

## **MATTHEW 5:17-20 • “THE LAW: FORGOTTEN. FATAL. FULFILLED.”**

Del Shimandle • July 12, 2020

### **INTRODUCTION**

Good Sunday morning everyone. It is so good to be “with” you today! This message is pre-recorded, of course, but I’m online watching and worshipping with you too. Hang in there. We hope to be together again soon in some fashion. If you are a visitor, please check out our website, and let us know you’ve been joining us, and ask any questions you have at [firstfree.com/welcome](http://firstfree.com/welcome).

Pastor Jason is on vacation this week and next, but we are continuing with our sermon series on the “Stuff Jesus Said.” Specifically we are examining some of the more confusing or challenging things that Jesus said in the Gospels. Today we come to a real doozy: the Law! And he doesn’t just drop a short, simple statement on us. He gives us a paragraph full of thoughts that will make us very uncomfortable and even confused.

A little over three years ago, in December 2016, I was sitting in a neurosurgeon’s office after an a couple of MRI scans of my head. The good news was that there was no cancerous tumor pressing against a nerve and causing the paralysis in my vocal chords and upper palette. But he said there was an aneurysm in my brain just behind my right eye. This guy was the best neurosurgeon the hospital had, he oozed confidence and kindness, which was comforting. He was explaining technical details about what the MRI revealed, what an aneurysm is, how big it was, where it was located. I was following along pretty easily and understanding what he was saying. So I asked: “So, do you recommend surgery?” He replied: “Yes. This aneurysm is on the larger end of the scale. It should probably be taken seriously. What we do is go in and clip the weak spot on the blood vessel with titanium clips...” more technical stuff.

But I was not interested in that so I said: “So doc, I’m about to start my next semester of seminary... How urgent is this? How long does the surgery take? What is the recovery time? How soon do I have to have the surgery? Could it wait until Spring Break, or even the summer?”

Without missing a beat, he matter-of-factly said: “Sure, you could wait. It’s entirely up to you. But it would be a shame to wait until summer but die in April.”

...

That took a while to process. His big, warm smile hadn’t changed, and his eyes were so cheerful. The startling words seemed so incongruent. And he just let them float there in the sudden silence.

Jesus’ words about the Law in today’s passage are like that. They catch us off guard. They are hard to understand. They are very uncomfortable. And He does not resolve the tension! He drops some really serious words, and then just leaves them there for us to consider!

Jesus says three startling things about the Law which are hard to understand, even hard to accept.

First: Not even the littlest part of the Law & Prophets will be FORGOTTEN.

Second: Christ came not to abolish the Law & Prophets, but to see that it was FULFILLED.

Third: Ignoring/and teaching others to ignore the Law & Prophets is FATAL.

Jesus’ words were like that cold pronouncement of doom from my neurosurgeon on that day over three years ago.

Now let’s turn to our Bibles and read what Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-20.

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.  
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.”

This is God’s word! Let us have ears to hear... Let us pray.

*Our Father in heaven, do give us ears to hear. For Jesus’ words can reveal truth to us if we have faith, but his words may also conceal truth from us if we are hard of heart. Soften our hearts Lord. Let us not presume to understand in our own wisdom. Let us not presume that we have You all figured out. We know and cherish the words in the Bible about Grace, but O Lord, today’s word about the Law is hard to understand. It is hard to accept. It is difficult to see how Jesus’ very words about the Law don’t conflict with His words about Grace. Help us hear and understand that the Law & Prophets will not be forgotten. That to ignore the Law & Prophets and to teach others to do the same is fatal! And help us understand what it means that Christ came not to abolish the Law & Prophets, but to see that they are fulfilled! And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray, Amen!*

Well, it’s unconventional and unexpected. But today I’ve invited a special guest to come and speak to us. He has personal experience with the Scripture passage we just read, so I think we might be blessed to hear his story.

### **LEVI’S ACCOUNT** *(Del in character as Matthew)*

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I’m new to video streaming on youtube and facebook. So bear with me patiently, please.

