

I Came Not to Abolish the Law

For the last several weeks we've been following a series of Bible studies called "The Story," which is designed to help us see the big picture of the Bible by presenting it 31 separate stories in chronological order. This morning we will take a break from that series, but the lesson is still related to it as I hope you will see.

Several years ago we devoted a year to teaching through the whole Bible, book by book. I remember somewhere around May of that year a member came up to me a little concerned, wondering if our series was appropriate. I was a little surprised and I asked what the problem was. She said, well all we've been studying for five months has been the Old Testament. The Old Testament is fine, but it's not really for us is it? I mean we are New Testament Christians. Why should we be spending so much time in the Old Testament.

She was echoing a teaching that is not uncommon in our particular religious heritage ever since our spiritual ancestor, Alexander Campbell, gave his famous sermon on the Law. In Campbell's day many if not most Christian fellowships did not make a great distinction between the Old and New Testament and often taught that Christians were still obligated to follow at least some of the commands of the Law such as tithing, observing holy days and keeping the sabbath. Campbell argued that the law was given only to the Jews and that with Christ came a new dispensation, a new covenant and a new law. Campbell argued that Christians

were under the new covenant and the guide for living under that covenant was the New Testament scriptures. Consequently, followers of Campbell which include us in Churches of Christ have historically had an ambivalent relationship with the Old Testament scriptures, thus the expression of concern about the propriety of spending half a year teaching the Old Testament.

I am a big fan of brother Campbell. His portrait hangs in my office. And I consider myself a card carrying member of the American Restoration Movement, the movement attributed to Campbell, his father Thomas, Barton Stone and others. But if one of the results of that movement has been to lessen the importance of our knowing and studying the Old Testament scriptures, that would be unfortunate, if for no other reason, it flies in the face of the teaching of our Lord.

In his most famous sermon, Jesus begins with a remarkable statement. *“I came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.”* Now, to many Christians today, this is a remarkable statement because most Christians today tend to deemphasize the Law and emphasize more the importance of grace. And there are certainly many scriptures which seem to support that emphasis. In Ephesians 2:15 Paul says that on the cross Christ *abolished in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations*. And in Colossians 2:14 he says something similar, *having cancelled the written code, nailing it to the cross*. John begins his gospel saying, *The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus* (John 1:17).

Yet, on the other hand, Jesus seems to indicate the core of his teaching is the Law and the Prophets. And he is not shy about it. He goes on to say: *I came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. . . anyone who breaks the least of these commandments is least in the Kingdom. . . except your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees you cannot enter the Kingdom. (Matthew 5: 19, 20).* So, what gives. Are we under law or grace? *Yes !* Did Jesus come to abolish the Law as Paul says in Ephesians or fulfill it as Jesus says in Matthew? *Yes !* I believe the key to resolving this tension and also to understanding this great sermon of Jesus, is found in the phrase of Jesus, *I came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them.*

Let us begin by stating what “fulfill the law” does not mean. Some might say Jesus meant that he would “complete” the law. What was given to Moses was good, but there was more to give. Jesus came to add to what the Law of Moses lacked. And what it lacked, some say, was its focus on externals. So, Jesus came to deepen Law, to make it more spiritual. The Law focused too much on external action, Jesus looked at the heart.

But anyone who has read the Law and the Prophets knows the focus is on the heart. The prophets teach us that God is about mercy. Hosea speaks for God when he says, *I desire mercy, not sacrifice.* The psalms repeatedly emphasize the importance of the heart. *A broken and contrite heart he will not despise.* Isaiah

makes it very clear that God is not about externals when he says, *In vain do they worship me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.* And nothing could be more clear than the single most important scripture in the Law, what the Jews even today refer to as the shemah and is the first scripture a Jewish child is taught. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.* Such scriptures suggest that whatever it was that the Law needed in order to be “fulfilled” it was not a lack of spirituality.

A better approach I think is to look more closely at the word, “fulfill.” The idea is to bring it to fulfillment, to make sure the Law accomplishes all it was meant to, that it fulfills its purpose. God’s Word must be full not empty. This is I think the same idea that is found in Isaiah 55: 10-11. *As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish. . . so is the word that goes out from my mouth. It will not come back to me empty, but it will accomplish what I desire, and will achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

So, when Christ says he comes not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them, he means I think that he comes to accomplish the purpose of the Law. And there are at least three ways I think Christ does that. First, Christ is the reality to which the Law pointed. Much of the Law was ceremony and ritual (sacrifices, feasts, offerings, incense etc...). Why did God give the Jews so many elaborate,

sensual and ceremonial laws? One reason I think, was to prepare them for something that was to come. This is the essential message of the book of Hebrews. The elaborate religious system of the Jews was a grand visual aid pointing to the Christ. Hebrews 10:1 says, *The law is only a shadow of good things to come, not the realities themselves.* Paul writes of the Law in Colossians 2:17, *these are a shadow of the things to come, the reality is found in Christ* and to the Romans *Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes* (10:4).

