

**Matthew 5:17-20 – August 15, 2021**

**“Learning to Love the Law”**

8:15am & 11:00am Morning Services  
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA  
*Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez*

Jesus opened the Sermon on the Mount expressing the blessedness of who we are in Him. Then he taught us that we are the salt and light of a world lost in darkness.

In this next section, Jesus sets the groundwork for all the difficult passages and laws he is about to unpack – the famously known passages that call us to pluck out an eye if it causes us to stumble. That call us to chop off a hand if it causes us to sin and to turn the other cheek.

These passages are often read in indignant shock and then with confusion they are quickly dismissed. “Surely Jesus wasn’t serious” we might be tempted to think. But Jesus anticipates this reaction. He knows we might be tempted to dismiss his laws. So he preaches this message so we can hear directly from him, what the law means to him and in turn what it must mean to us.

**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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

**This is the Word of the Lord.**

*Thanks be to God.*

Let’s pray together.

Many of us have people we look up to. There are spiritual leaders who we consider exemplary and who model a life of righteousness.

The Pharisees and the Scribes were those religious leaders that were so admired in their day. Their job was to know God’s law backwards and forwards. They led the people of God by providing instruction in His word and oversight of the synagogues. They would memorize large portions of Scripture and the Scribes were known to copy the Old Testament Scriptures by hand.

As the religious leaders, they put a high value on their own behavior and righteousness. They calculated, for example, that the laws of the OT Scriptures had 248 Commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they aspired to keep in them all. [Stott, 74]

They prayed long prayers, wore long robes, they fasted in public ways and made it very evident to everyone around them that they were the religious elite.

Many would compare themselves to the Pharisees and would feel that they could not compare. Jesus confirms this perception in one of the parables he tells in Luke 18. He paints the picture of a Pharisee standing and praying, thanking God that he is not like the terrible sinner next to him. The man glories in his own works, highlights his thorough tithing, and his twice-a-week fasting and judges the man next to him. The other man, a tax collector, stood far off. He could not even bring himself to lift his eyes to heaven recognizing that he was not worthy to even be in God's presence.

The Pharisees and Scribes, as righteous as they believed themselves to be, were strongly condemned by Jesus throughout his ministry. But "far from critiquing the Pharisees for focusing too [diligently] on God's law, Jesus critiques them for not being concerned enough with God's written law. They didn't give it too much attention; they gave it too little attention... they downplayed the level of obedience required by the law of God." [Crowe]

You see, they had perverted their interpretation of the law in such a way that it did not carry the teaching and authority of God's law, but rather their manmade traditions and practices. And this undermined the purpose of these laws.

In this way, they were guilty of twisting God's law. John Stott explains, "What the scribes and Pharisees were doing, in order to make obedience more readily attainable, was to restrict the commandments and extend the permissions of the law. They made the laws demands less demanding and the laws permissions more permissive...." They would, for example, restrict the commandments prohibiting murder and adultery [just] to the acts alone. They would accept swearing certain oaths they found acceptable, and would extend the command to "love your neighbor" only to people of their same race and religion. [Stott, 80]

Reducing the law in this way, made the law more achievable. They didn't have to love everyone...all the tax collectors, Samaritans, and sinners. They just had to love the people they already knew and loved.

They were also known to create boundaries around the laws so as to prevent accidentally breaking the law. The sabbath law was one of those areas that perhaps they were best known for. Because the command required rest on the sabbath, they would establish what they would consider acceptable distances that people could walk without breaking a sweat and thus "working." I had a professor in college who taught us that in his studies he discovered that the Pharisees would claim you broke the sabbath if you held a fig that was in the process of being dried out, because if you touched that fig, as it "was working" to dry out, you would be contaminated by that unclean act.

Having this context helps us understand how the rich young ruler might have truly believed that he had "followed all the commandments from his youth." Salvation through obedience

to the law with these man-made interpretations was much more attainable.

This background also helps us to understand why the religious leaders must have been so frustrated with Jesus. Jesus was not only not following their religious leadership and instructions, but he was directly contradicting them. He was not submitting to their authority, and was breaking all of their laws, together with his disciples!

