

## THE SMALLEST LETTER Matthew 5:17-20

### INTRODUCTION:

When I worked at church camp the first time, I was given a piece of advice by the older and more experienced Dean of the week. He said, "Be tough the first couple of days and then, later in the week, you can relax the rules a little bit and seem like a good guy but still keep things under control." Over the years, I've learned that this works. It's a lot harder to tighten the rules during the week than it is to loosen them as you go along. And, over the years, I've also applied that same principle in many other settings and I've seen it work.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid that I have probably also projected this approach onto God. I may have figured that He has set His standards impossibly high, knowing full well that we can't meet the standards, so that He can relax the rules on the Day of Judgment and we'll all think He's a nice guy because He overlooked some stuff for which He could have busted us.

What about you? Have you ever hoped that, in the Day of Judgment, God will overlook some of the Ten Commandments? You know you've broken one or two of them and you kind of hope God will give you a pass on them and, at the last minute, decide that He'll drop those requirements. Or maybe you haven't violated any of His Top Ten but you know you've messed up on some of the other rules and regulations and you are counting on the possibility that He'll let you off with a warning.

Bad news: Jesus says it all counts. No verbal warning, no last-minute rule changes, no fine print, footnotes or loopholes: it all still counts. Jesus said that not one tiny part of God's Law will be dropped until it has all been kept.

You've probably heard the expression, "every jot and tittle." Did you know that came from the Bible? Specifically, that phrase comes from the Sermon on the Mount. In the King James Version translation of the Bible Matthew 5:17-20 reads:

*<sup>17</sup> Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup> For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, **one jot or one tittle** shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. <sup>19</sup> Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

The “jot” is literally the *yod* in the Hebrew language and the “tittle” is the tiniest mark that would distinguish one Hebrew letter from another.

Perhaps it would be helpful now if I would read that same text again, this time from the New International Version of the Bible: the one in the pew rack in front of you. Hear how that translation of the Scriptures renders Matthew 5:17-20:

*<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, 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. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.*

The jot and the tittle are the smallest letters in Hebrew, the language in which most of the Old Testament was originally written. Jesus said that not one of those smallest letters from any word in any sentence in any statute of The Law will be revoked until the entire Law is carried out. Not one dot of an “i” or cross of a “t” will disappear from God’s Law until the everything is accomplished.”

I guess if we are going to grasp what Jesus meant, we’d better go to Law school.

## I. THE LAW: AN UNFAMILIAR CONCEPT

The Sermon on the Mount was a discourse that Jesus delivered very early in his ministry. In fact, in Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus, this text appears almost immediately after the baptism of Jesus, his temptation in the wilderness and his recruiting of the first disciples. The Sermon on the Mount is very early in the public ministry of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7. In the introduction to the sermon, Jesus delivers the Beatitudes in which he shares the pathway to true happiness and genuine bliss. Next, he addresses the subject of salt that has lost its characteristic saltiness and the characteristic of light to illuminate.

Then sixteen verses later (less than three minutes into Matthew’s text of the sermon), Jesus addresses a rumor about him that had already begun to circulate. The rumor was that he was out to destroy the Old Testament Law and the system life based on the Law.

Those charged with the responsibility to interpret and adjudicate the Old Testament Law were outraged. I can understand that. If we destroy the laws that regulate life and relationships in our society, we destroy our society. Where there is no law, there may be no lawbreakers but there will certainly be the rampant violation of human rights and personal privileges. Proverbs 29:18 teaches that where there is no vision, no revelation, no concept of God's laws, the people simply go berserk.

So you can imagine how the scribes (who meticulously copied the Law), the Pharisees (who scrupulously observed the Law) and the teachers (who faithfully explained the Law) would react when they heard that a new and uncredentialed rabbi was teaching that the Law was out of date and ought to be abolished. And to make matters far more serious, he was gaining quite a following.

Having heard what people were saying, Jesus sought to clarify his position on the Law. He said that he did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it.

"The Law", as Jesus used the term, was that body of rules and regulations that God gave and which were to govern the conduct of the nation of Israel. This nation, called Israel, after the name of their founding father, Jacob whom God had nicknamed Israel, was also referred to as the Hebrew people because they spoke the Hebrew language. And they were known as Jews because they called their kingdom "Judah".

But far more important than what they were called was what they were called to be. They were called to be a distinctive, unique nation set apart for and belonging to Jehovah God. They were God's chosen people and God intended their lives to reflect that.

So God gave them very detailed instructions about how to live. These began with Ten Commandments but eventually expanded to include all of the statutes in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In fact, those first five books of the Old Testament are known as the books of The Law. In The Law, God covered countless eventualities and myriad circumstances and in each case, told His people what He expected of them.

