

Fulfilling the Law

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

June 16, 2024 AM Sermon

Reverend Kristy Manion

Matthew 5:17-20

This week to check out a hunch I looked at traffic statistics. Michigan State Police traffic data doesn't show an uptick in the number of car crashes in the last several years. But somehow recently I seem to be in the right place at the right time to witness some near misses behind the wheel.

Take the morning commute a couple of weeks ago on Burton Street. As cars waited in line at the light, an eastbound driver skidded into the back of the line, horn blaring. Without waiting for the cars ahead to start moving when the light changed, this driver veered into the lane of oncoming traffic and sped jerkily around three or four other cars starting to accelerate. When our kids asked why I wasn't moving forward after the light turned green, I said, "Because I'm not sure what's happening here." I wished there had been a traffic officer around at the time.

The driver of that zooming car both deserves my curiosity, and needed some correction. Curiosity and generosity or in order because there's so much I don't know, maybe the driver was racing to get to a loved one's hospital bed. Correction, because driving is a privilege and a responsibility that can, and does, put others in danger.

A couple of weeks later I noticed a radar speed sign on Burton. I'm sure the road incident I witnessed and the placement of the speed sign aren't directly correlated. But it made me wonder if a speed sign might have been helpful on the day I watched this scene unfold. Maybe; maybe not. Passing that sign and watching the traffic slow as speeds flashed in orange digital figures reminds me that instant feedback is indeed helpful for correcting behavior. It's a picture of the mirror function of God's law.

John Calvin says God's law has three purposes: to teach us God's will, to restrain our misbehavior, and to show us a pattern for redeemed and grateful living. The law, Calvin says, "is like a mirror. In it we contemplate our weakness; then the iniquity (sin and dirtiness) arising from that weakness, and finally the curse coming from both—just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face."

In the packed short passage, we read this morning, Jesus is speaking about his relationship to God's 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 fulfill them. ¹⁸For 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."

One thing we need to understand in this passage is what Jesus is talking about when he says "the Law and the Prophets." Here he simply means the Old Testament Scriptures, including but not limited to the commands. He's trying to show those listening that he's not a Scripture-destroyer or a lawbreaker, and here's why.

Jesus has just spoken about what life looks like in the upside-down kingdom of heaven, where the spiritually poor are blessed, where the mourners are comforted, where those who love him will be persecuted, where those who hunger and thirst for right relationships with God and others will be filled. He has spoken about how this community, a blessed community, will not be able to remain hidden. No, their life-giving witness to the current reality of God's now-and-future kingdom will be on display for all to see, a witness received as a gift of life for some and experienced as subversive by others.

Such a vision without appeal to Scripture or tradition could lead some around him to wonder: "Is this rabbi preaching something totally new? Is he a "radical"? By what authority is he teaching?" So Jesus explains his relationship to the Law and Prophets, the Jewish Scriptures. No, he's not anti-Scripture. No, he hasn't come

to set aside the Old Testament Law, Prophets, and Writings. Instead he's come to fulfill them. In his teaching he will reinterpret them. In his life he will demonstrate a human life lived in the perfect will of God; the life humans were created for. As he does he claims divine authority to do this new thing built on the foundation of the Scriptural witness, a witness he honors even as he says he has come to "fill it full" of meaning. In his teaching and his own obedience to God, his obedience will go even as far as a suffering death for the sake of others.

Matthew, always eager to show how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, places Jesus on a mountaintop just like Moses as he speaks the commands of God to his disciples. And on the mountain Jesus outlines the commands that make up his own teaching, words that will stand the test of time, words that will never pass away, even when heaven and earth do.

Asserting his authority apart from other sources, Jesus gives six commands using the words, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you." Jesus' commands in Matthew 5 broaden, widen, and deepen the Old Testament commandments. Jesus' commands about murder, marriage and divorce, retribution, oaths and loving enemies cut to the heart of the matter. They are both simpler than the teaching of the Pharisees and more impossible to achieve. Simpler, because the straightforwardness of Jesus' commands cuts through the tradition built up around the Old Testament Law. And more difficult because they require not only outward obedience but also inward willingness of heart.

Around the 613 commands in the Old Testament Law, the oral tradition of the Pharisees grew to guard the sacredness of the Torah. This oral tradition totaled 800 pages after it was written down in the 200s. Rabbis then discussed these teaching and created commentaries on the tradition, further tightening the fence posts around keeping the Torah.

So when Jesus says that his disciples' righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, we might imagine the looks on the disciples' faces: wide-eyed discouragement writ large after hearing this standard. The Pharisees had already raised the intensity around righteousness to stratospheric heights. How could anyone possibly be more righteous than they?

