

Series: The Sermon on the Mount

**The Heart of the Law**

Matthew 5:17-20

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, September 28, 2025

A reading from 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, for truly I tell you, 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. Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly 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,” the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Paul: Good morning. I hope you all are doing well this morning. Before we get into the message today, many of you saw the e-mail that I sent out on Friday, and I just wanted to talk a little bit about that. It is a difficult moment and an announcement that I wish I did not have to make, but for those of you who maybe did not see the e-mail, as of this past week, Maddie Baker’s time on staff at Waterstone came to a close. This was a really difficult decision, and it was made after a lot of prayer and discernment. I want to be clear that it was a decision that I made as lead pastor, but I had the support of the leadership team and the elders behind that decision. I know for some of you coming in today, there might be confusion about that announcement. For some, there might be sadness. For some, there might even be anger, and I understand that, and I want to say that all of that is okay and that is welcome. That is part of being the body of Christ, and I understand that for some of you, I may be a little less popular today than I was before this. I really want to make this so abundantly clear. This decision was not made as a result of any moral or ethical issue from Maddie, but out of respect for her, we will not be sharing details about the decision, and I just ask that you would honor her by not speculating around that. Sometimes in church we can try to fill in the gaps, and I do not think that’s healthy for her or for the body. What I will say is that, like many of you, Maddie has deeply, deeply impacted the culture of worship here at Waterstone. She is an incredibly gifted worship leader, and she has helped many of us encounter the presence of God through her creativity, her passion, her singing, and her leading in worship, and so we will miss that deeply. We are very thankful for the ways that she has poured into and contributed to our church over the years.

As we move forward as a church, I just ask two things from you, and one is to just continue to keep Maddie and Brad in prayer as they step into this new season, and secondly, I think one of the challenges sometimes in a situation like this is how we establish closure. A church is not just a place where someone works. It is where they worship. It is family. It is community. It is the space where we come together because we have a common purpose in Christ, and when something like this happens, there is a loss and a gap, and trying to think through how to shepherd in this moment, we know one of the challenges is that sometimes it feels like there is not closure, that someone who is really important to us, who help us encounter life with Christ and help us encounter God’s presence is just no longer here, and so if you would

like to extend appreciation to Maddie, to thank her for her time here, we are leaving her e-mail open and available to the church, so you could send her a message of gratitude and thanks for the ways that she has poured into our church, and those will be compiled by Emily Clauss, our communications director, and she will make sure those are passed along to Maddie. In the coming weeks, we will share a little bit more about the plan for worship moving forward, but I just want to assure you in the meantime, we will absolutely feel a gap with Maddie's presence no longer here, but we have some really gifted people in this church who love to lead in worship, Ben and the team. We have people who will be stepping into that and helping us shepherd us through this time in the in between. If you have any questions, concerns, I want to make myself available. The elders are available. Our leadership team is available, and I would be happy to try to discuss with you any feelings you might have around this decision, but I just ask now that you would pray with me as we continue in worship.

Father, we come to you in this tender moment, and God, we are grateful for you. We are grateful that you are a refuge and our guide in moments of tension and difficulty. God, we want to express so much gratitude for the ways that you have worked through Maddie during her years here, for the songs that she has led, for the creativity she shared, for the ways that she has helped us encounter your presence. She has been a part of the spiritual formation of so many people in this church, and we are going to miss that. God, we just bless her and Brad and Jojo, and we ask that you would surround them with peace, that you would give them clarity for what is next in this season, that you would just provide comfort and your kindness to them, and God, we also pray for our church family. In seasons of transition like this one, it is easy for us to feel unsettled, to maybe feel unsure, and we just are reminded that you are faithful, that you hold us together. Just give us the grace to walk with each other through this and to keep our eyes fixed on you. We place Maddie and Brad in your hands, and we place ourselves in your hands too. I just ask that you would help to lead us forward in love and in unity and in hope, and it is in Jesus' name that we pray, amen.

