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First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Matthew 5:17-20

Title: "A Passion to Fulfill"

(Series: Following Jesus into the His Sermon on the Mount)

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In the words of this text, Jesus is drawing us into the heart of His Sermon on the Mount And as He does, Jesus is drawing us into the heart of His heart. Into one of the deepest passions of His heart.

"Righteousness." "Unless your righteousness ..." He has already spoken the word in His Beatitudes. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." "Blessed are those who persecuted for the sake of righteousness." In this text, which many consider to be the theological centre, or hinge, of His Sermon, Jesus now begins to spell out, unpack, illustrate what He means by the term. "Righteousness." It is a relational word. In both the Old Testament, in the Hebrew language, and in the New Testament, in the Greek language [*sedāqā* and *dikiosune*]. A relational word. Righteousness is all about relationship. Which is why it is sometimes rendered as 'justice.' Justice is all about relationship. Yes, it is about laws and regulations and principles. But justice is fundamentally about relationships. "Righteousness." Right-relationship. Right-relatedness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right-relationship." "Blessed are those who are persecuted for right-relationship." "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." You shall not experience the kingdom of heaven on earth. You shall not enjoy the kingdom of heaven on earth. For the simple reason that the kingdom of heaven, breaking into the world, in and because of Jesus, is all about righteousness. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," the apostle Paul told the believers in Rome. "Why?" we ask. Why are you not ashamed? "Because," says Paul, the gospel "is the power of God unto salvation." "Why?" Why is the gospel the power of God unto salvation? "Because," says Paul, in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed." In the gospel the righteousness of God breaks through. The gospel is all about God's way of righting all relationships. "Righteousness." It is the major burden of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, as You draw us further into Your Sermon, we trust You to speak into our hearts that they may beat with Yours. Amen.

For the first time in His Sermon Jesus makes Himself the subject of a sentence.

"I." Four times. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the Prophets." "I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill." "Truly I tell you until heaven and earth pass away ..." "For I tell you that unless your righteousness." It raises the question: Who does He think He is "I." "I." "I." "I." No appeal to any higher authority. "I have come." He says it

twice. “Do not think that I have come to abolish ...” “I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” Raising the question: From where?

You have come “from where”? “I have come,” implies He knows Himself to be a man-on-a-mission. And “I have come,” implies He knows Himself to be more than a man. You have come “from where”? One scholar, who does not hold a high view of Jesus, writes:

“the words ‘I came’ imply a Messianic status, and indeed of heavenly origin, on the part of Jesus; for they carry the sense of ‘I came down to earth’ – ‘I have come from heaven’.” I hear in Jesus’ words in the theological centre of His Sermon, what He says to His Father before going to the cross; what He says in His prayer recorded in John 17: “Father”, “they” – the first disciples – “know that I came forth from You” (17:8).

“I have come.” The Preacher on the Mount understands Himself as coming “out of” - that is the literal meaning of the preposition “from” – as coming “out of” the Living God; coming out of God in heaven to earth to do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.

“I.” Four times. “Have come.” Twice. Who is this “I”? Who is this who sees Himself as one who would even have the right to abolish the law and the Prophets? Who is this Who sees Himself as one who have the right to fulfill the law and the Prophets? Do you know the name Jacob Neusner? He is the world renowned rabbi who wrote the book, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. Rabbi Neusner is a brave seeker of truth. He has carried on extensive inter-personal dialogue with the current Pope, Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. The Pope shares some of that dialogue is his masterful book, *Jesus of Nazareth*. In his book, Neusner takes his place in the crowd that day on the mountain as Jesus preaches His Sermon. The rabbi likes a lot of what he is hearing. Much of what Jesus says rings true to the Old Testament and to rabbinic tradition. The rabbi is taken by Jesus’ depth and purity. Yet, as a rabbi, he is also deeply troubled. At one point in the book, Neusner imagines spending a whole day with Jesus, and then returning to his home village

to report of his fellow rabbis. One of the rabbis quotes from the Babylonian Talmud, where it says that Moses received 613 commandments. He then claims that King David reduced the number to 11. Isaiah reduced them to 6. And then to 2. And Habakkuk to one: “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The rabbi then asks Neusner: “is this what the sage, Jesus, had to say?”

