

That Generation's Requirement for Kingdom Entrance

📖 Matthew 5:17-20

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We are studying the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. We're getting to critical verses tonight, 5:17-20. There is a vast array of widely divergent interpretations that will send you in a number of widely divergent directions. The consequences of how you take these verses cascade into every other verse in the NT. As D. A. Carson says, "The theological and canonical ramifications of one's exegetical conclusions on this pericope are so numerous that discussion becomes freighted with the intricacies of biblical theology."¹ I really don't want to go into all the intricacies. I want to simply hit this straight on in terms of my overall approach to the Discourse on the Mount. What did we call my approach? The *covenant approach*. What's this approach saying? That the discourse is growing out of God's covenant program with Israel. What's the controlling covenant? The Abrahamic Covenant. Was it a unilateral or bilateral covenant? It was unilateral. Meaning what? Meaning that God alone was obligating Himself to fulfill the terms. What were the terms? That He would give them a land, a seed, a ruler of the land and through Him they would be a global blessing. Now what covenant came alongside of that? The Mosaic Covenant. Was it unilateral or bilateral? It was bilateral. Meaning what? That if they obeyed Him they would be blessed and if they disobeyed Him they would be cursed. So the enjoyment of the land was conditioned on their obedience. Now do you see where the Discourse on the Mount is going? Jesus is saying that that generation has to come into obedience to the Mosaic Covenant if they want to enjoy ultimate blessing in the kingdom. It was a unique time, the kingdom was 'at hand' in that the King Himself had arrived and it was a genuine kingdom offer.

Let's look at it this way, you've got an outer circle and it depicts the Abrahamic Covenant. It says what God is ultimately going to do. He's going to establish a kingdom. How did one enter into the Abrahamic Covenant such that he would ultimately enjoy the time of kingdom blessing? Faith, obviously faith. Abraham believed and it was credited to Him as righteousness. Those Jews who had faith in any generation were the Jews who would ultimately be the recipients of the Abrahamic blessings in the kingdom. No problem. But then you've got an inner circle and it depicts the Mosaic Covenant. What is it stating? The conditions that one generation of Jews would have to meet in order for the kingdom to

actually come. One generation of Jews would have to be obedient in order for the kingdom to come. And until there is a generation of Israel that is walking in obedience to the Mosaic Covenant the kingdom is not going to come. So you may have individual Jews in every generation that believe like Abraham and obey the Mosaic Covenant but until there is a generation of Jews that believe and obey then the kingdom is not going to come.

So if you look at the Discourse on the Mount as flowing out of the OT covenant program then you see that this generation was being given a very unique offer. The King had already come and the kingdom was therefore 'at hand' such that if that generation had believed and come into obedience to the Mosaic the kingdom would have come. What you don't want to do is start thinking about salvation and going to heaven. That will destroy the whole sermon.

Let's look at some OT passages that show what I'm saying. What am I saying? That for a Jew of any generation to ultimately enjoy the Abrahamic blessings in the kingdom they needed to have faith. But for the kingdom to actually come one generation of Jews that believed had to learn obedience so that the kingdom would actually come. Turn to Lev 26. I always emphasize two chapters in the OT. What are they? Lev 26 and Deut 28. These are absolutely vital. You can't understand the Bible apart from these two chapters. It's simply impossible. Notice the first 13 verses. What are the first 13 verses? Blessing, blessing, blessing. Blessing where? In the land. Note verse 4, rains in their season so that what will yield fruit? The land. Verse 5, end of the verse, security where? In your land. Verse 6. Peace where? In the land. And it goes on, but what's the condition for that blessing in the land. Verse 3, "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, 4then..." comes the blessing. See, it wasn't automatic. The way to ultimate blessing in the land under the Abrahamic Covenant was obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. Then he sketches what in verses 14ff? The curses if they don't obey. How many degrees of cursing are sketched in this chapter? Five degrees. And Moses just cascades through them. It's all divine discipline until finally they are kicked out of the land and come under Gentile powers. This is all starting in verse 29, where they're going to be under such severe famine that they eat their own children. This occurred three times in Jewish history. Mothers ate their babies. Now He's disciplining them, causing insanity, the land is laid waste, verse 32, the enemies settle in the land. Verse 33 the Jews are scattered into all the nations. There's the diaspora. Verse 34, the land will enjoy its Sabbath rests. Verse 35, they were to allow the land to rest every seventh year; they didn't do that so while they're in exile the land will make up for the Sabbaths. And this is the terrible situation. How do they get out of the terrible situation? Verse 40, "If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers..." Jump to the NT. What were people doing as John was baptizing them? Confessing their iniquity (Matt 3:6). There were individuals who were getting in shape spiritually like Leviticus says. They were confessing their sins, getting restored to the Mosaic Covenant, the place of blessing. Verse 41, middle of the verse, "or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their