This past Wednesday was one of those days that by the end of it, I was just very ready for it to be over. We had gotten the kids to school, and that is always an event and an ordeal in and of itself. I went into work and started preparing for Wednesdays at Waterstone to prepare for the teaching that I was going to give that night. Then I had several meetings back-to-back to back-to-back and then shifted to start getting ready for the logistics of Wednesdays at Waterstone, so getting out tables and chairs and tablecloths and pizza. At that time, Steffy came with the kids, because I had not gotten a chance to see them in a little bit, and so I was excited to have a moment with them, and as we were setting up for Wednesdays at Waterstone together as a family with a few others who came in to help, Landon, our youngest son, who is not quite two years old, he began to look really pale and was a little fussy, which is not like him, and so Steffie and I start talking like, "I don't know that he should stay for the night. I think he might need to go home. Why don't you go get your stuff? I'll hang with him for a little bit. Camden can stay late with me tonight. You can take him home, take care of him, and Camden and I will do Wednesdays, and we will come home after that." So, Steffie leaves to go get her stuff, and then I turn to look at Landon, and this is a little gross, but he just proceeded to projectile vomit all over the concourse out here, and it was so much, so much vomit. It was like there was a fire extinguisher from his face. I mean, it was just a lot, and then he stopped for a second, and then Camden started dry heaving, my older one, and then so Kay, our associate kids pastor, she took her, and she's like, "Let's go outside and get away from this," and she took

her, and so I was just standing there in front of Landon, who threw up three more times in succession and I couldn't pick him up, because I did not want him to throw up on me, so I was just like, "I'm so sorry, buddy." It was his first stomach bug, so he had no idea what was happening. He just looked at me like, "Why is my body betraying me like this? Like, what is going on?" Steffy comes back, she grabs him, she takes him home, I clean it up. We do Wednesdays, and then I take Camden home and start getting her ready for bed, and by that point, I am just exhausted from the day, and so Camden is supposed to be getting ready for bed. She is supposed to be brushing her teeth, and she is not. She is playing. She is all hyped up on her time with friends at Wednesdays and the pizza she ate, and so I am getting a little frustrated, and I got pretty short with her in a way that I try not to, but it happens, and so I am just like, "Camden, you need to stop. You cannot keep playing. You need to brush your teeth. It is late. It is time for bed. Like, just stop," and she looks up at me, and she smiles and she says, "Daddy, you are not being very salt and light to me right now." She goes, I am not kidding. She goes, "Daddy, I learned all about the Sermon on the Mount tonight at church, and you are not being very salt and light like Jesus right now," and I was just like, Oh man. Like, what do you say to that, right? And so then I turned to Steffy, and she's like, "She is not wrong." Like, she is not, and I am just so defeated and just like, yeah, you know, I've been preaching on the Sermon on the Mount. I have been studying it for like a year, and then my daughter just, "Daddy, you are not being very salt and light right now," and I just, I had nothing, and so I apologized, and I said, "Sweetheart, forgive me. You are right. Let's just try to get ready for bed," and there was a little more salt and light in our house by the end of the night than there was in that moment.

I share all of that with you, not because it is a gross story or even just funny, but because I think there is this deep truth that I felt in that moment that I am wondering if you have maybe felt as we have been opening up in Jesus' most famous teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. That tension, I think, that I felt in that moment is I know the words of Jesus. For goodness sake, I have been preaching the words of Jesus. I have been preaching them on Sunday mornings and Saturday nights and Wednesday nights. It is like three times a week. You would really think that it would like settle in, and I would be picking some of this up, and yet what I felt in that moment is, "This is really hard," and Jesus gives this very clear teaching and this call, this blueprint of what it is supposed to look like to experience the goodness of life in relationship with God, and He gives us this map of what it is supposed to look like, and I just feel like I keep stumbling through it, and my toe keeps getting stubbed, and I trip and I fall, and I wander off the path, and I get lost, and then I try to get back on, and it can feel really hard.

I think, truthfully, if we are doing the Sermon on the Mount right, that should be part of what we feel. If we are just talking about it on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday night or a Saturday night, and then we leave, and it is not impacting the rest of our lives, then we are probably not paying attention, because at the heart of what Jesus calls us to in the Sermon on the Mount is to live this out. He is saying that these are things that we are supposed to practice in our everyday life, that the Sermon on the Mount is not just something we admire or aspire to in some sort of way, but it is actually available to us, that we can live according to these teachings and experience the goodness of life with God when we follow his ways.

