

Oh, How I Love Your Law

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder if you would ever put these two words together, love and law.

We tend to see those words as opposites, don't we? No one can tell us what to love or who to love. There's no law of love. Or we think of rules and constraints as something that suffocates love. Love is free. Law is binding. Love is unconditional. Law comes with conditions.

I think that idea has crept into the way we as Christians can sometimes think of God. In the past, he was a God of law. He gave us a set of rules we couldn't keep. Now we know him as a God of love.

And he doesn't really do rules anymore. But that is a false dichotomy. Law and love. Love and law.

They are not opposites in the Bible. And they are not opposites in the Christian life. In Psalm 119, the psalmist exclaims to God, oh, how I love your law. Or we sang just from the same psalm a moment ago, I love to follow your commands, as others love to count their gold. Someone once asked, Jesus, teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? And Jesus famously replied, love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. See, God's law is a law of love.

[2 : 0 3] And if we love God, then we love his law. And here's the bombshell for us this morning.

If we love God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, then we love God's law more than God's people have ever loved God's law before. Now, how can I possibly say that? As we sit here, if we're Christians today, aren't we free from the law? Hasn't Jesus' life, death, and resurrection put that away for us?

Well, what does Jesus say in verse 17 of our passage? Just turn your eyes there. This is so important. The rest of chapter 5 is really just Jesus unpacking this one verse where he says, 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. How can we love God's law as followers of Jesus?

Jesus is so clear, friends, that he did not come to make God's law obsolete or redundant or give us a set of new and exciting commands. He says he came to fulfill everything that came before him, to bring the demands of the law and the promises of the prophets to life in his rule and reign, then his kingdom as never before. And that's what this whole section of the sermon is all about, as Jesus gives the law again to his salt and light people, his faithful followers. Now, there's so many ways that we could study these verses. We could spend weeks every time that Jesus says, you have heard it said, but I say to you. Instead, we're going to do it in a one-er and trust that you are going to come back later and work through these teachings more slowly for yourself. There are lots of places in the Bible, lots of places that teach us about anger and love and lust and lies. This is one of them.

But the big point of this teaching in this sermon is to break down our small, watered-down understanding of goodness and rightness and to teach us what real righteousness is and how we can live rightly. And so my hope by the end of this sermon is not that you'll go away thinking that you know everything there is to know about anger and love and lust and lying, but that you will go away being able to say more freely and more passionately than the psalmist could say more than the psalmist could. And so I'm going to say, you know, I'm going to say more than the psalmist.

[5 : 08] How I love to keep your commands, not in spite of Jesus, but because of Jesus. So how do we get there? Well, notice in verse 17 that there are two things Jesus says he fulfills, right? The law and the prophets. Two things that he did not come to tear down. The word abolish he uses there is the same word that he uses later when he speaks about the destruction of the temple.

So this is tearing down walls, ripping up floorboards, right? He says he did not come to demolish the law and prophets. Interesting, isn't it? When was the last time that you read through a law book or a prophetic book in your Bible cover to cover?

We treat those sections of our Bibles a little bit like derelict buildings, don't we? Jesus says the law and the prophets still stand in his kingdom. Truly I tell you, he says, until heaven and earth disappear. Not the smallest letter, the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. We could say not a dot over an I, not a comma, not a full stop, could be taken out of the law until it all comes true. The world will not stop turning before one letter goes missing from God's word. Jesus says he did not come to change that.

So if that's not what Jesus came to do, then whatever he did come to do cannot possibly mean that the law and the prophets are less important or not relevant to us today. Quite the opposite.

What he came to do make the law and the prophets more important, more relevant to us today than they have ever been because he came to fulfill them. And so we're going to see in these verses how Jesus fulfills the law first and then how he fulfills the prophets. Firstly then, Jesus fulfilled God's law.

[7 : 29] Now just to be clear, by God's law, we're not talking about a kind of natural law that we might be able to work out by the way we see the world working in general. God's law is the commandments that he gave from the top of another mountain a long time ago when he rescued his people and he gathered them to Mount Sinai. He spoke to them. He gave them a way of life now that they were his redeemed people, his treasured possession in all the world. And so you can read God's law in your Bible, in Exodus chapter 20, the Ten Commandments, and the chapters and the books that follow on from that, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. So how great is this? Think of it this way, how great is it?