My name is Levi. Or you may know me by my Greek name, Matthew. I’ve been asked to tell you some stories about my rabbi, Yeshua Hamashiach. Or Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. Specifically I’m to tell you about some of the things that he taught and said.

I’ve written a book about Jesus. You may have read it. If not, you can get it on amazon.com...

Jesus spoke many words. There are more stories and sayings than I could possibly write down. And I didn't always understand what He said or meant. Some of His words were so hopeful and encouraging. They drew me towards him like a moth to a flame. Some of his sayings were strange and mysterious, almost impossible to understand. And some words were shocking and distasteful. Sayings that seemed clear enough, but that forced one to doubt everything one believed to be true or sensible.

If there is one thing that is easy to say about Jesus, is that you could not put him into a simple and tidy category. He could not be pigeon-holed. But I came to understand that He always spoke beautiful words. Wonderful words. Such wonderful words of life.

But let me back up a little bit. It will be helpful if I tell you a little bit about myself so you understand how Jesus' words and life affected me.

I am a Jew from the region of Galilee. That's in the north of my country, by the Sea of Galilee, of course. I am the son of Alpheus. I was born at a time when Rome ruled my country with an iron fist. My people had returned from exile more than 400 years before I was born. We were a people born to trouble and suffering. And we longed for the Messiah that had been promised by the Prophets. We longed to be free again, independent of Rome, and hoped for the One who would rise up and overthrow our oppressors.

I was a bright student as a boy, particularly good with numbers. But I was disappointment to my parents, first because I preferred to always be studying rather than sweating in the fields or in a fishing boat. I hated dirt under my finger nails. I felt stifled by our small room in a crowded part of the city. Everything was always dirty, we were always wanting for a decent meal, and we had no privacy. I resented our station in life and I wanted something more and better for me and for my family.

So it seemed perfectly logical to me to pursue work as a tax collector. I was good with numbers. I could do my work from the comfort of a clean, cool and shaded booth. I could earn ever so much more money than those poor schlubs doing back breaking labor in the fields, or the

fishermen, exposed to the elements all night long, and who could never wash that fishy stink from their very skin and hair.

But my parents didn't understand. They felt betrayed and I was completely cut off from the family. In fact, I was seen as a traitor to my people. I could not understand their anger. It was a perfectly sensible job for someone of my talents. Why should they be bothered by my job. Taxes were inevitable, necessary even, since they paid for public services. Don't get me wrong, I was no lover of Rome, but there was nothing I could do personally about their presence in our country. I thought, if you can't beat them, join them.

I simply allowed the teachings of my family and people to be **FORGOTTEN**.

With newfound wealth I could afford a large villa, many servants, the best of food and drink, and the finest of garments. Oh sure my clothes may look worn and shabby now, but I was different then. I wanted different things then. And, sadly, my family wanted nothing to do with me any more.

Neither did anyone else really... I was rejected as a traitor by my own people for working with Rome, and disrespected by Romans for the same reason. Jews only spoke to me when they had to make excuses about why they needed more time to pay their tax. And Romans only spoke with me when I was turning over the money, and that with a condescending sneer at best.

This kind of social rejection, paired with the trappings of wealth and luxury turned most of the tax collectors into bitter, hardened, and cruel men. But I became lonely and despondent. I felt trapped. I had gotten everything I thought I wanted, but I didn't like what I had become.

You can see why, then, when John the Baptist burst on the scene, I was fascinated by him and the throngs of people who went out to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. His message about a coming Messiah did kindle a curiosity in me, but I couldn't bring myself to be baptized. It was fun to hear him criticize the Pharisees, but he spoke so bluntly, and harshly about repentance that I just couldn't stomach it. I was beginning to feel ashamed of my own choices in life, but who

was he to tell me to repent?

Then this man named Jesus came to the Jordan River. I overheard John say the strangest thing: “I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!?” And this peaceful looking stranger replied even more enigmatically: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to **FULFILL** all righteousness.”

