the Mount through verse 18 of chapter 6 in the sermon.

The standard of righteousness that the scribes and Pharisees taught and practiced differed from God's righteousness in several ways. It was external, it was partial, it was redefined, and it was self-centered.

[38 : 32] The scribes and Pharisees concerned themselves entirely with external observance with the law and tradition. They took little consideration of motives and attitudes. The righteousness practiced by the scribes and Pharisees was also partial or incomplete.

You can look at Matthew 23, 23 and see an example. That's where the religious leaders were so meticulous in tithing the smallest plants and seeds of their garden, but they showed no justice and mercy to other people for being faithful in their hearts to God.

The scribes and Pharisees took biblical terms and they redefined them to suit their own human perspectives and philosophy. They reworked biblical teachings, commands, and standards to produce variations that were in line with their own desires and capabilities.

We would never do that today, would we? The righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees was also completely self-centered. It was produced by them for their own self-glory.

They wanted people to see how righteous they were, at least how righteous they were in their own minds. We mentioned earlier how easy it is for us to be critical of the scribes and Pharisees, but if we're honest with ourselves, we should react to Jesus' words in Matthew 5, 20, just like his original hearers did.

[39 : 56] In one way or another, everyone, including us, is guilty of some of the same behaviors that the Pharisees showed. So if entrance into heaven depends upon exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, what hope do we have?

The implied truth of Matthew 5, 20 is this. The purpose of God's law was to show that to please God and to be worthy of citizenship in his kingdom, more righteousness is required than anybody can possibly have or accomplish on his own.

The purpose of the law was to show how utterly sinful and helpless all men are in themselves. As Christ said in the first beatitude, the initial step toward kingdom citizenship is poverty of the Spirit, and that's recognizing our total wretchedness and inadequacy before God.

But I don't want to leave you on that note. There is an answer to what hope we have, and that answer comes from 2 Corinthians 5, 21 and other places in Scripture. Believers will get into heaven because they receive grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Remember 2 Corinthians 5, 21. It says, For our sake, he, talking about God, made him, talking about Jesus, to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. [41 : 18] We never can and never will be righteous enough to get into heaven on our own, but by repenting of our sins and trusting in Christ for salvation, we get the benefit of Christ's righteousness.

As Alistair Begg put it, only one answer gets a person through the gates of heaven if the person is asked upon arrival why he should be allowed to enter. That answer is the same one that the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus must have given, and that answer is the man on the middle cross said I could come.

Jesus fulfilled the law by dying on the cross and thereby satisfying forever the demands of the law against those who would believe on him. Jesus came to cancel the demands of the law against all who would receive them as their Savior, and this is taught by the law itself.

When the law was given, the Lamb also was given, and when Moses was chosen to be lawgiver, Aaron was also chosen to be the high priest. In ancient Israel, the law and the sacrifices went hand in hand.

God arranged it that way so that when a man sinned before the law, as everybody did constantly, those people had a means of atonement by which their guilt was canceled.

[42 : 35] The innocent sacrifices pointed forward to the full and perfect sacrifice of Christ. Sacrifices then were signposts to the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

God gave them to teach over a long period of time that sin meant death, either the death of the individual sinner or the death of an innocent substitute. Martin Luther wrote that Scripture's purpose was to make one proclamation from beginning to end, and that proclamation is this.

Messiah, God's Son, was to come, and through his sacrifice as an innocent Lamb of God, bear and remove the sins of the world, and thus redeem men from eternal death for eternal salvation.

For the sake of Messiah and God's Son, Holy Scripture was written, and for his sake, everything that happened took place. That's why Jesus could say, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have not come to abolish them, but fulfill them. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the reminder tonight that we have no way to satisfy your law on our own.

[43 : 46] Help us always remember that our salvation depends not on us, but on what Christ has done for us. Help us use that knowledge to become more and more obedient to that law, and also seek to point others to the same salvation we have.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.