The sacrifices of the Passover lambs were only a shadow of the sacrifice of Christ the lamb. The priests and their ritual worship in the temple were only a shadow of the priesthood of all believers to come who would offer sacrifices of praise and incense of prayer. The temple itself was only a shadow of the indwelling presence of God to come through the spirit in the Church as Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:21, 22 *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.* Christ's life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension and the sending of his spirit fulfills, accomplishes the purpose of the shadowy ceremonies of the Law. *I came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.* Or as Isaiah puts it, *“to achieve the purpose for which it was sent.”* But, there is more to the Law, than ceremony and rituals!

Christ also came to reveal the nature and character of God. This too was a purpose of the Law, to reveal God. The Law showed us how to be godly, that is how to be good. The moral commands of the Law are not arbitrary, they are right and holy because they reflect the nature and character of the Lord God who is right and holy. There is a reason why murder is wrong. God is not a murderer! There is a reason why lying is wrong. God is not a liar! There is a reason why stealing is wrong. God is not a thief! There is a reason why adultery is wrong. God is not an adulterer! The law has revealed God's character and holiness to us.

And when you reveal what is right and holy, at the same time you expose what is wrong and unholy. The reason for all the sacrifices in Israel's Law was because the law exposed all the sin in Israel's life. The law led Israel to repentance and humility before the Lord. So another purpose Christ came to accomplish was to make known the holiness and righteousness of God. He was himself a walking example of how to live a godly life. And in his teaching more than any before or since, Jesus revealed God's truth. *No one ever spoke like this*, they said. And that brings us to this great sermon we call the Sermon on the Mount.

In it Jesus was preaching God's Law. He wasn't improving on the Law. He wasn't making the Law more spiritual. He wasn't giving us a Christian version of the Law. In a sense he was rescuing the Law from the Jewish leaders who had distorted it with their own traditions and self-serving agendas. The purpose of the

Law was to reveal the holiness of God and to expose the wickedness of man. But many Jewish leaders in Jesus' day used the Law instead to exalt themselves as morally superior to others. They manipulated the Law so they could live under the delusion of thinking they had perfectly obeyed it. So in his sermon Jesus fulfills the Law, he teaches it in a way that it accomplishes its purposes: that is reveal true righteousness and expose unrighteousness. In the sermon Jesus says, righteousness is loving your enemy, not just refraining from killing him. Righteousness is purity of heart, not just abstaining from immoral acts. Righteousness is seeking God in private, not just parading before him in public. Righteousness is speaking truth, always, not just when you make an oath. Now when you preach the Law the way it was meant to be preached, the Law accomplishes the purpose it was meant to accomplish. Which brings us to the third and most important way Christ fulfills the Law. Christ redeems us from the curse of the Law

In his teaching Christ made it clear how desperately we needed mercy. We see this in his parables of the tax collector and the Pharisee, the prodigal son, the unmerciful servant. We see it in his encounters with people like Simon and the harlot, the rich young ruler, Nicodemus. In all of these we see in Jesus what the law should do, bring an awareness to those who think they are righteous but whose lives in fact are a sinful mess. As wonderful as the Law is in that it shows us the holiness of God; it is also devastating in that it shows the wickedness of man. It

confirms the uncomfortable fact that man is under a curse of condemnation because of his sin. As Paul told the Galatians, *For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'* Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God (3:10,11).

Christ came to fulfill the law, to accomplish its purpose and here is the unbelievable good news of the gospel. One of the purposes of the Law was to condemn the sinner. So, *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"* (Galatians 3:13).

The Law's demand for justice was accomplished at the Cross. And so scripture says *God forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross* (Colossians 2:13-14). *For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility* (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but to abolish the condemnation of the Law on us by bearing that condemnation on himself. He did not come so we could put the Old Testament on the shelf and just be New Testament Christians; he came to help us understand the eternal truths of the Old Testament so we would understand why we must trust in the Christ of the New Testament. The truth is, you can't be a New Testament Christian without being an Old Testament Christian. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus refers to the teachings of Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, not because his audience was Jewish, but because these Jewish prophets spoke the Word of God, and he wanted God's word to accomplish its purpose in our lives. The same is true for the entire New Testament in which there are some 300+ direct quotes from the Old and according to some scholars well over 2,000 different allusions.

And so, as we read this year through "The Story" we will not make it to the New Testament until December. But I hope you can see that this is not a problem, even for us New Testament Christians, because in these old scriptures we are hearing the truth about God and his holiness. We are hearing the truth also about man's wickedness. And we are hearing the truth about God's grace and mercy. We are in fact hearing our own story. Our story didn't begin at Pentecost or even at the birth of Jesus. Our story, and everyone else's, begins "In the beginning." And if we will read these Scriptures that Jesus himself grew up reading, and read

them the way he taught us to read them, important things will happen. We will come to know God more personally. We will come to see our sin more penitently and we will come to desire our savior more passionately. We will come to see the shadows of our savior in these old stories. These old stories will nurture in us deeper appreciation for the good news we will find in the pages of that book we call the New Testament.

And then as we submit our lives to that Savior, our lives too will begin to better fulfill the law; the laws purposes will be better accomplished in our own lives. And “The Story” of Adam and Abraham, of Joseph and Moses, of Joshua and Jeremiah and Jesus, of Peter and Paul will continue to be told in the lives of Ellmore and Marie, Ruth and A.C., Shawn and Linda, Kenneth and Martha, Logan and Landon, Amanda and Ashton, and everyone of us. For from the beginning pages of Genesis this story is not just God’s story; it is our story.