Neusner: “Not exactly, but close.”

The rabbi: “What did he leave out?”

Neusner: “Nothing.”

The rabbi: “Then what did he add?”

Neusner: “Himself.”

[*Jesus of Nazareth, 104-105*]

Isn’t that good? Isn’t that insightful? Jesus does not change the law and the Prophets. He adds Himself. And thus brings the law and the Prophets alive in a way no one ever had! “I ... have come ... not to abolish ... but to fulfill.” It reveals Jesus’ over-all approach to life. “Not to abolish, but to fulfill.” Not to destroy, but to complete. “You

must never think.” That is a better way to render Jesus’ words. “You must never think that I have come down from heaven to earth to abolish the law and the Prophets.”

Given what He says in the opening section of His Sermon, in the Beatitudes, Jesus needs to say something like this. After hearing Jesus’ eight “Blessed are” ... His eight “Right-on” ... we wonder if anything of the past or present order of things was still valid. In His Beatitudes Jesus switched all the price tags! His Beatitudes are the ultimate “re-valuation of values.” The kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit, to those who know they are powerless to make life happen? The earth is given to the meek, to those who resist the urge to grab and push and demand? The new world order is subverting the old ... at the foundations. BUT ... “you must never think that I have come ‘out of’ God to abolish ... I came to fulfill.” Now, I think I readily get what it means for Jesus not to abolish but to fulfill the Prophets. The Prophets reveal God’s great plan to act in human history through “the coming One.” The Prophets announce God’s intention to send Someone Who would bring the plan to fulfillment, to completion. “I have come ...” The Promised One has come. The longings of the Prophets are now being fulfilled. The New Covenant is being inaugurated; the promised Kingdom has come near. 13 times in his gospel, Matthew says, “this was to fulfill.” He sees Jesus fulfilling text after text after text of the Prophets. So I get Jesus’ “I have come not to abolish the Prophets but to fulfill the Prophets.” But “fulfill the law”? That is not as easy to understand. How does Jesus come, not to abolish the law but to fulfill the law? For people of the 1st century, the word “law” encompasses three different kinds of law. The so-called “sacrificial law,” all the laws about the sacrifices that were to offered in the Temple. The so-called “ceremonial law,” all the laws about what is clean and not clean. And the ethical law, all the laws about how human society is to be justly and redemptively run. It is clear how Jesus fulfills the “sacrificial” law. He fulfills the purpose of the sacrificial system. He is the One great Sacrifice that fulfills the purpose of all other sacrifices. No other sacrifice is needed. Everything that needs to be sacrificed has been ... by the Once-for-all sacrifice of Himself on the cross. Read the bpk of Hebrews! Once –and-for-all...done. “Sacrificial law” – fulfilled, “It is finished,” He cries from the cross. I think it is also clear how Jesus fulfills the “ceremonial” law. He comes and cleanses us by His Word and Spirit. Cleansing does not happen by our efforts...by us offering up sacrifices. He cleanses His people by His efforts. And He comes and declares all food clean. No longer are there clean and unclean foods. As in the beginning, all foods are freely given (see Acts 10-11). That does not mean that all foods are good for all people. I think our Seventh Day Adventists are on to something in still taking guidance from the “ceremonial” food laws. As you know, they on average live longer than the rest of us, and have fewer sicknesses.

Which is why Loma Linda, California, home of the finest of the Adventist medical centers opposes allowing MacDonald’s to build stores in the city! But the fact is, Jesus fulfills the “ceremonial” law by overcoming the clean/un-clean barriers. I take the word “law” in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount to refer to the ethical law. More specifically, to the summary of the ethical law as we have it in the Ten Commandments, given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. ok, quiz time. Write out the Ten Commandments ... in order. You have 60 seconds. Just kidding.

You shall have no other gods between you and Me.

