



Lesson 4 – Christ and the Law

Matthew 5:17-20

In our study we have been looking at the Sermon on the Mount, Christ’s teaching on what righteousness looks like in his kingdom and for those awaiting his kingdom. He has described the attitude of these people (5:2-12) and also what kind of an impact those people will have on society. Now he drills down a little further and sets up what exactly righteousness looks like in his kingdom by introducing the theme of righteousness.

Verse 17

Why does Christ here refer to the Law and the Prophets? In the Jewish way of understanding the Bible, the Bible broke down into 3 main sections – the Law (first five books, what we call the Pentateuch), the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel – 2 Kings, and then our major and minor prophets), and the Writings (basically everything else). However, sometimes this could be shortened to just “the law and the prophets” or simply to “the law.” That’s probably what is meant here. Christ is saying that the whole Old Testament is not being put aside, it’s actually being fulfilled in him.

How does Jesus fulfill the Old Testament? _____

What did Christ say that might be taken as being contrary to the Old Testament? _____

Verse 18

In this verse, Christ reinforces what he just said. He goes on to say that not even the smallest letter (jot/iota, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet) or the smallest part of a letter (dot/tittle) would fail to be accomplished. The end of this verse is challenging to interpret, because it literally reads, “until all has been.” In other words, everything that God has said is going to happen, not one bit of it will not happen.

Do you think Christ is referring to the commands of the law, or to the Old Testament as a whole when he uses “law” here? ____

Verse 19

Christ took the Law very seriously, and he expected his disciples to as well. In fact, he includes a stern warning here. Whoever ignores the law, and then teaches other people to do the same, will be called “the least” in the kingdom of heaven.

What are the “these commands” that Jesus is referring to? _____

This verse warns against the one who would “relax” or “break” a command. The Greek verb is *luo*, which can either mean “loose” or “break.” Here both ideas are probably in mind. “Loosing” a command, or “relaxing” it means not taking it seriously, and this will inevitably result in “breaking” it.

What would it look like for a modern day disciple to relax the commands of Christ? _____

Verse 20

Christ comes at last to what many have taken to be the main statement of the Sermon on the Mount. Here Christ sets up a high demand for his disciples.

What does it mean for someone's righteousness to exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees? How do you think people felt when they heard that? _____

Why do you think the distinction between verse 19 "least in the kingdom" with verse 20 "never enter the kingdom"? _____

The Sermon the Mount presents challenges for how we understand the Old Testament and the law. Yet the main point of what Christ is saying is clear, especially when we study these verses in light of the rest of the sermon. Christ is calling his disciples, not to a lower view of the law than the Pharisees, but rather to a higher one. As one commentator put it, "Jesus goes on to define God's law not simply in terms of how people behave, but in terms of who they are." Through Matthew's record of this sermon, Christ continues to make that call today.