Yet at the same time as the traditions around the Old Testament laws became more and more specific, it's clear that the commandments and their fences could never quite have the desired result. They could not guarantee changed hearts and transformed lives. In Matthew 23 Jesus addresses the Pharisees, saying, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

For changed hearts and transformed lives, lives that keep the more important matters of the law without neglecting small acts of obedience, something else is needed. Lest we're too hard on the Pharisees in their attempts to safeguard the value of righteous living, it's good to note it's not just the Pharisees who expand rules and regulations. It's human to swing between poles: from many rules and regulations, to few regulations, to the fallout from too few regulations, back toward more regulations. It's hard for us to find a good middle ground between too much regulation and too much freedom.

In his book *After You Believe*, N.T. Wright describes the aftermath of the financial crash in 2008. After that happened, Wright says, "Lots of people pointed to the fact that over the previous twenty years all kinds of rules and regulations that had previously been in place to stop the banks and other money-lending institutions from behaving in an irresponsible fashion had quietly been set aside. They were over-restrictive, the politicians had been told... Everyone went along for the ride, not realizing they were accelerating toward the edge of a cliff. So [afterward], people [were saying], we need to put all the rules and regulations back in place..." Wright continues, "We...need to notice that our culture has lurched between deregulation in all key areas of life, money, sex, and power, to put it crudely, and what you might call re-regulation. Deregulation happened

because people wanted to do their own thing, to be... true to themselves and see what happened. But when deregulation results in chaos, whether in banking (money), in human relationships (sex), or in the way we do war and politics... (power) people are eager to reintroduce rules that will get us back on track. The problem is that introducing new regulations doesn't get to the heart of the problem. Doing your own thing isn't good enough, but rules by themselves won't solve the problem."

Instead, keeping our systems, our families, our business, and our churches running requires people who can be "trusted to do the right thing, not because there are rules but because that's the sort of people they are." In other words, people receiving and inhabiting character graced by Christ. Jesus comes not simply to give us a new set of rules, an external standard based on his own authority. He comes to do something even better: to love us to death. As we receive his grace he begins to remake our hearts. He doesn't do away with God's commands; he fulfills them in his own obedience on our behalf, in the only perfect human obedience ever to be seen on this earth.

If we find ourselves following Jesus' commands to the letter but find we're doing it in a way that doesn't look much like the Jesus shown in the gospels, we might pause to reflect. Is it the Lord we're following? If we're meeting the outward requirements of Jesus' commands but not seeing love, joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness, it's possible we've left something behind while striving to honor the law that gives freedom.

And on the other hand, if we think that we can rest easy in the grace of God in Christ without following the commands of Jesus because, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:6, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life," we need the corrective lenses of Matthew's Jesus. This Jesus has authority. His commands are the red-carpeted path on which we walk as redeemed people. They are the pattern and form of life in the kingdom of heaven. Which danger are we more likely to tip toward, legalism or license? As we navigate between these opposing dangers, we do that with the help of our Lord, teacher, elder brother, Great High Priest, and merciful judge.

In Matthew 22, the Pharisees ask Jesus to identify the greatest commandment: Love, Jesus says. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,"

This love for God is not born out of fear of punishment. This love is moved by grace; grace given and grace received, a grace that remakes people in ways unlike any other performance-based system in this world. The obedience of Jesus' followers is a grateful obedience to a law already filled-full in Christ.

When we say yes to his grace, we begin to spend time with him and learn his ways. He makes us people of the kingdom, the people we've always wanted to be, people who find ourselves wanting to walk with him, thirsty for his teaching, eager to practice and do the things he says.

Captain Chesley Sullenberger, or Sully, is an airline pilot who received national recognition about 15 years ago after he safely landed a plane full of passengers on New York's Hudson River. Sully was a veteran pilot. He knew the "rules" for flying planes. He had years of experience enacting those rules in flights that went more "by the book," circumstances far less harrowing than a blown engine and an emergency water landing. In a situation that went beyond the norm, when the chips were down, Sully was able to do what came to him "second nature" as it were, without reference to the pilot handbook.

So, too, are people yoked with Christ by his grace. In them and with their participation, Jesus forms character that truly resembles his, even if it's in fits and starts and only in part for now. Jesus grants them a new "second nature." He is recreating a people able to respond in a Christ like way, even when faced with situations that go beyond the specifics of his commands.

Christ came to us overflowing with life, human life lived in perfect obedience to God. And on us, Christ's followers, some of that filled-to-the-brim faithfulness splashes out. We are washed in his obedience in

baptism. We taste and drink of his faithfulness at his table. We long to be full of his faithfulness ourselves so that the fruit of our Savior's life, a life that looks like the kingdom of heaven now and yet to be, grows in us too. Thanks be to God.

©Rev. Kristy Manion