

To Fulfill the Law and Prophets

Matthew 5:17-20

During this Advent season we are going to be looking at several statements Jesus made about why he came into this world. Advent means “coming” and is the time leading up to Christmas when we reflect on and celebrate the coming of Jesus – both his first coming and his second coming. It’s a good yearly tradition because it helps us see beyond our busy lives and schedules and remember why God saved us and brought us into his kingdom. We are here on assignment – not to focus on building our own kingdoms here on earth, but to focus on building Christ’s – a kingdom he started at his first coming and is spreading throughout the world right now and will one day come to fulfillment when he returns again.

I did a search through the four gospel accounts to find the statements Jesus made about why he came and I found 11 of them. In some of them he was saying the same thing, but there were distinct reasons as well. As I studied I ended up finding 5 reasons he gave for why he came and we’re going to look at several of them in the next few weeks. The first one I want to look at is one he made at the beginning of what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

To give a little background, this was early on in Jesus’ ministry. He had gained a lot of attention up in the region of Galilee because of his miracles and teaching, and on one occasion a large crowd of people gathered to hear him, and that’s when he preached this sermon. He was teaching them many things about the kingdom of heaven.

People were drawn to him because he taught as one who had authority, which was different than their other religious teachers. His teaching was so different in fact, that some were thinking he was trying to cast aside the Scriptures and replace them with something new. And in the statement we’re going to look at today he rejects that idea completely and elevates the importance and value of the Law and Prophets, which was the Hebrew Scriptures and what we refer to as the Old Testament.

The reason his teaching and interpretation sounded so different is that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had missed the meaning and intent of the

Scriptures. They were focusing on obeying the letter of the law and teaching the commands as a religious moral standard to achieve righteousness before God. They were stressing outward obedience but ignoring the matters of the heart. Jesus turned that upside down, focusing first on the heart and intent of the law and then what that looked like when practiced in outward obedience. His teaching revealed a much deeper meaning and application to the Scriptures, so it seemed different. But it wasn't, and we'll see that in our passage for today.

Read 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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So we see the first statement he makes about why he came in verse 17 and you can see he gives it in contrast to the faulty assumption some were making about him because of how different his teaching was: “*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.*”

He wanted it to be clear that he was not casting aside the holy Scriptures (or the Old Testament) with what he was teaching. He was actually teaching it as it was meant to be taught all along. The Law and the Prophets were precious to him and highly valuable. They contained the holy Word of God that he had given to his people through Moses and the prophets and Jesus said in verse 18 that not even the smallest pen strokes of the Hebrew words with which they were written would pass away until everything had been accomplished. He was referring to his second coming when this heaven and earth will pass away and the new heaven and earth will come. That's how important the Old Testament was to Jesus.

Furthermore, he said in verse 19 that anyone who treated even the least commands in it lightly would be least in his kingdom but those who honored them and taught them to others would be great in his kingdom. So he's clearly reaffirming the importance of them. And then, to expose the empty religion that the scribes and Pharisees were teaching and modeling, he made the provocative statement in verse 20 that unless a person's righteousness exceeded theirs they would never enter the kingdom of heaven.

He wasn't saying that they had to do even more than the Pharisees in order to try to earn their way into the kingdom of heaven, but he was saying that if they practiced mere outward obedience without having a transformed heart, they would never enter the kingdom. Their righteousness must flow from a new heart and new spirit and affect everything they did.

So he's pointing out the importance of the law and now I want to go back to look at the statement he made about why he came: Jesus came to fulfill the Law and Prophets. That's a monumental statement. What did he mean by that? As I said earlier, the Law and the Prophets were the holy Scriptures of the Jews, or the Old Testament. They considered the first 5 books that Moses wrote to be the Law, and everything after that to be the Prophets. Jesus declared that he had come to fulfill them – not to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

What did he mean by that? The answer to that question is enormous and as I dug into it this week it was an extensive and rich study. The Law and the Prophets are a very large collection of 39 books and they are full of references, portraits, symbols, laws, and prophecies pointing to the Messiah and many aspects of who he is and what he would do. They point to his birth, his life, his ministry on earth, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his kingdom advancing throughout the world, his priestly ministry in heaven, his second coming, the establishment of his kingdom on earth, his final judgment of the wicked, and his handing over the kingdom to his Father when there will be a new heaven and earth. A volume of books could be written about these things.

For the sake of our time here together this morning I want to highlight just a few that give us bountiful reasons to stand in awe and wonder, to celebrate his first coming, and look forward to and live for his second coming.

