

“Hearing and Doing”

Matthew 5:17-20

Christ Presbyterian Church  
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One time, Evelyne’s dad came in when I was doing my devotions, and he saw me writing in my Bible. He was shocked, and I thought, that’s ironic! I know he kept his Bible on a special place on his shelf, but he never read it. The way we honor God’s Word is to learn it and do what it says. If we love God and take him seriously, then we should love his *Word* and take it seriously, and be anxious to hear it and learn it. It’s what Jesus’ teaching here is all about: to be excited about hearing and doing what God’s Word says.

The New Testament has a number of similar phrases for it:

- “the Law and the prophets” (as in Matthew 7:12),
- “Moses and the prophets,” or “Moses and the prophets and the Psalms” (as in Luke 24:44)

When Jesus uses the phrase, it’s his way of saying, the whole Old Testament. It was his Bible, and by extension, what he says applies to the whole Bible as we now have it.

It’s a lot more than a collection of rules. It is the revelation, or the instruction from God. Our passage for this morning shows us Jesus’ relationship to Scripture, so the passage is also important for us if we want to understand what Scripture means for us. Because ultimately, the Scripture leads us to Jesus. It’s why John states,

Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (John 1:45)

There’s that phrase again—“the Law of Moses and the prophets,” or the Old Testament—it was all about Christ. All of Scripture anticipated and prepared for Jesus. So Paul wrote:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from Law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (Romans 3:21)

Jesus is himself the righteousness of God, or the flesh-and-blood expression of his holiness. Paul says the righteousness of God is “apart from the Law,” that is, you can’t be good enough and you can’t earn your way, but you can receive Jesus by faith. That’s why Jesus states,

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. (Matthew 5:19)

The main thing this passage is Jesus' order to love the Bible and to honor it as God's Word. Jesus values Scripture so much that he says not a single detail of it will disappear until it comes to fruition. God's Word is unchanging, because what he speaks is true. The truth of the Bible includes its Laws, its stories, its wisdom—but most of all, the message of how we find life.

Jesus goes on to say,

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.  
(Matthew 5:20)

That is, he links together righteousness as a condition for entering the kingdom, but it's not a righteousness we can earn. How do we gain it, then? By trusting Jesus as we find him in God's Word. Regeneration, being born again, inheriting eternal life, entering the kingdom, it's all the same thing, and it happens by trusting God's Word. That's because the Word is Jesus himself, the ultimate communication of God; like John's gospel opens, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)

So the authority of the Word is the authority of Jesus himself. He says, "*I have come...*" He's saying he is the Messiah the Son of God, and he came down to earth from heaven. It's the way Jesus always talks—he talks like he's God.

And with the authority of God, Jesus tells us what he *hasn't* come to do. He says, "I haven't come to abolish the Law."

The Word "abolish" is translated from the Greek Word, *kataluo*, which means "destroy, do away with, abolish, repeal, to loosen the force of." It's the word he uses later in Matthew to talk about the destruction of the temple. Jesus says, I'm not going to do that to God's Word. And when it comes down to it, you can't do it, either. It's like the song, "I Fought the Law, and the Law Won." In a real sense, you don't break the Law, the Law breaks *you*.

What has he come to do? To *fulfill* God's Word.

The Greek Word is *plero*, to "make full, to fill." It means to complete something, to fulfill by action a prophecy, to keep a promise or an obligation or a hope. It's what Jesus does this with Old Testament Laws. He does it later in this chapter when he takes the command "Do not murder," and he takes it deeper and makes it a matter of the heart, not just outward avoiding of sin. He takes the command "Do not commit adultery," and he takes it deeper, making it about honoring purity and marriage.

Jesus takes the Bible seriously, and he says he's not going to strike out one little mark from Scripture until he's accomplished everything it points to.

Sometimes people think the Old Testament is irrelevant for the Christian. They think the Old Testament is just about an angry, moody God, but that the God of the New Testament is loving and nice. But Jesus is saying if you only believe what you like in the Bible, you really don't believe the Bible, you believe yourself. But it's the same God in

both, a God who is holy and righteous, but who is also loving and filled with grace. So read the Old Testament as God's Word, looking for Jesus in every part of it. We should always read it asking, like the bride in the Song of Songs, "Have you seen the one I love?"

Jesus says, you don't want to blow it on your understanding of the Bible. If you do, you'll be the least in the kingdom of heaven. He's saying, don't disregard God's Word. Don't throw it away. He's warning, what you do to Scripture will be done to you in judgment. As we treat the Word of God, so he treats us. So, hear and do the Scripture. Make your life goal to be a personal expression of the truth of Scripture.

Now what does Jesus mean, "unless your righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law"? That doesn't sound like good news! They were some of the most intense religious people ever, and they spent all their time figuring out the finest points of the Law. Maybe you're thinking, "Who can do that? It sounds so legalistic!" Is Jesus putting a new burden on us? No, Jesus isn't talking about some new way to crush us with God's demands.

How Did Jesus Fulfill the Law? It might help to think of the Law, or Word of God in the Old Testament, in three categories: Civil Law, Ceremonial Law, and Moral Law.

Civil Law was to establish order in Israelite society. It was about property rights, civil rights, and inheritance. It brought order when Israel as a nation had God as their king. This ended once and for all when the last king of Judah was taken from the throne and taken into exile. But Jesus is the true King of Israel, and he fulfills all the kingdom promises of the Old Testament.

Ceremonial Law had to do with the construction of Israel's places of worship, the tabernacle and later the temple. It supported a giant system of sacrifice so the people would take seriously their need to get right with God, and the book of Hebrews tells us, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." (Hebrews 9:22) But Jesus is "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world," (John 1:29) because he said he loves you so much he would rather die than lose you." Jesus fulfills the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. We don't have to offer the sacrifices any more.

Moral Law is the third kind. There's no longer any need for the civil and ceremonial laws of Ancient Israel, but the moral law expresses the heart of God, and they stand forever. Like in the Ten Commandments, "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal." In fact, the whole moral will of God is summed up with,

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

Jesus says in Luke that that's how to read the Law, and he ties it to receiving life. He lived his life doing the will of the Father, and he keeps on fulfilling it through us by his spirit when we live in his new kind of life.

So, bottom line: you want to go to heaven? Pay attention to Scripture! That's why John writes,

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his Word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6)

Now, I need you to hear this. Jesus isn't saying, if you're good enough, you get into heaven. That's not the Gospel. You get into heaven simply by trusting Jesus, but if that trust is real, you'll do what he says. Jesus says in the gospel of John, you abide in his love if you obey his Word, just like he abided in the Father's love by keeping his Word. It that's scary to hear that, well, you know what? Maybe that's not bad—it drives us back to him, back to the source of grace, like in the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3)

Here's the good news: when we take him seriously, and know how much we need his help, he always helps. He always enables us to do what we can't do for ourselves. He's the righteousness of God, he's the assurance that God forgives us and makes us his sons and daughters. He's God's mighty claim on our whole life.