As I sat there just trying to get my daughter to brush her teeth after a long day, I was not very salt and light, as she pointed out to me, and we can have those moments where we feel like, "Oh, I just, I can't

quite get it right. I am trying, but it is not there,” and that is a very normal tension, but I think as we continue further into the Sermon on the Mount, that tension is only going to build in some ways. I think that in many ways that we are asking the wrong question around that tension potentially, but the tension is there, because it is trying to pull us into this idea that we are supposed to become more like Jesus and live for others, and that is going to feel like something that is difficult, something that is hard, something that pushes against our natural inclinations and our natural bent as humans. I think the passage today, the one that Ben just read, I think the Sermon on the Mount is challenging enough without even getting into the parts that feel really confusing, and this passage that Ben just read is one of the more puzzling sections of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says that He did not come to abolish the Old Testament and the law. He came to fulfill it, but what does that mean? What does it mean that the Old Testament is not abolished, but that He fulfilled it? Because if we look at the Old Testament, there are a lot of places that we probably have questions about what the Old Testament is teaching us it means to do and what it means to live with God, and what does Jesus mean when He says that our righteousness has to surpass the Pharisees? I thought they were the bad guys in the story. They were the ones who killed Jesus, so how are we supposed to be more righteous than they are?

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is pressing into this deep question his audience would have had at that moment. So far, what we have walked through is the Beatitudes and the background for the Sermon on the Mount the first week, the Beatitudes, Jesus’ proclamation of what the good life looks like with Jesus, and then last week, we looked at his teaching of salt and light and what it means that we, as followers of Jesus, are called to be the salt and the light. Now, all of that is actually just the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. That is just the introduction. We are now moving into the body of the sermon, and a natural question that Jesus’ audience would have had is, “Are you a teacher worth listening to? Like what you had to say about the Beatitudes, we like this idea that you are calling us to be salt and light and that that is part of our identity,” but there was a lot of question and tension circling around Jesus at the time.

He climbed onto the side of the hill to begin teaching the Sermon on the Mount. People had heard rumors and stories about Jesus that He did not really follow the Sabbath according to the Old Testament rules, at least not the same way the Pharisees did. Jesus seemed to be playing fast and loose with some of the laws, and then He also seemed to be pulling some of them tighter. There were other groups that felt like Jesus was drawing the boundaries around what the rules were to follow after God a little too tightly, so there would have been this question hanging over Jesus, “What are you doing? You are challenging some of our presuppositions about what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like and how it arrives, but you are also seeming to contradict scripture in some ways. Are you a teacher that is worth listening to? What is your view of the Torah and the law of God? Are you someone who upholds it and believes in it and thinks it is the guiding path for how we are supposed to live with God? Or do you think maybe it is a little outdated, that maybe it does not apply to us anymore and we should just set parts of it aside?” Those are the questions that are hanging over Jesus, and in many ways, it is the questions a lot of us have about scripture.

I mean, there are some of us who in this room right now, we feel this tension that we need to just draw the boundaries around what it means to live for God way tighter than they have been. Culture is

going to like hell in a handbasket, and the answer to that is just following more rules, making sure everybody knows the right thing to do and making sure everybody is following God's rules. Then others of us on the other side, we look at what is going on in culture, and you say, "Some of these rules feel really ancient or outdated, and they do not really apply to our culture the same way that it seems like they should, and so maybe we just need to set some things aside. Maybe if we can look at it through a certain lens and rewrite it a certain way, we can make it a little more palatable to the culture around us," and the idea of that conversation that I think we all feel the tension around, that we question, that we wonder about, that is the same conversation that was happening around Jesus' day. There were two groups of people, and we have talked about them before, but they had two different views of the law.

First, there were the Pharisees, and they looked at the law, and they had this idea that when you looked at scripture, you needed to build fences of extra rules around the rules, and so what they would essentially do is if there was a clear line in scripture that God said, "Don't go over here. Don't do this. Don't wear two different types of clothing, because that's bad," and that was what the Old Testament said, then the Pharisees would say, "Sometimes people get a little close to that. Maybe their shirt and their tunic, they are two different types, and it is not that the same type of clothing has two different types of fabric in it, and so maybe we just need to draw an extra fence around that line, so we do not even get close to that line. So, we will just put the fence back here, and then that way people will not even come close to bothering what God has actually said," and then they are like, "but you know what? Some people crawl over that fence. That fence is a little short, so let's build a higher fence around that fence, so people can't climb over it. They can't even come close to the fence that we created around the original boundary." So, they were just adding to the rules. They were trying to create this system, this structure where people could not even come close to disobeying God's law. They were obsessed with strict obedience and the absolute, and they measured holiness by performance, that you just need to try harder to be better, and if you are not doing what God has said that we are supposed to do, then we need you to understand how much guilt and shame is heaped upon you, because you are preventing the kingdom of God from coming to us.

