

Whenever I return to CPC, I'm flooded with memories. My first Sunday was in December 1986. We were a church of about 300 people. A few of you remember that we met at Bowdich Middle School here in Foster City. I preached in a suit and tie under a banner with Bowditch's mascot on it, which was a Buccaneer, like a Pirate! We continued to meet at Bowditch after building our offices here on Shell Blvd. Then, a few years later, we added what's now the multipurpose room and classrooms and began to worship there on Sundays. I took off my tie but still wore a jacket. I'll never forget the Sunday after 9/11. The church overflowed that day, with people literally standing outside on Shell Blvd.

It wasn't long before we grew out of the multipurpose room, so we built this beautiful sanctuary. And guess what? I took off my jacket and put on jeans! Then after a few years we ran out of room and set up a group in Millbrae as our North Campus. Seven years later we planted them as New North Church. Lots of change!

Changes in where we met were often accompanied by changes in leadership: Elders like John Brandon, Ralph Kirkup, Bob Portman, and Allen Johansen were succeeded by younger guys. Pastors like Steve and Jeff Farrar were succeeded by a host of others, including myself. Now, there's a whole new group of really fine leaders here.

So there's always change. How do you feel about change? Whenever there's change, it's natural to wonder how much change will actually take place. Will we continue to stay committed to those beliefs and values that have defined us year after year, or will those change, too? You see, I think we'd all agree that in a healthy church, there ought to be some things that change and some things that don't. One of those things that does not change at CPC is a commitment to the authority of God's Word. Buildings change, leaders change, dress codes change, but God's Word doesn't change, nor does our commitment to it.

When Jesus came on the scene, he brought about change. He chose ordinary, uneducated men to be his disciples rather than the religious elite. He violated

Sabbath rules the rabbis adhered to. Nothing about Jesus conformed to the old system. He wasn't a Pharisee or scribe, yet he taught with authority. People heard him and asked, "What is this? A new teaching!" (Mk 1:27). He was openly critical of the official teachers of the Law, often contradicting their teaching. At times, he focused more on the grace of God than the demands of the Law. He told stories like the Prodigal Son to show that God held out open arms to sinners.

Even more shocking, he hung out with these people—sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. They were his friends. He went to their parties and enjoyed their company. Because of all of this, it was natural for people to wonder, "Is this some kind of new morality? Is this guy changing all the old rules?" These were people steeped in the Old Testament Scripture. Their whole worldview was rooted in the idea that to be pleasing to God, you must adhere to the Old Testament Law. But now this rabbi comes on the scene, who clearly has great authority but seems to be turning his back on the Law.

This brings up an important question: What is Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament Scripture, what the Jews called "the law and the prophets"? Did Jesus establish a new and different law? This is important because it determines what our relationship to the Old Testament will be like. Should we disregard the teaching of the Old Testament in favor of the new? Did Jesus come to abolish the old morality in favor of something new? Does truth change?

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus addresses these questions. What he says might surprise you. He says when it comes to being his disciple, what we do with all of God's truth is all-important. He comes down even more conservative and strict than the Scribes and Pharisees. He says his commitment to even the smallest part of the Old Testament is unwavering. Why is that? Why must we, as followers of Jesus, take all of God's Word, even the Law, with utter seriousness? Jesus answers that question with four statements found in this passage.

Jesus fulfills the Law, and the prophets

The first statement is found in v. 17. 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."* Again, "the law and the prophets" is the sum of the Old Testament Scripture. Apparently, some people thought he was trying to abolish the Law and the prophets; he said absolutely not. But this raises questions.

God gave Israel a whole menu of foods they couldn't eat—pork, rabbit, lobster, and shrimp. Yet, Jesus declared all foods clean. The Law required Israel to stone a person caught in the act of adultery. Yet, Jesus showed mercy to a woman condemned of that very thing. There are huge chunks of the Old Testament devoted to telling people how to sacrifice animals and grains to God, yet few of us will make a trip to Jerusalem each year to offer a lamb.

