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Series: The Sermon on the Mount
Message: Christ & The Law

Transcribed Message
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Matthew 5:17-20

If you have been a Christian for very long you know there are some significant differences between the Old Testament part of your Bible and the New Testament. If you've been a Christian for very long, it's very possible that at some point along the way somebody has asked you about that very matter, about your Christian faith, and about how there are some things in the Old Testament that you don't seem to pay a lot of attention to anymore. There are things that are written there that you don't really pay attention to or follow anymore and they wonder why that is. There are things in the Old Testament that were given as instruction to the people of God that we don't put ourselves under any longer today. Why is it that we're not afraid to eat certain foods like raw meat or pork? We don't worry too much about the length of our sideburns. We don't have a fence around the roof of our house. Our view of the Sabbath is decidedly different. We don't live with a sense of anxiety about violating certain laws of the Old Testament in facing severe and sometimes capital punishment for the violation of those laws. Why is that the case?

We come this morning again in Matthew chapter 5 to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is going to help answer that question for us this morning. We're in the fifth chapter and we're looking again at verses 17 to 20. We kind of did a flyover of this passage last Sunday. Being the first Sunday of the year, I really wanted to focus on what Jesus says in this passage which is the very obvious truth that Jesus had a very high view of the Word of God. Jesus had a very high view of Scripture. That's the way we approached it last week. This morning we want to approach it from a little different angle. We want to approach it from the vantage point of what Christ has to say about the law. We're not getting down deep into some of the issues in this passage because DA Carson, who was an outstanding New Testament scholar, says this about these verses. "This is one of the most difficult passages in all of the Bible." We're not going to

solve some of these problems this morning. In fact, we will do well to get the main idea of this passage and see how it impacts our lives and we'll let some of the scholars debate some of the finer points of this passage. Here in my mind is what I want us to see from this passage this morning. When Jesus spoke these words, once Jesus declared the truth of Matthew 5:17 to 20, nothing was the same from that point on. Honestly, from that point on, as we're going to ask the Holy Spirit to give us that understanding of this passage, we don't read the Bible the same again because of what Jesus brings before us in these verses.

Let's do that together. If we are to read our Bible with understanding, which is certainly what all of us want to do, then there are certain things that we need to know. Let's start off this morning with some background information, some foundational things to these verses. Let's start by talking about what it is that we know about the Old Testament Scriptures. What do we know about the Old Testament Scriptures? Let's begin with this. The Old Testament was God's revelation to Israel. The Old Testament was God's revelation to Israel. Having said that, there are three things that we want to acknowledge. The first one is that this revelation came to a specific people. God's Word came to a specific people. When God called Abram to leave the land of Ur and go to a land that He was calling him to, that was the beginning of the ethnic nation of Israel. That was the beginning of the Jewish people. Those were the people to whom God gave His Old Testament Scriptures.

One of the things that I speak of when we talk about how it is that we got our Bible is the fact that God didn't give His Word and place it somewhere out there in the world and tell His people to go find it. He gave His Word to His people. That's certainly what He did in the case of the Israelites in the terms of the Old Testament Scriptures. Listen to one of the things that Moses says in Deuteronomy chapter 7 and verse 6: "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." That is what God said to Abraham's descendants, to the Jewish people, that they were a unique people. He went on to tell them why He called them. It wasn't anything special about them. It was His special grace that He was putting upon them.

Secondly, the Old Testament speaks with regard to a specific time. So we have a specific people. We have a specific time. It was after the Exodus when the people came up out of the land of Egypt having been in slavery for 400 years. It was there at Mount Sinai that Moses received what we know to be the law of God, a major section of the Old Testament. It was in giving of that law that God established within that time frame and within that framework a guidance for how it is that He wanted His people to live. It came to them in that sense as the beginning of God's revelation. We can rightly speak of the progress of revelation. The progress of revelation simply acknowledges that God did not drop His Bible from heaven and 66 books compiled nicely in a leather bound edition. He gave His Word to His people in a progressive manner. As we read our Bible, there is a progress of revelation that takes place so that we learn and build and grow. We see the redemptive purposes of God as they unfold step-by-step. That's what we have here with God giving to His people's revelation for this specific period of time.