Could you imagine showing up to a Bible study on a Tuesday night or like your small group, and you walk in, and you have an athletic shirt on that has a few different types of fabric in it, and everyone in the group just stops you at the door and says, "No, wait, timeout. You can't come in, because if you come in to us, then you will completely defile this community, because your shirt has too many fabrics in it, and if you wear that shirt, you will prevent the blessing of the kingdom of God from coming to our community, so off with you." Could you imagine that kind of pressure? That is the kind of pressure that people were living under with the Pharisees' understanding of the law, but there was another group, and they were the Sadducees.

They had this view that they compromised with culture and power, but they also, in order to do so, had to rewrite or dismiss certain parts of scripture, so if you think about it, Rome is in charge. They are the cultural people who are in power. Well, there were certain things in scripture that very clearly went against how Rome lived life, and so the Sadducees would say, "I don't know. If we really want to compromise, if we want to be on their good side, then we will probably just have to set aside some of our values, some of our religious practices, some of the things that are important to us because, after all, we don't want to offend them. We want to make sure our faith is palatable enough that they are not upset with

us or they do not ostracize us, and so we will just set aside certain things that God has said about morality or sexuality or how we look at those sorts of things, and we will just pretend that it is okay. You have your way of living, and we will just set those things aside and try to make it a little easier for them to understand.” So, they treated the law as if it was negotiable.

I think we can look at our culture, and we can see that there are people who would probably fall into one of those categories, and some of you probably fall into one of those categories. I would just ask, and not necessarily a show of hands, but some of you know that you are rule followers, right? You might fall more in line with the Pharisees, that if there is a rule and it says do not do that, like you follow the speed limit, right? Like that’s the best way. You see that it says 65, and you’re like, “I’m going to drive 65 and maybe 64 just so I’m not even close. I’m going to be above reproach in that. I’m going to keep it there.” There are others of you, and I would probably fall more into this category, that I see sixty-five, and I say, “I could probably go seventy-four before they will pull me over. Like, seventy-four is not quite ten, and so that is like in that safe zone, that if I just am like a hair beneath it, I’m breaking the law, but it is like a guideline. It is a suggestion, and I need to get where I’m going, so 74, that feels like I’m still honoring.” When we get into these places where we trip ourselves up, and we try to create these different rules or different boundaries, and the question that was hanging over Jesus as He steps up onto the side of the mountain is, “Jesus, what are you? Are you a Pharisee? Are you someone who says, it is 65, so you better be going at least 55 or lower? Are you a Pharisee or a Sadducee who says, you know what? Yeah, that is like a guideline. It is negotiable. We can just loosen the grip on the law a little bit there.”

So, with that question hanging over Jesus, this passage begins to make way more sense, because in Matthew chapter five, verse 17, it says this, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.” Now at first, when you read these words of Jesus, it almost sounds like He is a Pharisee, doesn’t it, which does not quite make sense. It sounds like He is saying, “I have not come to get rid of the law. I have come to uphold the law. The law is something that we have to follow. I am not getting rid of it,” which sounds like the argument the Pharisees were making, which feels confusing, because the Pharisees were the ones who were always arguing with Jesus, but notice what He says. He does not say that he has come to keep the law and enforce it more strictly. He says that I have come to fulfill it.

Now I think as evangelicals in the church age that we are in, when we hear this idea that Jesus has come to fulfill the law, we almost immediately go to prophecy, because we look at the Old Testament scriptures, and we see all of the different prophecies about where Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, and how He would die, and how He would be raised to life, and we think, “That is what Jesus means. It is that He is fulfilling the Old Testament promises and the prophecies and the law by living it out, but more so because He is fulfilling all of the prophecies that had been told about who the Messiah would be.” I think the problem with that is what we are doing is we are actually reading back what we know happens later in the story into this moment with Jesus, because you have to understand in this moment that Jesus gets up to speak, He has not been crucified. He has not been raised from the dead, and so when He stands up to say that He is here to fulfill the law, it is something that is happening in that moment. It is something that would have mattered for the people who were listening to him at that moment. He is not speaking in riddles that you do not understand right now, but someday, three years from now, when I am crucified, it

will make sense. He is fulfilling it in the present moment, so we have this misunderstanding about what it means that Jesus fulfills the law.

