

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 11”**  
***Matthew 5:13-20***

Last week, as part of our series in Matthew’s Gospel, we started to look at Jesus’ first major piece of teaching, *The Sermon On The Mount*. Over three chapters, Matthew records the words Jesus spoke to help his newly formed band of disciples to grasp what it means to be a follower of the Kingly Messiah. He began with a series of little sayings, all beginning with “*Blessed are ...*”, which we have come to know as *The Beatitudes*. These set out the attitudes that Jesus’ followers should try to cultivate in order that their behaviour (which he goes on to talk about in the rest of the sermon) should be appropriate for those who are part of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus moves on from that in this next section and talks of his followers as being “*salt and light*” in the world, people who are quietly influential in their communities. It’s about people who make a difference – just as salt makes a difference to food and light makes a difference to darkness – people who are clearly keen to let others know something of the values of the Kingdom of God and who are prepared to model those values in their own lives. Basically, that’s what God has always wanted his people to do and to be. There’s an awful lot in the Old Testament about letting your light shine or letting God’s light shine through your own life.

So Jesus deals with the way that God has set it out in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish holy writings, the part of the Bible that we now refer to as The Old Testament. He calls it here “*The Law and the Prophets*” – the Law being the books of Moses (*Genesis to Deuteronomy*) which set out the basis of the covenant that God had made with humanity and the guidelines for getting the best out of that: and the Prophets being the writings of those who applied the Law to the behaviour of God’s people. Once again, we can see how Matthew is emphasising to his first readers – mainly Jewish people who have come to believe in Jesus – that Jesus really stands in continuity with what they already believe and it’s OK to believe in him.

And in these words here, Jesus makes it very clear that he hasn’t come to negate any of what they already know and believe. This isn’t something different, something that will cause a break with the past: it’s really a continuation of it – or, rather, a fulfilment of it. In v17, he tells them, “*I have not come to abolish these things but to fulfil them.*” That’s another of those sayings over which a great deal of ink has been spilled and a great deal of debate has ensued. I’ll spare you the Greek lesson this morning and simply say that the words Matthew records Jesus using here make it clear that Jesus has come as the climax of this Old Testament teaching. All those things that were promised by God and proclaimed through the prophets and preachers of the Old Testament reach their goal in Jesus. When he states that he fulfils the Law and the Prophets, Jesus is saying that he is the one to whom they were all pointing. He is the climax of this covenant. People now need to look no further for the one of whom the prophets spoke.

Everything in those prophecies will remain true, he says in v18. He talks about the “*smallest letter, the least stroke of a pen*” in the translation we use. In others it talks about the “*jot and tittle*”, which refer to the tiny dots and accents which distinguish some Hebrew letters from others. It is all still valid, he says, even the smallest accents and punctuation, “*until everything is accomplished*”. And as this gospel moves on, we see that, actually, it is all accomplished in him. Jesus has come to make good the promises of God. He accomplishes everything that God wants to happen as he inaugurates the Kingdom of God and brings to fulfilment the plan of God’s salvation for humanity. He will ensure that what God wants – the things that he spoke about through the Old Testament prophets – will happen. He will assure the triumph of righteousness. You see, that’s what the Law is all about – about God’s will being done, about things being done God’s way.

The trouble is, as he goes on to make clear here – and in the following sections which we’ll look at next time – most people have forgotten that that’s what it’s all about. That’s particularly true in the case of the “*Pharisees and teachers of the law.*” These are the people who really took the Law seriously. When Paul is talking to Agrippa in *Acts 26*, he tells him that he was once a Pharisee, “*the strictest sect of our*

[Jewish] religion.” They were genuinely trying to do good, to follow the Law and put it into practice. They took it very seriously indeed – and wanted others to as well – because they believed that once everyone was keeping the Law in every particular, God would really start to bless them. The trouble was that they had substituted keeping the Law for doing things God’s way, for really listening to him and living for him. The Law was given to help them do things God’s way, to help them in their righteousness, but they’d got so caught up in trying to keep the Law, they’d forgotten what the bigger purpose was.

You see, in order to make it easier to keep the Law – or, at least, to know in detail how to deal with its few fairly simple instructions – they had codified it and set it out on their terms. In a sense they had domesticated it and turned it into a great series of box-ticking exercises which eventually meant that the point of it was lost. It’s a bit like something such as Health and Safety law or Child Protection law, I suppose. I know it’s easy to have a pop at such things, but it seems to illustrate this quite well. Laws that are intended to ensure that workers are protected or that children are kept safe are great, and their overall original purpose is totally laudable. But, unfortunately, the “*teachers of the law*” – lawyers, civil servants and the like – get involved and every little possibility and procedure has to be covered by a regulation. And those regulations get more and more detailed and complicated as case law proceeds. The original aim gets lost in a sea of red tape and complex legislation.

