

Great in the Kingdom of Heaven

Thomas Robinson, *Seeing Life Through Jesus' Eyes 15*, May 6, 2012

Matthew 5:17-20

¹⁷ “Do not think that I came to **abolish** the **Law** or the **Prophets**;
I came not to abolish (them) but to **fulfill**/fill (them).

¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, **until heaven and earth pass away**,
not an iota, not a dot, will pass from **the Law**
until all is accomplished / everything happens.

¹⁹ Therefore whoever **relaxes** one of the **least of these commandments**
and teaches others 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**.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless **your righteousness** exceeds /abounds
more than **the scribes and Pharisees**,
you will **certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven**.”

Matthew 6:33

³³ “But **seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness**, and all these things will be added to you.”

Matthew 7:12, 24

¹² “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for **this is the Law and the Prophets**.”

²⁴ “Everyone then who **hears** these **words of mine** and **does** them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Matthew 11:13-14

¹³ “For all **the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John**, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” (Mal 4:5)

Matthew 18:1-4

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who **is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?**” ² And calling to him **a child**, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will **never enter the kingdom of heaven**. ⁴ Whoever **humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**.”

Matthew 20:25-28

²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But **whoever would be great among you must be your servant**, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the **Son of Man came not to be served but to serve**, and to **give his life** as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 22:35-40

³⁵ A lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the **great commandment in the Law?**” ³⁷ And he said to him, “**You shall love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a **second** is like it: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself**. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all **the Law and the Prophets**.” (Dt 6:5, Lev 19:18)

Matthew 28:19-20

¹⁹ “Go therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The Importance of Being Puzzled

Of all the Sermon on the Mount this passage seems most unexpected. Christians often think of Jesus as freeing us from the Law and rendering the OT as dispensable preamble to the Gospel. Within the sermon there seems a tension between these verses and what follows: “You have heard ... but I say” – sometimes directly challenging the OT Law.

Jesus builds the sense of puzzlement. For people of his day, it was precisely the scribes and Pharisees who emphasized the permanence of the Law and were admired for their obedience to even the least commands (23:23). Jesus says their careful righteousness must be surpassed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. What’s going on here?

Jesus pushes us listeners to break out of our ways of thinking about what God wants (kingdom of heaven). If the Pharisees’ rigorous obedience isn’t good enough, why? What then is the doing and teaching that is “great” in the Kingdom of heaven (v 19)? In what sense is Jesus fulfilling the Law and Prophets (v 17)? “Till everything happens”? What does that mean?

What About the Law and the Prophets?

The Law and Prophets means the scriptures, the OT. Jesus hammers home their permanent importance and value. Christians have often devalued, silenced the OT through a well-meaning emphasis on sin, atonement, salvation. But the whole NT shows that the event of Jesus has meaning only within the great narrative of God’s work in and through Israel.

Jesus lived, breathed, and loved the Scriptures. He knows that he is filling them up to their full meaning, bringing them to their intended purpose, and opening them to the world. Every letter has a permanent place in the story that moves through Jesus to fulfillment.

But Jesus firmly disputed the right of professional rigorists like the scribes and Pharisees to define what fulfillment of the Scripture means. They saw the Law as God’s final gift to the world and controlled its meaning through oral traditions and legal interpretation. Jesus said that they often undermined God’s will by their legalistic “obedience” to the law.

Jesus taught that the Law was aimed toward a goal, the Kingdom of Heaven, breaking in in his work and teaching. That kingdom was/is the true fulfillment of Law and Prophets. With authority he expressed God’s will for his Kingdom and called people to hear and do.

Great in the Kingdom of Heaven

We are never finished with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He challenges our imagination, will, life, everything. He sends us back to the Law to look with new eyes. He sends us out to seek the Kingdom; ask, knock. Journey with the Father who sees in secret. Know our relationship with God is absolutely real and lasting. Everything else is just stuff.

He tells us to practice, practice, practice: hear/teach and do. That is the humility of the poor in Spirit, the beloved child who knows God as loving Father, the house on the rock, the righteousness that abounds more than religiosity, that enters into the Kingdom of God.