

Basic Training: The Great Educator of God
By Jason Huff
February 21, 2015
Deuteronomy 9:1,4-6; Romans 3:19-26; Matthew 5:17-20

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 5:17-20. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with your bulletin insert. Let's listen to the Word of God. "[Jesus taught,] "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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.""

Have you ever gotten under the hood of your car and wondered, "What does all this do?" A few of you engineers in the building tonight could tell us! But most of us have no clue. I never knew what a catalytic converter was – or how expensive it was to replace! – until I had a car that burned through them every couple of years. We all know that a car needs an engine – but what does it look like? Do I have a 4-cylinder or V6? What's the difference? I never knew until I had a Mercury Milan with a 4-cylinder and Catha got the exact same car in the Ford model with a V6. One has no pickup and gets great gas mileage; one zooms around like a 4-year-old and guzzles gas like a 4-year-old guzzles milk. But one thing is for certain; if your car doesn't have an engine, you're not getting anywhere.

Tonight, the Sermon on the Mount takes a new direction. He discusses the Law and Prophets, what we call the Old Testament. He'll deal with it the next several weeks. Jesus is going to pull up the hood on the Kingdom and examine it with us. Tonight we learn that the Law is not something you don't really need; it isn't the entertainment system or OnStar. Instead, the Law is vital to understanding God and faith and why we believe in Jesus Christ; it's a necessary as the battery or the engine or the gas.

Jesus says He didn't come to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them. Why does Jesus say this? Jesus is about to blow the crowd's mind. He'll quote what the Law says about murder and adultery and oaths and then say, "But I tell you this instead." It will appear at first that He's contradicting the Law and teaching against it. He tells us right up front that isn't His intention. Instead, He's going to fulfill the Law and Prophets. That term has a double meaning. He's going to complete the Law and Prophets – He is the person they have pointed to all along – and He will "fill full" the Scripture. He's going to unpack its full meaning.

Why does Jesus give them this assurance? It's simple. When somebody shocks us or contradicts us or attacks our point of view in a conversation, we shut down right there. We stop listening. When a political leader that we disagree with makes a speech, we often miss things we agree with because we're too busy disagreeing with them!

Several years ago, I preached from the book of James about how Christians are called to be accountable to one another, to gently point out if someone is caught in a sin. Someone said I was encouraging people to make lists of other peoples' faults! I never said it, but when they heard "accountability," all they could think of was when people made "slam books" of people they hated in middle school. When we shock people, we often lose them to further conversation.

Jesus knew that when He explained the Law's greater meaning in detail, some in the crowd would think He was tearing down God's Law and stop listening. No, Jesus says – I'm here to explain its deeper meaning and to live out my life according to that true meaning. In fact, Jesus says, not the tiniest little bit of it is going to disappear until everything is accomplished. In Jewish thought, heaven and earth were the constants – the Law was so foundational, so bedrock, that it would stand as long as creation itself. They didn't need to fear Jesus dismantling the Law.

In fact, Jesus takes it a step further – break the commandments and teach others to do so, you're called least in God's Kingdom. Keep them and you're called great. Let's get some historical context to this. In Jesus' era, there was an obsession with law-keeping. The Pharisees made it their duty to follow the Law completely, and they believed they were truly righteous by keeping the Law. Even splinter groups like the Essenes, who lived out in the wilderness away from society because they thought true faith was being corrupted, were very legalistic. They saw following the Law as the way to God. In a sense, they were right. Jesus says if you practice and teach the commands, you're on the right path.

But the problem is that the Pharisees and teachers had filled the law with loopholes and interpretations. If keeping the Law is a matter of rules and not of the heart, then you're always looking for how much you can get away with. Kids do this all the time. "Don't punch your brother." Five minutes later, one's complaining, "Dad, he's poking me!" "Why did you poke your brother?" "I didn't punch him!" When I worked at a call center, everyone had their scheduled start time and scheduled fifteen-minute breaks twice a day. We had to define at what time you were considered late to work and late back from break. And people would still complain – "I signed in at 17 minutes and 5 seconds – that's still 17 minutes, right?"

The ancient Jewish rabbis did the same thing. Yes, you must honor father and mother – but they came up with ways to ascribe your net worth to God so you didn't have to spend it on your parents. Yes, God hates divorce...but if your wife intentionally burns your food because she's angry at you, you can divorce her. Some rabbis taught that it was your duty to divorce your wife if she displeased you. Yes, you must keep the Sabbath...but they wrote ways around it that favored the rich. Jesus condemns that here; they were teaching people to break God's Law.