There are really three ideas about this word, “fulfill,” and what it means in the original context. One is that it brings it to completion. What Jesus is saying is that the story of scripture, its intended goal, is all headed to the person of Jesus. He is the place that it was always pointing to, but it also means that He was trying to reveal its true meaning, that Jesus reveals the heart of what the law and the prophets were really about all along, and it is also that He was embodying in life perfectly what the scriptures said to do, showing in flesh and blood what obedience to God looks like. So, Jesus is saying, “I am not here to abolish the scriptures. I am not here to do away with them. I am not here to negotiate what we have to listen to. I am showing you their true purpose. I am bringing the story to its climax. I am showing you what the scriptures were always intended to do.”

Oddly enough, and this is a really weird segue, but that made me think of the first date I ever went on in middle school, so I was about thirteen years old. I promise this is going to make sense. Just hang with me for a second. I was dating this girl named Jessica, and she and her dad invited me to go to a Dallas Mavericks basketball game when they were playing the Washington Wizards. This was towards the early 2000s, which meant, some of you know this, that Michael Jordan was playing on the Washington Wizards at the time, and so it was this incredible opportunity as a thirteen-year-old who loved basketball to go see the greatest basketball player of all time, and he was a little older at that point, but he was still Michael. He was still doing his thing, and so I was so excited. I didn’t even think about the ramifications of meaning that I would have to spend like five hours with this old man that I did not know at all, and what does a thirteen-year-old say to his girlfriend’s dad? So that was an awkward situation, but when we got to the game, we got there a little early so that we could watch the warm-up line, and as we’re watching the warm-up line and seeing Michael Jordan do his thing, this dad, he turns over to me, and with a smile on his face, he goes, “That lay-up line looks a little different than your middle school basketball team, doesn’t it?” and I was so offended. I cannot tell you, like I still remember the visceral reaction that I had of like, “What happens if I punch him in the face right now? Like what?” I was so angry. “How dare you talk badly about my basketball skills and my team?” We were like one and thirteen that year. We were not good, and not to mention we were in middle school, and I love middle school, and I am not trying to make fun of middle schoolers, but at that point in time, we were all elbows and knees. I was this height at thirteen years old, just about 150 pounds smaller, okay? It was all elbows and knees, and you think of the middle school basketball line. It is like the ball is hitting the bottom of the rim. You are passing it to your friend and beaming them in the face because they can’t catch. It is a mess. You are dribbling it off your shoe, and then you watch Michael Jordan, and it is like effortless. You watch Michael Jordan play basketball, and I don’t know how else to describe it other than it is what basketball is supposed to look like. Like when you watch him play, if you watch highlights of him, you just think this, whoever came up with basketball and whatever that was supposed to look like, he is the epitome of what it meant to play basketball, because it is so graceful and smooth and clean and just makes the game look easy compared to a middle schooler that is like, I don’t even know if you’re playing the same sport, right?

That is what Jesus is saying about the law, that He came to fulfill it. If you think about the Old Testament, and you think about the Israelites, and you think about any of us that try to follow God’s

commands and his rules and regulations, we look like the middle school basketball team, that we are just bumbling around and all elbows and knees and awkward, and then Jesus steps onto the scene, and suddenly all of these rules that we fumble through, all of these ideas God has about what it means to be in right relationship with Him, He just does them effortlessly. It just seems so graceful, and you look at Him, and you think, “Oh, that is what it is supposed to look like,” and that is what Jesus is saying here when He says that He fulfilled the law. It is that He is showing us what relationship with God was always supposed to look like, beautiful, graceful, elegant, smooth. This relationship with God was not always intended to be a struggle, but something that was life-giving, and so when Jesus says that He is there to fulfill, He is showing us the way. He is showing us the path, what it means to live with God in a life-giving way where all of the commands do not feel burdensome