Then thirdly, it is all under a specific arrangement. It's a specific arrangement. Israel lived as the covenant people of God. Israel is unique in that way. Israel is the only nation on the face of the earth that ever lived in a specific covenant relationship with God, beginning again as we said with Abraham. When God called Abraham, He said I am going to bless you and you're going to be a blessing to the nations of the earth. Abraham, I am going to give you a land and, Abraham, through you is going to come a seed that is going to be My people. Then it went to the Mosaic covenant. As we said, on Mount Sinai God gave to Moses what we know to be the Mosaic law, the Mosaic covenant. It was going to guide God's people as they lived their life before Him and in the world in which He had put them. God gave to David a covenant in which He said through you, David, is going to one day come the Messiah and the King who will reign forever. So the point of it is God called Israel to live in what we call a theocratic relationship with God. God was their king, a unique place for sure. No other nation like it. All of that was looking forward to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 in which God said I'm going to take that heart of stone out of you and I'm going to put in a heart that is soft towards Me. Everyone is going to know me in a way that they have not before. Those three things help us understand the Old Testament Scriptures. A specific people. A specific time. Living under a specific relationship.

The second thing that we want to say specific to the Old Testament law is that it addressed every area of life for this nation and for these people who lived in a theocratic relationship with God as their king. As we read the Old Testament Scriptures, and as we read specifically the law that God gave to His people through Moses, one of the things that Bible teachers have done to help us better understand that law and get a handle on it is to divide it into three different categories. Understand the law itself does not do that. It is one, if you will. But in our understanding of the law, it is probably helpful to think of it in three different ways. The first way we can think of it is as regard to the ceremonial laws of God. If you're familiar with your Old Testament, you know that in the ceremonial laws there are a whole bunch of things having to do with how it is that God's people were to approach Him, how they were to worship Him, how they were to conduct themselves in worship. It is very specific and in some regards is very strenuous. There were laws with regard to the sacrifices that they were to bring. There were laws about feasts and laws about festivals. There were laws about the priesthood and how it is that they would approach God. There were laws with regard to where God would meet them. All the teaching about the tabernacle and in the intricacy of that instruction. Behind all of that was the understanding that there is a holy and righteous God and we need to be very mindful of how it is that we approach Him in worship. We call that the ceremonial law of the Old Testament.

The second part of that law is often described as being the civil law. It is really the case law of the nation of Israel. It dealt with day-to-day life in the nation of Israel. That's why you have a civil penalty for committing sin in a theocracy. That's why if someone were to break the Sabbath it could, but didn't necessarily have to, but it could result in capital punishment. If someone committed adultery, it could lead to capital punishment. If children were disobedient to their parents, the law actually allowed for those children to be stoned to death. So you see, we have civil law that governs life in the nation. Remember this is a theocracy. When you sinned under a theocracy, there was a civil penalty that needed to be paid as a part of that punishment. Today in the church if someone sins, there is rebuke. there is admonition. There could ultimately in some cases be expulsion. We call all of this church discipline. We don't function under a

civil law any longer as the church in that sense as Israel did. So we have ceremonial law we have civil law. In a theocracy, sin resulted in a civil penalty.

