



## **Matthew 5:19–20**

19 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. 20 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.

## **Reflection**

Jesus has been charged with the worst charge that you could level against a Jew – setting aside the word of God. The Law, which is another way of saying the Jewish Scriptures, was at the heart of the Jewish national identity. Many people as they heard Jesus preach were deeply concerned that Jesus was leaving the religion of their forefathers and starting something new. And what many people were thinking, it's likely that the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, were saying – some of them out of misplaced zeal but most of them out of jealousy because of the huge crowds that Jesus was drawing. The syn-

agogues were emptying and the countryside was filling as huge crowds came to hear Jesus preach.

And so over the last couple of days we've heard Jesus emphatically deny the charges. He hasn't come to abolish the law and the prophets, he's come to fulfil them. The Law is so important to him that he has just reiterated that not the smallest letter of it, not even the least stroke of a pen of it, can be altered until the whole Law is accomplished and the very universe itself disappears. You can't get much more emphatic than that.

Today, Jesus turns on his accusers. He's not setting aside any of the commandments of the Old Testament but they are. The crime that they are accusing him of

committing is the very crime that runs rampant amongst them. That's how Jesus starts today's passage. There's very little subtlety in his words, he's now the one levelling the charge.

19 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,

I'm not setting aside any of the commands in the Old Testament but some of your teachers are. Not only do some of them set them aside, but worse, far worse, they teach others to do so as well. He's speaking about the Jewish religious teachers, the Pharisees and so called 'teachers of the law' who are not only disobedient to

the law themselves but have led God's precious people astray by teaching them incorrectly.

Then Jesus makes a shocking statement that is tantamount to a declaration of war. Did you see it in verse 20, it would have sent shockwaves through the crowds and signalled Jesus' clear intention to reform the whole Jewish religious establishment. This was a declaration of war that would in the end see the son of God handed over to be killed by the leaders of God's own people. Listen to Jesus from verse 20,

20 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.

Think of the shock on the faces of the Jesus' disciples and the crowds. There would have been an audible gasp, an audible intake of breath, and pockets of angry shouting, and people from non-Jewish backgrounds perhaps even applauding. No-one would have been nodding off in this sermon – then the plots would have started being formulated on how best to kill this man.

You can almost hear the crowds can't you? 'How can we be more righteous than the Pharisees? I mean they're the shining examples of the Jewish faith? They practically do this full-time, I'm a farmer. What can this man be talking about?' And the Pharisees and teachers of the law would have been shocked and then angered

in the extreme. ‘How dare this carpenter suggest that we aren’t going to heaven? How dare he?’

Well the truth of Jesus charge will play itself out as Matthew’s gospel unfolds but in essence he’s accusing the Pharisees of two things. The first is hypocrisy and the second is a deep misunderstanding of God’s word. Jesus will expose their hypocrisy over time but most importantly he’ll expose the way they’ve misunderstood and twisted God’s teaching in the Old Testament. Perhaps both these things are clearest in Matthew 23:23 when Jesus says,

23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill

and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

They're tithing herbs from their herb garden, nowhere in the Old Testament does it say you need to do this, and yet while they are doing this which is going to the nth degree, they're neglecting the big driving themes of the Old Testament in not only their personal lives but also their preaching. And so Jesus is understandably furious with them because they are supposed to be teaching and leading God's people which comes with huge responsibility, and instead of leading by example and leading God's people to him, they're leading his people away from him.



## Think

How about you? Are you neglecting justice and mercy and faithfulness while you tick the outward boxes of being a Christian? Do you have your priorities right as a follower of Jesus or are you just going through the motions? The bible says that man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart. Does your outward appearance line up with the state of your heart? Or is there hypocrisy in your life. A blending of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world? And worse still, if you're in a position of influence, which most of us are in one respect or another, are you leading people further away from God by the way you are living? Maybe this is being just like your non-Christian

colleagues alongside you at work. They know you're a Christian but because you act pretty much like they do, they're thinking in their minds that there's no real reason to check Christianity out. Or maybe the way you're living as a Christian, all law and no grace, what you're projecting as a Christian is actually driving people away from Jesus instead of attracting people to him. These are tough questions but the accusations Jesus is making in this passage are directed at us all to some degree.

## **Pray**

A passage like this when we think deeply over it is meant to make us uncomfortable. There's a degree of hypocrisy in us all and there are plenty of commandments, small ones and big ones, that we set aside

even as mature Christians. So after thinking honestly and deeply over this please spend some time praying to God about it. Repent of your sin. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see more clearly. And especially, if you are a teacher of God's people, ask God to make you more fully appreciate the responsibility and the blessing that is yours as you teach his word faithfully.

And tomorrow the masterclass in the Old Testament law begins. I hope you can join me.