

A Law Fulfilled and Our Needs Revealed

Pastor Chris Baker // 06.02.19 // Centralia FBC

Intro

The video you just watched was produced by a ministry called The Bible Project. They're a non-profit animation studio that produces videos to make the biblical story accessible and understandable to everyone, everywhere. If you're looking for an overview of a particular book or theological idea I'd recommend you visit thebibleproject.com to watch one of their videos or even donate to their ministry.

It's rare that we'll watch such a long video during a service but the text we're studying this morning takes us to a topic that is a little fuzzy for many of us. We know there are laws in the Bible. Some of them are pretty straight forward. We have the 10 Commandments. We get most of that. Do not murder. That's pretty simple. But you heard the video, there are 613 Laws in the Old Testament. What do we do with all of them? Some of them aren't that clear, are they?

Leviticus 19:19 says "**You are to keep my statutes. Do not crossbreed two different kinds of your livestock, sow your fields with two kinds of seed, or put on a garment made of two kinds of material.**

Ok, we get it. If you have a Labradoodle, you wear polyester, and you plant both corn and beans you're going to hell. That's strange. That's probably not what it means but it's in the Bible.

Deuteronomy 22:12 tells us to dress like Elton John: **Make tassels on the four corners of the outer garment you wear.** And Leviticus 19:27 tells us to grow sideburns and a beard: **You are not to cut off the hair at the sides of your head or mar the edge of your beard.**

I don't just throw these things out there to be funny. They're really in the Bible and they really matter for something. These are not useless verses and we need to understand why God placed them in Scripture. We believe 2 Timothy 3:16-17

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

If we believe 'all scripture' is profitable, the Old Testament Law is profitable, too. Let's hear what Jesus says about it in our text today, then we'll pray for His guidance as we dive into His teaching together. This is the Word of the Lord:

17 "Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

Sovereign God—you are good. And You have given us a good law to point out our shortcomings and to point us to You. Help us, we pray, to understand it, to trust it, to stake our very lives on it, and to rightly apply it to everyday life. We ask for focused hearts and clear minds in the next few minutes as we examine this text together. Please grant us a clearer understanding today of both the Law and the One who fulfilled it on our behalf for it is through His name, the name of Jesus Christ, that we pray. Amen.

There is so much in these four verses we could spend two or three sermons digging into them and not wring all the good stuff out. We are trying to get an overview of this section in one sermon, knowing that as we explore Jesus' interpretation of the Law in the following passages that we'll be bouncing back here a few times over the course of the next few weeks.

Here's what I think this overview will teach us: *Jesus fulfills the Law and in doing so reveals our need for a Savior.* And we're going to see that overarching truth by examining just two elements of Jesus' statement about the Law.

God's Law is Steadfast

The first element is that the Law of God is Steadfast. It's permanent. We'll see that in just a minute, but first let me make sure we are clear on what Jesus means when He says the Law or the Prophets in verse 17.

When we hear the Law, we might think of the 10 Commandments, or maybe the first five books of the Bible (all written by Moses). He was talking about those things, but not just those things. He was referencing the Scriptures, what we now know as the Old Testament.

He was not, however, referencing the additional laws imposed on Israelites by their rabbis over the centuries. You see, as the video we watched earlier referenced, they went through the Old Testament and

pulled out each of the 613 commands God gave to His people. To break any of those commands is sinful. So what their teachers, the rabbis, did was to come along and build a fence around those laws.

So if you're not allowed to do work on the Sabbath and carrying a moving a piece of furniture into your house is work, then is it work to move it from room-to-room? If it is, then is it work to move your chair out from the table to sit down on it? We don't want to do work on the Sabbath, so let's make a law that says you can't even physically move a piece of furniture on that day because that may constitute work.

I made that example up, but those were questions they tried to answer and the rabbis came up with all these extra laws on top of those 613 so that they would insulate themselves from breaking God's law. The desire to not break God's Law is good. But imposing man's rules passing them off as righteousness is sinful.

