

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
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The Law Fulfilled

God is achieving the *purpose* of the law by overturning it, demanding even more of God's people and giving them the help they need.

Imagine yourself a Hebrew in 1st Century Palestine listening to Jesus begin a Sermon on Mount Eremos. You and your family and neighbors are agitated. That's an understatement if ever there was one. You are under the heel of an idolatrous foreign Empire enabled by cruel puppet monarchs.

You and your people *are faithful*. Very faithful. It has been about 30 generations since, because of their wickedness, God abandoned your ancestors and allowed the Temple to be destroyed.

God is active in the world everywhere all the time. You see that as plainly as you see the grass and trees around you. It's why you've been faithful for generations. But God hasn't rescued you from your enemies.

Yet God has promised to *forgive* the sins of his people, return and establish the Kingdom of Heaven. For you, that doesn't mean a place where disembodied souls go when the body dies, it means that God will take charge and make everything right for Israel and the whole world!

You think that the time is near, that *finally* God will keep the promise and end this nightmare once and for all. Because a wild man said that he was preparing the way. But John's wasn't doubling down on Torah like the Pharisees; neither was he practicing swordplay like the Zealots. He was dunking people in the river. Right after Jesus stops by He drops off the grid and absconds to the desert. It's weird. Maybe God is doing something unexpected ... but doesn't scripture tell us that we will be forgiven when we turn back to the law with all our hearts?

But the problem is that Law **is not working**. Isaiah tells us that the law is supposed to achieve something, make Israel the light of the world and build a community where everyone is included and no one is oppressed or exploited. The Kingdom of God. But people being what they are, twist the rules for their own selfish ends.

So what do you think Jesus means when he tells the crowd "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

Jesus is saying that the *purpose* of the law is being accomplished in Him. He is saying "I've got this. All of it. On me". That's pretty bold if you think about it.

He is telling the gathered that the Kingdom of God has started right here and right now with Him. Believe it and change your hearts if you want to be a part of it.

But there are whispers in the crowd that this fellow, whoever he is, can't be the *Jewish* messiah. After all, He's driving the most faithful Jews *waaaay* past distraction. He's overturning the Law!

100 generations in the future the preeminent New Testament scholar NT Wright will explain that Jesus subverts every important symbol and practice that makes up your identity as a 1st century Palestinian.

Doing things like that might get a person killed.

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And Jesus is only *just* getting started.

The next thing he tells you is that following the law even as diligently as the Pharisees do counts for squat. That you are going to have to do something even harder.

Think about that for a moment.

Generation after generation has failed, and Jesus is going to give the people a more difficult task. I'm not sure what He learned in management training, but *usually* if a task is too hard, you don't give one that's *even harder*.

But remember the struggle in the wilderness. Jesus defeats the real enemy—it's not the Roman Empire but the power behind **any** empire. If the enemy is defeated, and we have help, maybe we **can** do the harder thing. Maybe we can repent—which means to turn our hearts towards being intuitively selfless rather than selfish, seeking reconciliation rather than strife, forgiveness instead of division. A more repentant heart yearns for justice, speaks truth to power and is willing to take but not give the violence that happens when norms are challenged.

We can't repent without God's help. Not if we are under the heels of the enemy who's power is death with the intimidation, fear, shame and wrath that flow from that power.

Repentance has to start with the Cross. It is seeing the shadow of death in our hearts: the fear, the wrath, and the shame. It is, with God's help, letting go of those sins and then the misdeeds that follow from them. It's a lifelong journey. I know it will be for me.

If the law is fulfilled why do we have norms? They are important for all sorts of reasons. They are needed for communities to form, for people to be in relationship. They are guardrails for the unspiritual or spiritually immature.

But laws are not an end in themselves. No self-licking ice cream cones in the Kingdom of God. They are means to ends.

And the Holy Spirit whispers in the ear of people all the time and puts them in each other's lives. Is God putting you in a situation for some divine purpose? Is there some whisper? Maybe you are ignoring it, like I do all the time? If you are like me the voice might have to get really loud before you do something like, I dunno, preaching the good news in church.

What is God doing in the world today?

A hundred generations ago St. Paul took the Church in Corinth to task. They were busy exalting different *human* leaders, forming their identity around *them* in order to split into factions and feel superior to each other.

I'm *pretty* sure that never happened again after Paul gave the Church a good talking too.

God's answer through Paul was simple. Start only with the Cross. The worst thing Empire can do has no power over Jesus, or you by extension. Start with that.

In our day, with all sorts of human leaders, movements and schisms it might be good to remember that no matter what we do Christ is still undivided and the only power that matters is the power of the Cross. Start with that. If believe that, we might have a lot less anxiety and a lot more joy.

But then we might read the news and forget again. If Jesus really achieved the law's purpose, are the blessings Isaiah prophesied coming to pass?

Stephen Pinker and others that have extensively researched the question respond unequivocally, yes. A few examples among countless -

Slavery used to be commonplace. Normal. But today slavery is globally illegal and, with God's help, Kingdom people are going after the traffickers that remain.

In 1990, 36% of the people in the world were struggling to survive desperate poverty. In 2015 it was down to 10%. With God's help, Kingdom people are figuring out how to help the last 700 million in the most difficult places on earth.

The chance of death from war or other violence has inexorably been declining over the centuries, lower now than it's *ever* been.

People are more free all over the world to form communities with each other and use their gifts in more roles than would have been conceivable just a few generations ago.

The news *is* filled with unfinished work. But how can someone believe that things are terrible, and that God is in charge at the same time?

Not every change or reaction to change is good. Even with God's help we can and do work against God's purpose individually and corporately. That's how World Wars happen. God did and does redeem tragedy, but the unbridled sin on earth that was World War II is not something that my Grandparents that lived through it could just get over. Much less the families that didn't make it out alive.

How do we decide if a change or our response to change align with God's purpose?

If your your body enters a fight-flight-or-freeze adrenaline rush because of something someone said, the enemy who's power is death has grabbed the controls and you can't be rational much less spiritual. Clickbait thrives on that, by the way. Just say no.

Maybe discernment needs a repenting heart and contemplating mind. Maybe we need to remember that God is helping and we're not on our own.

Still, there is a tension, following God's purpose does NOT mean uncritically embracing Bobby McFerrin's most famous advice which was...

[wait for it] ... "don't worry, be happy"

Public Enemy had the right answer

Damn if I say that you can slap me right here.

Following God's purpose might mean direct action in Birmingham and being assassinated for it. It means discerning which whispers to listen to and doing the work. Ask in your heart, is the action or reaction likely to help or hurt us love God and our neighbor? Pray and listen without anger or fear or shame.

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