[I didn't understand what he meant by that. Not until much later, after I became His disciple and began to study the Scriptures. They all pointed to Him you know... the Law and the Prophets. I explain it all in my book. Do read it when you get the chance.]

Well, there was quite a commotion when Jesus came up out of the water. The wind suddenly picked up, and there was some lightning and thunder. John claimed it was the voice of God saying: “This is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased.” But I couldn't make sense of that, and yet I knew I had witnessed something important. I just didn't know what to make of it. And then Jesus walked off into the wilderness...

When he appeared again 40 days later, there was quite a stir in Galilee. News about him spread so quickly because he was doing things no one had ever witnessed before. He was healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, making lame people walk again. He was unafraid to interact with women, with Samaritans, with lepers. In fact he seemed more interested in seeking out the people on the fringe of society, the outcasts and rejects, than the wealthy and prominent and pious. When the Pharisees asked Him why he would associate with the “tax collectors and sinners,” Jesus simply said: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor. I have come to heal the sick...”

In those early days I went out to see him too. I was curious. I was, as you could tell by the Pharisee's comment, one of the outcasts of society. I was hungry for something better and I was dying inside. Living my own way, on my own terms was proving **FATAL**.

Once when I was inching in closer to try and hear Jesus speaking, I was pushed away by a

Pharisee in the crowd. He spat at me and said a sinner such as I had no right to even brush by someone like him. I was just a tax collector, a vile sinner, a traitor!

I was so tired of it all. I was exhausted from being pushed to the fringes. I was sick of being judged by everyone. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. All I wanted to do was hear what Jesus was saying.

Well, all at once these emotions boiled over, and I screamed at him:

“DO NOT THINK you know me or anything about me!

DO NOT THINK you know what price I have paid.

DO NOT PRESUME that you know my pains or sorrows or regrets...”

I guess I shouted a little too loudly, because suddenly the crowd had fallen completely silent and everyone was looking at me. I wanted no attention or trouble, so I just quickly and quietly left the crowd and went back to my tax booth.

The next time I heard Jesus speak is what I really have wanted to tell you about. I heard that he was out in the foothills outside of town. But His fame had spread quickly, so I was not the only one looking for Him, and the crowd gathered around was much bigger now. He sat down and began to teach.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

My head began to spin... His words brought a sort of lightness and hope to my heart. I felt like He was describing me. Talking TO me...

Yes, I was poor in spirit, broken hearted, feeling trapped. Were the blessings of God even for me? Could the kingdom of heaven be even for one such as me? I was sad and lonely. I never thought this to be a state of blessedness, but this promise of the comfort of God stirred in me a great hope...

I had hungered and thirsted after riches and status, and was never satisfied. What was this hunger and thirst for righteousness that He was speaking of? I was certainly hungry for something different, and the promise of being filled whetted my appetite.

I had been shown little mercy, and knew less of showing it to others myself. But oh how I longed for mercy to be shown to me.

Here was a new and unexpected teaching I would be willing to accept. Not like that blunt and harsh teacher John the Baptist. "Repent... Repent... Repent..." Of course, I laughed when he called the self righteous Pharisees "brood of vipers." But surely I wasn't like them.

Might God actually have mercy upon me? Might He just ignore my sins and look the other way?

But then Jesus said something that sounded every bit as harsh as The Baptizer...

He was still speaking softly, gently, and I could have sworn he looked right at me when he said it...

**"DO NOT THINK..."**

(Oh my ears ring with those words now!)

**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.**

I couldn't believe what I was hearing... He came to make sure the Law was FULFILLED?



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.

What could He mean? None of the Law would be FORGOTTEN?

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.”

We, everyone of us standing there, would be held accountable to the Law, and failure would be FATAL? A death sentence?

Had He come, then, to execute judgment or to provide mercy? I was reeling in confusion. And he kept on in the same vein:

“You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall not murder! If you do you are subject to judgment.’ But I say to you: ‘If you call your brother a fool, you are subject to judgment and in danger of the fire of hell!’”