No wonder they considered him to be a lawless person. "Jewish teachers said that one 'abolished' the law by disobeying it." And in Deut. 27:26 we can gather that when they read "Cursed is anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." That they considered Jesus one of those cursed lawbreakers. He rejected their authority, and did not obey the commandments as they taught. No doubt they considered him to be seeking to abolish the law. But we will see as Keener points out, "Jesus opposed not the law, but an illegitimate interpretation of it that stressed regulations more than character." [Keener, 57]

The Pharisees saw the law in a legalistic fashion. They twisted it so they could read it at face value and reduce it to benefit themselves.

This was how the Pharisees viewed the law.

## **2. Our relationship to the law.**

For anyone who likes to drive at high speeds, it would be a dream come true to be able to rent the car of your choice and drive on the German Autobahn. This famous German motorway is known for having no federally mandated speed limits. The fastest speed recorded on the Autobahn was 268.8 mph (youth: an accident followed this record! – Don't try this at home.)

One of the reasons some of us are tempted to drive on a motorway like the Autobahn is because it offers the lure of no limits or controls. You can drive as fast as you want, and no one is going to stop you.

We like the idea of being free. Especially as Americans. We pride ourselves in our freedom. But what if there were no speed limits anywhere else in the world, the Autobahn wouldn't be as famous or appealing of a motorway. The reason people like it, is because it offers the opportunity to go as fast as you've always wanted to go.

One of the reasons we don't always like restrictions, is because we like to determine what we do with our lives. We don't like being told what to do. We like the freedom of making our own choices. We want to live however we want.

And when it comes to the Scriptures, as we read the controlling nature of the Pharisees and their imposed laws, sanctions, and strict enforcement of all things law-related we recoil. If we sense others starting to teach that way, we start to resent the law that they teach. We get to the point where we don't want to have anything to do with it because it is burdensome, and it can be used to beat us down.

To make it more complicated, Paul, in Ephesians teaches that we are not saved by works of the law, but by grace, so that no one can boast.

Paul goes on to say in, Romans 3:20,28 “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight....For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

It isn't hard to see why for many Christians, the “works of the law” seems like an unimportant issue in our minds. After all, if we can't be saved by works, what is the importance of it?

To add to that, if we are Presbyterians, we know all of God's promises and assurances for the saints. We aren't worried about losing our salvation because we believe in the perseverance of the saints. And we repeat phrases like, “once saved always saved”, or we reference Romans 8:38, trusting that “nothing can separate us from God.”

All this reinforces the idea that we don't really need the law. We know that we are supposed to do good, out of gratitude to God for our salvation. We know that we should live holy lives. But at the same time, it seems like there is nothing really on the line if we do not. If we are saved by grace, and Jesus has paid it all, why do we need to contribute? Grace is everything.

It is not uncommon to have this perspective. At the same time, Paul tells us that it is deeply flawed. He argues that we cannot continue to sin that there might be grace, how can we who died to sin still live in it? [Romans 6] The believer, rather than return to the life of past sin, should be striving to flee from it.

R.C. Sproul notes that “we are living in an age of unpre-cedent-ed antinomianism. Antinomianism means literally “anti-law-ism”. [Sproul, 82]

And I have found this to be true. I recently talked to a Christian on the east coast who admitted to having issues with alcohol. He said that a recent week-long camping trip was the longest time he had been without wine in a long time. I talked to him about this, and he shut me down saying, “yeah, I'm not going to stop drinking.”

While I have nothing against wine. I like a good wine and I appreciate other fine beverages. In fact, Paul seemed to as well. He recommended that Timothy drink a little wine for his stomach issues. And yet, it is another thing entirely...to drink too much. And I think that one of the most commonly abused Christian liberties in the church today is drinking. We excuse it and feel like it isn't hurting anyone, but if this describes you, I pray that you do not respond as this man did, and say, “Yeah, I'm not going to stop.”