First, I want us to see some of the prophecies he fulfilled by his birth. The prophet Micah foretold the location of his birth in Micah 5:2: *“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”* Isaiah prophesied he would be born of a virgin in Isaiah 7:14: *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”* Two chapters later, in Isaiah 9:6, he again prophesies about his birth and the kind of king he would be: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* Jesus had already fulfilled all these by the time he gave the Sermon on the Mount.

The second set of references and shadows of the Messiah I want to point out are those having to do with the Laws of the covenant given to Israel on Mt. Sinai. Jesus fulfilled huge portions of these laws during his time on earth, especially through his death on the cross and ascension into heaven. Many of you were here when I preached through Exodus and Leviticus which contain the story of the Exodus and the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. In the Law, he gave commands and instructions about how they were to live in holiness among the pagan nations so they would reveal him to the world. He also gave extensive instructions and commands about how they were to build a special tent, or tabernacle where he would come to dwell in their midst. He gave instructions about the furnishings that were to be in the tabernacle, the priests that were to serve in it, the clothing they were to wear, and the sacrifices they were to make.

When you read through all those details, page after page, it’s easy to get bogged down. It’s easy to think, “Why in the world did God command them to do all those strange things?” At first they don’t make sense. The scribes and Pharisees had wrongly taken all these things and turned them into a religion of rule-following, but they were missing the deeper meaning and the key to understanding why they were given. After Jesus’ ascension to heaven, the

author of Hebrews makes it clear that they were given to be copies or shadows of heavenly realities (Heb. 8:4-5; 10:1), and at the center of those realities was the revelation of the Perfect High Priest who would come and minister in perfect righteousness and holiness – representing God among man and man before God. He would offer his own life and his own blood as the eternal sacrifice of atonement that would cleanse his people from all their sins forever. (Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:23-25)

All those tedious laws about the intricate details of the tabernacle, priests and sacrifices that take up page after page in the Old Testament – all of them were pointing to Jesus. And when he came to earth the first time, he fulfilled all those things. He was called “Immanuel” which means “God with us” and made his dwelling among us like God did in the tabernacle (Jn. 2:13-22). He lived a perfect life of righteousness and holiness before God and among the people, which was represented by the office of High Priest. He took our sins upon himself and shed his blood on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness, like all those bloody sacrifices at the altar (Heb. 7:23-25; 9:6-14, 23-26). He rose again and ascended to heaven where he serves as our perfect High Priest even now, always making intercession for us before God.

So all those commands and instructions in the Law were pointing to him, and when he came and lived, died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, he fulfilled them all.

But there’s one more thing I want to point out about how Jesus will fulfill the Law and the Prophets and that has to do with his second coming. Throughout the Old Testament, this is referred to as “The Day of the Lord.” For God’s people, it will be a day of peace and rejoicing, but for the wicked it will bring terror and judgment. These prophecies were misunderstood by the vast majority of Jews who assumed they would happen at the Messiah’s first coming. They rejected Jesus as Messiah because, despite his teaching, they didn’t understand that he came first to deal with sin and then, at his second coming is when he would usher in his earthly kingdom and make his enemies his footstool. There are many, many prophecies about his future reign, and here are just a few ...

- Daniel 7:13-14 *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*
- Joel 2:28-31 *“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. ³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.”*
- Mal. 4:1-2 *“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”*
- (Also: Isa. 9:7; 11:1-10; 63:1-6; Zech. 9:9-10; 14:3-4; Mic. 5:4-5)

We’ve just begun to see some of the ways Jesus has and will fulfill the Law and Prophets. That is why he came. And because of his fulfillment of these things, we who are sinners have incredible hope! We deserve death and judgment because of our sins against God, but by turning to Jesus and putting our faith in him, our sins can be washed away, all our guilt removed, our heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh that’s alive to God. We can receive salvation and eternal life and look forward to being part of Christ’s future glorious kingdom forever and ever! And all this, because Jesus came.

So as we celebrate him in this Advent season, let’s reflect on these things. Let’s spend time with him and in his Word so that we can deepen our appreciation and worship for the One who has given everything to us.

And if you have not put your trust in Jesus and are hearing and seeing these things for the first time, the invitation to salvation is open to you! Your sins are not too great to be forgiven, but they're not too small to be overlooked. The Day of the Lord is coming and you will either experience overwhelming peace and joy or overwhelming dread and sorrow. The difference between the two is what you do with Jesus and the truth from God's Word that you've heard today. Put your faith in Jesus and devote yourself to being his disciple. Begin a new life so that when that Day comes your heart will overflow with rejoicing.