

Matthew 5C

- We're studying through Jesus' first sermon delivered during His earthly ministry, which we call "the Sermon on the Mount"
 - We've already studied the first sixteen verses of the sermon, including the well-known section called, "the Beatitudes"
 - In that section, Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God (or Heaven) was reserved for people who have a certain spiritual nature
 - Jesus gave nine traits of the Kingdom-bound person in His beatitudes
 - They included humility, repentance, gentleness, purity, mercy and a general longing for righteousness coupled with a recognition that we won't find satisfaction this side of Heaven
 - As we learned, these traits are the spiritual fruit of a changed heart
 - By placing our faith in Jesus Christ, God changes our spirit so He may begin to develop these qualities in our nature
 - As we live-out these Kingdom traits outwardly and consistently, we become salt and light for the world
 - This process marks the believer as different than the world, because it's not the way the world thinks and acts
 - But as I read from Luke's Gospel last week, Jesus also taught that the Pharisees, Israel's religious leaders, weren't authentic representatives of God
 - They may have possessed authority over the nation's spiritual life, and they were certainly experts in the customs and traditions of Israel
 - Nevertheless, Jesus exposed them as ignorant and blind when it came to knowing how to please God
- Now imagine if you were a member of the crowd gathered listening to Jesus
 - You are a Jew who has grown up under Pharisaical Judaism

- Since your youth, men like the Pharisees have been your teachers, your spiritual authorities, and your examples of godliness
- Moreover, these men are the most scrupulous observers of the Law you've ever seen
- Time and time again, you've been amazed at their self-discipline as they practiced the rules of the faith
 - They fasted several times every week
 - They washed themselves before every meal
 - They prayed long, intense public prayers several times daily
 - They tithed on everything they received, even on the herbs growing in their garden
 - Simply put, you could not imagine someone more pleasing to God
- But now Jesus, a man clearly empowered to speak for God, has declared that the Pharisees' demonstrations of piety counted for nothing with God
 - The Pharisees lacked humility and mercy and love
 - They were depending on their self-righteousness rather than relying on God's mercy
 - They loved the money and power of this world, rather than seeking for the riches of the Kingdom to come
 - In short, Jesus has labeled the Pharisees as fakes, counterfeits, and frauds
 - Now as you take this in, you start wondering what, if anything, you've been taught is correct and true?
 - Jesus has rocked your world, calling into question everything Jewish culture held dear
 - Because if the Pharisees *weren't* God's spokesmen, then what about the Law & traditions they commanded everyone to follow?
 - Was Moses wrong also? Are the feasts irrelevant? Was the temple service invalid?

- Was Jesus advocating that it all be thrown out?
- I think Jesus knew His listeners would have these concerns, so in the next section of His sermon, Jesus reassures the crowd

Matt. 5:17 “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

Matt. 5:18 “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Matt. 5:19 “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:20 “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

- In v.17, Jesus addresses the crowd’s concerns, saying He didn’t come (meaning His mission wasn’t) to put an end to the Law and Prophets
 - You may know that this statement has been a source of considerable controversy in the Church
 - There are those who point to Jesus’ words here, to claim that some or all of the Law God gave to Israel remains in effect for the Christian
 - They maintain this despite the consistent and unequivocal teaching of Scripture that Christians are NOT under law
 - Instead, we have been freed from the Law by grace
 - Nevertheless, some use Jesus’ words here to defend their assertion
 - But as is usually the case, these claims rely on a misinterpretation of the text made possible only by taking Jesus’ words out of context
 - First, let’s understand what Jesus actually said
 - He said that He did not come to abolish “the Law or the Prophets”
 - For a Jew, the phrase “the Law or the Prophets” was their way of saying “the whole Bible”

- Since the New Testament didn't exist in Jesus' day, the Jewish Bible wasn't called the Old Testament
- Instead, they called the Bible "the Law and the Prophets" or sometimes "Moses and the Prophets"
- So in effect, Jesus said, "I didn't come to abolish the Bible"
 - And of course, Jesus never advocated for doing away with the Word of God, for after all, Jesus IS the Word
 - Jesus was not a revolutionary...He didn't advocate anarchy or lawlessness
- But it's also clear that Jesus wasn't talking about just the Mosaic Law, much less the issue of whether a Christian must follow the Law of Moses
 - Jesus was answering critics who claimed He was encouraging Jews to ignore all of God's Word
 - Knowing the context then, we can't use Jesus' words here to support or defend a particular view of the question of Christians keeping the Law
 - On the contrary, on the question of whether a Christian must live under the Law, we have to turn elsewhere in the Bible to find our answer
 - And when we do, we find Scripture telling us consistently that the answer is, "No" (*see Romans study*)
- Returning to our passage, we could translate Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17 this way:
 - Don't think I came to abolish the written Word of God...on the contrary, I came to fulfill all that God's Word requires
 - Jesus came as a man to live in perfect compliance with God's Word, never committing even a single act of sin
 - Since Jesus was born a Jew under the Law, He also lived in perfect compliance with all the requirements of Israel's Law
 - And more than that, Jesus also fulfilled all the prophecies spoken by the prophets concerning the Messiah
 - Some of these prophecies Jesus has yet to fulfill, but He will do so at His Second Coming and in the Kingdom