Lloyd Jones argues that people have a false view of the law and of grace. “They think that grace is apart from the law and has nothing to do with it. That is what is called antinomianism, the attitude of people who abuse the doctrine of grace in order to live a sinful, slack, or indolent type of spiritual life. They say, I am not under the law, but under grace, and therefore it does not matter what I do.” [Lloyd-Jones 197]

But as you know, this sort of perspective of the law is unbiblical. To hold to the law as no longer useful to us, and our obedience as inconsequential, is to misunderstand the whole purpose of the gospel.

We might not be legalistic Pharisees, but we might be in just as much danger of lawlessness.

Do we take God's commandments seriously? Do we truly believe that they are still important to us today? Or in our freedom in Christ, have we submitted ourselves again to a yoke of slavery?

Have we come to rely on our salvation in Jesus, to the point that we have chosen to entertain the very sins he came to save us from? We cannot use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. It is far too easy to justify these matters under the guise of Christian freedom.

We must take great caution, because as Jesus warns, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments (as insignificant as it may seem) and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

If legalism and freedom from the law are not how we are to read the law, how did Jesus understand it?

Looking at the NT Scriptures from our vantage point, it would seem that we would be able to clearly perceive the error of the Pharisees. And while we might be able to see their error, I don't think that we can quite say we "get it" either.

### **3. Jesus' and the law**

It is in part because we still don't understand the beauty of the law. We don't get it. We still wonder in our hearts, "Why did Jesus have to die?" Couldn't there have been another way?

We know the answer theologically, but we still sort of question if it was all really that necessary. Why didn't God just start over when Adam and Eve sinned? Why not just forgive everyone? Why would God send his only Son? His beloved, his one and only Son to the world, and to the cross?

It was not just because it was some random artificial commitment that God had made. You see, anytime we begin to think that way, God corrects us. If we think that Jesus because he was God, didn't really suffer, he corrects us. If we think he didn't really face temptation, we're corrected.

For some strange reason, humanity thinks that God is trying to trick us. We can't comprehend his purposes or his will, and we think something must be off.

And I think we feel that way toward the law sometimes as well. We think the law is not that

appealing. Why would it be important? Why would God's covenant word and covenant law be so important?

God isn't trying to trick us, he isn't playing with our hearts. We might not understand it, but God did something we never would have.

And all the commentators express shock and admiration for what God did here.

"When the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for us, he showed that God took the law with full seriousness.

The law demands death for infractions. Jesus met that demand by suffering the law's penalty in our place. Therefore by basing salvation on what was accomplished by Jesus's death ... God establish[ed] the law while at the same time providing a way by which sinners could be saved." [Boice, 423]

Another commentator asks rhetorically and rightly, "Can there be any greater respect shown to the law, than that when God determines to save men from its curse, he makes his own Son sustain its curse in their stead and fulfill for them all its demands?" [Haldane]

See, the law is no nuisance. It is not something to be forgotten. It is part of God's plan A. God's righteousness is such that he cannot, he literally cannot contradict himself. He is who he is, and why would he change? He is righteous.

This is why the law is so important and why Jesus values the law. He goes out of his way to make it clear that he did not come to abolish the law. He came to fulfill it.

One commentator writes, "[Jesus] rejects the superficial interpretation of the law given by the scribes; he himself supplies the true interpretation. His purpose is not to change the law, still less to annul it, but "to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold." [McNeil, 58; Stott, 72]

In Jesus' interpretation, we learn to love the law in our hearts. Like Paul, we can delight in the law of God, in our inner being. [Romans 7:22]

As we do, in faith, the Spirit of Christ will subdue and enable our will to do God's will, revealed in the law – freely and cheerfully. (Westminster Confession of Faith 19.7)

And as the Spirit works in us, our righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. For as we love the law, we love righteousness.

### **How can we love the Law in our daily lives?**

We have worked through this passage, and we understand how easy it is to misunderstand the law. We all have our tendencies toward legalism. In reaction to that, we can tend err toward allowing ourselves freedoms – and simply ignore the law.

So what *can* we do? What can we do that is good and right and holy? How can we love the Law of the Lord in our daily lives? What practical steps can we take to put God's law into practice and pursue holiness and righteous living?