So what did Jesus mean? The key is the word "fulfill." Jesus says he came to "fulfill" the Law and the prophets. That word means "fill up" or "complete." Think of a puzzle. Sometimes, when we go on vacation, we bring a puzzle, like 500 pieces. We lay it on a card table and display the cover, which shows what the finished project will look like. Whenever anyone wants, they can fit a few pieces together. Inevitably, we start around the edges because it's easier, but sooner or later, we have to fill in the middle. It's only as we fill in the middle that the full picture on the box begins to emerge. The Law and the prophets were like the edges of the puzzle, but Jesus is the One who emerges when all the pieces are filled in. It's his picture on the cover of the box. It was always meant to portray him.

Jesus fulfilled the Law and the prophets both directly and indirectly. He was the direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Micah 5:2 says the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, and that's where he was born. There are hundreds of such prophecies he directly fulfilled. But he also indirectly fulfilled Israel's story. The prophet Hosea wrote, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1). Hosea was pointing to how God led the Israelites out of Egypt. However, Matthew quotes this verse when, as a child, Jesus came back to Israel from Egypt after the death of Herod.

There's a sense in which the whole of Israel's story was an unfinished puzzle, waiting for and pointing to its completion in Jesus. The history of Israel portrayed his life. All the edges: the events, the ceremonies; animals offered on the altar; food laws, all pointed to him. He filled it with full meaning.

We're to take all of God's word with utter seriousness because Jesus himself is the fulfillment of all the Law and the prophets. The entirety of the Law and the prophets are completed in his life. It all points to him.

The Law Will Endure Unchanged

The second statement Jesus makes as to why his followers must take all of the Law and prophets with utter seriousness is because these words are enduring and unchangeable. *"For truly I tell you, 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"* (Matthew 5:18). Jesus gives two illustrations to make this point.

First, he thinks big. He looks at the universe and says as long as heaven and earth exist the Scripture will endure. The Law and the prophets aren't the noble but misguided notions of prescientific nomads. They can't be contradicted and replaced by something new.

In the second illustration, Jesus thinks small. It's like he picks up a microscope and says not the "smallest letter or least stroke of a pen shall disappear from the law." The smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet was the size of an apostrophe. The least stroke was a tiny dot. Imagine that! Every detail of the Old Testament is inviolable. It can't be changed. It must be accomplished. There are some who say, "It's just the ideas of the Bible that are inspired, not the words." Jesus says, "Not just the words, but every letter, every comma, every dot of the I."

Years ago, Lynn and I were in Moscow with our Mission Partners, Gary and Jeanne Parsons. We visited several old Orthodox churches in Russia full of beautiful icons and paintings. Someone from our group asked an Orthodox priest what happened to these churches during the Communist reign. The priest told us the churches were used for storage. The icons were discarded as useless relics, and the paintings were painted over. He said that after the fall of Communism, they went back to the buildings, scratched off the new paint, and found underneath that the paintings of Christ and the apostles were still there. The priest said, "Even Communism couldn't get rid of Christ. He was there all along."

Jesus says that about the Law and the prophets. You can't get rid of it. You can't paint over it. We can take our modern ideas of Communism, humanism, or post-modernism and try to prove the earth was a product of time and chance. We can take our enlightened ethics and say that what the Bible says about

sexuality is outdated and dangerous. But no matter how hard we try to do away with it, the Scripture will remain as long as the universe remains. And underneath it all is Jesus Christ.

You see this utter reliance of the Old Testament Scripture in Jesus. He quoted or alluded to the Old Testament over 180 times in the Gospels. His deepest instincts were to rely on Scripture. On the cross, he turned to the Psalms: When he asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he quoted Psalm 22:1. When he cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," he quoted Psalm 35:1. At the moment of his greatest need, he turned to God's word. God's Word continues to endure unchanged. That is the second statement Jesus makes as to why we must take all of God's word with utter seriousness.