- Jesus was perfectly righteous in all that He thought and said and did
 - Therefore, by His earthly life, He brought to pass all that Scripture requires and promises
 - In that sense, Jesus fulfills the Word of God, and He is the only human being who has ever done so or ever will do so
 - His perfect life sets the standard for our entry into Heaven, the Bible says
 - The Bible describes Christ's perfect life as equaling the glory of God
- Only those who equal the glory of God are eligible to enter into His presence
 - Jesus meets that standard because He is God
 - But the Bible also says that everyone else ever born has fallen short of that standard
 - Romans 3:23 says that all humanity has sinned and therefore all have fallen short of the glory of God
- We are born sinners and so by our nature, we stand no chance of meeting the standard Christ set
 - We start sinning before we even know what sin is
 - That's why Jesus came, He says, to accomplish all that the Word of God required because we couldn't do it
 - And then, when we place our faith in Jesus as our substitute, the Father is willing to credit us with Jesus' perfection
 - But then Jesus went a step further, dying an undeserved death on the cross in our place so that He could pay the price for our failure to meet Heaven's standard
- And if you're thinking that perhaps you can find some way around this standard, that maybe this rule won't apply to you, take note of what Jesus says in v.18
 - Jesus testifies that the Word of God is going to stand the test of time and be proven right in the end

- When all is said and done, the Word of God will still be there, setting the standard for entering Heaven and convicting us of sin
- In fact, Jesus says the physical universe itself is less enduring than the Word of God
- When you consider the vastness of space and the enormity of planets and stars and galaxies, remember it will all pass away one day
 - And after it's gone, and we're experiencing what God has prepared for us afterward, this same Word will be with us
 - So if you think the Universe is unshakable, what does that say about the Word of God?
 - Jesus says everything in this Word will come to pass exactly as God has spoken...and Jesus fulfills it all for us
- In that verse, Jesus uses a uniquely Jewish idiom to emphasize His point
 - He says that not the smallest letter or stroke of the Word would go unaccomplished
 - Jesus is referring to characteristics of the written Hebrew language
 - The smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet is called a "jot" in English, and it's barely the size of an apostrophe
 - Secondly, in the Hebrew alphabet, some characters are distinguished from one another merely by slight protrusions, called "strokes"
- So Jesus says that even the smallest letter and the most subtle stroke of the Hebrew alphabet has purpose and meaning to God's purposes
 - And therefore, every detail in Scripture, no matter how minor, will come to pass and cannot be set aside
 - Today, we have a doctrine built on Jesus' statement...the inerrancy of Scripture
 - Every word in the original written manuscripts is exactly as God intended, with no mistake or error
 - Not even a single letter is out of place

- If we don't believe that, where do we go from there? It becomes a slippery slope – there are people today who don't even believe that David existed
- We believe it, because Jesus said it
- Jesus' idiom emphasizes that He's committed to fulfilling the written Word of God in its entirety, because it's a perfect reflection of God's will
 - Those who accuse Jesus of trying to tear down God's Word are dead wrong
 - He is so committed to it, that He will comply with everything it says, down to the least detail
 - Which was more than His critics could claim for themselves
- But Jesus referenced these features of written Hebrew in His idiom to make another point concerning the Pharisees
 - Jesus was implying that He was NOT interested in complying with the Pharisees' oral law
 - Remember a couple of weeks ago, I explained how the scribes had created a vast set of rules and traditions for Jewish life
 - These rules were first developed following the Jewish return from captivity in Babylon
 - They were intended as a form of protection to ensure Israel never violated Scripture again and thus, never be sent into captivity again
 - The scribes called their new rules "fences" because they were barriers to violating Scripture
 - If you kept the scribes' rules, then you would have no possibility of violating Scripture, or so they assumed
 - A classic example of a "fence" is the kosher requirement to never combine meat and dairy
 - In kosher kitchens, meat products and dairy products are never combined or served together
 - To make sure meat and dairy never mix by accident, kosher kitchens maintain separate dishes, pots and even refrigerators for serving and storing meat and dairy

