

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – MATTHEW 5-7

Christ, the Old Testament, and a Greater Righteousness

Matthew 5:17-20

Faith Church of Linden

By Daniel Patz on May 31, 2026

THE TEXT: MATTHEW 5:17–20 (ESV)

“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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

INTRODUCTION

Last week Jesus closed with a command and a purpose: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Our lives are meant to be visible — not for our glory, but for the Father’s.

So here is a question worth sitting with: [What does your Christianity actually look like to the people around you?](#)

There seem to be two common versions of Christianity that both miss the mark. The **first** is so rigidly buttoned-up, so proud of its moral performance, that people feel exhausted just being in the room. They keep all the rules and are quietly horrified when you don’t. Nobody watching that life thinks: I want what they have. Often major hypocrites.

The **second** is warm, likable, and almost entirely indistinguishable from everyone else. They love Jesus — they’ll tell you so. But their lives look more or less like their non-Christian neighbors: same priorities, same anxieties, same loves, same compromises.

Neither is what Jesus is describing in the Sermon on the Mount. And as we step across a threshold this morning into the body of this great sermon, Jesus addresses both distortions directly.

Matthew 5:17 begins the body of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, salt, and light — all introduction — are behind us. These four verses function as a hinge and a thesis for everything that follows through chapter 7. 5:17-7:12 form an *inclusio*. Don’t not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets (5:17) and whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (7:12).

Three questions drawn directly from the text:

- *What did Jesus come to do? (vv. 17–18)*
- *What does this mean for how we live? (v. 19)*
- *Why does Jesus require a different kind of righteousness altogether? (v. 20)*

1. WHAT DID JESUS COME TO DO? (vv. 17–18)

17 “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. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

What Are “the Law and the Prophets”?

Before we can feel the force of what Jesus is saying, we need to know what He is referring to. “The Law and the Prophets” was the standard Jewish way of referring to the entire Hebrew Bible — the whole of what we call the Old Testament. This is God’s Word in its full Old Testament form: Genesis through Malachi, every covenant and command and promise and prophecy.

The **Law** in particular referred to the Torah — the five books of Moses — which contained not just the Ten Commandments but the entire moral, ceremonial, and civil framework God gave Israel. It included the story of creation and the making of covenant with man — especially Abraham, Moses...eventually David. The Prophets were those who spoke God’s Word into Israel’s history — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the twelve minor prophets — calling the people back to covenant faithfulness, announcing judgment, and above all pointing forward to a coming redemption.

So when Jesus says “the Law and the Prophets,” He is talking about all of it. The whole sweep of God’s revealed Word. Centuries of Scripture. And He is about to make a staggering claim about His relationship to every word of it.

The Claim: Fulfill, Not Abolish

Jesus anticipates the objection. They have been watching a teacher who challenges the religious establishment at every turn, and is opposed by the teachers; who speaks with His own authority rather than citing earlier rabbis — who says “But I say to you” rather than “Thus says the Lord.” He is “working” on the Sabbath and his disciples do not fast like the religious Jews. The natural conclusion forming in the crowd: He is dismantling Moses. He is building something new on the ruins of the old.

Jesus corrects it before it can take root: Do not think this. **I have not come to abolish. I have come to fulfill.**

The word “fulfill” carries the sense of bringing something to its full and intended completion. Matthew uses this word throughout his gospel whenever he notes that Jesus did something “to fulfill what was written by the prophet” — it appears more than a dozen times. It is not merely that individual predictions come true. The entire trajectory of God’s redemptive purpose — everything spoken, everything written, everything promised and prefigured through centuries of covenant history — has been moving toward this person and this moment. It has been building toward a fullness. Jesus says: I am that fullness.

The Law of Moses was never a self-contained destination. It was always pointing somewhere. Every **sacrifice** pointed somewhere. Every **priest** pointed somewhere. The **Passover lamb**, the **bronze serpent** in the wilderness, the **tabernacle** with its **holy of holies**, the **throne of David** — all of it was building a picture of something that had not yet arrived. And the Prophets spent centuries announcing that arrival — a new covenant, a suffering servant, a coming King. The Word of God is not a collection of unrelated rules. It is one great story, and Jesus says: I am what the whole story has been moving toward. It was said in ancient Roman history that all roads lead to Rome...well, in the Scripture, all roads lead and point to Christ. Jesus isn't against Scripture...He is the point and fulfillment of it.