Never did God's people have to wonder what would please God. They didn't have to kind of figure him out, and they didn't spend their lives trying to make him happy, but never really knowing if they were getting it right. God simply told them, this is who I am, and this is who you are to me. I've set my love on you and given you a new way to live. So live in the way that I love. But before he'd even finished speaking, his people were breaking his commands, they got their gold jewelry together, they melted it down, and they made a golden calf, like a cow, and said, this is the God who rescued us.

And they worshiped what they made as if it was God, but God had said only hours or minutes before, as you do in the second commandment, you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above, the earth below, or the waters below. You shall not bow down and worship them.

But as soon as they thought his back was turned, that is just what they did. They broke God's commands before the ink had even dried on the page.

And God was and is unbelievably gracious and forgiving. He gave his people away back to him through sacrifices, but that instinct to disobey him didn't change from day one.

[10 : 04] They were, in God's words, stubborn and rebellious people. Every line God drew, they crossed. Every target God set, they missed. Every command God gave, they broke. So when Jesus sits now on another mountain and gives God's law again, what would these people be thinking?

You've heard it was said to people long ago, you shall not murder. That's the sixth commandment. You've heard it was said, you shall not commit adultery. That's the seventh commandment.

Again, you've heard it said to the people long ago, do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you've made. The ninth commandment. The people listening to him teaching would not have been wisely nodding and saying, yeah, that sounds great. If only the whole world, you know, lived like that. They would be thinking, no one has ever lived like that. How can we live like this? Especially when Jesus takes what they've been taught in their day by their so-called teachers of the law and says, you haven't even scratched the surface of this command. The teachers of the law said, you know, as long as you don't actually go and kill someone, well, you're okay. It doesn't mean you have to care about people who are unwell or help them get better or rescue an animal out of a ditch.

Or if you don't sleep around, well, that's fine. Even if you leave your wife for another woman, as long as you fill in the paperwork, well, that's okay. But I say to you, says Jesus, that that watered-down box ticking does not get close to what these laws are really saying. It's important that we understand that when Jesus says that the seeds of murder are in our angry feelings or the seeds of adultery are in our lustful thoughts, he's not adding to the law as if God in the past only really cared about our behavior, but Jesus cares about our hearts. He's correcting the legalistic impulse of the human hearts to bring God's commands down to a standard that we can comfortably meet so that we can say that we're good people, but still carry on having a short temper or a wandering eye. Jesus is confronting the lawyer in our hearts that stands up to defend us when we sin in what we think or what we feel or what we want.

And what we say, he's saying, before God's law, you have no defense. You've heard people say it before, perhaps you've said this yourself, I hope I've done enough.

[13 : 26] I hope I've done enough. When I die, I'll go to heaven. Or I think probably my good things, they outbalance the bad things that I've done. I think I'll be all right. But see this, what does Jesus say is the sentence for something as simple as getting angry? It's at the end of verse 22. What does he say?

The fire of hell. What is the sentence for something as common as lust? Verse 29, and again in verse 30, for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

If those single sins in our hearts are enough to condemn us, who can claim not to be guilty of breaking God's commands?

Jesus leaves us with no room to claim that we're good enough or don't deserve that sentence. Now, if that is all that he had said, we would have no hope.

We would have no hope. But what has he said already? Verse 17, that he did not come simply to repeat the law, but to fulfill it.

[14 : 55] He is claiming to be the one person ever who has lived a human life from the womb to the tomb and has kept God's commands.

And there is no reason to doubt that that's true. We find in the records of his life, in the testimony of people who were with him, that Jesus did not sin. So not only did he not murder someone, but never did he inwardly crucify someone.

He never imagined a conversation where he nailed someone with his criticism. He never secretly wished that they would get what's coming to them. He never snapped or spoke a harsh word in his life.

He never slept with someone wrongly, nor did his eyes ever wander lustfully over a group of women. He never mentally undressed someone. He didn't use his position to get access to somebody's body, nor did he want to.

He never broke an oath or a promise. Neither did he ever lie in anything he said or even consider deceiving someone or bending or muddying the truth.

[16 : 12] We could go on and on, but that is what he is saying when he says he came to fulfill the law. He came to keep it, and not only in an outward and a visible way, but in ways that nobody would ever have known but him.

