

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Governed by God

Matthew 5:17-20

In last Sunday's pre-election sermon, we heard Jesus reminding us of who we are in God's world. We're the earth's salt, the world's light, embodying and exhibiting the values and vision of God's kingdom, especially as laid out the Beatitudes. This includes the ways that we engage with our nation's public life, partly through our political processes. This past Tuesday, we did that through our votes. And today, in a post-election environment, we've gathered again to hear the word of our Lord, teaching us what it means to be his disciples, especially within our society and our culture.

What better way to continue our instruction than by picking up where Jesus left off. After telling us that in the midst of all our affiliations, loyalties, and identities, we are, above all, salt and light, Jesus continues by shifting to the subject of God's law. "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" (v. 17). When Jesus speaks of "the law," he's referring primarily to the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. "The prophets" includes numerous books in the Hebrew Bible that contain the messages of God's messengers to his people. So "the law and the prophets" can be a shorthand way of speaking of the whole Hebrew Bible, what we often call the Old Testament.

These Scriptures were God's gift to his people. Having chosen Israel to be his people and having rescued them from slavery in Egypt, God didn't leave them to find their own way. He provided them with the Torah to guide them in their relationship with him. This was God's teaching, God's wisdom. It was more than just a collection of religious rules. It was his revealed will for his people. This included more than just the "religious" part of life. The law and the prophets were meant to govern all of life. They were meant to be a way of life for the people, individually and collectively.

But the law was read and applied differently by different groups within the Jewish faith. We see this reflected in today's text, where Jesus defends his handling of the law against accusations that he's trying to do away with what God has given his people. On the contrary, declares Jesus. He's not erasing a single letter, or even a stroke of a letter, from God's teaching. It's not as if God's voice, speaking into the life of his people, has changed, or that God can't be trusted anymore. No, Jesus maintains that he stands right there in the same stream righteousness and hope that has guided generations of faithful Israelites.

So our Lord says that he hasn't shown up to demolish the Scriptures, but to "fulfill" them. God's law, while it contains plenty of commandments, includes more than just commandments. God's law is also about the actions God has taken, the promises God has made, and the purposes God has committed to accomplish. God's ultimate aim is the redemption of the world, the establishment of his kingdom of justice and peace. And the gospel, the good news, is that this redeeming reign has arrived in and through Jesus. This is why Jesus says that he has come to "fulfill" the law and the prophets. He hasn't come to bring them to an end, but to bring them to completion.

This conviction that God's rule has dawned in Jesus the Messiah is in the background, and often the foreground, of the Gospel scenes where Jesus is involved in debates and disagreements about God's law. Today's text is a good example. Though the Sermon on the Mount is directed primarily to his disciples, Jesus makes a very provocative point about God's law by referring to other groups that were prominent in the religious landscape. "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" (v. 20).

While Jesus' statement includes the teachers of the law, also known as the "scribes," who were primarily interpreters of the Scriptures, I want to focus especially on the presence of the Pharisees. They show up a lot in the Gospels, often in situations where there's resistance to what Jesus is proclaiming and practicing. It's easy to jump from these scenes of controversy to unfair conclusions about the Pharisees or inappropriate stereotypes of who they were. This is where we need to be careful in the way that we portray them.

The Pharisees often get caricatured as self-righteous morality police. They're all assumed to be legalistic, trying to earn their way into heaven by strict obedience to the minutiae of religious rules and regulations. What's more, they're hypocrites, presenting themselves as one thing, hoping to gain the praise of human beings, while in reality they're not really practicing what they preach. Their holiness is just a façade.

There's a story told about the *Queen Mary*, which was the largest ship to cross the oceans when it was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a world war she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum. During the conversion, her three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock they crumbled. It turned out that nothing remained of the 3/4-inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that was left were the more than 30 coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away.¹ What was on the outside hadn't really matched what was, or was not, on the inside.

That's the way we often perceive the Pharisees. They're not really what they appear to be. And no doubt, there were some Pharisees whose spiritual pride or pious exterior made them deserving of criticism. Jesus didn't hesitate to challenge religious leaders who were more devoted to their own glory than to God's glory. But that doesn't mean Jesus always criticized all Pharisees or that there was no hope of their recognizing and entering the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus shared much in common with the Pharisees, particularly their devotion to following the will and way of God.