I thought He had come to turn the world upside down with concern for the outcasts, and teachings about love, mercy, and justice. And here He was sounding more stringent about righteousness than the Pharisees.

Yet he spoke so calmly, and gently. There was none of the venom or latent condescension of the Pharisees. It all seemed so incongruent.

But the thing that haunted me were those words he spoke which echoed my own:

“Μὴ νομίζετε...”

“Do not think...”

“Do not presume...”

I pondered that for days, and was faced with the simple truth: I didn't understand. And he was telling me, telling us all, that we didn't understand. We could not presume to fully understand, not the Law & Prophets, not the Exile, not our oppression by Rome, and not least of all this Man named Jesus who spoke beautiful words of life.

Not long after that, as I was sitting in my tax booth one day, Jesus actually walked by. His disciples were with Him, and the contented, peaceful look on their faces struck a chord in my heart. A crowd was tagging along as well, and I watched longingly as they passed by. But suddenly the entire crowd halted many yards off. The crowd parted as Jesus came several steps back. He looked directly at me, smiled warmly, and said: “Follow me.”

That was when I began to learn, and began to understand. Going my own way had led to riches and luxury, but also rejection and self-loathing as well. But following Him, and learning from Him, I began to live again.

It wasn't until years later, just before He died, that I began to understand just what Jesus had meant when He said: “I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them!”

He had tried to explain to us three different times that He had to go to Jerusalem to die. But the night before He was crucified He spoke to us over the Passover meal. He explained that His body was like the bread, that it would be broken for us. He said that the wine was the blood of the covenant, which was about to be poured out for the forgiveness of sins, and that we should drink it.

Then I began to understand — just began mind you — He was fulfilling the Law and the Prophets not by executing punishment on us as sinners. Rather he was fulfilling the Law by

bearing the punishment for our sins on our behalf! He was not setting aside the Law and requirements of righteousness, but He himself was fulfilling the Law as the Passover sacrifice. I knew I could not have a righteousness that surpassed that of the Pharisees. I had no hope of entering the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus was fulfilling the Law on my behalf. His righteousness would be a gift to me... and for all those who follow Him.

He hadn't come to turn the world upside down. He had come to turn the world upside right!

There is so much more I want to tell you. There is so much more that He did and said. But alas, my time is up. Just know this, I am glad he loved me as I was. But even more I love him because he didn't leave me as he found me. I am forever changed, and where I once scoffed at keeping the Law and Prophets, now I take joy in following my Lord. I don't live in obedience to gain His love, but I live in joyful obedience because He loved me... and now I am growing to love Him.

Thank you for listening to my story. Be sure to read my book...

## **CONCLUSION**

Well, I hope you learned something fresh by hearing from Matthew in this non-traditional style of preaching a sermon. The passage is certainly a difficult one to fully understand. Considering it within the context of Matthew's life and the book that he wrote, will hopefully help you begin to understand.

It's a hard truth that not even the littlest part of the Law & Prophets will be FORGOTTEN. It's a confrontational truth that ignoring the Law and teaching others to do the same will prove FATAL for each one of our soul. But I hope that you see the beauty and know the joy of how Jesus came to FULFILL the Law on our behalf. Because of His life and death, we too can be redeemed, given new life, and transformed in our very heart.

Allow me close in prayer: God our Father, Jesus our Lord, Holy Spirit our guide, thank you. Your Word is wonderful and beautiful, but can be oh so hard to understand and accept. Forgive

us for being prideful. Forgive us for presuming. Forgive us for all our sins. We surrender to you, and glorify your name, for you prescribed a way of living in your kingdom, you forgave us for failing to follow that way, and you fulfilled all the requirements so that we could be made new in Christ.

### **BENEDICTION**

As you go now and preparing for your next week, go at peace with God. Believe Jesus' good news. Trust in his work that means the Law & Prophets are fulfilled. Walk in newness of life and power to follow Him in obedience. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength. And love your neighbors as yourself.