This is what makes these verses so full of awe. We are watching the One the entire Bible was written about announce that He has arrived.

The Permanence: Not an Iota, Not a Dot

Verse 18 drives the point home with an image that would have been vivid to any Jewish listener. The iota is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet — or the yod in Hebrew, the tiniest character in the script. It is a dot that refers to the small decorative strokes that distinguished certain Hebrew letters from each other. Jesus is saying: not even the smallest written mark will pass from the Scripture until everything it speaks of is **accomplished**.

This is a breathtaking statement about the Word of God. Not one syllable is disposable. Not one law is arbitrary. Every command, every promise, every word of prophecy was placed with precision and will be honored in full. The Scriptures are not a rough draft. They are the living Word of the living God, and they stand.

We read Moses more fully now that we know whom Moses was pointing to, not less. The Old Testament is the testimony of Christ — and in Him every word of it is yes and amen (2 Corinthians 1:20).

He Fulfilled the Law in His Life, Death, and Resurrection

Three specific ways worth naming:

In obedience — He lived it perfectly. Every commandment, from the inside out, in every thought and motive and action, without a single failure. When He was baptized He said it was “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). He is the only human being who ever lived the life the law described.

In accomplishment — His death accomplished what the entire sacrificial system was pointing toward. The Day of Atonement, the Passover, every burnt offering and sin offering — all of it moved toward the cross where the Lamb of God took away the sin of the world. On the cross He cried *tetelestai* — it is finished, it is accomplished. The same word.

In inauguration — His kingship in his presence and then resurrection and ascension brings in the new covenant that Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised: “I will put my law within

them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). The new covenant does not eliminate the law’s demands for true righteousness. It accomplishes from the inside what the old covenant could only demand from the outside.

The entire Old Testament is a treasure chest, and Christ is the key. Open it with Him and every promise glows. Every prophecy resolves. Every sacrifice makes sense. This is a glorious and beautiful thing — that the God who spoke through Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and the Psalms was, all along, speaking of His Son.

And here is the gospel at the center of all of this: The law demanded what none of us can produce. It called for perfect obedience — and we have all failed it. But Jesus didn’t come merely to explain the law or inspire us to do better. [He came to do what we could not do — to fulfill it in our place. His perfect obedience is credited to everyone who comes to Him in faith.](#) His death covers the debt our failure left. And His Spirit begins writing that law on the heart of everyone who receives Him.

If you have never come to Christ this way — empty-handed, trusting His finished work and not your own — that invitation is open right now. This is not a call to try harder. It is a call to receive what He has already accomplished.

Reflection Question: Have you received the righteousness Christ fulfilled in your place — or are you still working to produce your own?

2. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR HOW WE LIVE? (v. 19)

19 *“Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”*

“Therefore”

That word “therefore” is doing real work. It is a hinge connecting what Jesus has just established — that every word of Scripture stands fulfilled in Him — to what must logically follow. If the whole of God’s Word finds its yes in Christ, then **the life of a kingdom citizen is not a life of reduced concern for God’s will**. Precisely the opposite.

The verb “relaxes” means to loosen, to untie, to set aside. Jesus has just said He did not come to loosen the Scriptures. And now He says: don’t you do it either. The one who loosens even the least commandment — who says this part of God’s Word doesn’t really apply, who teaches others that it doesn’t matter — will be called least in the kingdom. *(this get’s tricky because Jesus does fulfill and then free us from the ceremonial requirements of the law – he declares all food clean)*

We are talking primarily of God’s righteousness standards. There is a temptation that has followed the gospel from the beginning. Paul names it in Romans 6: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” If Christ has fulfilled the law, if we are saved by grace through faith, can we relax? Does obedience still matter? Jesus says — firmly — no. Grace received rightly **does not loosen our grip on God’s Word**. It tightens it — from the inside out, because we now love the One who gave it.

