

Law and Murder

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[0 : 0 0] And that's where we'll be. We are continuing our series and the sermon on the mount. And last week we had a hiatus because we had to cancel evening worship for the concert.

So Derek has given me the task of preaching last week's sermon and this week's sermon. So put on your seatbelts. We're going to be here for a while. No, I'm just kidding. We're going to wrap it all up into one tonight, but we are going to have a look at last week's text.

The text that was meant for last week and this week. And that's Matthew 5 starting in verse 17. And we're going to read to 26.

This is God's word. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not in an eota, 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.

[1 : 1 2] For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder.

And whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council.

And whoever says you fool will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court. Lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison.

Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. This is God's word. There's something in this text for everyone here tonight.

[2 : 1 4] Whether you've been a Christian for years and years and you've never been more sure of God's work in your life. Or whether you're a Christian tonight and you're coming here and you're struggling.

You're looking for hope. You've struggled with doubt. You struggled with depression, with fear, with hopelessness. You need assurance.

There's something in this passage for you. And if you're coming tonight not so sure about Christianity at all, maybe even after you've been sitting in these pews for a long time.

There's something in this text for you as well. Let me just give you the context really quick of what's happening here and then we'll dive in. The context is this. This is the Sermon on the Mount.

And Jesus has talked a lot so far about what it means to live righteously. Christ's ministry was radical. It was radical at the time. And one of the effects of it was that the scribes and the Pharisees, the leaders of the religious community at the time, came often to Jesus and accused him of a type of libertarianism with God's law, with the Old Testament law.

[3 : 29] In Matthew 11, Jesus recounts this type of accusation. He says, The son of man came eating and drinking, referring to himself. And people say, or the scribes say, Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners, yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

So Jesus was well aware that this was one of the accusations that was being thrown out against him, this type of libertarianism with the Old Testament law. The point that he's making in the very first verse, or the background to the very first verse here when he says in 17, Do not think I've come to abolish the law.

This is the case that people think he came to abolish the law. Scribes and Pharisees think that he has come to do away with the Old Testament entirely, that he's come preaching this radical new type of religion.

And Jesus is coming tonight and saying, I haven't come to do that. He says, I did not come to denigrate, to degrade, to dismantle the law. I didn't come to undermine the foundation of Hebrew culture and Israel, religion and society for a thousand years.

I didn't come to do that. I came instead to fulfill the law. I came to fulfill the law. So there are three major points I want to point out tonight in this text about how Jesus is responding to this accusation.

[5 : 02] And the first is this. Jesus offers us in the first place a picture of what he thinks about the Bible.

Jesus is telling us something here about what he thinks about the Bible. Sorry, I think this is... Is this okay? Is this rubbing too much? No, that's right. In the 19th century in the academy, especially, this new idea started to come to the forefront, especially in places like Edinburgh and all across Europe.

And it was known as the secularization thesis. Okay? And basically what this thesis said is this, that as the world gets more technologically advanced, right, as medicine gets better, as housing gets better, as we figure out how to do life better, as we figure out how to structure society better and govern it with laws better and do all these things, what's going to happen is we're not really going to need religion anymore.

And one of the first people who talked like this was a guy named Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a German philosopher, and some of you guys have heard of him, he's famous for saying, God is dead in one of his books. And what he meant by that was when he looked out at society, he could see the early stages of this secularization process, that society was getting to a point where it no longer needed God anymore, because, well, we have technology and we have good medicine, right?

And so part of this thesis was that religion, and especially Christianity, was just like what Karl Marx said, an opiate for the masses. It was this thing for lowly people, people who were peasants in a feudal system, slaves, who needed this religion thing just to get by, because they lived in a tough world, they lived in a world without the benefits of modern medicine and modern technology, and life was hard, and their children were dying in birth.

[6 : 54] And that's what religion does, is it satisfies people who suffer, right? And so if technology gets better, we don't need this stuff anymore. There was even actually a book that came out in the 1950s from a Harvard professor where he actually mapped the future decay of Christianity and all traditional religions.