iniquity," then what, if they do this? "then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land."

Alright, so you see that the ultimate blessing in the land under the Abrahamic Covenant comes only on the condition that a generation of Israel returns to obedience to the Mosaic Covenant.

Look at another passage, Deut 28:1. How can Israel be the chief nation on all the earth? "Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth." ²All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the LORD your God:" then he goes through all the blessings and I take it these blessings will be enjoyed in the kingdom, but only if they obey. So only if they come into obedience to the Mosaic Covenant will the kingdom actually arrive.

Deut 29:9, "So keep the words of this covenant to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. Verse 12, "...that you may enter into the covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath which the LORD your God is making with you today," See, they had to come into the bond of the Mosaic Covenant in order for verse 13 to occur, "in order that He may establish you today as His people and that He may be your God, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Etc...etc...the same relationship with the nation Israel is posited, that the way to blessing under the Abrahamic Covenant in the kingdom was through obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. And so until a generation of Israel comes into obedience to the Mosaic Covenant then the kingdom cannot come. And surely, Deut 30:1, the kingdom blessing will come, but only when they return to Him, then all the blessing...This story goes on and on...

What's the story we find in the Discourse on the Mount? The same story. Except this time the King has come and He is making the kingdom offer to that generation, if they will return to Him and be obedient to the Mosaic Covenant then the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant in the land will come. Look how the logic progresses in the discourse. There is a logical progression that I think is almost always missed. The sermon is difficult to understand if you don't come at it out of the OT story. The immediate setting of the discourse is set in Matthew 4:25-5:2. What's happening in 4:25? The King has become immensely popular. What happens in 5:1 when He sees the crowds? He went up on the mountain, and after sitting down who comes to Him? His disciples came to Him. How many of them at this time? Four. Only four at this time. And in the manner of rabbinical teachers He begins to teach these four. What is His teaching in Matthew 5:3-10? Blessed are they, that is, any and all Jews of the past who manifested spiritual character, that is, who lived their lives in accordance with the Mosaic Covenant. What will they enjoy in the kingdom? Blessing and reward. Then what does His teaching turn to in Matthew 5:11-12? He shifts to "you," His immediate disciples to connect them with the prior generations of spiritual Jews, including the prophets and He pronounces blessing on them for the same. Then the logic progresses in 5:13-16.

What is He doing here? In a sense do you see that He is commissioning them to be the leaders of the nation Israel? Verse 13, "You are the salt of the earth." Do you think the scribes and Pharisees were the salt of the earth! You're kidding, right? Verse 14, "You are the light of the world." Were the scribes and Pharisees the light of the world? No, they were in darkness, they were supposed to be but they were followers of Satan. There's a powerful contrast here. Jesus is condemning the scribes and the Pharisees and commissioning His disciples to be the new leadership. Verse 16, He commands them, "Let your light shine before men..." So what are His disciples being commanded to do as true leaders? Prepare the nation Israel for the kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees weren't preparing them. They were leading them down the primrose path to destruction. So what's happening is the kingdom was at hand and Jesus is commissioning a new leadership because the nation at that time had a defunct leadership and yet here's the King and that generation has an opportunity to be the generation that would see the kingdom come and all the Abrahamic Covenant blessings! The question is how are His disciples going to be salt and light? How are they going to prepare the nation Israel for that kingdom? By following Jesus' teaching and luring the nation away from the scribes and Pharisees and into obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. That's what the OT is saying, that one generation must be in obedience for the kingdom to come. So how are the disciples here going to lead the nation to obedience? By proclaiming the true intent of the Mosaic Covenant.