Be Perfect as Your Father Is Perfect — Whole, Not Divided

The first section of this sermon ends with one of the most breathtaking statements Jesus ever made: “**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**” (Matthew 5:48). Everything from 5:17 to 5:48 is moving toward that summit. But perfect here is not an impossible performance standard. The Greek word is *teleios* — the same root as *telos*, meaning goal, end, completion. In this context it means wholeness, integrity, undividedness. A person whose interior and exterior are not split but integrated — fully ordered toward God. It is the opposite of double-minded. It is the pure in heart. This is central to the whole sermon on the mount and the verse 20 which we will see in a minute.

And this is not a new standard. Jesus is restoring and revealing the original one. Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” Peter quotes it into the New Testament in 1 Peter 1:15–16. Be perfect as your Father is perfect. Be holy as I am holy. The call is the same.

Grace Rightly Understood Does Not Relax Obedience — It Inflames It

This is where the connection to the **Beatitudes** matters so much. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be satisfied. The pure in heart are those whose ruling desire is for God — not divided, not managed, but wholly His. Grace does not produce a casual attitude toward God’s will. It produces love for God. And love for God produces love for everything He has said.

Titus 2:11–12 is perhaps the most compressed statement of this anywhere in Scripture: “For the **grace of God** has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, **training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled**, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Grace is described as a teacher of righteousness. It does not produce license. It produces holy training.

Here is a question worth sitting with honestly: Do you see fruit in your life — however imperfect and growing — that you cannot fully explain apart from God’s grace at work in you? A deepening desire to obey, a genuine grief over sin, a love for Christ that goes beyond mere religious habit? That fruit is not yours to boast in. It is the Spirit’s work in a person who has been born again.

But if you look honestly and see almost nothing that looks like what these Beatitudes describe — no hunger for righteousness, no real mourning over sin, no movement toward purity or mercy — that is worth taking seriously. It may be that you have never truly received Christ. Not just admired Him, not just attended services, but come to Him as a sinner who has nothing to offer and received His righteousness as a gift. That gift is available today. And receiving it is where the fruit begins.

Reflection Question: Is your obedience flowing from love for a Father who has already accepted you in Christ — or from fear, habit, or performance?

3. WHY DOES JESUS REQUIRE A DIFFERENT KIND OF RIGHTEOUSNESS ALTOGETHER? (v. 20)

20 *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

The Weight of the Verse

Stop here for a moment. Feel the force of this. The word “exceeds” means to overflow, to abound, to go beyond measure. It is used elsewhere in the New Testament of grace that “abounds” (Romans 5:20), of joy that “overflows” (2 Corinthians 7:4). I think Jesus is saying the righteousness He requires must be of a fundamentally different order than what the most religiously disciplined people of His day were producing.

And the scribes and Pharisees were not doing nothing. They were the most respected religious figures in the land. This statement would have landed on the crowd like a thunderclap. If their righteousness isn’t enough — whose is? “Who can be saved?” That is precisely the reaction Jesus wants. Because the answer He is moving toward will change everything.

What Pharisee Righteousness Actually Was

The Pharisees held to 613 commandments in the Torah plus an extensive oral tradition designed to build **fences** around the law — additional rules to prevent anyone from getting close to actually breaking a commandment.

The **Sabbath law** said: do not work. The rabbis created 39 categories of prohibited labor with thousands of specific regulations: how many steps you could take, whether you could spit on the ground (it might water the soil, which could count as farming). The fence had grown so elaborate that navigating the fence had become the entire religion.

They tithed the herb garden — measuring a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin at every meal.

They fasted twice a week voluntarily. They wore conspicuously wide phylacteries so everyone could see their devotion. Even their own tradition recognized the absurdity: Jewish writings satirized six of the seven types of Pharisees — the one who wears his good deeds on his shoulder, the one who performs humility so conspicuously he walks into walls, wearing his bruises as badges of piety. Religion had become theater.

The Problem: Outside and Inside Disconnected

Matthew 15 gives us the first major confrontation. The Pharisees challenge Jesus about handwashing. He turns it back with Isaiah 29: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”* Matthew 23 is the full reckoning — eight woes, two unforgettable images:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” — Matthew 23:25

“You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.” — Matthew 23:27

Beautiful surface. Death inside. And the woe that names the deepest failure: they tithed mint and cumin and neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They had perfected the small to avoid the large. They had successfully managed the exterior while leaving the interior entirely untouched.