He mapped the decay and said, this is how it's going to happen, decade by decade. This is how religion is going to go away. The more advanced we get, the less we'll need it. Now, you guys know this story probably.

Most of these guys have been confounded, because as soon as you hit the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, religion boomed across the world. It has never been bigger really, especially in the global south, as many of you know.

Christianity is spreading like wildfire, right? We keep getting more advanced, medicine keeps getting better, all these things, and religion does as well.

It keeps spreading. And even in our own culture where Christianity is not so dominant anymore, what sociologists are saying today is it may not be the case that Christianity is dominant in societies like Edinburgh, but spirituality is.

[8 : 07] That most of our friends and family and all the people we know are not so much walking around as absolute atheists. They're walking around as some type of spiritualist, trying to wrestle with some type of idea of the divine in nature, in themselves, or some type of New Age religion, right?

And that's not necessarily a good thing, or a good thing at all. But the point is that why did the secularization thesis fail? Why is it that this never happened, that religion just keeps on getting established?

And let me say this, the only area of religion that is clearly going down right now is the areas or the traditional aspects of mainline denominations that are rejecting notions of absolute authority, that are rejecting the scriptures as absolute authority.

Here's why the secularization thesis failed. Because number one, people are not satisfied with material explanations. It's just not good enough. It doesn't satisfy the needs of the heart.

Number two, because despite our advancement, suffering didn't get any better in the 20th century. It got worse. The 20th century had the worst amount of death through war in all of history.

[9 : 23] It got worse. And lastly, and this is the main point that I'm going to bring out of our text tonight, people are always looking for absolute authority in their lives.

Anywhere they can get it. And if it's not in the Bible, it's going to be in something else. People want absolute authority. Absolute authority is what satisfies us as human beings.

Look, Jesus is telling us in the first part of this passage what he thinks about absolute authority. He's been accused by the Pharisees and scribes of undermining the authority that their entire society and religion have been built on.

And he gives us in the very first verse a picture of what he thinks about absolute authority. Come with me to verse 17. Do not think I've come to abolish the law or the prophets.

Now notice there that he uses the phrase, the law and the prophets. This isn't just a reference to Moses' law in the Old Testament. This is actually a Hebrew shorthand for the whole of Testament, the law and the prophets.

[10 : 32] You see that throughout Paul as well. A lot of times Paul will refer to the Old Testament as the law and the prophets. And sometimes it will be the law and the writings in the prophets. Or sometimes it will be the law and the Psalms and the prophets.

He's talking about the whole Bible, the Old Testament, the Bible that they had present in their day. And the face of accusation, as point is this, I didn't come to undermine the absolute authority of the Old Testament.

I came to say I'm here precisely because I believe it is the absolute authority. Jesus is giving us his doctrine of Scripture here. He's saying this is the Word of God.

I think that. That's what he's saying to them. I didn't come to undermine it. I think that. Look at what he says in verse 18. For truly I say to you until heaven and earth pass away, not an odah, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Now if you remember, if you guys grew up reading the King James version, some of you I'm sure did, the King James says not a jot or a tittle, if you remember, instead of an odah or a dot.

[11 : 40] These little words are references to actually characters in the Hebrew and Greek alphabet. The two languages that the Bible was written in. The jot is a reference to a little mark called a yod, and to our eyes it would be nothing but a little comma.

In the yoda is nothing but a reference to a tiny little mark at the bottom of a letter in Greek that confounds Greek learners everywhere, because it's so hard to see and you miss a word entirely if you miss it, right?

The point is that the tiniest little marks of the Old Testament are not to be done away with. They are absolute authority. Every single jot and tittle, every word of it, he's saying, is God's speech.

It's the location or the place where we have relationship with God. It's how God speaks to us. And look, for many of us, whether you're a Christian tonight and you've been one for a long time, or whether you're not at all and you're struggling, it's difficult to take this book as an authoritative text.

