

Matthew 5v17-48

I don't know if you saw on TV a few months back a programme on Channel 4 called "The New Ten Commandments". In it they polled 65,000 people across the UK to find out which of the original 10 commandments they felt were still relevant to living a moral life in the modern world, and what they consider to be the most important commandments in the 21st century.

These are the top 10 that they came up with:

10. Protect your family.
9. Never be violent.
8. Look after the vulnerable.
7. Protect the environment.
6. Protect and nurture children.
5. Do not steal.
4. Be honest
3. Do not kill
2. Take responsibility for your own actions.
1. Treat others as you would be treated.

That, according to the people of Britain, is how to be a good and moral person in the 21st Century. Only 3 of the original 10 were left, which reflects that most people these days see the 10 commandments, and indeed the Old testament as a whole, as distinctly irrelevant to modern life.

The passage we're looking at today is also all about the Old testament, what Jesus thought of it, and therefore how Christians should view it. Should we, like the nation, think it's irrelevant, or should we obey every word?

There are Christians today who don't bother to read their Old testaments, because the Old has gone, the New has come, they say. Others read what Jesus said in 5v3, that being poor in spirit gets you into heaven, and so say it doesn't matter how anyone behaves, because the Jesus didn't really care about morality and all that kind of thing.

A lot of people today think that the Old Testament was plan A, but then when things didn't work out, God changed his mind and decided to initiate plan B and send Jesus along.

While many today still try and faithfully live by the Ten Commandments, and recite them each week in church and keep the Sabbath special and all that. Is that right?

Well, this passage anticipates and answers those questions, and helps us to understand what Jesus thought about the Old Testament, and in particular, it tells us what kind of standards he sets for his people.

And what we find first of all is that the King has high demands of his people.

The standards of the kingdom are high

Firstly, v17, Jesus says that he hasn't come to abolish the Old Testament. READ v17a. "The law and the prophets" is a Jewish way of saying "the whole of the Old Testament". He hasn't come to wipe the slate clean and tell people to forget the Old Testament, in fact he says that *every single part* of the law is important, and not one bit can be ignored, v18 READ.

So his view of the Old Testament is very high – it's ALL important, ALL to be read and taken notice. And all to be obeyed, and anyone who teaches anything different will face the consequences of that, v19. READ.

So Jesus isn't in the business of sweeping the Old Testament under the carpet. If we're to follow his example, we must also be people who read it, take note of it, and who take it seriously. And who obey it.

And obey it? Really? Well, that's what verse 19 says, isn't it? READ.

But hang on a minute - anyone who is a Christian, or who has been to Sunday School knows, don't

they, that Christians aren't supposed to obey all the Old Testament Laws.

There's a famous passage in Leviticus 14 about mildew. If someone finds mildew in their house a priest is to come and inspect it and do all sorts of things depending on what colour it is and how deep it is and so on. When I was a student every house I ever lived in had mildew in it. Admittedly, that wasn't very healthy, but it was hardly something I should have called my pastor in to sort out, was it? Or do we need to be re-writing Andrew's job description?

Thankfully for Andrew, no, because while Jesus says he hasn't come to abolish the Law, he doesn't stop there.

Because the second thing he says is that he has come to *fulfil* the law and the prophets. V17 READ.

So the Old Testament isn't abolished, it's fulfilled. When we hear Jesus say he isn't abolishing the law, we immediately think of the opposite to abolish, which is to keep. "I have not come to abolish the law, I have come to keep it". But that's not what Jesus says. He's come to fulfil it, he says.

And it's this idea of fulfilment that we need to understand if we're to understand how Jesus wants us to see the Old Testament, and why we don't need to go home this afternoon and search high and low for mildew.

If only for that reason, then, take a deep breath and concentrate for the next couple of minutes as we think about fulfilment.

When you think of fulfilment, you automatically think of prophecy, don't you?

And it's easy to understand how Jesus fulfils prophecy:

They predict something, he does it, so he fulfils it. Simple.

But what about Law? Jesus says he also fulfils the Law – but how? "Thou shalt not murder". How do you *fulfil* that? Law is something to be *kept*, isn't it, rather than to be *fulfilled*?

Well, flick over if you would to one example of many, in Matthew chapter 11. Look at verse 12.

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John."

So, Matthew tells us here that the Law prophesies, too.

The Law has some kind of prophetic function.

Now when a prophecy is fulfilled, the way we understand and read it changes, doesn't it? It's function changes – it's no longer telling us something that is going to happen, instead it sheds more light on something that has already happened. So we don't ignore it, it's not abolished, but its function changes.