Temptations that he resisted, opportunities to bend or break a command that he ignored. His obedience to God's law was and is perfect.

From the depths of his heart to every extremity of his body. So that as he presents the law to us, friends, in a very real sense, he is presenting himself to us.

This is what my heart is like. This is who I am. This is my life. And verse 17, he says, that is why I came, to give us himself.

Because apart from his perfect obedience, we could not be right with God. You need to hear what Jesus preaches here. And to think back even to yesterday or the past week.

[17 : 30] Who can possibly say that we have not once got it wrong? If we searched our hearts, we would see it's not once or twice in our lives, but once or twice, multiple times a day that we break God's law.

We fail to live as God wants us to. But Jesus came to meet the holy requirements that we cannot meet. Down to the letter. He did that to provide us a perfect record.

To clothe us with a spotless obedience. So that when we come to him, poor in spirit, with nothing to offer him but our failings, nothing to set before him, but a record of sin, what can he give us?

He gives us the kingdom of heaven. He clothes us in his own perfect righteousness and stands us before God. So that as God looks on us in Christ, what does he see?

The obedience and the record and the perfection of his own son. And so if you're here and you have not yet come to Jesus, poor in spirit, empty-handed, you need to know where you stand that God's verdict, says Jesus on you today, is that you are guilty.

[18 : 51] And the only way to change that is not by going and trying harder or trying to be a better person. You can't undo what you've done.

And you can't make it better. And friends, the stakes are too high to bet your eternity on the strength of your own willpower or your own will to change.

The sentence for every sin is eternity in hell. And the only way to change God's verdict on you to be spared that punishment is to come to the one who has kept God's commands pure and unstained from his heart and give him the record of your wrongs and receive the record of his obedience.

obedience. Jesus' obedience on your behalf is the only way that you will ever come in to God's presence and enter his kingdom.

And that is why he came, to fulfill the law. So come to him, come to him with empty hands and a bankrupt heart and he will give you the kingdom of heaven because he fulfilled the law on our behalf.

[20 : 14] But secondly, and vitally, we need to see that Jesus gives us a new heart for God's law. Because remember, fulfilling the law is part one. Part two, he says, he also came to fulfill the prophets.

Now, even if we've followed up to this point, you lots of us in the Christian life, we can think or we can live as if. Because Jesus has done it for me, well, now I don't need to do it.

But part two says, no, it's the other way around. See, the prophets were like lawyers who told God's people when they were getting it wrong. Where have you got it wrong?

What are the consequences? But they saw that the people were not getting it right and nothing was changing. And so part of what the prophets did was to give God's people hope.

that better days were coming when God's law would be a reality in their lives. So they say, like we heard from Jeremiah 31 earlier, a day is coming when God will write his law not on tablets of stone out here, but in here on your heart.

[21 : 22] Or Ezekiel 36, I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and put my spirit in you so you will be careful to keep my laws. the prophets said those promises of a new obedience from the heart were all wrapped up in what they called a new covenant.

And that is just what Jesus is giving us here, a new covenant. This is who I am. This is who you are to me. That's what we've been seeing the last two weeks.

Now this is how you are to live as my people. And what will happen if you do and what will happen if you don't. So when Jesus says he came to fulfill the law and the prophets, he's not only saying he came to keep the law in place of lawbreakers.

He's saying he came to give us a whole new relationship to the law. Instead of a hard heart that God's commands rebound off of, a soft heart that loves to listen and obey and respond to God's commands.

He has come to reprogram our whole inner self so that we are able and willing to obey God in a whole new way. You hence why. He says in verse 18 that none of God's law will pass away until heaven and earth give way to the new heavens and new earth when it will all be true.

[22 : 51] Or verse 19 that whoever sets aside the very smallest commandment and teaches others to do the same will be called the smallest in the kingdom. And whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Brothers and sisters, the law is very much still in play. He's not talking about, okay, the ceremonial laws, the sacrifices and whatever, or the civil laws that governed you, the country.

But he's talking about the moral law that commands our love towards God and our love for others. It's what we call the Ten Commandments. Because if we've followed the story up to now, it's obvious that's a huge part of why Jesus came to give us a new heart, to obey God's commandments.

That helps us see too why verse 20 is there. I think this can trip us up sometimes. Because we think the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were way more obedient than us.