Jesus, in fact, slams the Pharisees and the scribes in Matthew 15 for breaking God's commandments for the traditions of men. They loved their own laws more than God's.

Jesus isn't talking about man's law in our text today, He's talking about God's law. And God's Law, the entire Old Testament here, is steadfast. Jesus didn't come to abolish it.

We see from the very beginning of Jesus' first teaching in His earthly ministry that He is a very different kind of teacher. The rabbinical additions to the Law were all about outward behavior. Jesus, instead, begins His teaching with the inner workings of His disciples' hearts.

We've already studied the Beatitudes. These characteristics of those who belong to Christ that begin to grow as a result of His Lordship in your life. Then we saw His salt and light statements about how His people are to live. So we have who you are and how you are to live and both of those things grow out of radical heart obedience to Christ and His teachings.

Jesus didn't start His teaching with the Law. But that isn't because he views the Law as meaningless.

No, He makes it clear He has the highest regard for the Law. He said He didn't come to abolish or to destroy the Law. Instead, He came to fulfill it. That's why it stands forever, by the way. The Law is steadfast. The Law is permanent *because* it meets its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

To understand that fully, we need to understand a little bit about the Law itself. What does it mean when we look at the Old Testament as the Law of God?

Paul helps us see it in Galatians 3. We're going to focus on verse 24, but I want to start reading in verse 19 to give you the context. This is another passage we could spend weeks on. Paul says:

19 Why then was the law given? It was added for the sake of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise was made would come. The law was put into effect through angels by means of a mediator. 20 Now a mediator is not just for one person alone, but God is one. 21 Is the law therefore contrary to God's promises? Absolutely not! For if the law had been granted with the ability to give life, then righteousness would certainly be on the basis of the law. 22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin's power, so that the promise might be given on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ to those who believe. 23 Before this faith came, we were confined under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith was revealed. 24 The law, then, was our guardian until Christ, so that we could be justified by faith. 25 But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus.

The law was our guardian. The King James Version helpfully translates that word as 'schoolmaster.' The New American Standard Bible translates it tutor. I love all those translations because they help us see roundly what this Greek word means. It carries with it the idea of both teaching and guarding.

The Law was given to teach us what true righteousness really looks like. If you want to be acceptable in God's sight, you need to be righteous. How can you be righteous? Keep the Law.

We see the need for Law, or for righteousness, almost immediately in Scripture as Adam and Eve sin in the garden and are separated from God. The only way to get back into relationship with God is to be righteous.

The earliest hint we have that this righteousness comes from outside of us happens in Genesis 3:15 when God tells Eve her offspring would crush the head of the serpent of sin once-and-for-all.

God gradually reveals more of His righteousness through the Law to His people, first through a family and then through a nation. That particular revelation culminates in the giving of the Law in the wilderness. And after the giving of the Law comes the prophets, who are to teach the Law of God—the Word of the Lord—to His people.

There are three divisions of the Law we see in the Old Testament and Jesus fulfills all three.

The three divisions of the law are the **moral law, the judicial law, and the ceremonial law.**

Each division of the Law sets God's people apart and teaches them about righteousness in a different way. The ceremonial law is about worshipping God in a righteous way, a way set apart from all other people groups. Leviticus 7 offers us a glimpse into the ceremonial law as it teaches how the priests were to take part in the offerings of the Israelites.

The judicial, or civil, law shows us how Israel as a nation is to be set apart in the way it is governed—all the while with an eye toward God's righteousness. For instance, we see in Leviticus 19:15 the following command: ***"Do not act unjustly when deciding a case. Do not be partial to the poor or give preference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly."***

God's character attribute of justice is on display in this portion of the Law. And in the moral law it's the very character of God Himself that is on display.

The 10 Commandments are part of God's moral law. So is Leviticus 19:2 which says in part, *'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'* That's the essence of the entire moral law! God is Holy and our character and conduct as His people should reflect that holiness.