Now in the same way, if the Law *prophesies* about something, when it is fulfilled, the way we understand and relate to the Law must also change.

It will serve a very different purpose. Whatever is prophetic, must also be provisional. It will still be important, because it will tell us more about the thing about which it prophesied. But it's provisional.

Let me try and help you out with an illustration. It's an imperfect one, but think of the Law as an escalator. What is the point of an escalator? To get you from one floor of a shopping centre to another, usually. It's very useful. But when its job is fulfilled, when you're at the top of it, you have to get off it. And there's no point trying to stay on it, or to get back on to it. You start to enjoy and pay attention to the floor that it's safely brought you to. And once its function is fulfilled, the escalator step you were on serves a very different function, as it moves back down.

He's saying that the whole of the Old Testament points to him. The function of the Old testament is to get us to Jesus. The prophecies **and** the Law. He's the reason for the Law, he is its end point. He fulfils it. So to try and "get back onto" the law, to carry on using the Law even after it has been fulfilled, is, frankly, a bit daft. That's why we don't need to worry about mildew. Worrying about mildew is like staying on an escalator after you've reached the top.

So Jesus didn't come to abolish the Old Testament, to say "forget that, I've got something new and different to say". He came to fulfill it, to say "I'm here! The person that all prophecy, **and all the law**, are talking about is me, I'm here!" So get off that escalator and pay attention to me now!

He's claiming great authority here: "I'm the person that all the law and prophets point to, so **you better listen to my teaching**".

So when I said earlier that we must obey the Old testament, I stand by that. But with Jesus saying here that actually the Old Testament is about him, what obeying the Old testament means is simply obeying Jesus.

Being obedient to the law as in v19, means being obedient to the fulfillment of the Law – that is, Jesus.

Now that's quite a complicated issue that whole books have been written on, but in essence that is the relation of Jesus to the Old testament Law. He fulfils it, he redefines it, therefore the Christian has no obligation to it, they simply have to obey Jesus. There's a lot more that could and should be said there, but we need to move on.

Because we need to obey Jesus, then, and because of his authority, what Jesus goes on to say in v20 seems like very bad news indeed. Look how he starts it – “for **I** tell you”. Listen to me, he’s saying. I have authority. “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”.

Here’s Jesus’ answer to those who say that obedience doesn’t matter, that he’s not as strict as all that Old testament stuff. But if you were brought up in a Christian home or went to sunday school, you probably instinctively know that the Pharisees are, generally, the bad guys in the Old testament. They’re the people you boo in the pantomime. So it might not seem much to say that we have to be more righteous than them.

But that’s not how it would have been understood in Jesus’ time. The Pharisees were the respectable bunch. The ones who were seen as being devoted to God, upright, respectable, to be admired and whose example was to be followed. And they were the EXPERTS in the law, so surely if anyone knew what righteousness was, it was them.

But Jesus is saying here that those in the kingdom of heaven will need to be MORE righteous than them! More righteous!

The kingdom of heaven has strict demands. Entry is not for anybody – only for those who are righteous – extremely righteous.

It gets worse though. Look quickly right to the end of this chapter, because Jesus is even more explicit about the demands of the kingdom in verse 48. “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect*”. There’s no mistaking it is there. The standards of the kingdom are high. Being more righteous than the teachers, the experts, the people who knew all there was to know about the law. Being perfect.

So Jesus’ kingdom is not plan B, it’s not something out of the blue. He is what the Old Testament is all about. And He will entertain no thought at all of his kingdom somehow being second best to the Old testament’s standards. The standards haven’t slipped.

But if this amazingly high standard is to be reached, how on earth can we reach it?

That's the question Jesus goes on to answer in the next section. And if we've taken verses 19-20 seriously, it's a question we should be very keen to know the answer to.

How to meet the standards of the kingdom v21-48

And in answering that question, Jesus gives 6 examples of ways in which the Pharisee's' righteousness was not good enough for his kingdom.

Each of the examples starts with a statement of what the people had been taught. Now these all had their origin in the Old testament, but they seem to have been altered or added to slightly, if not in the actual wording, certainly in the way they were interpreted or obeyed.

Then after saying what they had been told, for example "do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment", Jesus uses that phrase again 6 times, that authoritative phrase "but I tell you...".

Once again, he's underlining his authority, saying that the way we obey the Old Testament is by obeying him.

Lets look briefly at a few of these examples.

The first one we see is about murder: Verse 21. "You have heard it said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment".

The Ten Commandments, as we probably all know, explicitly prohibited murder. But what the people of Jesus time seemed to have done was think that simply by not murdering people, they were avoiding judgment. "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment". As if stopping short of murder would be ok.