That's where the last line comes in: "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." This was guaranteed to have gotten gasps from Jesus' audience. Remember, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were the most righteous people in Israel. And Jesus didn't argue that they weren't! Their righteousness wasn't enough. It's no wonder that the Pharisees were livid and the crowds were aghast. This one statement is the lynchpin behind Jesus' eventual crucifixion at the hands of Israel's religious leaders – and it's also the key to understanding why the Law exists in the first place, and why the Old Testament still matters to believers today.

So let's explore that. Why does the Law matter? How is it that not a stroke of the pen has been erased from it, even though Christians don't practice every rule in the Old Testament? In Galatians 3:24, the Apostle Paul explains that the Law serves as our teacher and tutor, our educator, to lead us to Christ so that we might be justified – we might have salvation – through faith in Him. The Law wasn't given to make us righteous by itself. Paul says in Galatians 3:21 that if a law that could give life had been given, we could have been made right with God through it. But that's not the purpose of the Law. It can't make us righteous. It's our guide.

Here's how God intended the Law to work. First, the Law tells us the good and right and holy way that God has ordained for His people to live. Some parts of the Law were specifically for the people of Israel, the parts that set them apart from their neighbors and their religious rituals. Other parts of the Law were universal for all people, the ethical and moral codes. A Jewish person had to keep every last bit of it to be called genuinely righteous by God.

Then God intends for the Law to convict us. In trying to keep it, we find out that doing so is impossible. The Law is often vague – how do you not do any work on the Sabbath, for example? It's hard to tell from the Law alone. The Law commands us to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind. How do you do that? You can't. It's unachievable by definition.

One option is to ignore the Law, disobey it, and live how you want. Many Israelites did just that over the centuries. Another option was what the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law did. They argued and debated and wrote down their interpretations of the Law in two books called the Talmud and the Mishnah. They believed if you followed their interpretations, you'd never break the Law and thus could be righteous. But that wasn't what God wanted either. Jesus says the Pharisees missed the mark of true righteousness and were still guilty before God.

The third option was to recognize your guilt in your inability to keep the Law and to turn to God in faith, counting on Him to rescue you and not your own righteousness to save you. That's why the Law exists – to bring us to Christ, the Savior through whom forgiveness comes. By trusting in Him, by having faith in Him, God declares Jesus' righteousness to be our own. That's how we are saved. That's how we have righteousness greater than the Pharisees. And once we turn to Christ for salvation, we can begin living life according to the greater meaning of the Law – the meaning Jesus will explain throughout the rest of the sermon.

What does this passage mean for us today? First, Christians own the Old Testament as our book too. Most people think the Old Testament is dull, and truthfully, it can be tough to read through the 613 laws and pages of prophecy against countries that no longer exist. It's hard work to understand the Old Testament. But worse than dull or difficult, it's seen as irrelevant. And there's nothing further from the truth. It is eternally relevant.

Parts of it don't apply to us now. Jesus accomplished everything on the cross that needed to be fulfilled, so we are not bound to the Law. We aren't obligated by any of the ceremonial laws that set Israel apart. The moral and ethical laws still stand, but if we fall into sin and break one, forgiveness is available as we turn to Christ. As believers, we live by the higher standards Jesus gives us, not the rules of the law. As Paul continues in Galatians 3, he says, "Once faith has come, we no longer need the supervision of the law as our tutor."

But does that mean the Old Testament is irrelevant? Absolutely not! Without it, the whole story of salvation becomes cloudy. We don't know what we're saved from. We don't have the examples of God's people throughout time coming to trust in Him for salvation. We don't see God's work in history. We lose the songs of God's people. We lose the wisdom He has shared through the generations. We lose the prophecies that point to Jesus, that give us hundreds of proofs that Jesus isn't a crazy person but the promised Messiah. Without the Old Promise, you don't have the New Promise.

Imagine that you fell in love. Now imagine that the person you fell for said to you, "I don't wanna know anything about you before I met you. I don't want to know about your parents or your siblings or your childhood or your school or your friends or your kids (if you have them). I don't want to know about trips you've taken or former careers. All I care about is who you are now and who we are as a couple." If that were the case, I'd tell you to run away...quick! Who we are now can only be fully understood by knowing who we were and what we've come through and how we've acted. Someone who didn't want to know who you were can't be that in love with you!