Thirdly, there's the moral law. Behind all of this other, behind the ceremonial, behind the civil, there is the moral law of God. The character of God, the holiness of God is behind all of it. Why did God give His people this kind of specific instruction? Because He wanted them to know that He was a holy and righteous God. We see the moral input of the law precisely in the 10 Commandments. In the 10 Commandments, God declared that there isn't any other god. He said don't be making an idol to reflect other gods. Don't be taking My name in vain and treating it lightly and treating it insignificantly. Make sure that you rest and observe a time of rest with regard to the Sabbath. Honor your father and your mother. Don't commit murder. Don't take somebody else's life. God values life. Don't commit adultery. God speaks to every area of life in the 10 Commandments. What are they doing? They're reflecting the moral character of God. In very many ways, our Judeo-Christian laws of our own land and all through Western Europe were based very much in part on this same perspective that there are things that we value because behind those values there is a greater one that we value. We've lost so much of that along the way. when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, out of all the 613 laws that were a part of the Mosaic law, Jesus said, in really giving to us the heart of God, what God wants from us more than anything else. Yes, there are 613 laws that He's written down, but what God wants for you more than anything else is He wants you to love Him with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. And oh by the way, He wants you to love your neighbor as much as you already love yourself. That was what? That was capturing the moral essence of the whole of the law. It was what God ultimately wanted.

Remember what David said in Psalm 51 after he had arranged for the murder of a man? He would literally himself be guilty in most states of first-degree murder and before that he had committed adultery with another man's wife. Do you know what David said in Psalm 51? He didn't focus on the 613 laws of the Mosaic covenant which he rightly could have in many respects. Do you know what he said? God, I know what You want more than anything else. You want a broken and contrite heart. That's what God was trying to communicate to His people in giving them this law. So we have in the

Old Testament a specific people getting a specific word from God for a specific time under an arrangement unlike any other nation state has ever experienced. They were a theocracy with the living God of the universe.

When we take all of that and we bring it then into Jesus's teaching this morning, I want us to notice secondly that what we need to know when we read the Scriptures is first of all this. The coming of Christ changed everything. The coming of Christ changed everything. When I talk about the coming of Christ, I'm talking about the coming of Christ as the Son of God incarnate. I'm talking about His perfect and sinless life. I'm talking about His teaching. I'm talking about His death on the cross. I'm talking about His resurrection and His ascension. All of that is in that word "coming". With the coming of Christ, everything changed. It changed the way we read our Bible. It changed the things that we need to know as we handle God's Word.

So first of all, I want you to see what happened when we moved out from underneath the old covenant and we moved into the new covenant, because that's what the cross represented. The cross represented the end of the old and the beginning of the new. I want you to see 5 things. First of all, the sacrifices stopped because the One that they pointed to had come. The sacrifices stopped. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world", he was acknowledging that very truth, that there was the One who would end all sacrifices. I noticed this morning that I not only don't see but I didn't hear any lambs bleating. I didn't see any large bulls or rams or any other such thing in the sanctuary this morning. The question could very well be asked why not? Why didn't you folks bring any of that to offer on an altar of sacrifice? Why don't we even have an altar anymore of sacrifice? Because of this very truth. With the coming of Christ, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament law came to an end. Why did it? Because Jesus offered once and for all the last sacrifice for sin. Hebrews 9:12 says that.

Secondly, the priesthood came to an end. The priesthood. Those men who stood between worshipers and God stopped because of what? Because now we are all believer priests. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9 "You are all a chosen generation, a royal priesthood." That's true of every one of us. I have no advantage over you. There's nobody else that has an advantage over anybody else. Sometimes people will say

there's something that I want you to pray for me. I want you to pray for it because I think you've got a better in or your prayers are more likely to be heard. No. we're all priests. The priesthood has been stopped as it was exercised under the Mosaic law. It is so because we're all believer priests.