Adherence to the Law will determine status in the kingdom

The third thing Jesus says about this is that adherence to what's written in the Law and prophets will actually determine our status in the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly 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. Matthew 5:19

When Jesus talks about "these commands," he's pointing to his own interpretation of the Law right here in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, starting in verse 21, Jesus interprets several of the Ten Commandments. In essence, Jesus is saying, "I'm establishing a kingdom. As King, I'm giving you commands which explain the true meaning of the Law. Your standing in my kingdom will depend on obeying and teaching these commands."

We may ask why we might be tempted to change one of his commands. What might tempt us to do such a thing? One thing is we know we can't keep them, so we avoid responsibility by saying Christ didn't really mean what he said. He says unchecked anger is a violation of the commandment to not murder. We hear that and know we can't keep it, so we say, "He didn't really mean that. We all lose our temper at times. We all say things we shouldn't say." So we rationalize his commands because we can't keep them, and we teach others the same things. Jesus warns against that.

Another reason we do this is we really don't know how to balance grace and truth. We know we're to

be people of grace and love. We've seen how Jesus treated broken sinners with love and tenderness. We've also seen how people who cling to truth can toss it around like grenades. So we minimize Christ's commands, or reinterpret them, because we don't want to violate grace.

For instance, I know how difficult it is to teach about divorce when some of my listeners are either divorced or suffering in an awful marriage. These things are painful enough; I don't want to cause more pain. So, I'm tempted to minimize what Jesus says about divorce. Right here in chapter 5, he says it's wrong except under some very narrow circumstances. There are times when I'd rather not have to teach that, but Jesus doesn't give me that option.

Why must we, as followers of Jesus, take all of God's Word with utter seriousness? Because Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Scripture. Because the Old Testament Scripture will endure unchanged. Because adherence to it will determine our status in the kingdom.

Entry into the kingdom requires more righteousness than the Scribes

The 4th thing is the most shocking: It's not just status in the kingdom that's at stake; it's entry into the kingdom. *"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" (v. 20).*

Jesus is not changing the subject here. The righteousness he speaks of is the sum of keeping his commands. He says unless you do this better than the Scribes and Pharisees, you won't even get in. How can that be? The Scribes and Pharisees calculated the Law has 248 things to do and 365 things not to do. They'd memorized the list. They ordered their entire lives around the list. Who can top that?

Jesus is not saying our righteousness must surpass theirs in degree but in kind. He's not saying if they kept 240 of the commandments, we have to keep 245. No! The greater righteousness Jesus calls for is greater because it's deeper. It's a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees had a righteousness that was external, formal, and manageable. The whole point of the rest of chapter 5 is the Law goes beyond external conformity to inward righteousness of mind and motive.

It's like Jesus is changing the rules of the game. He says, "You've been practicing the scales; I'm inviting you to play music. You've been memorizing vocabulary; I'm inviting you to have a conversation." Rather

than keeping a list of do's and don'ts, Jesus is painting a picture of the type of people we must become if we're going to live in the kingdom of God. He calls for a transformed inner life rather than just an external life that keeps the rules.

This is hard for us to understand because this isn't the way the Law works in society. When you pay your income tax, the IRS could care less what your attitude is about it. They just care you pay what you owe. A woman may decide one day to murder her husband, but the Law will never bring her to court for deciding. She can think about it for weeks, but until she does it, she won't be convicted. But, for Jesus, righteousness starts in the heart. He says the command against murder can be violated by simply dismissing someone. The command against adultery can be violated by a lustful thought. It's not enough to love your neighbor; you need to love your enemies! Make no mistake, this is a description of the Christian life! That's what the Sermon on the Mount is—it's how followers of Jesus are called to live. But how is that possible?

I love to watch track and field. I love the high jump—how they raise the bar an inch or so at a time until only one person is left who clears it. Well, Jesus has just raised the bar by ten feet! No one can clear this. No one is good enough to meet his standards. So what do we do? One response would be to just blow it off. Many people object to the idea anyone should tell us how to live our lives. What's right for me might not be right for you. I mean, Jesus said some pretty crazy things in this sermon. A lot of people blow it all off because they want to make up their own rules.

