



Study Series

Follow Me: Week Three PM

The kingdom and the law: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 5:17-20 (NIV)

The Fulfilment of the Law

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. **18** 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. **19** 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.

20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Sermon Summary

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matt. 5:17) At first glance it seems strange that Jesus would have to defend his approach to the Law, but the gospel accounts make it clear that Jesus clashed with the religious leadership over how to interpret the Law. And the clashes were over pretty significant issues such as keeping the Sabbath and clean/unclean food which were at the heart of Jewish practice. Regardless of the background to this defence, Jesus makes it clear that He holds the Law in high esteem. Very high esteem in fact.

The word “fulfil” is used elsewhere in Matthew’s account to describe the fulfilment of prophecy. It is more than obeying the Law, but completing it; fulfilling its purpose. This raises the question of what, precisely, was the purpose of the Law. We can often treat rules like suggestions, things to do to stay out of trouble, or as a burden, but rules are about defining the good life and, therefore, have as their ultimate purpose lawlessness. Consider road rules. Speed limits, use of indicators, seat belts, right of ways, road signs, prohibitions on phone use and alcohol levels, are all designed to keep everyone safe as they travel. If we recognise these we should internalise them until they become second nature. For instance, I no longer have to think about putting on my seatbelt. It is second nature stemming from consistent practice but also the internalised recognition that seat belts save lives. I have, in a sense, become law-less; I no longer need to law to remind me.

This is the purpose of the Law in the Old Testament as well; to define the good life and to promote lawlessness. The good life, according to the Old Testament, is lived in relationship with God. Relationship is foundational to understanding lawlessness as well. Consider your own relationships. All relationships have “rules” - expectations about how people act towards each other. The more significant the relationship the more “rules”, but the more significant the relationship the more “lawless” they are. When you are in a deep relationship with another you don’t think about the “rules” but about the relationship and you keep the “rules” without needed to keep a list of them in your pocket. It is the same with God and the Law. The Law was given to define the good life and to promote – through consistent practice and belief – the adoption of the law as second nature. This is what Jesus has come to fulfil; the purpose of the Law. Jesus didn’t just obey the Law, he fulfilled it. It was completely second nature to Him because of His relationship with God. And so, Jesus can affirm that every bit of the law is important and that our righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were fastidious in their attempts to keep the Law, but to clarify, Jesus goes on in the sermon on the mount to point out what

He means. It is not enough not to commit homicide, we are to rid ourselves of anger. It is not enough not to commit adultery, we are to rid ourselves of lust (Matt. 5:21-30).

The implications for following are important. Firstly, it points out that a “lawless” relationship with God lies at the heart of the kingdom. Secondly, and following on from this, we are reminded that following Jesus will bring about a crisis of behaviour. Our lives are meant to be aligned in such a way to the will and purpose of God that we no longer have any need of the Law. As followers of Jesus, therefore, we need to consider our behaviour, and where our lives need realigning to the plans of God, as well as the nature of our relationship with Him. Thirdly, we will quickly be confronted by the realisation that our righteousness is insufficient. Lest we despair and stop following Jesus too early, it is important to recognise that Jesus fulfils the Law; he succeeds where we fail. This truth lies at the heart of the good news and we’ll return to it later in the series. However, until the good news becomes clear in the gospel account, remember that Jesus allowed “sinners” to eat with Him without (or so it seems) making any demands about their behaviour (This is suggested by the fact that the religious leaders were confused about why He would eat with them at all – if they were being called to repentance they might not have been so troubled.) The crisis of behaviour may still be before us, but we do not have to immediately confront it to continue to follow Jesus.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don’t feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Describe a time in which you have had to completely rely on someone else. How did dependance on another make you feel? What were the challenges involved? In reflection on that time, what have you learnt about yourself? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 5:17-20 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you’ve been lead to.

3. Describe your understanding of the lawlessness of relationships. How does this change how you understand the nature of the Law in the Bible?
4. Whilst the Law is not meant to be a burden, it does help us identify where we are not living as God intended. What patterns of behaviour in our own lives does the law challenge?
5. How does the realisation that our own righteousness is insufficient make you feel? How have you consciously or subconsciously responded to this realisation in the past?
6. What are the implications for us that Jesus has fulfilled the Law?

Prayer

Take some time to pray for each other, remembering that Jesus has fulfilled the Law, invite the Holy Spirit to continue the work of realigning your behaviour towards the good life.