Thirdly, the physical temple ceased to be a geographic place and gathering place for worship. Isn't it interesting that as Christians we don't have any place where we all long to go because we want to get closer to God? We don't have a Mecca. We don't have a Jerusalem. We don't honestly even have a building that is the Lord's house. I know traditionally many have referred to this kind of place as the Lord's temple or the Lord's house and we're to act a little bit differently because this is a special place. Well, it's a special place but not for the reasons that carry over from the Old Testament. We don't have a geographic place where we're closer to God than some other place. Why is that? Because the coming of Jesus changed everything. He didn't specify that we had to meet in a certain place. In fact, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19 – Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is within you. That's right. You're a temple of the living God if you're a believer in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the food laws that separated Israel from the nations have ceased because everything is now clean. Go to Acts 10 and Peter is having this vision because God is arranging providentially a meeting with a Gentile by the name of Cornelius. God brings down from heaven a sheet with all kinds of food on it, including a bacon cheeseburger. Peter says Lord, I have never eaten a bacon cheeseburger. The Lord said three times, Peter, if I tell you it's clean, go ahead and eat it because it's clean. Peter ate that cheeseburger and life has never been better for any of us. Why don't we put ourselves under the Old Testament law? Because with the coming of Jesus everything changed and God said all things are clean.

The last thing. Point 5. The civil law ceased because God's people are no longer a nation/state. We don't live under a theocracy. Interestingly, there are people within the Christian church who long for the church to go back under a theocratic relationship with God in which He is viewed as our king. They long for the Old Testament theocracy. But that's not God's plan. That's not God's purpose. We live today as the people of God under all kinds of governments. All around the world the people of God gathered this

morning. Some couldn't gather because they live under so many different forms of government. But not theocracy. That's why today we don't exercise the civil penalty of capital punishment for the things that are listed in the Old Testament law. Those days were specific to the nation of Israel for a specific period of time. So things have changed. In fact everything has changed.

I want you to see this morning now in Matthew 5 the teaching of Jesus explaining in greater detail why that is. Let's look at verses 17 to 20 again this morning and just for reminding us, the setting is the Sermon on the Mount. This specific section that we're in could rightly be called a transitional section. We've already seen the first 16 verses. We've already seen that we have the Beatitudes and the similitudes, and we're to go out in the world and we're to be salt and light. Then we come to verses 17 to 20 and this is a transition into the rest of the sermon. What we'll see, Lord willing, beginning next week is Jesus is going to take on this matter of anger. Then He's going to take on the matter of lust, and then He's going to take on the matter of divorce, and oaths, and retaliation. Just work your way through the rest of the fifth chapter and what these verses do for us is they form a transition from the first 16, which is Jesus saying this is the way to live life. This is why in verses 17 to 20, and then we'll launch into the specific things that Jesus puts before for us as to what that life looks like.

The question that was in the minds of the people as they are listening to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is what? The question they were all wondering about: is Jesus doing away with the Old Testament law? They're asking that question and are wondering if Jesus is a lawbreaker. Remember Galatians 4: God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Jesus is born under the law. Jesus lived His entire life under the law. We're going to see what He says about that in just a moment. But the question being asked is this: is this guy a lawbreaker? Is He kicking over the traces and the law is no longer relevant? Why are they asking that? They're asking it for two reasons. They're asking it because the things they're hearing Jesus teach in comparison to what they're hearing from the religious leaders. They're asking it because of what they're seeing Jesus do in His day-to-day life. They're seeing someone who actually touched lepers and you weren't supposed to do that. He touched diseased people. You weren't supposed to do that. He touched a dead person. You were never to

do that. He appeared to be breaking the Sabbath when His disciples went off into a field on one occasion and picked grain and ate it. There were violations in their minds all over the place with regard to Jesus and His disciples. So they're rightly asking is this man a lawbreaker?

Jesus says three things. and we've looked at a little bit of this already so we can move maybe a little bit quicker than we might otherwise, but notice in verse 17 that He is the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament. "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." What Jesus just said in verse 17 is an absolutely staggering statement. Hopefully you got a sense of that last week. But here Jesus says the entire Old Testament points to Him. That is an amazing thing for somebody to say. All of the Old Testament Scriptures point to Him. All of the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Him. Who could possibly say something like that? It would be outrageous on any level except if it was Jesus, the Son of God.