Another response would be the opposite. A person might think this is the way for them to be acceptable and loved by God. They feel they must do their very best to clear this high bar and keep every command given in this sermon. If they do, then they are okay with God. But if they fail, they feel condemned by him and somehow have to earn their way back into his good graces. Lots of religious people live that way, constantly trying to earn God's favor, but that's impossible. Jesus said, down in verse 48 of this same chapter, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Can you clear that bar? None of us can.

A final response is the one I believe Jesus is looking for here. To understand this, we have to go back to the Beatitudes. Jesus started this whole Sermon with these words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." What

does that mean? It means we recognize our own spiritual poverty, that our soul is bankrupt, and we can't clear this impossibly high bar. A bit later, he says we're blessed because we "hunger and thirst" for a righteousness we do not have. We come to see we can't clear the high bar.

We recognize what Dallas Willard said is true: "Trying merely to keep the law is like trying to make an apple tree bear peaches by tying peaches to its branches." It doesn't work! So what do we do? We look outside of ourselves for help. We look for a Savior. His name is Jesus. When we cry out to him and put our trust in him he does three things.

He pours his love into our hearts

First, he pours his love into our hearts, a love that forgives and cleanses us through the cross. The Bible says, "*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). So we know we are loved not because we earn it but because he died for us. Jesus wants to shower his love down on you in such a way that it changes you from the inside out, so you want to do more than keep the rules; you want to become a righteous person, inside and out.

He credits us with his righteousness

Second, he credits us with his righteousness. Jesus was the only one who could clear that high bar. When we trust in him, he attributes that to us. It's as if we cleared the high bar! Paul wrote, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21). Scholars call this "imputed" righteousness. Luther called it an "alien righteousness" because it comes from outside of ourselves. It's a gift.

He gives us his Spirit

However, as important as that is, Jesus is talking about more than imputed righteousness. You see, the third thing he does is give us his Spirit, who comes into our life and begins to work within us so we actually become the kind of person Jesus describes in this sermon.

Jesus came to establish a New Covenant with us. In the Old Covenant, we relied on our own resources to jump over an impossibly high bar. But in the New Covenant, God begins to conform us from the inside out, so we become the kind of person Jesus describes here.

The prophets predicted this. God said through Jeremiah, "The days are coming...when I will make a new covenant...I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (Jer. 31:33). He told Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezek. 36:27). So, the demands of the Law help us see our poverty of spirit, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and this drives us to cry out to him as our Savior. When we do that, we're loved and forgiven, made righteous, and filled with the Spirit of Jesus, who empowers and enables us to live out the true intent of the Law, to actually do the righteousness he describes in this, the greatest of all sermons. Make no mistake, we are called to be and do what Jesus teaches in this sermon, but we can't do it alone.

The preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was once talking to a cleaner who'd recently become a Christian. Spurgeon asked her what difference Jesus had made in her life. Rather timidly, she replied, "Well, Sir, I now sweep under the doormats." Why would she do that? Because she knew what God had done for her in sending his Son to die for her. She was forgiven and cleansed and clothed with his righteousness. The Spirit of God had filled her life, and she wanted to please him. She knew in her job, she was now serving and worshipping Jesus, so there was no room for cutting corners.

Lots of things change. Buildings change. Leaders change. Styles change. But God's Word doesn't change. When it comes to following Jesus, what we do with all of God's truth is all-important. Don't set it aside. Don't play fast and loose with it. Let it convict you. Let it drive you to Christ.

Once you've come to Christ, learn his ways and let the Spirit of God so work in your life that you become the kind of person who sweeps under the doormats, who reflects the righteousness and goodness of Jesus. We can't do this alone. We have him to help us. This is who we're called to be, and this is what we're called to do.