So, He goes on in the next verse, and He says this, to expand on this point, “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen,” and I love, actually, I never reference the King James Version, but I love how the King James Version puts it. It says, “Not even one jot or tittle will ever be changed.” What Jesus is saying here is nothing will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished, so what is Jesus saying here? He is saying that the Bible stands, that we can’t just dismiss what God has said. We can’t just rewrite it. We can’t just make up our own rules, that every stroke of the pen still matters. Jesus is saying that what the scriptures say is very important, that He takes the scriptures with the utmost seriousness, and if we want to follow after Him and become like Him, then we should too. It is one of the reasons as a church that we have started standing when we read scripture in this series, because we want to embody that belief in our lives. We want to say with our whole selves that what Jesus is saying, the word of God, it matters, and that it is authoritative over us, that we can’t dispose with anything that God has said in his word. It is still his word to his people, and if Jesus has fulfilled the words of scripture, then the call is for us to hear them and to honor them and to live through them.

I think this is where it gets uncomfortable for us, because culture says that it is okay if you just take some of the good parts. We like the parts where Jesus says something about not judging people. That feels good, but the part where He says, “Love your enemy,” it makes us a little less comfortable, and so some of us, we can live in this place where if a verse doesn’t line up with our politics, then we try to ignore it, or if a verse or a passage in scripture does not align with the cultural values around us, then we just try to explain it away. If it confronts how we live, then we just try to find a workaround to say that it is actually okay, it is not that big of a deal, and I can live this way. Jesus did not actually mean what He said, and we can live in this place where we try to push the limits of how far we can listen to scripture or not.

Some of us love the verses about grace and forgiveness, but we would rather not deal with Jesus’ commands about money and generosity or sexual integrity. Some of us, we love the verses about morality and judgment, but we would rather not deal with the commands of Jesus about mercy, forgiveness, caring for the immigrant, and loving our enemies. I think the great temptation of the church today is to edit the Bible to something more manageable. What Jesus is saying here is you can’t, not if you truly want to follow after me. Not one letter, not one stroke of the pen, not one jot or tittle is disposable. Jesus is saying you have to, if you want to follow after me, then you have to go to the word of God and let it show you the way, and you don’t get to cut corners. You do not get to decide what you want to follow for yourself.



Following after Jesus means following his word, that we can't just cut it apart and keep what we like and get rid of what we do not like. If Jesus has fulfilled the word of God, then in Christ, it is still authoritative for us today. It is still meant to form us into people who live whole lives of love for God and neighbor, so we do not get to pick and choose. Jesus goes on, and He continues this point, and so far, I will admit, it sounds a little bit like the Pharisees: "I am not getting rid of anything. I am not abolishing anything. Not even one stroke of the pen will go away," but then He says this that I think might push back against some of the Pharisees. He says, "Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands or teaches others accordingly 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."

What is Jesus saying here? That you can't set aside any of these commands and that the scriptures are something that we can't edit, that we can't just decide to do away with. God has spoken, and He has taught us, and we need to follow after those things, and if we do not, then we will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. So how is that actually pushing against the Pharisees at all? Because it sounds like just more of doubling down on the same thing, you can't get rid of scripture. Well, notice what Jesus says about teaching and practicing. He says that anyone who wants to follow after Him, whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. You notice what He puts first, practices, and then teaches, because one of Jesus' greatest critiques of the Pharisees was that they taught the law, but that they did not practice it or live it out. They were the hypocrites, remember? In fact, there is one part where Jesus says that woe to the Pharisees, because they tie the law of God around people's necks like a stone and a burden that they can't carry, but they will not lift a single finger to help them under the weight. There is another part where Jesus says that the Pharisees, they are like whitewashed tombs, and on the outside, they look polished and pristine and so beautiful, but on the inside, they are rotting, like there is death inside of them. They taught the law of God, and they created all those boundaries and all of those rules and all of those things to make sure people understood what God wanted from them, but they did not actually practice it, and so what Jesus is saying is when we look at the scriptures, even the Old Testament, it is not enough to just understand the commands. We have to actually live them out. Practice comes before teaching.