But according to Jesus, people are not only guilty if they murder, they are guilty, and deserve judgment, even if they are simply angry with their fellow man or woman, even if in their anger they insult someone and call them an "airhead" – that's the kind of thing that "raca" means.

Following the commandment "do not murder" is not enough. Jesus' kingdom has standards which are much deeper and purer than that.

To surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees, we must avoid anger.

It's easy for respectable people like us to look at Harold Shipman, or Myra Hindley, or Ian Huntley, terrible murderers, and think "well, I've never murdered anybody, I've kept that commandment". But that's why living by the 10 Commandments does us no good at all, because we are fooling ourselves if we think that that is good enough for Jesus' kingdom. We're like the Pharisees, smugly pleased with ourselves for obeying a commandment.

The next example is of adultery. Look at v27-28 READ. Here, not actually committing adultery with someone doesn't mean innocence in terms of sexual sin. Simply looking at someone with lust is actually committing the same sin. A sin which would deserve the judgment of hell, v29.

We mustn't pretend that just by not sleeping with someone, or just because we don't go that little bit too far with someone, we have avoided sexual sin. It's what goes on in our hearts which matters – verse 28, "he has already committed adultery with her **in his heart**".

If we are to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees, we must not look at anyone else and lust. We must not. Otherwise, we will not be able to enter his kingdom, because our righteousness will not be good enough.

These two examples show us the problem with trying to live by the Law. The Pharisees thought they made themselves righteous enough for the kingdom of heaven by keeping the law. But what they didn't understand was that there is a problem with Law. It can't legislate for what goes on inside people's hearts.

The Law can't legislate for what goes on inside people's hearts.

You see, Tony Blair can make as many laws as he likes, he can turn us into the biggest nanny state of them all, but he will never be able to outlaw pride, or anger, or lust. No court can adjudicate on things like that. A legal system can only legislate for actions, not attitudes.

So it is possible for me to live as a citizen of this country and follow every law there is. But I wouldn't have to be a good, moral person to do that. I could still do that and be angry and lustful and hateful.

But people in Jesus' time seemed to think that avoiding sinful actions would be enough. That they could avoid sin and meet God's standards by following the letter of the law. But however hard they tried to keep laws – however successfully they kept them, laws only legislate for what goes on on the outside. They can't control what our minds think, what our hearts feel, and what our eyes linger on.

So, in the TV programme the New 10 Commandments, 15% of people in Scotland said they kept at least 9 of the original, Biblical 10 commandments. But if those people think that that is good enough, even the ones who say they kept all 10, they are wrong, like the Pharisees.

If we want to enter the kingdom of heaven, we mustn't be like the Pharisees and be content to follow a list of do's and don'ts. We must be internally righteous. We must be as concerned with the state of our hearts as with our actions.

But there's another problem with Law, and that is that sinful humans twist it and domesticate it and look to get around it in all sorts of ways. That's what the Pharisees seemed to be doing in the next few examples, though we'll only look at one – the one about oaths, in verses 33-37. READ

Somehow it had become allowable for people to break oaths that weren't made to the Lord. So someone could say "I swear **by Jerusalem** that I will pay you back tomorrow", and not actually have to stick to it, because the letter of the Law said that only swearing by God had to be stuck to. (Quite how this system worked I don't know, because you'd have to be a bit dull to swear by Jerusalem, because no-one would take your word for it!).

But however it worked in practice, a Law that had been intended to ensure truthfulness, had been twisted, and wriggled out of, in order to make it possible to lie without sinning. No! says Jesus. "All promises are made before God, because God has authority over everything, so all promises should be kept. And so don't bother swearing by anything at all". Let your Yes be Yes, and Your No be NO.

But sinful human hearts will always twist Law.

Most famously of all, The President of the United States tried to twist the Law. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman". When it was clear to all that **something** had obviously gone on between Bill and Monica. But that's the kind of thing that we all do, isn't it?

"yes, I **know** I promised I'd do that, but..."

"yes, but he's never liked me, so how can I be expected to be nice to him"

"yes, but all that really matters is that we love each other and are committed to each other, so Jesus doesn't really mind me sleeping with them"

Doing that kind of thing is not acceptable in the kingdom.

By doing that we will not get into the kingdom, because Jesus, in his authority, says that that is wrong.

Those are all the examples we're going to look at. Read the others for yourselves sometime and I think you'll see that similar principles are at work there. And examine your own hearts to see the way you twist law, or are simply happy to obey external law rather than worry about your heart.

