

THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW

by Steve Zeisler

If a traveler from first century AD Israel were to cross time to our own century he would see some things that were familiar and some unfamiliar. He would recognize the call to obey the rules, and expectations that we are handed by the culture we live in. We will either meet success in keeping them or live with some disgrace or frustration because we can't. That process would be familiar to a traveler from any time in human history.

For Jews in the first century, the rules were based on the rabbinical teaching of the Old Testament. The rabbis took the truth of Scripture and reduced it to a collection of rigid laws, formulas, and expectations that the Jews were to keep. They either did well or not and lived with the consequences. In our day and age the rule-makers gain authority from other places, but otherwise the process is very much the same.

What would be unfamiliar to a first-century time traveler is the content of the rules we live by in our culture; they are very different from those based on an interpretation of the Old Testament. And the frequency with which we overturn moral standards would be unfamiliar. In ancient times people tended to take a longer view. Values carried through from generation to generation. In our day it is unusual for a call to moral performance to last more than a few years. Decades get named for the contemporary mores of our society: The seventies were the Me decade; the eighties, the Avarice and Greed decade; and the nineties, the Victimization decade. We might anticipate what the next swing of the moral compass will be and expect that to be replaced quickly as well.

Charles Colson recently made these comments:

When people stop believing in a transcendent truth, debates about ideas degenerate into power struggles. After all, if there is no truth, then we cannot persuade each other by rational arguments. All that is left is power. Whatever group has the most power imposes its opinions on everyone else. (*Christianity Today*, June 1994)

The Sermon on the Mount issues a challenge to every other way of ordering human life. Jesus speaks in this passage about two great realities that transcend every culture, idea, and twist and turn of history. First of all, in a remarkable disclosure of what he believed about himself Jesus describes himself as being at the center of creation, and the center of all human history. And secondly, Jesus is going to talk about the Law of God---the standards God commends for the human race because the Law draws on his own character. These do not change despite the confidence of commentators everywhere around us who tell us what is new and cutting-edge in how we are to live. If we align ourselves with what God has said from the beginning about what makes humanity work and how we should function, we will find joy and blessing. The other alternative is to find our lives broken on the hard rock of those realities, because they will not change.

Matthew 5:17-20:

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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 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. 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.

Jesus opened the Sermon on the Mount by talking about how his hearers might discover life to be fulfilling: Where does blessing lie? Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the pure in heart...blessed are the persecuted. He began by engaging his hearers in learning that the way they had been taught to think about themselves was all wrong.

Jesus abolishes rigid rules

But now he is going to talk about himself. There are three aspects I want to highlight, two of which are clear implications of the phrase, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets...." First, Jesus is answering the thoughts or statements of the people in front of him. He assumes that they might reasonably expect that he has come to abolish the Law and the Prophets---and that is an astonishing thing. What would there be about Jesus that would lead people to think that he would or could abolish the Law and the Prophets? For those raised in Judaism, the notion that anyone would ever abolish the Law and the Prophets is staggering, and the notion that someone could do so is even more staggering.

Now, listen carefully to what Jesus says. He doesn't say, "Perhaps you are assuming that I intend to break the Law." Everyone knew people who broke the rigid standards. We in our culture know people who live in direct defiance of the way they are expected to live here. They shake their fist at rules, strike out on their own, and are proud of their rebellion. Those who flaunt this world's mores are commonplace. That isn't what Jesus is talking about here. He is saying, "I imagine you think I have come to *abolish* the Law and the Prophets." Anyone in a position to do that is a remarkable person indeed.

Jesus goes on to make it clear that he knows it is not the description of God's character embedded in the Ten Commandments, rightly understood, that they should consider him a candidate to abolish. He is going to fulfill that Law. But what he has done is shake up the Jews of his day by his personality, the way he lives, the things he has said, the gravity of his message, the content of his joy, the certainty of his step, and the intimacy he has with God. He has shaken everyone around him to the point that they are beginning to think, "This one is equal with Moses the Lawgiver, equal to the prophets who have gone before us! This one, by his life and words and impact, is an extraordinary, authoritative person who has a marvelous freedom about him. He is different. He doesn't do what everyone else does, and he is not doing less, but more. There is more of God about him."