Alright, that brings us to what they thought of the Mosaic Covenant. What did the average Jew think the Mosaic Covenant said? Whatever the scribes and Pharisees said it said. Where did they hear them? In the synagogue. Hold your place here and look briefly at Acts 13:27. This is Paul at Pisidian Antioch; it's a lot later but he's referring back to our time period in Matthew. And he's preaching in the synagogue. What does he say in verse 25? He's talking about John's ministry and how John wasn't the Messiah but He pointed to one greater than Him. In verse 26 he's talking about how the message was for the Jews. It was a kingdom message. In verse 27 he's talking about how the leadership blew it. Let's read. "For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him." Did the rulers know the OT? According to this verse did they know the word of God? No. Did they read it every week in synagogue? Yeah, they read it week after week after week; they'd pull out the scrolls and read them. They could quote them from memory but they didn't know them. If they really knew them they wouldn't have crucified Jesus. So what had they done to the OT? Reinterpreted it. Alright, now we're getting somewhere.

Back in Matthew 5, what's Jesus doing in Matt 5:21-48, the main body of His teaching? Contrasting what the people had heard in synagogue all their life with what He was saying. Take a look at Matt 5:21, "You have heard that the ancients were told..." where did they hear it said? In the synagogue. Who said it? The scribes and Pharisees. Then what did they hear? Jesus quotes an OT scripture. There's a pattern

here, note verse 27, "You have heard that it was said..." and then He quotes what? Another OT Scripture. Verse 31, "It was said..." and He quotes another OT Scripture. Verse 33, "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told..." and He quotes another Scripture. Verse 38, "You have heard that it was said..." followed by another Scripture. And finally verse 43, "You have heard that it was said" and He quotes another Scripture. Six times Jesus says "you have heard it said..." Was there something wrong with the Scriptures they had heard quoted? You can look at the quotations of Scripture there. Is there anything wrong with them? Nothing wrong. Word for word. Well, if nothing's wrong with these Scriptures then why does Jesus, after He quotes each one, say, "But I say to you..." Why the stark contrast? What's Jesus doing? Is He abrogating the Law? Do you see how He could be misconstrued as abrogating the Law? That's why He prefaces this section with 5:17-20. To clarify so that when He starts His contrast between the scribal and Pharisaic interpretation of the Law and His view in 5:21ff His audience doesn't misunderstand what He's doing. What is He doing? If He's quoting the Law accurately and saying, "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." and His statements are not abrogating the Law then what is the contrast? The contrast is between how the scribes and Pharisees interpreted the Law vs how He interpreted the Law. Who were the ones who actually abrogated the Law? The scribes and Pharisees. Jesus wasn't doing that, Jesus was establishing the Law.