A lot of us do so intellectually, but do we do so functionally? Is this the actual functional authority of your life?

[12 : 59] Do you search it in such a way that it's something more than just a confession? It's actually what you do. It's actually the location where you think God has spoken to you.

And look, if you're not a Christian tonight, one of the principal reasons that Christians take this to be the word of God is not because we want to give 101 answers to the questions of historicity and of rational arguments about the manuscripts and how many more manuscripts it has and how it changed the course of world history in less than 100 years and how the entire corpus was traveling together only 75 to 100 years after it was written.

All those things are big. But one of the reasons we believe it and the main reason we believe it is because Jesus Christ believed it. Jesus Christ said that it was the word of God.

The God-man who came into history and changed the course of the world said, I believe this is God's word. In fact, I am God and I spoke it.

That's why we believe it. So if you're saying tonight, right, right, right, I know. I've checked that on my box of beliefs.

[14 : 18] I'm a Christian. This is God's word. Check. That was done for me a long time ago. I think one of the implicit questions we're left here with is, is this your functional authority?

Do you search it to hear God's words? Secondly, this. Jesus not only affirms for us that the Bible is God's word, but he also makes sense of it.

He also makes sense of it. Look, Jesus thinks the Old Testament is so important that in verse 17, he says this, I didn't come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have come to fulfill them. I have come to fulfill them. The Old Testament for Christ was not just a bundle of laws and a lot of boring genealogies and a history of how people traveled through a wilderness.

Instead, it is the first instance in history of the very thing Jesus came preaching about. And if we could summarize that in a word, it's the kingdom.

[15 : 31] It's the kingdom. In Genesis one, the premier image that runs from there throughout the entire Old Testament is the kingdom of God.

God and his royal majesty sitting on high created all that we know to exist. He created his kingdom in Eden where man, humanity and God dwelt together hand in hand.

He gave dominion over that kingdom to humans, the pinnacle of his creation. And in the fall, this kingdom was undermined by rebellion, by disobedience, but this was not a surprise.

God and his infinite mercy told Eve, told Adam that by her seas, by their children, one day, one person would renew and restore this kingdom that had been lost.

And then the story of Israel throughout the whole Old Testament is the story of the re-establishment of this kingdom. It's the story of God plucking a people out of slavery into a promised land, a land that he said, build me a temple.

[16 : 41] And when they build that temple, how did he tell them to build it? He said, build it in the shape of a cube and fill it up with imagery of the garden.

Walls and the columns were to be crafted into flowers and plants and animals. In other words, this was the picture of the re-establishment of Eden on earth. And in this place, God came and dwelt with them.

And by sacrifice and by law, he made it possible to make his presence known once again in this small kingdom on earth. But Israel's mission was to expand the kingdom and they failed.

They weren't able to do it because they weren't able to keep the law and they weren't able to uphold the sacrifice. And what we learned by the end of the Old Testament, as the sacrifices were never good enough in the first place, the blood of bulls and goats and rams and sheep was never going to do the work of re-establishing the kingdom of God.

And so when we open to the New Testament, we find John the Baptist in the earliest pages of the Gospel saying, make way for the kingdom is at hand.

[17 : 52] The kingdom of God is coming. Prepare the way. Repent. It's here. That which was lost is now going to be found.

The kingdom of God is going to be restored. And so the prophets had spoken of a child, a child that was to be born in a manger out of Egypt.

I called my son. When it says, when Jesus says in this passage that he is did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but he came to fulfill them. The point is that he's saying, I am the point.

I am the point of the whole Old Testament. What does it mean that Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets? It means that he is the fulfillment of the law and prophets. Everything that was spoken was about him.

He came not only to completely obey the law that Israel couldn't do, he came to be the true humanity, to be true Israel, the Israel that never was, and to re-establish this kingdom.