You shall not make for yourselves any image of Me.
 You shall not take My name in vain.
 You shall keep the Sabbath.
 You shall honor your father and your mother.
 You shall not murder.
 You shall not commit adultery.
 You shall not steal.
 You shall not bear false witness.
 You shall not covet your neighbor's condo or vacation or Mini Cooper, or pension fund.

"I have come not to abolish the ethical law, but to fulfill the ethical law." How?
 In three ways.

1. First, Jesus affirms the law. Jesus says His great "yes" to the law, to the Torah, as the righteous way of life. This is so important to emphasize in our time. Many people read the rest of the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul, and especially his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, and conclude that the old law is no longer operative in this new age of grace. We read texts like Romans 10:4 – "For Christ is the end of the law." And take it to mean, "the coming of Christ means the law has come to an end." But is that what Paul wants us to think? No. We have to read the whole sentence: "Christ is the end of law for righteousness for those who believe." That is, now that Jesus Christ has come and died on the cross for us, no one need earn relationship with the Living God by keeping the law. We enter into right-relationship with the Holy God solely on the basis of grace, un-merited, freely given grace. But that does not mean the law has no place in our lives. It seems that there is within us the tendency to read Jesus' words the way the second century preacher Marcion did. In his edition of the New Testament Marcion edited out all references to the Old Testament. Marcion accused Jewish Christians of tampering with Jesus' words. Maricon claimed that what Jesus "really said" was: "Do you think I have come to fulfill the law and the Prophets? I am not come to fulfill, but to abolish." Human nature apart from grace would much rather have Jesus speak that way. Apart from grace we see the law as an impediment to life. Adolf Hitler took this tendency to the extreme. He said: "This stupid 'thou shalt not.' It must be eliminated from our blood, this curse from Mount Sinai! This poison with which both Jews and Christians have spoiled and defiled the free, wonderful instincts of humans and reduced them to the level of fawning fear .. What we are battling is the so-called law." [Quoted by Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount: Utopia or Program for Action?* 42).

The law cannot be abolished from human life. It is built into the very fabric of our being. "Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished." Jesus is saying that the ethical law is as durable and enduring as creation itself! For the simple reason that the ethical law emerges from the heart of the Creator! The law reveals the heart of the Creator. The law is not an imposition ... it is an

exposition. The law is not an imposition by the Creator on the creature. The law is an exposition of Who the Creator is and how the Creator has created us to live.

You shall not murder ... because I do not murder.
 You shall not commit adultery ... because I do not commit adultery.
 You shall not steal ... because I do not steal.
 You shall not bear false witness ... because I do not bear false witness.
 On it goes.

So of course Jesus affirms the law. He, the Creator, comes from heaven to earth; more to the point, He the Law-giver comes from heaven to earth, and says His “yes” to His law.

2. Second, Jesus fulfills the ethical law by embodying it. Jesus actually lives the law. The first and only human who does. Oh, the Scribes (the law-teachers) and the Pharisees (the law-keepers) did not think so. As far as they were concerned Jesus did not teach or keep the law. But that was because, as Jesus tried to show them, they had distorted the law; they had twisted the purpose of the law. The law is all about relationship, righteousness. The Scribes and Pharisees missed the point, and became obsessed with rules and regulations, and missed relationships. I will say more about this in a moment.

3. And third, Jesus fulfills the ethical law by “filling-it-full.” Jesus draws out the full intention of the law. Given Who He is He is the only one who can draw it out. I like how the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber said about Jesus and the law. “Sinai is not enough for Jesus. He seeks the clouds above the mountain from which the voice comes; he would penetrate God’s original intent ... in order to fulfill the Torah – “that is, to invoke and actualize its fullness.” [Quoted by Lapide, 46]