Now, just a side note, but is the issue whether you can quote a Bible verse? There was nothing wrong with the Bible verses as the scribes and the Pharisees quoted them. They could quote them to you all day long. And this shows you it doesn't matter one iota if you can quote a Bible verse. I don't care and Jesus doesn't care if you read through the Bible every year and memorize every verse in the Bible. That doesn't matter and God could care less about it. Satan quoted it in Matt 3. The scribes and Pharisees knew it word for word. People can stare you in the face and quote Scripture and be straight out followers of Satan. It's not about quoting Scripture. What is it about? What did Jesus care about? Whether you understood it or not as He intended it to be understood! Because if you're coming up with your newfangled ideas of what it means then you are the authority. So it's all about interpreting it straightforwardly as it was intended or whether you like to play games with the text. Now the scribes and Pharisees liked to play games. The scribes had developed oral tradition and how did they view their oral tradition with respect to the Law itself? It was more authoritative! More authoritative! The average Jew couldn't posit some alternative interpretation. The scribes and Pharisees did that. The people had to go to the scribes and Pharisees and ask them what it meant. It's the same way today in Judaism and in Roman Catholicism. You can't read this and understand it; you just take their word for it.

In fact, at this time, the scribal interpretations as embodied in oral tradition were so embedded that when they read the passages out of the Law in synagogue their minds went immediately to the authoritative interpretations. Never even thought about the text itself. So what is Jesus about to do? Glasscock says, "Jesus was about to attack the oral interpretation of the Law, which most of the Jews of

the time had been conditioned to accept as the Law itself. Six times in the next verses He will challenge their oral traditions... This contrast between what the rabbis had been teaching for centuries and what Jesus Himself was about to teach could be misconstrued, so He stated plainly His intention of not doing away with the Law.² If you understand that you'll understand what Jesus is doing. If you don't you'll never understand what Jesus is doing. Jesus is not taking issue with the Law; Jesus is taking issue with the scribal and Pharisaic interpretations of the Law as embodied in oral tradition. He came to restore the true intent of the Mosaic Law. Why? Because if that generation did not return to the true intent of the Mosaic Law then they would not have the righteousness necessary to enter into the kingdom and then the kingdom would not come.

So before He does this, in verse 17, he's going to give some preliminary remarks before He even gets to the compare and contrast between His teaching and that of the scribes and Pharisees. Let's look at verse 17, a hotly contested verse, but I think I've given you the frame from the OT covenants to view then properly. He says, **Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.** The controversy is the words **abolish** and **fulfill**. I want to point out that **abolish** means "to dismantle so as to demolish." Could it be perceived that Jesus was dismantling the Law so as to destroy it in vv 21ff? If He's contradicting the scribes and the Pharisees it could very well be perceived that He was doing that. That's why He says up front, **do not think that**. Instead what should they think? That He came **to fulfill** it. The translation says **fulfill**. I want you to forget that translation. That word is jam-packed with baggage in the English language. In fact, I want you to mark that word out. It's okay, it's not inspired, it's a translation of the verb *πληρωω*. What's the meaning of it here? Whatever it is it's the opposite of abolish! So we translate it "establish." What's Jesus come to do? He's come to establish the Law and the Prophets. The majority of chapter 5 is Jesus re-establishing the Law. What had the scribes and Pharisees done to the Law? They had abolished the Law with all their reinterpretations. Jesus had come to establish it. Why? So that that generation could see the scribes and Pharisees for the wolves that they were and return to true Covenant obedience so that they would have the righteousness necessary to enter the kingdom! That's verse 20, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." That generation would not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they returned to the Mosaic Covenant and lived accordingly. The Mosaic Law was a righteousness code and God demanded them to live according to it for the kingdom to come!

So is it sinking in what I'm trying to communicate? Verse 20 isn't individual entrance into the kingdom; it's generational entrance into the kingdom. The kingdom was 'at hand.' The generation that has a righteousness that conforms to the true intent of the Mosaic Covenant is the generation that will enter the kingdom. So Jesus didn't come to dismantle the Law or the Prophets, He came to establish them. Toussaint agrees, "The verb "to fulfill" (*πληρωω*)... means to establish completely. This He did by (1)

perfectly conforming His life to its high standards, and (2) retrieving its true meaning from the niceties of its rabbinic interpretations.”³