God's Law taught Israel how she was to relate to Him in corporate worship, in civil matters, and in personal holiness. The biggest problem here is that no one could keep it. God knew that would be the case. There was a mechanism for failure built right in. It was the sacrificial system. No one could uphold God's standard of righteousness and from the very beginning of His relationship with Israel God taught that sin required blood.

The penalty for sin is death, so to atone for death something has to die. If not you, then something must die in your place. You see, even the ceremonial law was a foreshadowing of what was to come. And that is what Jesus means here in Matthew 5.

He didn't come so that no one had to follow the Law. He came so that someone could follow the Law perfectly.

In the person and work of Jesus Christ the whole Law of God meets its fulfillment. The ceremonial law is fulfilled because there is no more need of sacrifice. His sacrifice has covered the sin of His people once-and-for-all.

No sin goes unpunished. In God's economy no guilt will ever remain unpaid. Christ took our guilt and our punishment if we belong to Him. If we don't belong to Him that wrath of God kindled by our sin still hangs over our head. We need to understand that sin is only punished in two places: at the cross of calvary and in eternity. One sacrifice happened so that repeated sacrifices didn't have to take place.

Why do we no longer sacrifice sheep and doves? Because there is no longer any need. This section of the Law has been fulfilled. It can still teach us much about the seriousness of our sin and about worship. But we no longer live under this Law because this law has been fulfilled. It didn't pass away, it met its fulfillment.

To get right with God a priest had to go behind a curtain to the most holy place on behalf of all God's people to offer a sacrifice. We're told in Scripture that when Christ died on the cross that very curtain was torn in two. There's no priest who stands between us and God. We have a mediator with God in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of the ceremonial law.

The same is true of the judicial law. God's people were a nation in the Old Testament. To belong to God was to belong to Israel. There are a few outliers but that was generally the case. So God gave His people rules to govern themselves and those rules were very different from the people around them. But ultimately, Israel rejected God.

The very Messiah to which all the Law pointed arrived and Israel bonded together to see Him murdered. So when Jesus commissions His kingdom people at the end of Matthew's gospel it's no longer a nation God is redeeming it is a people from *all* nations.

Paul explained Israel's rejection of Jesus this way in Romans 9:

**31 But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not achieved the righteousness of the law.
32 Why is that? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone.**

They didn't pursue it by faith—remember, radical heart obedience—they pursued it by works, attempted to meet the demands of the law by their actions.

Which we find out is not even possible. That become perhaps most clear when we look at God's moral law.

God's moral law is His character revealed to His creation. It's God's standard of moral perfection and Jesus is about to reveal in a new way what it means as we get in to the next several sections of the sermon on the mount.

But what we need to understand today is that Jesus fulfilled the moral law of God by living a holy life just as God demanded.

Jesus isn't teaching the Law is meaningless now, He's teaching that it's fulfilled. All the Laws of God meet their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He's the one to which all the parts of the law are pointing. As the law acts as a tutor it is teaching us that we need a righteousness that comes from outside us if we ever want to be in right relationship with God.

Jesus fulfills the Law because He's the subject of the law. He's the subject of the whole Old Testament, as a matter of fact.

After the resurrection Jesus encountered two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. They were confused about the crucifixion and what it meant and so Luke records this for us:

27 Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. (24:27)

Every page of the Bible is about Jesus Christ. He is the one to which all the Laws were given to point us. He's the subject of every book of the Old Testament.

I love this explanation by John MacArthur. It's long, but it's worth it:

In Genesis, He is the seed of the woman. In Exodus, He is the passover lamb. In Leviticus, He is the high priest. In Numbers, He is the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. In Deuteronomy, He is the prophet like unto Moses. In Joshua, He is the captain of our salvation. In Judges, He is the judge and lawgiver. In Ruth, He is the kinsman redeemer. In I & II Samuel, He is the trusted prophet. In Kings and Chronicles, He is the reigning king. In Ezra, He is the faithful scribe. In Nehemiah, He is the rebuilders of the broken wall. In Esther, He is the Mordecai. In Job, He is the ever-living redeemer. In Psalms, He is the Lord our shepherd. In Proverbs & Ecclesiastes, He is true wisdom. In Song of Solomon, He is the true lover and bridegroom. In Isaiah, He is the prince of peace. In Jeremiah and Lamentations, He is the weeping prophet. In Ezekiel, He is the wonderful four-faced man. In Daniel, He is the fourth man in the fiery furnace. In Hosea, He is the eternal husband, forever married to the backslider. In Joel, He is the baptizer with the Holy Spirit. In Amos, He is the burden-bearer. In Obadiah, He is the Savior. In Jonah, He is the great foreign missionary. In Micah, He is the messenger with beautiful feet. In Nahum, He is the avenger. In Habakkuk, He is God's evangelist pleading for revival. In Zephaniah, He is the Lord mighty to save. In Haggai, He is the restorer of the lost heritage. In Zechariah, He is the fountain opened in the house of David for sin and for cleansing. In Malachi, He is the sun of righteousness arising with healing in His wings. He is the theme of the Old Testament; every bit of it is His story.¹

¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2209>

Jesus is the culmination of Scripture. And because of that, the law of God is steadfast.

Not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished Jesus tells us in verse 18. He's essentially referring here to the line that marks the difference between the letter E and the letter F. The who

There was endless debate in Jesus' day as to how to interpret Scripture. That's what the rest of the verses in chapter 5 deal with. And so do many of Jesus' other teachings recorded for us in the gospels.

The moral law of God is still in effect today just as much as it was in ancient Israel. The ceremonial law met its fulfillment when the curtain was torn in two, the judicial law met its fulfillment when Israel rejected the Messiah, but the moral law of God—His revealed standard of personal holiness—remains the same today. And because of that the law of God isn't just steadfast. The law of God is unsettling.

The Law of God is Unsettling

19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is clear. His fulfillment of the Law doesn't nullify its requirements. If anything His fulfillment of the Law emphasizes its importance even more.

We're not just to follow them, we're to teach them. And that should be unsettling. Do you know why? It's because we can't follow the Law. We are incapable of living up to the standard of God's moral righteousness just like the Jews were in Jesus day, just like the Children of Israel who rebelled against Moses. We are fallen humanity and God's standard of perfection is impossible for us to achieve.

Jesus' last statement would have sent chills down the spines of his audience. Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you'll never get into the kingdom of Heaven.

Those were the holiest people, the most righteous people in all of Israel. And even they're not good enough. That's actually the message of god's moral law: you're not good enough. Now you've had your encouragement for the day, we can pray and you can go eat funnel cake.

No, fortunately there's more, right? Thank God that's not the end of the message of Scripture.

The Law teaches that God's standard of moral perfection is so high that no one can ever achieve it. And then it points us to the one who did achieve it and has offered us the gift of his righteousness in place of our failure.

We've left the law empty. Either through our outward actions or inward thoughts we have fallen short of God's standard set before us in Scripture. And so we fail when it comes to righteousness. James 2:10 says *'For whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all.'*

The Pharisees biggest problem was not that they tried to appear righteous, it's that they actually believed they were. They created a substitute set of standards. They took God's standard and set it aside for something more manageable. And then when the Messiah showed up they not only missed Him, they rebelled against Him and they killed Him.

Understanding both God's Law and Jesus teaching about it here should be extremely unsettling to us because of all the people in the world who risk being most like the Pharisees it could be those of us in this room. We understand there's a standard. And if we're not careful we'll work to be conformed to Christ for so long that we actually think we're there. And there's great danger in that.

Christ fulfilled the Law not just so that we won't have to, but because we can't. Just like with the Old Testament law, our sin had to be paid in blood. This time, it wasn't the blood of an animal that was our substitute. It was the blood of God's own Son, who was able to live a righteous life and was willing to die in our place.

Jesus fulfills the Law and in doing so reveals our need for a Savior. Have you recognized that need? Let's pray.