Unfortunately, sometimes that's how we treat the Old Testament. We aren't interested in it because we don't see Jesus on every page. But He's there. In every story, God is working. In every prophecy, Jesus is there. In the hard times and the odd laws and the confusing bits, He's there. He's God. It's His story. It isn't going away. Nor should it.

I encourage you if you haven't gotten into the Old Testament, talk to me and I can help you create a reading plan just for you that will help it make more sense. I'd love to set up times to talk with you about it. I am here to help you, to be your guide and resource, to make Scripture come alive so you can better know God and His rescue plan for you through both the Old and New Testament. Even if that sounds like a lot of commitment, take some time to read the Old Testament. We have reading guides out in the entryway. You'll find God still speaks through it.

Another way this passage speaks today – it warns us not to rewrite God's ways to suit ourselves. We aren't bound to the old law any more. In Romans 7:6, Paul says that "we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." But just like the Pharisees created loopholes in the ancient Law, if we aren't careful, we can try to create loopholes in the new way of life Christ has taught us and gives to us through the Holy Spirit.

James 2:13 says, "Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!" Yet how many of us wonder if we should show mercy to illegal immigrants? To the small-time drug dealer on a corner in Hamtramck? To the homeless man who threw his money away on alcohol? Jesus taught us to love our enemies...but the guy who fired us? The congresswoman who votes in ways opposed to God? The estranged child who wants our money but not a relationship? The gay couple suing a cake baker?

We always want to make exceptions, but God calls us to love them all. God asks us to live in a difficult place. We are to truly hate sin, all sin, our own sin and the sins others commit – we can't consider the sins of our friends and family anything less than rebellion against God just because they are people we like. At the same time, we are to genuinely love them and care for their well-being. We don't get the choice of what we consider sin, and we don't choose who we will or won't forgive. Instead, at Paul writes in Colossians 3:13, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." If we live and teach God's commands rather than bend and break them to suit ourselves, we will be called great in the Kingdom.

But the greatest thing for us to learn and remember from today's passage is what it hints at: Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, and He frees us from the requirements of the Law when we trust in Him in faith. The Law is how we know what being right with God is all about. In Romans 7:7, Paul helps us out – he says, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law." But knowing what God desires of us just makes it clear how far we are from it. In Romans 7:11, Paul writes, "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death." The law proves that there is no "good enough." You either have broken the law or you haven't. Everyone has broken the law. No one gets a pass. Under the Law, every last one of us is condemned – put to death physically, eventually, and put to death spiritually for all eternity.

That's why Jesus fulfilling the Law through His perfect life and His eventual death on the cross is why we come to church every week and pray every day and sing His praises in our hearts all the time. We can't be good enough. Jesus was perfectly good, enough to cover our lack of goodness. Are we as righteous as the Pharisees in following the law? No, of course not! Not even close! But we are counted even more righteous than they ever were because we trust in God for salvation; we have faith in Him that He will save us. We turn to Him for forgiveness and rely on His mercy alone. Because the Law has been fulfilled, we can be people of grace and kindness, of compassion and forgiveness. We have been chosen, washed, redeemed, and adopted into God's family. All because of what Jesus promises here – He has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.

How does that affect us in the everyday? We can live with joy! We do not need to worry about if we are good enough to be accepted by God. We do not need to worry about our eternal destiny. If Christ knows us and we trust in Him, we are saved! We can do good deeds out of the joy in our hearts. We can minister to others and let them know the saving power of Christ. We have the Holy Spirit working within us to guide us in God's ways. When we sin, we need not be overwhelmed by it, or deny that it is sin, or convinced we can never overcome it – Jesus has overcome sin on our behalf! The Beatitudes we studied are real – there is true happiness found in following after Christ. Live in the delight that the Law is fulfilled and sin no longer has to master us! We are now slaves to Christ and His righteousness and nothing else.

The Law and Prophets, the Old Testament, is incredibly good for us. They tell us God's work in our world and what righteousness looks like. They prove our inability to save ourselves and they act as our great educator to lead us to Jesus. They are for Christians to read and enjoy, because if we look between the lines, we will see the story of Jesus and our need for Him written on every page. May we leave here tonight rejoicing that He has fulfilled the Law and saved us.