Remember in Luke 24, after the resurrection Jesus was walking along the road with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. I hope in heaven that there are extended study times where we can go and sit under people teaching, especially the writers of Scripture, and especially people like those two disciples. What was that like when you were walking on that road to Emmaus? Luke 24 says He opened to them all of the Scriptures beginning with Moses and the prophets and He explained to them the things concerning Himself. Now you know He had to go back to Genesis 3 and He had to talk about that first preaching of the gospel. He had to talk about the bruising of the heel and the crushing of the head. He had to go to Genesis 22 when Abraham took Isaac to Mount Moriah and he was getting ready to offer him. Do you know what that was? That was a foreshadowing. That was a picture of God giving His only Son for the salvation of all mankind. He almost would have had to have said something about Joseph and how Joseph was a type of picture of Christ in so many ways. He probably got into Psalm 22 which before there was even crucifixion describes crucifixion in greater detail than anybody could have ever done apart from divine inspiration. Then of course Isaiah 53. Man, they must've spent time in Isaiah 53! All we like sheep gone astray. We've turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Remember

the eunuch when Phillip came up alongside of him in Acts 8? Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. His reply: How can I understand what I'm reading unless someone explains to me. The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Who? Who is the Him? Who did He lay it on? He just went through the whole Old Testament and He said this is all written about Me. It all points to Me. I fulfill it all. An amazing, amazing statement.

But look at this. The ultimate meaning of this is what? Behind this claim is an equally important assertion. What is Jesus claiming when he says all of the Old Testament is written about Me. all of the Old Testament is foreshadowing me. all of the Old Testament is pointing to me? I have fulfilled the law to perfection. He's claiming to be perfect. He's claiming to be sinless. He is claiming to be no one other than God Himself to have made that statement and to have made that claim. My friend, you and I can't get through a day and not break almost every one of the 10 Commandments, let alone the 613 rules of the law. We regularly elevate somebody to the place of God. We have idols all over our lives. We treat God lightly. His name is not honored. We rest when we want to. When we don't want to do, we don't. We don't always honor our parents. If we don't murder somebody physically, we do it in our heart. Just go through the list. What is Jesus claiming? Jesus is claiming that every one of these statements of the law that was given to us to reveal our sin, part of the law's purpose was to reveal our inability to keep the law. Jesus said He kept it all. This expression of the character of God, of the holiness of God, Jesus said I didn't come to abolish that. I came to show you One who has done it. Jesus lived under the law but He also lived up to the law. He did it perfectly.

Secondly, He is affirming the Word as enduring. Look at verse 18: "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away until all is accomplished." To me, the practical take away of this, and we spent much more time on this last week so we're not going to go back over that ground, but to me the practical take away of this is the need to value and appreciate and work and read and understand the Old Testament Scriptures. Do you know that Bible you're holding in your hand or that phone that you've got turned to your Bible, do you know that 77% of your Bible is the Old Testament Scripture? 77% of your Bible is the Old Testament. You can't

understand major parts of the New Testament if you say I'm really not into the Old Testament. I don't really read it. You're handicapping yourself as you try to understand the New Testament, because the reality is there are whole portions of the New Testament that are tied in with the Old. Matthew, the very gospel that we're in, writing to a Jewish audience, spends more time quoting the Old Testament Scriptures than any other gospel writer. There are things that he says that we don't have any understanding apart from an understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. You have no chance to understand the book of Hebrews, which is why many of us don't ever go to the book of Hebrews, because we don't understand the Old Testament. We need to read and we need to value and we need to study the Old Testament. The book of Revelation. Lots of stuff in Revelation pertaining to the Old Testament. Here's what Augustine said: "The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed, and the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed." I think he had a pretty good handle on what was going on.

The point is simply this. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. All Scripture is profitable for our growth. All Scripture God designs to for us to benefit from. Paul said in 1 Corinthians talking about the Old Testament stories, these things were written for our instruction and for our learning. The language of God in the Old Testament reveals the heart of God to us for His people. The wisdom literature shows us how to live life wisely. The prophets give us words of warning, words of hope. All of it is there.