- Obviously, this restriction isn't spelled out in the Law given to Moses, so why did the scribes propose it?
 - In Exodus, and again Deuteronomy, the Lord instructs Israel not to boil a young goat in its mother's milk
 - This practice was uniquely associated with Baal worship among the Canaanites
 - In Canaanite pagan rituals, worshippers would take a baby goat or calf from its mother soon after birth and boil it in the mother's milk
 - So God gave this law to Israel to keep them from participating in Canaanite idolatry
- But when the rabbis and scribes sought to create a "fence" to protect Israel from violating this law, they missed the whole point of the law
 - They focused entirely on the logistics involved and overlooked the spiritual purpose of the law
 - The rabbis wondered what would happen if a Jew bought a young goat from a certain butcher
 - And then that same Jew also bought milk from a farmer in the market
 - But unbeknownst to that Jew, the milk he purchased just happened to come from the mother of that young goat
 - If that Jew then cooked the goat in the milk, he would have broken the law, the scribes concluded
 - So to preclude any possibility of such an accidental violation, they established rules barring the mixing of meat with dairy
 - Over the centuries, later rabbis came along and expanded on the rules of the prior rabbis
 - So the fences continued to grow ever more encompassing
 - Until eventually, the rabbis reached the point of requiring separate dishes and pots and pans
 - And that, my friends, is why even today in Israel you cannot order a cheeseburger at a kosher McDonald's

- Once these rabbinical rules became firmly entrenched in Jewish culture, the original intent of God's Law had long been lost
 - What started as a prohibition of engaging in Canaanite pagan worship had become a silly concern about cheese sitting on a burger
 - In fact, by the time the rabbis had decided to outlaw the mixing of meat and dairy, the Canaanites were extinct!
 - Nevertheless, their rules live on without purpose or reason, and with little or no relationship to the Word of God
- Over the centuries, the Pharisees' rules were assembled into a book called the *Mishnah*
 - *Mishnah* means "repetition", because it was taught through repetition, and it records centuries of rabbinical "scope creep"
 - By Jesus' day, the Mishnah's reach extended far beyond simply prohibiting the mixing of meat and dairy
 - It has six divisions covering tithing, feasts, sabbaths, temple service, ritual cleansing, women, and various crimes
 - And in its printed form, the Mishnah can reach to over 1,000 pages in length!
 - Obviously, that's a lot of additional burden, so to ensure the Jewish people respected the Mishnah, the Pharisees eventually claimed it was equal to Scripture
 - Despite the fact that the Mishnah wasn't written by Moses, the Pharisees claimed Moses received it from God
 - They claimed God communicated the Mishnah orally to Moses, not in writing
 - Over the centuries, it was passed down orally through the elders and priests of Israel
 - Only after the Jews' return from exile in Babylon did the scribes write it down, supposedly under the inspiration of the Spirit
 - So the Pharisees began calling the Mishnah an "oral" Law, which complimented God's written Word
 - So the Jews of Jesus' day had two forms of "Scripture"

- They had true Scripture, called the Law and the Prophets
- And they had an additional work of so-called Scripture called the Mishnah
- It's similar to the way Mormons claim that both the Bible and the Book of Mormon are Scripture
- But also like the Mormons, in practice, the only book the Jews *actually* studied and followed was the oral Law, the Mishnah
- So, when Jesus' accusers lined up to say he was abolishing the Law or the Prophets, what they actually meant was He was disobeying the oral law
 - His accusers made no distinction between these two works
 - In fact, the Pharisees were more disturbed by a violation of the Mishnah than they were of a violation of God's Word
 - Today in Israel, it's a far greater scandal to set butter on your dinner plate in a kosher home than it is to commit fornication
 - So when we read about Jesus being accused of violating the Law, we need to understand they mean the oral law
 - But Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that these two works, Scripture vs. the Mishnah, were not equivalent
 - One came from God, but the other was given by men
 - One was the way to life and godliness, but the other was merely a means of self-righteousness
 - One must be accomplished, but the other must be abolished
 - And I think Jesus chose the idiom He used in v.18 to clarify where His allegiances were
 - Jesus was committed to every letter and stroke of the written Word, the true Word of God
 - But He cared nothing for the Pharisees' so-called oral law
- This one issue explains everything you need to know about why the Pharisees hated Jesus
 - If Jesus invalidated their treasured Mishnah, then what would happen to the Pharisees' power over the people?

