

August 8, 2021

"But I tell you..."

"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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:17-20

As we noted last week, the Master teaches that you and I, as believers, are light and salt. The rest of his sermon will pretty much focus on what that means and so he transitions by explaining his relationship with the Law and the Prophets. The Jewish people in Jesus' day referred to most of the Old Testament from Exodus 20 on as the Law and the Prophets so Jesus is clarifying his relationship with the long history of their relationship with the God of heaven.

Our Lord says that his role is fulfill the Law and the Prophets; to fulfill God's purpose in the history of that relationship. So, to understand what Jesus is teaching us we need to understand God's purpose in the Law and the Prophets.

Peter defines our heavenly Father's purpose when he writes, ***"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*** (II Peter 3:9) So, God's overarching purpose in everything he does is to bring those who would eventually be eternally lost to repentance and salvation.

But what role do the Law and the Prophets serve in helping accomplish God's purpose? Both the author of the Hebrew letter and the Apostle Paul make the function of the Law and Prophets clear for us, I think. The Law and the Prophets show us what God expects of us. The Ten Commandments, for example, teach us the basics of what God wants our relationship with him and with one another to be like.

But, the Law and the Prophets also demonstrate all too clearly that we cannot and do not successfully keep them. Their basic purpose, Paul would teach, is to help us recognize sin as sin, so that we can know that we are sinners without hope. Referring to the Law he writes, ***"Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin, might be recognized as sin..."*** (Romans 7:13)

So, when Jesus tells us that he has come to fulfill the purpose of the Law and the Prophets he is, I believe, telling us that while they show us our own sin-filled and hopeless reality he is come to bring us grace in fulfillment of their purpose in God's plan.

The Master concludes this section of his sermon with this statement, ***"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*** In saying this Jesus must have shocked most, if not all, of those in the crowd that day. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were, in the eyes of most of the Jewish people, the most righteous of all believers. They kept the Law and the Prophets so, so very carefully, but the Master tells the people that their righteousness must be even greater.

The problem as we shall see in the rest of this sermon is that these great religious leaders pretty much missed the point of the Law and the Prophets. They did not understand that the Law and the Prophets underlined their own sin-filled existence and their overwhelming need for grace just like they do for us. They believed as we too often do, that their careful obedience to the letter of the Law and the Prophets made them more righteous than others. Because of this mistaken belief they became major stumbling blocks to the salvation that Jesus came to accomplish.

The Law and the Prophets should, I think, constantly remind us of just how unrighteous we really are, and they should in turn instill in us a thirst for the grace of God that makes us righteous anyway.