The third thing that Jesus brings to us in these verses is He is the righteousness that God requires. He is the righteousness that God requires. Look again at verses 19 and 20. In light of what He just said: "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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now this is nothing short of another staggering statement. What Jesus said in verse 20 caused that whole crowd to gasp. I don't know what I could say that would cause all of you to gasp but that's what would've happened. When Jesus said that they all audibly must have gasped. It was so incredible what He just said. Why would that be? Because He just said unless your

righteousness is better than the righteousness of the scribes and better than the righteousness of the Pharisees, you've got no chance at all in getting into heaven.

Now from our vantage point and our perspective, we don't often think that highly of the Pharisees. We may not think that highly of the scribes because they were the adversaries of Christ. But in Jesus's day, the scribes and the Pharisees were what everybody wanted to be. In fact, there was a saying: If only two people are allowed to enter heaven, then one will certainly be a scribe of the law and the other a Pharisee. Jesus just said you've got to be doing better than they are. In fact, you don't have to be doing better than they are...you have to be doing different than they're doing. He has just removed from everybody in that audience any hope that they might have of ever getting to heaven. Jesus said the righteousness of the Pharisees is not enough, which meant that everybody who heard it was then asking the question: how can a sinner get to heaven? How could I possibly get to heaven? Is Jesus putting us back under the law? No, He said He's the one who fulfilled it. He's the one who brought it to completion. We've already seen with His death on the cross a new covenant was entered into. The old, Paul says in Galatians 3, ended. It is over. He is focusing on what God wanted all along. It's what that famous Pharisee by the name of Saul in Philippians 3 tells us. God changed his name to Paul. In Philippians 3, Paul is sitting there with a pen and paper and he is looking at his life and he is saying here are all of the assets of my life and here are all of my liabilities. He ends up taking all of his previous assets that were a part of being a Pharisee that he thought were in some way engendering acceptance before God, and Paul moves them all from column asset to liability. In column asset he has one thing: grace. He talks about the grace of God. He talks about the righteousness of Christ. He talks about what it is that can give any sinner any sense of hope that they could ever qualify for heaven.

You see, my friend, the Bible makes it abundantly clear, whether it is the old covenant or the new covenant, that what God demands, what God requires is 100% righteousness. Under the old covenant, nobody could qualify to have completed 613 rules of the law. No more true than in the new covenant. No one walks in perfection before God. That requires another and that other is, of course, Christ Himself. That's what Jesus is pointing to of how we get to heaven. It is not by law keeping, but it is by

the grace of God. For by grace we are saved through faith, that not of ourselves. It's the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone of us should boast. We look at what Jesus said and I say to you this morning, if you have any hope of getting to a place of eternal life, if you have any hope of an eternity with God, your only hope is in the righteousness that God's righteousness requires Him to require. That is only going to be qualified by none other than the sinless son of God, Jesus Himself.

What do we take away? When we have Christ, we have everything that God promised through Him. So what do we do? We worship the wonder and the beauty of Christ who made all of these blessings possible. We are going to do that this morning. We're going to close and spend some time of worship in the wonder and the beauty of Christ. Our heart for everybody here this morning is that you see that all of your good works are not assets before God at all. They're liabilities. It is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but it is according to His mercy that we're saved.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we are so incredibly grateful for the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, for this amazing redemptive plan that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in eternity past put into place so that people like us today could know with absolute certainty and confidence that we will spend eternity with You and not separated from You forever in hell. Father, if there is somebody here this morning who is not sure, I pray that your Holy Spirit would cause them to seek out someone, would cause them to listen to the words of the gospel – for by grace are we saved through faith. I pray that they would believe and would trust in Jesus alone for the gift of eternal life. Lord, we lift our voices to You in praise. We thank You for the blessings that have come to us, blessings that we have not yet even come to understand or grasp or enter into, for everything that You have promised comes through Jesus. In Your name we pray, Amen.