

AN EXCEEDINGLY GREAT RIGHTEOUSNESS
Matthew 5:17-20; Trinity 6; July 10-11, 2021

In today's Gospel Reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains the relationship between the Old Testament Word of God and what He was saying and doing. **“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. 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. Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

When Jesus used the expression “Law or the Prophets” He meant what we call the Bible's Old Testament. The “Law” in Hebrew is *Torah*, which designates the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. (You might have noticed that our Old Testament Reading for today was from the *Torah*, the Law, Exodus 20, the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses.) The term “Prophets” was often applied to the rest of the books of the Old Testament besides the Law, including the Psalms and other poetic and wisdom books like Job or Proverbs that were not technically “prophets.”

What does Jesus teach His Church about how He related to the Old Testament Word of God? **Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.** Jesus Christ did not come to do away with the Law and the Prophets, Moses and the rest, as if those Scriptures were no longer the Word of God and could be ignored. The God who inspired the Old Testament writers to write is the same God who came in the flesh of Jesus Christ and taught His disciples. The Old Testament does not have an “expiration date” that states: “good until Jesus comes and then you can forget it.” No, the Old Testament is the authoritative and powerful **Word of the Lord that endures forever** (1 Pt 1:25). But didn't Jesus say that it will pass away when **heaven and earth pass away** at the end of this age? No.

Jesus did not say that the Old Testament will pass away with His coming at the end of the age, but that the end of the age will signal the accomplishment of His final work when the last enemy, death, is destroyed. **For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot** [the smallest letters and markings in Hebrew Scriptures], **will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.** This fallen creation, **heaven and earth**, will pass away at Jesus' coming at the Last Day, and on that Day everything Jesus came to do will be completed, but not until that Day.

So what is Jesus' relationship to the words of Old Testament if He did not come to abolish them? **I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.** To "fulfill" something has the sense of bringing it to its intended goal, to finish the job, to keep filling until something is completely full. A good way for us New Testament people in the Church to think about the Old Testament is as the first chapter of a two chapter book. To get the proper sense of it you have to read them both.

When I was in high school I took a literature class on the American novel and one of the books we read was John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. In typical fashion of teenagers I left reading it to the last minute and had to quickly skim the book because I knew we were going to have a quiz on our reading before discussing it in class. Spoiler alert! The end of the book has George killing Lennie, which didn't make sense to me because George had been protecting Lennie throughout the whole story. What I had done in my haste was I skipped reading the second-last chapter which set up the conclusion. It's hard, if not impossible, making sense of the end of a story if you skip reading what comes before.

Without the Old Testament the New Testament and the coming of Jesus Christ does not make sense. Why does God's Son need to be a human born of a virgin as a Jew in the line of Abraham and as a descendant of King David? Why does Jesus get into trouble with the Jewish religious authorities over how to keep God's Law? Why does Jesus have to suffer and die on the cross and then rise again on the third day? Without the Word of God in the Old Testament nothing Jesus says or does, as recorded in the New Testament, makes any sense.

What did Jesus come to accomplish and fulfill as written in the Old Testament? He puts the answer to that in terms of **righteousness**. **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** The term **“righteousness”** is one of the key words in the Bible and is used to describe both God and His people. In the Old Testament, God, who is righteous, chooses Israel as His people, not because they are righteous but despite the fact that they are unrighteous, not righteous. Yet, Jesus says that our righteousness needs to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees of His day. But sinners are not righteous, and we all are sinners. How is it possible for us to have an exceedingly great righteousness?

It helps to understand that righteousness is part of a constellation of related words in the Bible such as “just,” “justice,” and justification,” which are legal terms about standing before a judge. God is just and righteous and sits in judgment over people who have broken His laws and are guilty and deserving of God’s righteous justice, which means we deserve God’s wrath and punishment. Whenever we hear in the Bible something about our righteousness it is helpful to think of it as a verdict handed down by God. In the Bible to be justified by God means to be declared righteous by God, to be declared innocent of our guilt for some reason. To be credited by God with this righteousness means that we are somehow “right” with God despite the fact that we are still sinners and lawbreakers. On what legal basis can God declare us sinners to be righteous?

The short answer is Jesus. We are not righteous because of our sin, but Jesus is righteous and has no sin. Sin has been the problem of every human being since Adam and Eve sinned. St. Paul summarized the teaching of the Old Testament on human righteousness: **As it is written: None is righteous, no, not one... for all have sinned”** (Rom. 3:10, 23). But God wants to save sinners and share His righteousness with us through faith. **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [that is, declared righteous] by His grace as a gift** (3:23-24), **“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”** (3:22). When Jesus says to us, **“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,”** the only righteousness that qualifies is the righteousness of God.

God's righteousness was fulfilled and accomplished when Jesus took our sin on Himself and suffered on the cross all the wrath of God we deserved. Jesus accomplished salvation for us on the cross and rose from the dead to declare us righteous, justified. This is the story of the Old Testament: that God created life, but sin brought death, so God promised to overcome sin and death by the Son of woman. What Jesus did for us fulfills the righteousness of God, an exceedingly great righteousness that has been credited to us through faith in Jesus.

So what was wrong with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus warned that our righteousness needs to exceed theirs if we are to be in the kingdom of heaven? They sought a righteousness apart from faith in Jesus Christ. They were really good at following all of God's rules, at least in an outward way, but could not keep the First Commandment, "**You shall have no other gods,**" because they tried to keep that law apart from faith in Jesus.

There are a lot of good people in the world today who do not believe in Jesus, and sometimes their behavior is far better than many Christians. But their good behavior won't save them because they have rejected the righteousness of God that is found in Jesus Christ alone. Whoever or whatever their god is, it is not Jesus who died because of their sin. This is why Jesus warns the Church when teaching not to "**relax the least of these commandments.**"

By "commandments" Jesus means the law of God that confronts all of us in our sin and unrighteousness and calls us to repentance, that is, a turning away from our sin. But Jesus' "commandments" also include the gospel words that teach faith in Him, a turning from sin to Jesus for our salvation and a sharing in His righteousness. Everyone needs to know and believe that God is reconciled to sinners only because of Jesus' suffering and death that forgives all sin.

What is the relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus Christ? Jesus did not come to abolish the Old but to fulfill it and accomplish salvation for us and for all people. By doing this, an exceedingly great righteousness that is His has been given to us by faith in Jesus. Amen.