- If the people realized that the Mishnah's requirements were not sent from God, then the Pharisees instantly became irrelevant
- Because their power and wealth was based in their expertise of the Mishnah, not in the Word of God
- So at the core of their conflict, was the fight over the authority of Scripture vs. the teaching of men
 - The Pharisees claimed their teaching was equal to the Word of God, and therefore they substituted it for the Bible
 - Jesus disputed the Pharisees' claims and even blatantly ignored the Mishnah at times, especially when it conflicted with righteousness
 - For example, in every case where Jesus is accused of violating the Sabbath, he is actually violating the Mishnah's rules concerning Sabbath observance
 - And those rules were not God's definition of how to keep the Sabbath
- This same conflict continues today, because the enemy knows how important discrediting the Word of God is in his war with God
 - And the enemy works to discredit the Word of God with two versions of the same lie
 - To the irreligious of the world, Satan lies by telling them the Word of God is nonsense, full of myth and error
 - And therefore they can ignore it, and they gladly do
 - But to the zealous of the world, Satan's lie goes in the opposite direction
 - To that group, he says that Scripture is so holy and special we can't begin to understand it without expert assistance
 - It's like your mom's special china...so precious, you never actually use it to eat
 - Or like someone who buys a really nice couch, but then covers it with plastic
 - The Word of God is so special, we don't actually read it or learn what it says

- Instead, we need priests or popes or sages or imams...or Pharisees to interpret it for us
- And for the same reason, they study their books, books like the Mishnah or the Catholic Catechism or the Book of Mormon, rather than the actual Word
- Both lies have the same effect...Satan takes our eyes off of the truth and replaces it with nonsense dressed up to look like it's from God
 - For those who care nothing for religion, their eyes go to the Creation or to themselves, instead of to the Word
 - And for those who are zealous, he directs their eyes to false teaching that obscures the Word
- We need to guard against falling into this same trap today
 - There are many Christians studying in Bible studies or small groups and when they gather, the book they open isn't the Bible
 - They open books written about the Bible
 - Men study pamphlets about how to live a manly life, women watch emotional videos of how to live a victorious life
 - Teens read books about how to avoid sex and drugs, *etc.*
 - We think we've learned something about the Bible, but we probably didn't – we were probably just entertained
 - That stuff is fine, but only if it's a supplement to – not a substitute for – the Bible
 - By knowing the Bible, you'll be able to filter that stuff; you'll know what was good and what was not
- If we're not careful, we risk focusing on our own "mishnahs" rather than turning to the one Book actually offering truth on all these matters
 - That's the key issue behind His conflict with the Pharisees
 - Jesus said He came to uphold and fulfill the irreplaceable, irrefutable, unequalled Word of God
 - But just as assuredly, He came to tear down the worthless manmade rule books that distract people from that truth

- That's why Verse By Verse Fellowship exists...to reassert the importance of Christians knowing and obeying the Word of God
- Even as we know and follow the One Who fulfilled it all
- If you want to know how serious Jesus is about elevating the Word of God over the opinions of men, hear what He says in v.19
 - Jesus says that anyone who advocates for the annulling or ignoring of even the least requirement of Scripture will be held accountable by God
 - Such a person, Jesus says, will be least in the Kingdom
 - Obviously, Jesus is speaking about those who would enter the Kingdom in the first place, that is, believers
 - And Jesus says for believers who use their time on earth to weaken obedience to the Word of God, they forfeit their honor in the Kingdom
 - In other words, there is no greater way for a believer to offend Christ than undermining the Word of God
 - On the other hand, those who set their minds on obeying the Word of God, and teaching others to do the same, will be worthy of the greatest honor
 - Because no one else will have done what He did...no one else can say that
 - Jesus is making a veiled reference to Himself in that statement
 - Because of course, Jesus will possess the greatest honor in the Kingdom, having obeyed all that the Word requires
 - And having taught us all how to obey it by His Spirit
- So where does that leave the Pharisees?
 - Remember, if you lived in that day, you saw these men as the most religious, most dedicated and fervent followers of God imaginable
 - Won't they receive honor for their respect of God's Word?
 - Well, notice Jesus adds in v.20, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom

- That's like telling a Catholic that unless your righteousness exceeds the Pope, you can't enter Heaven
 - Or telling a Mormon that unless your righteousness exceeds Joseph Smith, you can't enter
 - Or telling a Muslim that you have to exceed the righteousness of Muhammed
 - It's shocking and unbelievable
- But it's true...as scrupulous as the Pharisees were, they were still a long way from equaling the glory of God
 - They may have tried their best, but in reality, they simply became practiced at following their own rules, rather than obeying God's Word
 - And as much as we may look down our noses at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, we're no better
 - We do the same thing...we carefully define the rules we think make us holy so we can sleep at night
- For example, if we like to lie, but we never cheat on our spouse, then we tell ourselves that lying is no big deal to God
 - But we're going to Heaven, because He approves of our faithfulness in marriage
 - Or we judge homosexuals or murderers or pagans by saying, "There's no way that person is going to heaven"
 - Conveniently forgetting our own lusts or hatred of others or devotion to materialism
 - That's being a Pharisee, and Jesus says it's not good enough to get into Heaven
- So how do you get into Heaven? You have to be perfect like Jesus
 - Which means you need Jesus
 - You have to receive His perfection on your behalf
 - You have to put your faith in Him or you won't be in Heaven
 - That's why Jesus came...to bring you into the Kingdom with Him