Remember that the Pharisees were what one person has called "serious pursuers of God and holiness."² They were committed to teaching and embodying a way of life that reflected the character and will of God, and to helping God's people do the same. Doing that required careful, precise interpretation of and obedience to the Torah's commands. So the Pharisees' aim was to spell out the implications of God's law for every dimension of life. But when it came to the details of daily obedience, perspectives on God's law varied. Everyone agreed that the Sabbath should be honored and observed, but what exactly did observing it entail? Everyone agreed that purity was important, but what constituted true purity? Everyone agreed that tithing was important, but what was involved in tithing your produce? These kinds of questions generated ongoing and often intense debates about precisely how to carry out the commands of God. And what you see in many scenes in the Gospels is Jesus' participation and engagement in these disagreements within Judaism. These were in-house debates about what kind of Jew one should be.

These are important things to keep in mind when we encounter a text like today's passage from Matthew. As he teaches his disciples, Jesus brings the Pharisees and their followers into the discussion. In one respect, he recognizes and acknowledges their devotion to studying God's law and obeying God's law. The Pharisees are all about righteousness, which means behavior, how you live a life aligned, in every detail, with the will of God. That's a good thing. That's what faithful and committed members of God's people do. But in another respect, Jesus says there's something different about the righteousness to which he calls his followers. "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."

Maybe this means Jesus is setting the bar even higher for his followers. Perhaps the Pharisees, for all their precision and attention to the details of holiness, had relaxed the commandments or attempted to make them easier to attain, so Jesus is now raising the degree of difficulty. There was once an interesting cartoon that shows a fourth-grade boy standing toe-to-toe and nose-to-nose with his teacher. Behind them is a blackboard covered with math problems the boy hasn't finished. With rare perception the boy says, "I'm not an underachiever, you're an overexpecter!"³

When it comes to what Jesus wants from his disciples, is he being an overexpecter? Though expectations are involved, I think there's probably more going on here than that. In the rest of what Jesus teaches in Matthew 5, he definitely operates with an expansive definition of righteousness. Not only murder, but harboring anger toward someone, is condemned. Not only adultery, but the lust that leads to adultery, comes under judgment. And on Jesus goes to other topics like divorce, keeping promises, nonviolence resistance, and loving your enemies. At every subject along the way, Jesus isn't calling his followers to do more good deeds, or greater good deeds, than the Pharisees and their followers, as if they're in some sort of morality competition. No, when Jesus says his disciples' righteousness must "surpass that of the Pharisees," he means this is what life together looks like under and in the reign of God. The Pharisees believed that their mission was to prepare the ground for the coming of God's kingdom, but Jesus announces that God's kingdom has already broken into human history in him. All God's promises, commands, and actions are still in effect, but now the final page in God's story of redemption has turned, and a surpassing righteousness has come on the scene.

While this dawning kingdom doesn't erase what has come before, it is new in the radical way that Jesus puts God's mercy and lovingkindness at the heart of God's purposes and the center of his people's life. I think of a passage later in Matthew where Jesus warns some of the Pharisees about getting so caught up in the minutiae of applying God's commands that they lose sight of what Jesus calls "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (23:23). Their pursuit of holiness and righteousness is good, but it needs to be more deeply grounded in a passion for God's holiness and righteousness, revealed in Jesus, redeeming sinners. That means people like us, called into God's kingdom, sent into God's world.

Pre-election, we were salt and light. Post-election, we are salt and light. So it is with our righteousness as well. Doing what's right, living in alignment with the will of God, practicing justice, mercy, and faithfulness, is what our Lord Jesus calls us to. He summons us into a kingdom that was on the scene long before this past Tuesday. It has been here during all previous presidential administrations, and will be during the next administration as well. Whatever the governing of our nation looks like during the next four years, our responsibility as followers of Jesus is to live lives governed by God, prayerfully pursuing holiness, embodying a passion for God's righteousness, and bearing the light of his lovingkindness in our nation and the world.

¹ From *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: from Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 118.

² Kent L. Yinger, *The Pharisees: Their History, Character, and New Testament Portrait* (Eugene: Cascade, 2022) Kindle edition.

³ *Today in the Word*, MBI, April 1990, 30.