God's laws were intended to be a blessing for His people. The object was to save them from making many serious, and in some cases fatal, mistakes. These were not laws for the sake of laws: they were laws for the sake of the people.

But over the years, the people lost sight of the purpose of the Law.

- Some began to think of God as a cosmic killjoy Who was out to keep them from having a good time.
- Others began to think of the Law as a way of earning God's affection. They figured if they kept all the laws in the Law, God would love them more than He would if they didn't.
- Still others used the Law as an answer-sheet for keeping score in the game of life. They believed that the one who came closest to a perfect score, as measured by the Law, was the winner and everyone else was a loser.

Missed in the mist was God's purpose for the Law. It was intended to make life more blissful and to draw a grateful and obedient people close to Him. Instead, the misuse of the Law was making people miserable, was alienating people from Him and was driving His people apart.

When God became flesh and lived among men, one of His objectives was to renew people's understanding of the Law. The idea of the Law as a blessing had become an unfamiliar concept to people.

## **II. THE LAW: AN UNFULFILLED COVENANT**

Not only was the Law an unfamiliar concept, it was an unfulfilled covenant.

When I refer to the Law as a covenant, I am using Biblical terminology. There are several examples of covenants in Scripture. God made a covenant with Abraham and told him that if he would keep all of God's laws, then out of all the people of the world, he would be blessed. God told him that if he would keep all of God's laws, God would make him to be the father of many nations. God said to Abraham that if he would obey all of God's statutes, God would give him the land that he was visiting.

God made a covenant with humanity when He sent His son as a sacrifice for sin. God said that if we would accept His son as our savior, our sins would be forgiven and we could look forward to enjoying heaven as our final home.

Biblically, covenants are initiated by God and offered to man. Biblically, covenants have both provisions and promises. If the ones to whom the covenant is offered are willing to abide by the provisions of the covenant, then there are certain benefits that are promised to them as a result.

God's Law was a covenant. God offered it to Moses and the Hebrew people. The provisions of that covenant are all of those rules, regulations, rituals and requirements that God laid down for His people. The promises are the blessings that God assured His people would follow if they would only live by the Law.

But the Law was an unfulfilled covenant because the nation of Israel had never fully obeyed it. Because the provisions had not been kept, the promises had not been fulfilled. God's people had never known the blessings that were to come to them through the keeping of the Law.

- They did not know the material prosperity that God intended for them to have and that would have come to them as a natural consequence of living by the stipulations He had given them.
- They did not enjoy the national protection that God had planned for them and that would have been theirs if only they had obeyed Him in their relations with other nations.
- They did not experience the personal peace that God wanted for them and that they would have known had they lived their lives in harmony with His direction.
- And, most tragically, they did not live within the divine partnership that God had designed for His children. Adam and Eve knew it briefly in the Garden but forfeited it because of their disobedience. But God provided for that partnership to be restored if people would meet Him on His terms. But they did not.

For the Israelites, the relationship represented by God's Law remained and unfulfilled covenant because they had not obeyed His Law.

### III. THE LAW: AN UNFINISHED CODE

And, for them, the Law also remained an unfinished code. The statutes, stipulations and strictures of the Law were not God's final word on the subject. What He had intended was that as people intentionally decided to consciously read, remember and respect His Law, eventually it would not have to be written on tablets of stone or on pads of paper. If people really conscientiously observed the Law, eventually it would be written on their hearts and it would become second nature for them to keep it. They would have become trained by it.

But that never happened. Because the people rebelled against the Law, it never changed their souls. It never changed their natures. The code that began by being engraved on stone was never completed by being inscribed on their hearts.

### CONCLUSION:

Until Jesus came. Jesus said that he did not come destroy the Law but to fulfill it. Not to cancel it but to complete it. Not to abolish it but to affirm it.

Jesus came to embody the Law, to live it, to obey it and thus to satisfy it. Therefore, very early on in his public ministry, he explained that far from disregarding, disrespecting and destroying the Law, he came to honor it by obeying it. He said that not one of the *iotas*, one of the littlest letters of

the Law, would fall through the cracks until he had fully complied with every detail of the Law.

Then Jesus said that the righteousness of his disciples would have to exceed that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law if they ever expected to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. That is an impossibly high standard and it is not humanly possible. I can't even remember all of the old Law; much less obey it. How can I possibly be expected to obey the Law more meticulously than the most scrupulous of the Pharisees?

I can't. But Jesus did. And he offered that his righteousness can be credited to my account.

*He took my sins and my sorrows;  
He made them his very own.  
He bore the burden to Calvary  
And suffered and died alone.*

Because of that, the Law has been obeyed, my duties have been discharged and my penalty has been paid. And I stand amazed in the presence of such love as this!

**INVITATION:**       # 348 – “My Savior’s Love”