

The law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. This grace and truth is the very fulfillment of the law. Christ did not come to abolish the law, nor Moses, nor any of the prophets. That is to say, he didn't come to set them all aside, bringing in a newer, nicer version of the mean and strict Old Testament. No, he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. Nothing can fall from the law until it is all fulfilled. The truth of the law is upheld in Jesus. And in this way, he brings grace to poor sinners. His obedience in our place avails before God as true righteousness in our place. And God looks at us with his grace and favor, declaring us righteous and forgiven of all our sins.

When a man is studying to be a pastor, one of the last things he must pass before he can be certified for the ministry is a theological interview. Usually he meets with two of his professors who have been teaching him over the last three or four years, and they ask him a series of questions to determine whether he has learned anything at seminary. If he passes his theological interview, along with whatever remaining classes he is taking in his final term, and as long as none of the faculty raise any objections, then he is certified for the ministry.

A few weeks before my theological interview, my brother James was telling me about a good discussion he had in Dr. Winger's class. Dr. Winger said that he would often ask students in their theological interviews to explain what the law is. Most of the time, the students would respond, "The law accuses us and shows us our sins." Dr. Winger would then reply, "That's what the law does. But I didn't ask you that. I am asking you to define what the law is." The law accuses us because of our sin. It exposes the wickedness of our hearts. It drives us to repentance. This is true. This is what the law does. But we still need to know what the law is. The law is God's righteousness, which he requires of us. It is summarized in the Ten Commandments, which can be further summarized in these two tables: Love God with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. The law has content. It isn't just someone yelling at you and making you feel bad.

As my brother relayed to me what Dr. Winger was teaching him, it stuck with me. It impressed on me the importance of teaching the law. It's not enough simply to call people sinners and accuse them of all sorts of things. They need to be taught what the law actually says and what the law actually demands. Now, James didn't realize that my theological interview was coming up. And as it turned out, Dr. Winger was one of the professors interviewing me. Sure enough, the first question I received in my interview came from Dr. Winger: "What is the law?"

While Jesus addresses the multitudes in his Sermon on the Mount, he is especially speaking to his disciples, his future ministers who would teach his Word. He warns them that if anyone relaxes the law and teaches others to do the same, then he will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. The law must be taught. He then goes on to tell everyone that unless their righteousness exceeds that of the current teachers of the law – the Pharisees and Scribes – then they cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The law is taught. It was taught by Moses. It was taught by the priests. It was taught by the prophets. It was taught by John the Baptist. And it was taught by Jesus, God's Anointed One. But in his teaching of the law, Jesus fulfills it. He brings about what Moses and the other prophets could never do. Moses told the Israelites to be circumcised in their hearts. Jesus is the very circumcision made without hands. He has condemned the sinful flesh in his own flesh. He has been raised from the dead, never to die again, freed from sin, vindicated forever. In him and him alone we are forever dead to sin and alive to God.

Jesus fulfilled the law for sinners. But listen to how he teaches about the law. Because it is in his teaching about the law where we find how he himself fulfills it. He says, “You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’” Here he is referring to the Fifth Commandment. But Jesus then reveals himself as the Lord of the law. “But I say to you,” he says. He is the one who gave Moses the law on Mount Sinai. And now he gets to the very heart of the law. The law doesn’t only condemn the heinous crime of taking someone else’s life. It condemns the very impulse of the heart. It exposes the first root, the first urge, the first inclination.

Someone irks you by what he has said. Someone has treated you unfairly. Someone caught you off guard with aggressive or even passive-aggressive comments, ridiculing you, insulting you, or even threatening you. You can’t stop thinking of it. It won’t go away. It constantly bugs you, and the longer you let it fester the hotter your anger burns within you. You may have a good reason to go and talk to that person, to bury the hatchet, or simply to ignore it and move on. But you have no good reason to let this enmity harbor in your heart. And Jesus says that for this, you deserve to face judgment. You can’t stop thinking about it, so you can’t stop talking about it, and you say things about your neighbor you have no right to say, only to make yourself feel vindicated. Jesus says you deserve to be dragged to court for this. Or you want to write him off as a loser, throw away any kind of love you ever shared, and give yourself the right to hate him in your heart, not concerned for his well-being or his repentance. Jesus says you deserve hellfire for this.

This is the intent of the law. The intent of the law isn’t that you jump through hoops and stay out of trouble. It is that you love your neighbor from the heart. It is that you desire good for him and strive at all times to speak well of him and bless him even if he is cursing you.

It's at this point when Jesus brings up the most important object lesson in the law. When God gave the law through his servant Moses, he gave all sorts of object lessons. This is all part of teaching. From the kind of food they should eat and avoid eating to the kind of clothes they should wear and not wear, even when they are to assemble for worship, all of these object lessons served to teach the people to fear God, to shun the uncleanness of sin and false gods, to listen to his Word, and to love their neighbor. But of all these object lessons, the first thing he commanded the people to do was build an altar for him. It was to be built out of the earth, because God made man out of the earth. They were not to cut the stone, because God would not save them by the works of their own hands. And they were not to walk up the steps to the altar, because they stood naked and bare in their sins before God.

This altar was at the center of their worship. It was where the sacrifices were made by the priest as the people gathered near it.

Now Jesus has come, and he uses the altar to teach the most important thing. He says that if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, then you should leave your gift before you get to the altar. First, go and be reconciled to your brother.

Here Jesus is teaching the fulfillment of the law. He is teaching how he would fulfill the law. He is teaching the righteousness, which exceeds the righteousness of even the greatest teachers of the law. It is reconciliation.

It is exactly what Jesus did. While we were yet his enemies, he died for us. We were lost in our sins, and he was completely innocent. But he left his home in heaven to reconcile all sinners to God. As St. Paul says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Cor 5:19)” And he went to the altar of the cross to give the final sacrifice for sin. He gave himself. He offered his own perfect obedience. When he was insulted, he didn’t well up in anger. He blessed those who cursed him. He forgave those who crucified him. He did nothing but thirst for the salvation of every sinner. This reconciliation, which Christ has won for all, is the true righteousness, which the law could never accomplish, no matter how many object lessons it provided. No matter how many regulations, the law could never make clean what it pronounced unclean. But Christ has done it. He presented the greatest gift on the altar of heaven, sprinkling his own blood on the mercy seat. And he speaks to us his testament with pure words of grace and truth.

Those who attempt to fulfill the law by their own reason and strength will only become more conceited. And no matter how much they believe they are in the right, no matter how much they condemn their brother and expose his faults, they will be locked up forever, never to be released until they have paid the last penny. There is a hint of irony in what Jesus says here. As if you could ever pay the last penny! You need what only God can give. This is why the law was given. It was given to teach us how much we fall short and how much we need something much greater than the most righteous reputation we can think of. But the law drives us to this conclusion by telling us what to do.

Love your neighbor. Love God. Try to do this at all times. Forgive. Seek to make peace with those who have offended you. Strive to be an example to your children of mercy, kindness, and the fear of God. When you do, then you learn just how much you fall short. You learn just how much you need what your best efforts could never achieve. And you learn again and again how sweet Christ’s righteousness is. Rely on it. Rest in it. Because it is the gospel, the good news, the hope of the world to come. It is the peace, which flows from the body and blood offered to you on this altar. It is the life you now live to God. And it is the bond we share as we confess his name together. Amen.