They really kept the law down to the fine print, right? So when Jesus says, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven, we think he must only be talking about part one.

[24 : 16] Right? We need his obedience to get in. Yes, we do. But unless we are really changed, unless our lives are characterized by a new obedience to God from the heart and we grow in righteousness in our lives, then we cannot possibly be in this right new relationship with God through Jesus.

We cannot possibly be trusting Jesus unless we are also following him. the two go hand in hand so that our righteousness really does overtake the Pharisees and teachers of the law and not when you've been a Christian for 20 years.

Because remember, their problem, their problem was not that they were too righteous and they just needed to kind of relax about following commandments.

Jesus says that's definitely not what they needed to do. the problem was that their obedience was only skin deep. They only kept God's commands to impress other people.

It's okay, they weren't wanted murderers, but they certainly thought less of and looked down on a lot of people. And perhaps they weren't breaking their promises and oaths left, right, and center, but they certainly didn't speak with perfect truth and integrity.

[25 : 40] It was an outward box-ticking exercise, but an inward swamp of sin and disobedience. And left to ourselves at our very, very, very best, we are just like them.

You, on our own, we cannot be more righteous than outward box-ticking. That's what we do. But friends, becoming more righteous than the Pharisees, it is as simple as turning to Jesus from our sin and asking him for a new heart.

Because then you will have what they never had, which is a desire to obey God's law from the heart, so that you can say more passionately and more freely than they could ever say, oh, how I love your law.

They did not love God's law. So where do we go from here? Well, Jesus, doesn't leave us guessing who God wants us to be and how he wants us to live.

Here it is in black and white. If we are Jesus' followers, he wants us to put away from ourselves all anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from our mouths, to throw cold water over our burning rage, and to root out the bitterness in our hearts, and to hold our sharp tongues.

[27 : 12] He goes further in verse 23, not only if you've fallen out with someone, but if someone's fallen out with you, don't settle for that. It's not enough, says Jesus, to say, well, it's not my fault, it's not my problem.

First, go and be reconciled to them. He says, that's how serious we should be about our relationships in the church, not only to be content with not holding a grudge, but if you know someone has a grudge against you, go and find them, have peace with them.

We're also to put to death sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires in our hearts. Jesus isn't asking us to cut off our body parts, but his language should press on us the severity of the issue to cut off our impure sexual feelings and thoughts.

And again, to stress how serious God is about sexual sin, Jesus says, it is the only legitimate reason to get divorced. I know that will rub a raw spot for some of us, but in the context of this sermon, Jesus' point is less to do with divorce and more to do with the seriousness of sexual sin.

There are only two other reasons in the New Testament to get divorced, but nothing breaks a marriage, says Jesus, like sexual immorality, and it begins in our heart.

[28 : 45] So keep sexual sin far from you, inwardly and outwardly. We're also to keep our word. Jesus' point in verses 33 to 36 is, if you're an honest person, you shouldn't need to take oaths and make promises to follow through on what you've said, you'll just do it.

We're not to seek revenge, verse 39, want to get our own back. Instead, says Jesus, we need to die to ourselves and serve the person that humiliates us or hates us or harms us without wishing them harm in return.

We're to love our enemies. Pray for those who persecute us. As I say, I hope you'll want to open up these verses again tomorrow and go through them more slowly and carefully, because as a follower of Jesus, I pray that you will love God's law, that you will want to listen to his commands and learn how to obey them, because when we live more and more as God commands, says Jesus in verse 45, that we truly are children of our Father in heaven.

Isn't this amazing? Why love your enemies? Jesus says because God loves his enemies. Doesn't this blow your mind?

He causes his son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. So if we're following Jesus, if we're learning from his teaching, if we love God's law, then these commands are for making us more like God himself.

[30 : 31] They are for forming the family likeness in us so that Jesus can set before us the glorious prospect of verse 48, being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Now, we will not be perfect here and now, and stories will need to be said, and relationships patched up and growing to do, but one day if we follow Jesus, we will be perfect in life and heart and will and love and obedience as God himself is perfect.

perfect. What a promise that is. What a hope to cling to, what a glory to press on to, and all because Jesus came to fulfill the law and to fulfill the prophets.

in the hearts. Let's say freely and passionately today, Lord, in Jesus, how we love your law.

Let's pray and thank him now together. Let's pray. Let's pray. Okay.