We can ask for the Spirit to help us learn to love the laws we already know and that are written on our hearts. We can examine the ways in which we have allowed sin to creep its way into our lives. We can see how we have deceived ourselves into thinking that certain sins in our lives are not all that important.

Paul tells us that the day is at hand, and he says we must, "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." [Rom 13:12]

This is essentially the formula for repenting of our sins. We must first confess and cast off our sin and then clothe ourselves with righteousness and obedience in Christ.

Some of those hidden, not-so-obvious sins can be found hidden beneath the surface. How can you uncover those sins that are less obvious?

Lloyd-Jones writes,

"A man once said that the best definition of religion was this: "religion is that what a man does with his own solitude." In other words, if you want to know what you really are, you can find the answer when you are alone with your thoughts and desires and imaginations. It is what you say to yourself that matters. How careful we are in what we say to others; but what do we say to ourselves? What a man does with his own solitude is what ultimately counts. The things that are within, which we hide from the outside world because we are ashamed of them, these proclaim finally what we really are." [Lloyd-Jones, 204]

If we think of ourselves as that person that we present to our friends, we think, "I'm not so horrible." If we see ourselves through the lens of our brothers and sisters, our children, or a spouse, we become a little more vulnerable – after all they see us all the time.

But this method strikes at the root—the heart. Who are we when we are alone? What do we say to ourselves when we are alone?

What do we utter in our hearts when we stub a toe on a piece of furniture or worse, a Lego piece? Or what rage grows within when someone cuts us off on the highway or honks at us?

How do we react when we don't get the grade we hoped for, or the job, the relationship, the loan or the (fill in the blank) we wanted so badly? What goes on in our hearts?

Meditating on God's word and holding it up to our heart of hearts is a first step in identifying areas where we have let sin sneak in. Where we have allowed sin to dwell, undisturbed.

But as children of God, we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We seek to repent from ALL

of our sins. We seek to be holy as he is holy. We make no provisions for the flesh. We close the door *all the way* to our sins.

We give no room for anger, no room for harshness. We abandon vengeance and lustful thoughts. We do not allow a place in our hearts or minds for resentment, jealousy, or bitterness. When we are offended, we turn the other cheek, and we show mercy.

Are you arrogant? Do you judge others harshly in your heart and give yourself a break?

Do you seek first the kingdom of God? Do you meditate on God's Word, and do you pray?

God's law calls us to love his law. To delight in it and to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The way we can begin to practice loving God's law in our hearts, is by letting go of our "pet sins" that we have let creep into our lives. Those sins that we sweep under the rug, explaining them away as "bad habits" or "character flaws." We stop making excuses for our sins, and we rebuke our idol-factory-making hearts and seek to live for righteousness.

And these are just some ways we can jump-start this life-long endeavor of loving God's law and hating sin.

Thankfully, Jesus answers this question much more comprehensively in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the next two chapters are dedicated to Jesus teaching us the true meaning God's law and helping us to get a better understanding of how we are called to live.

But for now, we can begin by taking small steps to rebuke and repent from the sins we know we harbor, and relearn what it means to live our lives as children of God. Children who love God's law and seek to practice it with all our heart.

***In Conclusion:***

Brothers and Sisters,

As we close, I want to remind you that Jesus came under the law to fulfill the law. And he has freed us from the bondage of sin and death, that we might live life righteously – according to his law.

And he did so in order that we could delight in it, and so that we might say with David in Psalm 119:

97     **Oh how I love your law!** It is my meditation all the day.

103    How sweet are your words to my taste,  
          sweeter than honey to my mouth!

104    Through your precepts I get understanding;  
          therefore I hate every false way.

105    Your word is a lamp to my feet  
          and a light to my path.

[Psalm 119:97, 103-105]

As we seek to love God's law, may this be our prayer. Amen.

**This sermon series draws on material from:**

Crowe, Brandon <https://faculty.wts.edu/posts/how-to-avoid-the-fooly-of-the-pharisees/>

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