One commentator notes that Matthew 23's **eight woes are the mirror image of the eight Beatitudes**. The Beatitudes describe true righteousness commended; the woes expose false righteousness condemned — point for point. The Pharisee is the inverted image of the kingdom citizen. This is not ancient history. The Pharisee lives in our churches — and in our own hearts — every week.

The Righteousness Jesus Requires Is a Different Kind Altogether

Righteousness, by Jesus' standard, is whole-person behavior that accords with God's nature, God's will, and God's coming kingdom. Not just the hands. Not just the words. The whole person — interior and exterior together, integrated, consistent, and aimed at God. It includes love and mercy and holiness.

The rest of Matthew 5 (21-48) unpacks this in six concrete examples — the antitheses. Do not murder — yes, but the commandment reaches into contempt in the heart. Do not commit adultery — yes, but it reaches into lust. The law was always after the whole person. The Pharisees had externalized it so completely that they thought they were keeping it — and Jesus shows them they had barely begun.

Romans 8:3–4 — The New Covenant Answer

If verse 20 is a wall — and it is — none of us can scale it by effort. Paul puts it plainly:

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” — Romans 8:3–4

The righteous requirement of the law — the whole-person, inside-out righteousness Jesus describes — is fulfilled in us who walk by the **Spirit**. Not fulfilled by us through effort. Fulfilled in us by the new covenant work of the Spirit. This is Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 made flesh in the life of every believer.

Christ fulfilled the law for us — perfectly, in His life, death, and resurrection. Now He gives His Spirit to begin fulfilling it in us. This is not salvation by works. This is salvation for works. The righteousness Christ requires He also provides — **first as a gift credited to us by faith**, and then as a work being formed in us by the Spirit from the inside out.

The Beauty of What God Calls Us To

The Pharisee life was exhausting. Counting herb-tenths. Managing fences. Calculating steps. Performing for the room. That is a grinding, joyless, fundamentally dishonest way to live — because the interior is never dealt with, only hidden.

What Jesus calls us to is entirely different. He calls us to be like our Father — to have His character, to share His priorities, to love what He loves from the inside out, because

He has given us a new heart and put His Spirit within us. That is not a burden. That is life. That is the whole-person flourishing the Beatitudes have been describing since verse 3.

CONCLUSION

He came to fulfill — so the Scriptures stand in their full weight and authority, and the entire Old Testament finds its center and meaning in Him. He is the one the whole Bible was written about. Every promise in it is **yes** and **amen** in Him. Every command is related to Him in some way. Every sacrifice in it pointed to Him. To know Christ is to have the key that opens the whole treasure chest of Scripture, and the riches inside are beyond calculation. The riches are Christ and knowledge of Him in relationship!

This means His disciples are not lawless. They are called to whole-hearted, whole-person obedience. To be perfect — whole, complete, undivided — as the Father is perfect. Grace rightly received does not relax that call. It makes it possible. It makes us want it.

And the righteousness He requires is not a stricter version of what the Pharisees were doing. It is a different kind altogether — inward before outward, rooted in love before expressed in obedience, worked by the Spirit before performed by the will. None of us can produce this on our own. The Sermon on the Mount, honestly heard, makes that plain.

If you are here this morning and you do not yet know Christ — if you have been managing your exterior while the interior remains untouched, or if you know you have never truly received Him (maybe you have given up) — hear this: the work is already done. Jesus has fulfilled what you could not. He has paid what you owed. He bore the condemnation the law rightly pronounced against sinners, and He rose on the third day. He is not asking you to clean yourself up first. He is asking you to come as you are — poor in spirit, empty-handed — and receive the righteousness He offers freely to all who trust Him. That is the gospel. It is the most beautiful thing in the world.

This is not salvation by works. It is salvation for works. The life Christ describes is what the works of a saved person look like. It is more comprehensive than Pharisee religion. And it is infinitely more beautiful.