I think we have this idea, and we usually assume the opposite. We think if I can learn enough, if I can listen to enough podcasts, if I can be in enough Bible studies, if I can get a sense of what God is saying and understand what He is teaching, then that is the key to maturity, but Jesus is saying maturity is measured in obedience, not what we know in our minds, and again, I think this is so countercultural to us. We value people with microphones and platforms and people that say the right things, people with a book deal, people that have the right words, but Jesus says the ones who are great in the kingdom of heaven are the quiet saints who keep showing up and practice what scripture teaches again and again and again. If scripture is like the sheet music that God has given us to understand the melody and the music, what Jesus is saying is that it is entirely possible to read the sheet music, to understand the theory of how it should be played, to even be able to teach someone how they should play it, but unless you pick up the instrument for yourself and start practicing and making mistakes and muddling your way through it and trying to figure out how to practice what Jesus has taught, then you are not actually living according to what He

has commanded, that it is not enough to just know the theory. We have to actually step inside of the music, and we have to play the music and practice again and again and again, until the melody gets inside of us.

Again, I think Israel had been trying to play the melody for centuries, and sometimes it was beautiful, and sometimes it was badly out of tune. Not to pick on middle schoolers again, but it is probably like a middle school band. I love middle schoolers, but we have all been in that room where all of the parents are beaming and so proud of the thirteen-year-old that has picked up a trombone or a clarinet or drums for the first time, but those clarinets are squeaking so badly, and the drums are way ahead of the measures they are supposed to be playing, and everybody is there in support, but if you go to an actual symphony, and it is the exact same melody being played, suddenly you think, “Oh, that is what it is supposed to sound like. My ears are not supposed to bleed when I hear this.” Again, I love middle schoolers. What Jesus is saying is that he does not want us to throw the sheet music away. He has played it perfectly. He has shown us what it looks like to play it perfectly, but then He invites us to take the sheet music for ourselves. He hands us the instrument, and He says, “Follow after me. Practice this. Join in the song.”

The Sermon on the Mount is not abstract philosophy. It is not words for someday in heaven. I firmly believe this, that what the world needs now more than anything is not Christians who come on a Sunday morning and just admire the words of Jesus, but a people who practice them. For some of us, it is possible that we nod our heads on a Sunday morning, and we harbor bitterness in our hearts on a Monday with our boss. We can study God’s word, and we can highlight all of the verses that matter to us, and we can memorize them, but if we do not forgive our coworker or our roommate or our spouse, then what does it matter how many highlights we have in our scriptures? There is a way of living for Jesus where you can post online in today’s world about love and justice but rarely put yourself in a place where those words cost us anything. What Jesus is saying is that greatness in the kingdom of God is about ordinary people who day after day put his words into practice, that do not just know the teachings of scripture but actually begin to live them out.

So, He follows this up with a statement 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 into the kingdom of heaven.” Now I have to tell you that if you were a first century person listening to Jesus say these words on the side of a mountain, there would have been an audible gasp in the crowd when He said this. More righteous than the Pharisees? They were the ones who had rules on rules on rules about what it meant to follow after God. They were the ones who had like the fasting schedule dialed in to a T. They had entire books of scripture memorized from the Old Testament. I mean, they could memorize Leviticus. We are supposed to be holier and more righteous than they are? How many of you have Leviticus memorized? No hands are up right now, right? How are we supposed to be more righteous than the Pharisees?

The important thing we miss here is that the Pharisees, they were not just bad guys in the story. There are far worse postures we could take than trying to obey God’s law and take that very, very seriously. Their heart was in the right place, but it was the implications of how they lived, and so Jesus is saying here, “It is not that I want you to do even more than the Pharisees. I do not need you to come up with more rules than the Pharisees have. I do not need you to follow the rules more than the Pharisees follow them, but I need you to be something more than the Pharisees.”

Sometimes we have this understanding that when we come to a word like “righteous,” we hear moral perfection. We think that God wants us to be morally perfect, and we are incapable of being morally perfect, and so what it means to be more righteous than the Pharisees is for Jesus just to give us his righteousness, because we can’t do that on our own, and there is a truth in that story, but again, it is getting ahead of the story, because that is not what has happened yet when Jesus utters these words. See, it is a misunderstanding that we have about what the word “righteous” actually means. Here is a clear definition, and the simplest way we can put it. The word righteousness in scripture means living in right relationship with God and with others. It does not mean moral perfection. It means that how you treat people, how you walk in the world, it is about integrity, that what you say you believe in your inner world matches your actions that show up in the world.