So it was with these Pharisees. Let’s take just one example. God had told his people that there should be one day in each week when they didn’t work. It’s a great law, one of the Ten Commandments. It’s all about the rhythm of life and the need to rest, to relax, to enjoy time together as a family, to avoid exploitation of workers and so on. But the Pharisees and teacher of the Law needed to define things so that people could be sure what they were doing was OK. What is work? Well, all kinds of things could be classified as work. Listen to this, from William Barclay’s *Daily Study Bible* (pp128,9). And that kind of thing continues today, as life moves on and throws up new challenges – you can’t switch the lights on on the Sabbath, but you can put them on the night before or ask a Gentile to do it for you.

Do you see what was frustrating Jesus as he spoke these words? These people, good Jewish men, had devoted their life to keeping the Law, but they’d forgotten why. More importantly, they’d forgotten God and the reason he’d given them the Law. They had a good deal of rightness, but they’d lost sight of righteousness. What they called righteousness, in fact, was simply a slavish devotion to correctness and box-ticking rather than a joyful devotion to pleasing God by doing things his way.

Now, we saw last week, as you may remember [actually, we were talking about preaching at a conference I attended this week, so I did a quick survey about its effectiveness here. Of the sample group of people I asked about last week’s sermon, 25% weren’t here and of the ones who were here 66% had no idea what I’d been talking about. Anyway, for the 33% who can remember,] we looked at what Jesus had to say about the blessing by God, the joyful satisfaction with life experienced by those who were really desperate for things to be done God’s way – “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled*”. Jesus wanted people who were really hungry for God’s will to be done in their own lives and in the way the world operates. He didn’t simply want correct behaviour, behaviour modified by rules and regulations, by habit and conformity – like Pavlov’s dogs or Skinner’s rats. He wanted transformed hearts, new attitudes.

We’ll come across this again later in this Gospel and look at it more carefully then, but do you remember Jesus’ encounter with the Rich Young Man? It’s recorded in *Matthew 19:16ff*. A young man who was very rich came to Jesus and asked him how he could get to be part of the Kingdom. As Jesus quizzed him about whether he was keeping God’s law, he answered that he was – and, indeed, he always had done. So Jesus challenged his attitude to his wealth: was he prepared to give it up? It wasn’t just about keeping the letter of the Law, it was about his attitudes and how that expressed a relationship with God.

When we move into the next section of this chapter – from 5:21 onwards in a couple of weeks time – we’ll see that Jesus takes something from the Law, a commandment from God, but goes behind the actual

commandment to see what the point of this. It's not just about correctness, about keeping to the letter of the law and that's it – it's about the attitudes behind it, about the spirit of the law. Again, to bring it up to date a bit – we have fairly clear laws about paying taxes, for example, but the “*Pharisees and teachers of the law*” (or tax lawyers and specialist accountants as we now call them) are able (if you can afford them) to help you keep to the letter of the law whilst completely ignoring the spirit of it as they give advice about offshore funds, complicated trusts, money laundering and other avoidance schemes. You may think it's not a great problem, really, but if the big multinationals paid their taxes as intended, for example, the national debt would be wiped out overnight. If large companies paid their taxes in the countries where they make their profits, a pretty hefty chunk of world poverty would be eradicated.

That's an example calculated to let everyone here this morning off the hook, probably. But what Jesus says here is for all his followers, not just the rich and clever ones. He says here that, if you want to be part of this Kingdom he's come to inaugurate, then “*your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.*” We're back to this desire to do things God's way. This isn't about just keeping rules. They're important, of course, but what's more important is seeing what God wants behind those rules. You see, the Pharisees and teachers of the law couldn't be faulted when it came to keeping the law. They kept every little bit of it. But they'd forgotten why they did it – and, more importantly, they'd stopped looking for what God really wanted. The law was a means to an end and part of that end was the coming of Jesus and the inauguration of God's kingly rule.

This all comes back again to Jesus' desire that those who follow him should be devoted to living God's way. He doesn't want us to domesticate and codify the laws God has given us so that we just have a series of boxes to tick each day – keep your nose clean and you'll be OK. He wants his followers to embrace and enjoy God's will in all its wild and radical adventure. He wants us to listen for God's voice, to follow where he leads, to live lives that are not only law-abiding (that's a non-negotiable, really), but to go beyond that, to go the extra mile, showing in our generosity, our hospitality, our humility, our peaceableness, our selflessness, our love for one another and for God, that we are truly serious about being his disciples. [I suppose today it means bringing gifts for the Pathway Project that you've thought about and bought specially, rather than getting rid of the stuff in the pantry that's near its sell-by date!] If you accept what Jesus said in *v6* – “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled*” – if you're desperate for things to be done God's way, then you're starting to get to the point where “*your righteousness does surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.*” Keep praying that God will give you the strength to do that.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. How can we be salt and light in our community?
2. In what ways do you think Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets?
3. Why should we keep the law? What's the difference between keeping the law and righteousness?
4. Who are the present-day Pharisees? Are you one?
5. Is there anything in this passage that particularly strikes you? What are you going to do about it?