Awe and freedom

The Law was given in a frightening and dark place, with clouds covering Mount Sinai. People and animals were forbidden to touch the mountain or they would die. Moses went up on the mountain and spent many days and nights. The thunder crashed and the lightning struck, and for a time people lived in deep awe---before they decided to live in idolatry. Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments and rejected their idolatry, and that was frightening as well. And there is something about Jesus, as we read of how people encountered him in the New Testament, that is very grave and awe-inspiring. In the same way that the Law first invoked those feelings, when they encountered Christ it was with those same feelings again.

The prophets declared the love of God for his people, his intimate connection with them, and his refusal to let them go. He was the Husband scorned time and time again who would not abandon them. The prophets spoke of judgment but also of hope, a Messiah yet to come, an answer; a Savior who would mend their hearts, gather up the broken, and make the nation as it ought to be. When these followers heard Jesus speak of the love of God and saw him experience the love and commitment and calling of God, they began to wonder, "Is this the One who fulfills, who answers, who could in fact replace what the prophets have said?"

The very fact that Jesus is able to say, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets...." means that people have encountered in him an authority, a freedom, a confidence, a godliness, and a challenge that they have encountered nowhere else. And they are beginning to dream about God in a new way: "Could we be given a whole new opportunity to know God in this man?"

What Jesus has broken open is a world in which people slavishly obey external rigidities. The first-century

Jews were given a religion based on the Old Testament that actually was contradictory to what the Old Testament taught. The rabbinical system of rules they were given was a Pharisaic distillation of the Law. Jesus would later say (Matthew 23:23), "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." They had taken the great themes of God's Law and reduced them to the counting of dill leaves that people would grow in a garden. If you were to sell thirty leaves of dill, you were to faithfully count out three of them so that you could set aside a tenth of the spice, and by this God would be pleased!

We live in a world in which different groups of people make the rules, but the rules are every bit as rigid. We attempt to conform to external expectations, and our lives are in turmoil or not depending on how well we do. The way of life that goes by the name Political Correctness is Pharisaism in spades. Today in universities, companies, and elsewhere speech and behavior will be rigidly combed for nuances as insignificant as the counting of dill leaves and peppercorns to see if a tenth has been set aside. A long speech will be examined by its hearers for even one misused masculine pronoun, any underlying heterosexual assumptions, or Euro-centeredness, all of which should be avoided at all costs.

Phillip Johnson, author of *Darwin on Trial*, gave a seminar here a couple of months ago. In it he talked about the rigidity of the scientific world regarding Darwinism. Men and women who are honest scientists have legitimate reasons based on science to question whether perhaps Darwinism can answer all the questions it claims to answer. But they are forbidden to say what they think, or they will lose their jobs. There is a requirement that they adhere to the party line and do things exactly as they ought to or face dire consequences. So in a world that claims academic freedom, there is none--there is Pharisaism.

The same is true of street gangs. Members must wear their gang's colors, assemble at their gang's locations, fight when they are told to, and react as they are supposed to. It is a stance of extreme defensiveness, and there are no circumstances in which they will not live as they are commanded to live, or pay the consequences.

It is true of corporate culture. If you do not act as you are supposed to in a particular corporate culture, you will pay the price. It is true even in artistic communities. There are rigid standards of what is permissible and what isn't.

Conservative evangelicals have sometimes adopted "simplistic principles of family life" (forgetting justice, mercy, and faithfulness) and created a pharisaical climate enforcing adherence to them.

Every time Jesus enters a formalized, rigid, rule-keeping culture, people come away saying, "Is he going to abolish it all? Does an encounter with him mean that it is possible to live differently? Maybe everything could change. Maybe there is reason for hope. Maybe it is possible to be free. Maybe love could break loose." And in fact it is always true--where he is present it is possible to be free. His life ought to have the impact on us of raising hopes; creating possibilities; opening doors; making us wonder if all the old ways of doing things are what they're cracked up to be; and creating a willingness to take risks and try things, go places, be someone.