Again, this is a place that I think can make us very uncomfortable, because the Pharisees, they were polished on the outside, but they ignored the heart of what God wanted. They were the whitewashed tombs. I think there is a major temptation in our world today as Christians and followers of Jesus to show up on a Sunday morning or a Saturday night and to pretend like we have all of life together, that our righteousness means that I am a perfect Christian. There are no hard things in my life, and my daughter would certainly never say to me, “You are not being very salt and light,” but it totally misses what Jesus is after. He is not after following the rules perfectly.

What Jesus desires from us, and this is so important, is not moral perfection. What Jesus desires from us is wholeness, that as we live and we follow Him, it is not about following all of the rules and checking all of the boxes. It is that we become a people who look more like Him, and that as we follow the things that Jesus has said that we cannot set aside, that it is actually not about following them perfectly, but that it is in following those things we actually are made whole, that we begin to look more like God has created us to be. We begin to look less like the middle school basketball player and more like Michael Jordan, that life with him becomes more effortless. It becomes more full. It becomes more abundant and less burdensome. What Jesus is calling us to in the Sermon on the Mount is this idea of this whole life transformation where we do not show up on a Sunday morning, and we have a perfect church attendance record, and we have great Bible knowledge, and we avoid all of the big sins, but then inside we carry things like anger and pride and envy and unforgiveness. Jesus says He wants what is inside of us to match how we live. That is surpassing righteousness. That is not about performance. What Jesus says is that it is entirely possible for us to follow all of the right rules and to totally miss God’s heart, that we can do all of the right things and completely miss what it is that God wants from us.

My grandfather, I have talked about him before, he was very influential in my life, but he was a man who used very few words. Quality time with him was going to get a chocolate milk while he got his coffee at the diner and not even saying hardly two things, or going fishing with him and having an afternoon in the sun and fishing and not really talking about anything except for bait or whatever, very few words. In fact, at one point my grandma said, “Why don’t you tell me that you love me anymore?” I may have shared this before, and he said, “I told you the day we got married. What else do you need from me?” That was his thing. I say that, though, because there is something else you do not know about his relationship with my grandma. A man of very few words, truck driver for 45 years, but every day during the summer, he grew a garden, and he had rose bushes in the garden, and every day when the rose bushes

were in bloom, he would go out before his morning coffee and clip a rose for my grandma, and he would bring it in to her, and he would hand it to her as she sat down with her coffee and the scriptures, not saying anything, but just a small act of loving kindness for her. Now there was no rule that my grandfather had to go pick the rose for her, but it was this wholehearted devotion that maybe did not get expressed verbally at times, but it was this surpassing love that he had for her, that he showed her in a very simple way. It was not about following rules, but about a deeper love.

I think that that is what Jesus is after from us. He has shown us what it means to play the melody perfectly. He shows us what it looks like to live out the Torah the way God intended us to, but then He invites us into the story. He hands us the sheet music, and He says, “Join me. Practice this. Live this,” and here is the beauty, that even in those small acts of faithfulness, like simply picking a rose for a loved one, it is that as we live out the melody, even in our middle school band ways where we struggle and fumble, something begins to happen. The world begins to hear the melody, and through the people of God living out the way of God, they begin to catch a glimpse of God’s kingdom breaking in. They see mercy in places where there should be retaliation. They see forgiveness where they expect to see bitterness. They see integrity where there should be spin. That is the point that Jesus is after. We live out the kingdom of heaven so that people have the opportunity to see the kingdom of heaven, and that does not come from a flawless performance. It comes from the slow practice over time of becoming more whole, like Jesus. It means that we can’t just admire the melody. We have to pick up the instrument and play and join the song. We have to practice the words, that as we do so, we allow Jesus to make us more whole. That is the point. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, as our time in your word comes to a close, and as we respond to your word and how you have called us to live, Lord I just pray that what goes on in the inside of our lives would match the exterior, that Lord, as we seek to become like Jesus and live for others, that people would not look at us and wonder why what we say and what we believe does not match up with our actions. I pray that we would be a people who are willing to fumble through the melody in the simple hopes that the world around us could hear the beauty of what you have said and what life with you is supposed to look like. It is in Christ Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

Let me just pray and give you the benediction today. Heavenly Father, Lord God, we just ask in the name of Jesus that this week as we go from this place, the words that we were just saying, that we are alive in Christ, would carry us forth to live for you, to love for you, to not set aside your scripture or your word, but to just follow after you and seek the life that you have for us. It is in Christ’s name that we pray these things, amen. You may go in peace.

51:18 minutes