Is that not a marvelous way to put it? Jesus seeks the clouds above the mountain ... from which the voice comes. Is that not because He was there in the cloud above Mount Sinai? Is He not the Voice now made flesh, dwelling among us. Six times in the section of His Sermon that follows His “not abolish, but fulfill,” Jesus says: “You have heard it was said, but I say to you.” You have heard it was said, “You shall not murder,” but I say to you... You have heard it was said, “You shall not commit murder,” but I say to you ... You have heard it was said, “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth,” but I say to you ... It initially sounds like Jesus is setting Himself over against the law, that He is contradicting the law. But that is not the case. According to the Jewish NT scholar, Pinches Lapide, the phrase, “you have heard it was said, but say unto you ...” is a “technical expression from the basic vocabulary of rabbinic rhetoric” ... and it is never used to introduce a contradicting of the law; rather it is used for the “elucidation” of the law. [44]

Jesus employs this standard formula to draw out the original intent of the law. But in Jesus’ case we hear more than the voice of a rabbi. We hear the voice of the Law-giver Himself. On the lips of Jesus, the One Who “has come” from heaven to earth,

the formula means: “you have heard the experts in law but I Who spoke the law say to you. I Who wrote the law am now going to interpret the law for you.” Jesus fulfills the law by affirming it, by embodying it, and by drawing out the law’s original intent.

My long-time friend Earl Palmer helps us here. Earl suggests that Jesus is treating the law as if it were a great arc. What Jesus is doing in His Sermon is “extending the line of the arc around to its fulfillment, completing the circle for which it was originally designed.” [*The Enormous Exception: Meeting Christ in the Sermon on the Mount*, 39]

“I came to fulfill,” means then, I came to draw the arc around into the full circle. Which means that we should not, as it often done, call Jesus’ six “you have heard it was said, but I say unto you” *antitheses*. It is more accurate to call them *full-fillers*. In each of the six cases, Jesus is drawing the arc into the circle. He goes beyond mere external rules into the deeper relationality. He goes beyond external codes and commands and prohibitions, and actualizes the original relational intention. Jesus is completing – fulfilling – the circle for which we were created. Jesus is drawing out full and true humanity. And now we can understand what Jesus is after when He says, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Exceed? Surpass? People of the 1st century thought of the Scribes and Pharisees as “way ahead,” “way beyond,” ordinary folks. Or, at least the Scribes and Pharisees thought of themselves as “way ahead,” “way beyond,” ordinary folks. But that was not the case; not at all. For the Scribes and Pharisees were only living the arc, not the circle. Actually, in most cases, they were not even living the arc. They were only living the letter of the law . . . not the spirit of the law. They thought they were “righteous” if they achieved external conformity to the law. What Jesus tries to show them – especially in Matthew 23, his “woe to you” sayings – is that one can exercise external conformity to the law and not really keep the law! For God’s will has more to do with the inner workings of the heart. Again, in the six “you have heard it was said, but I say unto you,” Jesus is not setting Himself up against the law. He would be setting Himself up against Himself! He is setting Himself up against the Scribal and Pharisaical misunderstanding of the law, the misinterpretation of the law, the misappropriating of the law.

He is moving us beyond mere rules and principles to relationship. He is moving us into authentic righteousness. We may never murder anyone. But the anger we nurse inside, that oozes out in sarcasm and insult, damages relationship. We may never take eye for eye or tooth for tooth . . . or insult for insult. But to desire for revenge we harbour inside damaged relationships. We may never commit formal adultery. But the lust we nurture inside, that uses other people’s bodies for our own pleasure, damages relationship. The “righteousness that exceeds,” that “surpasses,” is the righteousness that takes relationship seriously. It is the right-relatedness that involves the deep movements of the inner being. Jesus is telling us that it is when we attend to those deeper movements that we enter into the kingdom of heaven on earth.

It is when we attend to those deeper movements that we experience and enjoy the rule of heaven on earth. “You must never think that I have come to abolish ... I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” I have come to move you into the fulfillment of the Prophets. And I have come to move you into the fulfillment of the law. Follow Me into My Sermon, and I will lead you into the healing righteousness of the kingdom of God. Follow Me into My Sermon and I will heal you for a whole new way of relating. Follow Me into My Sermon and I will bring you into the full-orbed right-related-ness My Father and I planned for you when we created you in Our image.”