Verse 18, **For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.** The expression **not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law** strikes people as most interesting. The smallest letter is literally in the Greek “one iota.” The iota (*i*) is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet. It corresponds to the Hebrew *yod*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. The smallest...stroke is literally in the Greek “the keraia.” The keraia is a small accent mark on a Greek letter. It corresponds to a small Hebrew stroke on a letter of the Hebrew Alphabet that changes the letter. Barbieri explains, “In English a jot would correspond to the dot above the letter “i” (and look like an apostrophe), and a tittle would be seen in the difference between a “P” and an “R”. The small angled line that completes the “R” is like a tittle.” Usually at this time a teacher or commentator will say that if neither one dot over an “i” or one stroke on a letter would pass away before the Law was accomplished then what does this say about the preservation of the OT? It says that it will remain intact. Not just the thoughts or concepts but even the finest details of the individual words will be preserved. So this verse is offered as evidence for the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. While I agree with those doctrines I do not think that is Jesus’ intent.

Instead, what Jesus is saying is that the Law could not be dismantled so as to be destroyed before its intent was met. First, Jesus had to live perfectly according to the Law’s intent. Second, the nation had to come into sufficient obedience to the Law for the kingdom to come. Jesus is simply saying no one could destroy it before it met those two aims. Let me show you how we get to this understanding.

Twice Jesus says the Law will be established **until** a specific point in time. The two uses of until show that the Law will have met its goal when these two things occur. The two things have the identical verb tense so they occur simultaneously. First, **heaven and earth** will pass away and second, the Law will at that time be **accomplished**. Those two things happen at the same time. To be clear, what does **heaven and earth** refer to? This is simply the Hebrew way of referring to the “universe.” They didn’t have a word for the universe so they referred to it as **heaven and earth**. So the first thing Jesus is saying is that the Law will not pass away until the universe passes away. When will the universe **pass away**? That’s not the easiest question for even good Bible students to answer correctly. The majority think that it passes away after the thousand year kingdom (if they even hold to a thousand year kingdom). They think that because they see the sequence of one thousand years in Revelation 20, followed by the release of Satan and his defeat, followed by the Great White Throne judgment and finally in Rev 21 the creation of the new heaven and new earth. They see the sequence and so they say the present heaven and earth will not pass away until after the one thousand years when the new heaven and new earth are created. I don’t like that view. Isaiah 65 and 66 teaches that the new heaven and new earth has two phases; a

phase where there is still death though it is rare, which I associate with the one thousand year kingdom and then a phase where there is no death which I associate with the eternal state. The present heaven and earth will pass away prior to the one thousand years. 2 Pet 3:10 is referring to the passing away of the present heavens and earth during the tribulation. So I think Jesus is saying that **the Law** will not **pass away until** the present universe passes away during the Tribulation. When the kingdom comes the first phase of the new universe will have come which will last one thousand years. Second, the **law** will have been **accomplished**. What was the Law to accomplish? The verb **accomplished** is *γινωμαι* and means "to come into being through process of birth." The intended purpose of the Law here was to give birth to the kingdom by conforming its recipients to its high standards of righteousness! The very standards the scribes and Pharisees were trying to abolish, Jesus was trying to establish. So when a generation of Israel conforms to the true standards of the Law then the Law will be accomplished in the sense that it will give birth to the kingdom. This will occur when heaven and earth pass away during the tribulation. Until then the Law will remain.

What about the Law with respect to the Church? And what about the Law with respect to the Kingdom? The Law in the kingdom will not be the same as the Mosaic Law. There will be similarities and in some instances apparent identities. Nevertheless, the Law of the kingdom is distinct from the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law will be done away with as a rule of life during the Tribulation when the King and His kingdom come. But during the Tribulation that generation of Israel must conform itself to that Mosaic Law for the kingdom to come. That is why Jesus was trying to get His generation in spiritual shape, so the kingdom could come.