But we need to take a step back and think about the bigger picture here:

What we've seen is that Jesus' argument goes something like this:

"The Old Testament is all about me, I fulfill it, and I demand perfect righteousness. Forget what **you** might think the Old testament says, listen to what **I'm** saying it's actually about, and obey me."

And what we've found is that his standards are more challenging and more demanding than any legal system could ever be, they go a whole lot further than the original laws themselves ever did.

The original laws could not legislate for the affairs of the heart, and they could not stop people from twisting them and domesticating them.

But Jesus' law does concern the heart, and there's no getting away from that.

But what are we to make of all of this?

The most important thing to recognize is that Jesus is being serious here. These are not some set of ideas, some slightly unrealistic and unreasonable demands that we can explain away. These chapters aren't meant to induce in us some kind of sentimental do-goodism. Jesus' kingdom demands perfection, perfection of the heart, and nothing less will do.

This is serious stuff. It's a matter of life and death, of heaven and hell. Jesus makes that abundantly clear.

Anger and lust put people in danger of hell. Please believe that. It's not me saying that to you, it's Jesus, and it's there in black and white in the first two examples.

Secondly, we must all surely recognize that we do not match up to these standards that Jesus sets. I don't, and neither do you. Because I would be brave enough to say that there is no-one here, myself included, who has, for example, not committed adultery, whether actual adultery, or adultery by Jesus definition, in their heart.

We have to recognize that. We must not be like the Pharisees, twisting the law and explaining away our sins.

We might also be in danger of twisting what Jesus says here by thinking that he's really just exaggerating or just trying to scare us. But he's not. He's serious, and we don't match up, however respectable we look on the outside.

Thirdly, if we face those facts, that Jesus is serious, and that we have failed to live up to his standards, there is only one thing we can do, isn't there?

It's not to justify ourselves, it's not to wriggle out of it by some crafty logic. The only thing we can do is to fall at his feet, and beg for mercy.

Beg for mercy.

The fire of hell, the locking in prison with no reprieve, is what we deserve.

That's what King Jesus should do with his rebellious subjects – punish them. So we can only beg for mercy.

The good news, though – the glorious news, is that it is possible to receive mercy. **It is possible to receive forgiveness.**

Jesus has already hinted at that in the passage we studied last week. Matthew 5 v3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

So the kingdom of heaven is open to those who beg for mercy, who realize their sin and their failing and who crawl on their knees to Jesus, knowing they have nothing to offer him at all, knowing that they deserve punishment. Knowing that their righteousness is not great, that they are not perfect.

You may be left asking, though, what about righteousness? Didn't Jesus say that only the righteous and the perfect can enter his kingdom? How come suddenly I'm saying that being poor in spirit and begging for mercy will get me there? What happened to righteousness?

Well turn with me to Romans, chapter 3, verse 21:

"but now, a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the prophets and the Law testify".

This is the good news of the kingdom of heaven. While Matthew 5 leaves us on our knees, realizing

our sin, our wickedness, realizing that we have no rightful place in heaven, with absolutely no hope of ever being righteous enough ourselves, the rest of the New Testament does spell out the good news. The good news that even though the King demands perfect righteousness, even though his subjects fail to meet that standard and cannot attain that righteousness, it is made freely available through Jesus Christ - to those who see their need for it and who beg for it.

That is good news, isn't it? Isn't that the best news you've ever heard?

But the danger for us, particularly if we've been a Christian for a while, is that this all becomes a bit stale, and we go away thinking - oh, yeah, isn't the gospel great, forgiveness, mercy, brilliant. Righteousness, yeah, whatever, no big deal, I can get it freely, I don't have to worry too much about that. And sin, well, it's all forgiven, I need to say sorry for it and probably shouldn't get drunk too often and really mustn't have sex before I get married.

The danger is that we stop trying to strive for perfection, because we know we're forgiven and so think it doesn't matter.

But if we have that attitude, we have to worry about ourselves, and we're not taking this passage seriously.

Because this passage warns us that sin is terribly important. Look at what Jesus commands people to do in verses 23-26, and especially 29-30. We must take drastic action to avoid sin, we must do everything we possibly can to avoid it. Just because as Christians we know that we can have free forgiveness in Christ, does not mean that we can take sin lightly.

Why? Because if Jesus is our King, we as his subjects must obey him. That's what happens in a kingdom, isn't it? The King is to be obeyed.

Subjects of the king must strive for radical holiness, for perfect righteousness of the heart, because, quite simply, that's what our King demands.

Our loyalty to the King, and our place in the kingdom, will be proved by how much we desire to obey his law, in our hearts as well as our actions. And by how much we fight to meet his perfect standards, and by how seriously we take our sin.

Let's pray.