The Law is subject to Jesus authority

The second way that Jesus' statement displays his understanding of himself is this: It implies that he has the power to abolish the Law and the Prophets. Now, Jesus understood the truth of the Law, because it expresses God's character to those he created to be as ancient as creation itself. He understood all the things that God said--the Law, including the Ten Commandments, and the Prophets--to be an eternal expression from the Creator God himself that measured his own heart. And so if Jesus were not God, he ought to have recoiled at the suggestion and said, "That is blasphemy! The Lord God created these things and they are representative of him! If I were to imply in any way that I had the power to abolish them, I would be claiming to be God!" But he doesn't recoil at the suggestion. It is a completely legitimate question for him. He is really saying, "In fact I am not going to abolish the Law or the Prophets, and I'll tell you why in a minute. But it's a good question."

It is a good question because he is the Creator. Jesus understood himself to have power to later creation were he to choose to. He had come to this understanding of himself as a boy as he grew, read the Scriptures, and

went through the journey of discovering himself to be God incarnate. He was comfortable with questions that implied that he had the authority of God. It is a remarkable thing to call Jesus our Lord. He is our intimate friend, our High Priest, the one who hears our prayers, and the one who has entered our world and knows what it is like to be us. And yet he is the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth! That is implied here. He does not to any degree consider the assumed authority that is behind the question he answers inappropriate.

Jesus fulfills the Law

The third thing we learn from verse 17 about Jesus' understanding of himself is his claim that he will fulfill the Law and the Prophets. There is a great deal of discussion among commentators as to what it means for Jesus to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. I want to suggest two senses in which this very profound notion is true.

First, imagine that as the sun is coming up, its light is falling on an object and a shadow is being cast. The Old Testament is the land of the shadow. It is being cast backward in time so that the Old Testament believers see an outline in the ceremonial law of sacrifice. They begin to execute animals---doves, lambs, and others---knowing that their sins are a grievous, deadly thing that requires a death to take place. But the day comes when the reality gathers up the shadow. The day comes when Jesus dies on the cross for us so that no more sacrifices of doves and lambs need take place. He fulfills the Law by being the reality that casts the shadow. So for believers, all of the ceremonial law that has to do with temple service and so on is gathered up in the cross, and as we honor the cross of Christ we honor all those laws and see them fulfilled.

Another way we could talk about Jesus' fulfilling the Law is to imagine a garden in the winter time, in a cold part of the world. Gardens get very bleak then; trees are barren, vines are gray, and no life is being produced. We have some expectation of what a garden ought to be, only there is nothing growing. The Law, written on stone and spoken aloud, is true; we can understand its precepts, but it is not living. And then Christ empowers us so the Law can be life-giving and not merely a cold form. The trees bud and bear fruit, the vines grow thick with grapes, other plants come up and we see the garden filled with life. That is, Jesus takes truth of the Law of God and makes it life-giving in our experience: We know the character of God, dream his dreams, and hope for righteousness that comes from him. Suddenly, we experience it! And that means that failure, inadequacy, brokenness, things about our past that we hate, patterns we are in that frustrate us, ways of living that seem to be too much to overcome---none of those are sufficient to stand in the way of Jesus' life-giving fulfillment of the Law.

One of the reasons the enemy has worked so hard to take away the words of Jesus is that his testimony of himself is so profound. In the "Jesus Seminar" that you may have read of in recent days, unbelieving scholars attempted to reduce the sayings of Jesus to a mere handful. They concluded that he was a poor religious zealot. They allowed that he said a few things, but they throw away statements like Matthew 5:17. And the reason is that if word gets out that Jesus knew himself to have the power and authority to change all the structures and rules and rigidities, and that those who encounter him are going to find the Law fulfilled in their experience; then everything is going to change. The lives of individuals are going to be changed, and the world itself is going to be changed. The enemy has a great stake in making sure that no one believes these words of Christ.

The Law is immutable

The other great transcendent truth that Jesus teaches us in this passage is the nature of the Law. He makes three points, the first of which is found in verse 18: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." The Law goes back to the beginning, to creation itself. It will continue accomplishing its work until the very end. The moral statements of the Ten Commandments are as immutable as the physical laws such as the speed of light, which came into being at God's creative word in the beginning and will last until the end. The statements "You shall not tell lies," "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not covet," "Honor your father and mother," "You shall have no other gods before me," and "Treat my name with respect" cannot be changed until at last everything is accomplished. Not a letter or stroke will pass away.