What about the Law with respect to the Church? The Law in the church is not the same as the Mosaic Law either. There are similarities and in some instances apparent identities as well, but sometimes different. For example, 9 of the 10 commandments are repeated but never are we told to obey the Sabbath, one man considers one day more important than another, another man sees all days the same, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. So the Mosaic Law is distinct from Christ's Law. The Church is under Christ's Law but we have something additional in that we have the Spirit of God permanently indwelling us, we have available to us the filling of the Spirit if we depend upon Him and so the mechanics of meeting the standard of Christ's Law are different than what the OT saint had under the Mosaic Law. A lot of people want to take the Mosaic Law and Jesus' statement here that the Law will not pass away until heaven and earth pass away to mean it is for all time, but then they back pedal when it comes to the ceremonial law. They want just the moral law but the law doesn't divide that way, it's an arbitrary division. It's really much easier than that. Jesus is saying this to Israel not the Church. The Church was completely unknown at this time. The kingdom offer to Israel was on the table and that's the way you have to look at it. When Israel rejected then the Church comes on the scene. So the Church occurs during an intercalation or break in God's plan for Israel. We have our own law, Christ's Law. When

the Church is removed at the rapture then God's plan for Israel will be back on center stage and the Mosaic Law will be in effect once again. So the Law of Moses relates to Israel only and whenever Israel is on center stage, as they were here and will be in the future Tribulation, then **the Law** is in effect, but not to the Church.

So what Jesus is clarifying in verse 18 is what it meant at the end of verse 17 by the statement that He came to establish the Law rather than abrogate it. He came to establish it by personally conforming to it and by conforming a generation of Israelites to its statutes such that the kingdom would come.

Matthew 5:19, **Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.** The scribes and Pharisees were a hindrance to the kingdom coming. They graded the commandments according to what they thought were the most important. After grading them they annulled what they considered the lesser commandments. To **annul** meant that one was not obligated to follow it. Toussaint says, "The verb "to annul" (*λυω*, 5:19) was often used by the scribes and Pharisees to refer to that which according to their interpretation of the law was permitted."⁴ The point is they were playing fast and loose with the text. Jesus later says that they neglected the weightier things of the Law. Here He is warning His disciples not to follow the practice of the scribes and Pharisees. If they continued in the Pharisaic method and taught **others to do the same** then they would **be called least in the kingdom of heaven**. Of course to **be called least in the kingdom of heaven** means that they would be **in the kingdom of heaven**. But to follow the practice of the scribes and Pharisees would result in them being of lesser status or rank in the kingdom than those who did not. On the other hand, Jesus says **whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven**. The one who kept the Law did the opposite of **annul** the Law. He took the text of the Law seriously and considered it an obligation to keep every portion of it. He also **teaches** others the obligation to follow the true intent of the Law. If one did so he would **be called great in the kingdom**. Here again we see different ranks in status in the kingdom, some greater, some lesser. The bottom line is that Jesus' disciples would be ranked in the kingdom based on whether they kept and taught the Law as it was intended or not. Jesus placed a very high value on both keeping and teaching the Law as it was originally intended. To do otherwise was to do what the scribes and Pharisees did and they were not even going to enter the kingdom.

As Jesus points out in verse 20, **For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.** That generation had an opportunity to **enter the kingdom of heaven**. The kingdom was 'at hand.' But if they continued to follow in the **righteousness...of the scribes and Pharisees** which was not righteous at all but unrighteous, then they would **not enter the kingdom**. It was vital that that generation come to realize

that the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees was bankrupt. The disciples were to lead the way, being salt and light in preparing the nation to see the scribes and Pharisees for who they really were, false teachers who kept them from kingdom entrance. If the disciples were successful in leading the nation to see the true intent of the Law and restoring them to obedience then the kingdom would come. Time would tell but living after the fact we know that while Jesus initially rose in popularity, in the end the majority followed the scribes and Pharisees. Therefore the kingdom did not come.

¹Ibid., Glasscock, p 115.

²Glasscock, Matthew, p 116.

³Toussaint, Behold the King, p 99.

⁴Toussaint, Behold the King, p 100.