[19 : 02] These first two points simply means this. If you want to understand the Old Testament, if you want to understand the comprehensive scope of God's cosmic work in Christ, search the Scriptures and understand that Jesus Christ said he didn't come to get rid of the law, but he came to be the very point of the law.

It also means something else, and this brings us to the third point. Jesus thinks the Bible is God's word. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's word.

Thirdly, Jesus raises God's law to an even higher standard in this passage. Come with me to verse 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.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. But far from doing away with the Old Testament law, he's fulfilling it, and now he's saying that he's actually raising it to a higher plane.

[20 : 21] What does this mean? Let's start with verse 20. Read it one more time. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Here's this point. The law is so important that not even the scribes and Pharisees are righteous enough to keep it. Far from being lax, he's saying that Judaism, the religion that was being practiced at the time, as it's practiced by the Pharisees, is not actually righteous enough.

You see? I mean, as the Pharisees and scribes were coming to him and saying, you're a libertarian. You're too lax with the law of God. Jesus actually comes in and says, no, no, far from being lax, the fact is that you're not strict enough.

You're actually not righteous enough. You see? You've got it completely backwards. In verse 21 to 26, when he enters into this new section of text, is a formula for what this means.

Okay, in verse 21, he starts this new pattern, and this is the pattern that for the rest of our sermons on this series, we're going to see constantly over and over again. You've heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to the judgment.

[21 : 44] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to the judgment. So he starts this new pattern. You've heard that it was said, but I say to you.

And this is the pattern that he's going to continue to repeat throughout. The point of what he's saying is this, you've heard that it was said in the Old Testament, or you've heard that it was said in the Ten Commandments, in the law, or you've heard that it was said in the religion that you followed your whole life.

This is what the scribes and Pharisees have told you. You shall not murder or you will be liable to judgment. But look, Jesus is doing in this exactly what he just said. He's raising the law to a whole another plane, a whole another standard.

He's saying it's not just don't murder or you'll be liable to judgment. It's that if you have gotten angry with your brother, you have murdered. He's saying to the scribes and Pharisees, you're accusing me of being lax with the law, but what I'm saying to you is you don't understand the law.

The thing is, is that if you have ever done any of these things, even in your heart, you're guilty of them. The law is more pervasive than you ever knew. It's more comprehensive than you could have ever imagined.

[22 : 58] It extends to every single part of who you are as a human. You're knowing, you're doing, you're thinking, you're willing, you're emotive states, the very state of the heart. It stretches to all of it.

Far from being lax, Jesus is saying, you guys aren't strict enough. You don't understand it. And so when he goes on in this passage, he says, leave your gift at the altar if you realize that you've wronged someone.

If someone has anything against you, leave your gift and go be reconciled to them. What he's doing is this. He's saying, look, as you are going to the temple day after day and many of you are giving monetary gifts and offering sacrifices in some cases at the synagogue as well, the point is you can't just go and input your chips into the grace machine, crank the lever and get your grace back out.

If you think that going to the temple every day and just practicing this religion is going to be good enough, it's not. You've missed the whole point of the law. The whole point of the law is that every single aspect of your being must be in accord with this law.

And if you've ever angered your brother or sister in an unrighteous way, you're guilty. You're guilty. The scribes and the Pharisees are sitting there listening to this sermon and he's turning this around to them and saying, you're the ones that don't practice true religion.

[24 : 35] You're the ones that don't get what it means to follow the law. The law of the Pharisees is not sufficient. Now this drives us back to an earlier statement that he makes back in verse 17.

Jesus said, I am the fulfillment of the law. Now in the face of him telling me and telling you and telling the scribes and the Pharisees, you think that you're free of the liability of judgment because you go to the temple and you put your chips in.

But I say to you, if you've ever done a single thing, even a thought, you're liable to the hell of fire. His message is, but I am the fulfillment of the law.

In other words, every single human being, including Israel, including every single person that heard the Mosaic law spoken to them, failed to obey the point of the law.