The other day I read in the newspaper about a man putting on a seminar in Berkeley:

"Could it be that the pagan gods are trying to get through to us?" asks James Hillman, one of the nation's most influential and irreverent psychologists. "After all, they were here before Christianity." Hillman, the former director of Zurich-Young Institute, plans to revive the sex and love gospel of Hera, Venus, and Aphrodite Saturday at a day-long symposium in Berkeley.

That way of thinking is wrong on a number of counts, but one of the ways it is wrong is to imagine that there were gods, spiritualities, or ways of understanding the world that predated the truth of the Scriptures, that are older and therefore wiser. There is nothing older. When God called the universe into being, he called into being the moral order that it should have. It is based on his heart, and it will never change. Therefore, while our understanding of the Law will change---Jesus is going to explain various misunderstandings of the Law and the Prophets---what will not change is that we are made in God's image and are to be like him.

The difficult truth

The second point that we can distill from Jesus' teaching on the Law is in verse 19: "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." There are times in our Christian life when we will be tempted to be nice to people and change the words of God out of some kind of misguided sense of mercy or kindness, to wish things were different, to bend the Law, compromise, pat people on the back, and not say what needs to be said. I have at times counseled people who had had a very violent and miserable home life; they have been beaten and abused by their parents. And the easy thing to do in that circumstance is to set aside the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother...." I have wanted to say, "Since your parents were horrible we'll let you leave your past behind, and we'll talk about the current community and love of God. No one ought to force you to go back and look hard at those terrible people and what they've done, and find some way to honor them."

But it is very foolish to take the immutable words of God and set them aside out of a desire to be nice. It is much wiser to recognize that even the most terrible parents that ever existed need to be faced and acknowledged by the one who was raised by them. If you hate the roots you came from, you will only hate yourself. And in order to honor your parents you will have to remove all the denial, go back and look hard at what happened, to understand why they were the way they were, and find some way to forgive them by the grace of God.

You may remember the movie *Stand and Deliver*. A teacher at Garfield High School in Los Angeles said that disadvantaged teens could learn calculus. Calculus isn't going to change; there is no way for it to be easy. But he said, "Even if I insist that they work hard like other people and the rules remain the same, I can spur them on to believe enough in themselves that they can learn the hard truth. I would do that rather than say, 'For their sake it needn't be learned. We'll run the universe differently so that calculus isn't required, and they can get by with some bogus version of it.' That isn't good enough. They can learn it." And they did. They were as successful as anyone else, disadvantaged or not.

O.J. Simpson is in a horrible well of despair, and depending on what he has actually done, it may be deserved. Somewhere along the line someone should have said to him, "O.J., the fact that you're rich and famous and handsome, that people in certain settings regard you as remarkable, doesn't change the rules as to how you live at home. No husband has the right to beat his wife. That is the way God made the universe, and we aren't going to pretend it can be made different for you." If someone had cared enough to say that, murder and trauma might have been avoided.

What Jesus is saying here is that it is a good thing to know that the universe has moral laws embedded in it which are not going to go away, by which we will align ourselves or will pay the price. Jesus is going to fulfill the Law in us. He is going to make those things good, to give us a way to experience the beauty of the moral law; so that instead of crashing against it, we are strengthened by it. We hunger and thirst for this righteousness rather than resent it.

The Law is written on our hearts

The last point is in verse 20: "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." We are Christians because there is a greater righteousness than that of the Pharisees. What Jesus is speaking of is righteousness that starts in the heart. It doesn't matter in the long run what measurements are made of the externals unless those externals represent what is in the heart. The exceeding righteousness that Jesus is talking about here is one that is from top to bottom, exterior to interior. And he insists that the Law is not only an external code but is living and valued--our hearts must have the Law written on them.

We live in a world in which morality is sort of a fashion show in which the new fashions come out often; we are allowed to throw out the old wardrobe and put on what is currently expected. I remember someone's noting some time ago that people used to smoke with pride in public and fornicate in private. Now it's exactly the opposite. People are ashamed to be seen with a cigarette in their mouth, but they parade their sexual adventures at the drop of a hat. We live in a world that is mutable yet always handing us rigid rules to keep, a world that will never be free. Real freedom comes from Christ. He is going to uphold the character of God. It is his own character; he is the Creator who embedded the moral law in the universe. Jesus will fulfill the Law in a way that is life-giving to us. That is the source of our hope.

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