Not just at the jot and tittle, but at the biggest, most comprehensive, easiest, most obvious aspects of it. All of them failed. And he's saying, I have come to be that law that you couldn't be.

[25 : 58] I've come to obey the jot and the tittle because you couldn't do it. I've come to obey not just the outward demands of Judaism, but the most inner demands of the heart.

Jesus Christ obeyed the law in a way that the Pharisees never could and that we never could. He took Israel's place as the chosen one to rebuild the kingdom and he perfectly upheld every single jot and tittle of the law.

And then he became sin even though he knew no sin. And that was for us. You have to be more righteous than the Pharisees if you want to see the kingdom of heaven.

That's his message. And to be more righteous than the Pharisees, there's only one way. And that's to look at the one who fulfilled every jot and the tittle of the law for you.

If he is your God, if his righteousness is your righteousness, every single aspect of the law has been obeyed by you in him.

[27 : 08] Last thing in the second point that he makes in this final section. Not only does he say that he is the righteousness, the true righteousness that you could never be, not only does he say that by faith in him you can have that righteousness, you can actually exceed the religion of the scribes and Pharisees, but he says that the ethical demands of the kingdom, in fact, still are ethical demands.

In other words, for those of you who have put your faith in Christ, who have in Jesus obeyed every jot and the tittle of the law, because he obeyed it, he's saying, far from freeing you from this law, I'm actually telling you now you're free to obey this law in me.

You're actually free to take this law to another level, right? He's raising the stakes here. And what exactly is this law of the kingdom?

What exactly is this new ethic that's even bigger than the Old Testament Mosaic law in Christ? And he says it's this. When one of the scribes came to him later in this book and said, Jesus, what is the law?

He said, love God and love your neighbor. For in this hangs all of the law and the prophets.

[28 : 33] Love God and love your neighbor. The point is that Jesus is not just the righteousness you could never be. He is that, but that in him you can be, you can actually do righteousness.

He's saying that to live in this world is to be a city on a hill, to live a kingdom ethic, to be a Christian is to do exactly what he is prescribing, to love God and to love neighbor.

And to close, he gives us a perfect picture of this actually on one other occasion in the Gospels. And I'm just going to read it to you. Don't worry about turning there in Luke chapter 10.

This is the same exact scenario. One comes to him and says, what is the law? How am I then to live? And he says this.

Jesus replied to him, a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. And he fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

[29 : 36] Now by chance, a priest was going down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him passed by on the other side, but a Samaritan, a foreigner, his enemy.

As he journeyed, came to where this man was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. And he went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. And he set him on his own animal and brought him to an end and he took care of him.

And the next day, he took out two to Narai and gave them to the innkeeper saying, take care of him. And whatever more you spend, I'll repay it when I come back. Which of these three Jesus asked, do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?

And the scribe said, the one who showed mercy. And Jesus said to him, go and do likewise. If you're not sure about Christianity tonight, Jesus Christ is inviting you in this text to explore the text.

And consider the fact that maybe what he says about the Old Testament and about the New Testament might actually be true. It might actually be the Word of God. And if you're a Christian that's looking for hope tonight, the God-man who fulfilled the law, the only innocent man in all of history who was killed in the place of lawbreakers, he invites you to come to rest by faith in him.

[31 : 06] And if you're a Christian on mission tonight, Jesus has raised the stakes of the law, not abolishing it, but making it even more important.

He's called you to live in the Kingdom of God as a Kingdom participant, to love him and to love your neighbor in whatever context he's put you.

His word to you is go now and do likewise. Let's pray. Our Lord and God, we ask that you would make us believers in the authority of Scripture, lovers of the Kingdom of God, and those who obey the Kingdom ethic, to love God and love neighbor.

We ask now that in every single context that you have placed us out in life tonight, and tomorrow as we go to work or school, that you would make this context come alive to us as a place to be a city on the hill.

And we ask for the now in Jesus' name. Amen.