

## Jesus' Mission: Not Revolution, But Fulfillment

Matthew 5:17-20

Feb. 8, 2026 (Epi. 5-A)

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*“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. 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. 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. 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.” (Matt. 5:17-20 NIV)*

Dear fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, the Master Teacher:

Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' disciples who've gathered on the mountainside to listen to Jesus teach. You are in awe of this rabbi. He teaches with such authority, unlike anybody you've heard before! You hear his sermon start with a list of those who are blessed: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” all the way to “Blessed are those who are persecuted”—why this is a totally new thought! How profound! And then he addresses you, tells us what we, his disciples, are: “salt of the earth,” “light of the world”—what a dignified calling, how inspiring! You begin thinking to yourself, “This teacher must be from God. Has this Jesus come to do away with the old way of things, overturn it all and start a revolution in society and religion?”

The next words Jesus says pours cold water on such thinking. You hear Jesus say: *“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.”* Those hoping to find in Jesus a revolutionary spirit will be disappointed. But his words are as important for us disciples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD as it was for the 1<sup>st</sup> century. We will find that **Jesus' Mission is Not Revolution, But Fulfillment.**

Jesus talks here about not abolishing, but fulfilling *“the Law”* and *“the Prophets.”* He was referring to the entire Old Testament. The Law refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the books of Moses, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The “Prophets” refer to the other 34 books of the Old Testament, grouped together.

How much of the Old Testament needs to get kept and fulfilled? Jesus emphasizes: *“For truly I tell you”*—literally “Amen”, so it shall be—*“not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”* The smallest letter in the Hebrew language is yodh, just a little line. In our English language, Jesus might say, “not even an i, or the dot of an i, will disappear from the Bible,” as one translation puts it. All of the Bible, every last letter, every teaching, is to stand until the end of time, which is Judgment Day.

Jesus tells all disciples and all teachers of the Bible what this means: *“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.”* Again, “these commands” are referring not only to the Ten Commandments, but all of the Bible, the entire Word of God. If a Bible teacher thinks, “Well, this teaching about the earth being created in six days isn't all that important to our salvation, I'll set that aside and say evolution is an acceptable theory,” they will be judged by God! When a preacher tries to be “welcoming” to certain groups of people by ignoring what the Bible says about homosexuality, claiming, “That's just in the book of Leviticus and Leviticus doesn't apply to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” he is setting aside God's holy Word! He will be judged by God for that!

“But,” some might wonder, “didn’t Jesus set aside the Sabbath when he worked by healing people on the Sabbath, and he allowed his disciples to pluck grain to satisfy their hunger? We don’t observe the Old Testament Sabbath, either; people work on Saturday and we worship on Sunday. And we don’t do animal sacrifices, we don’t have circumcision laws like they did in the Old Testament. So didn’t Jesus spark at least a minor revolution, overturning the Old Testament?”

But in all of this, Jesus did not *revolutionize* the Bible; he came to *fulfill* the Law and the Prophets. He is the Lord of the Sabbath; the Sabbath laws find their fulfillment in Jesus who gives us true rest for our souls, the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit circumcises our hearts. Jesus is the Lamb of God; his sacrifice takes away the sin of the world. All the Old Testament, Moses’ Law, the writings of the prophets, all find their fulfillment in Jesus, as he himself put it: “These are the very Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39b).

So when we observe the Bible’s commands and teachings, let’s not set aside even the tiniest one. And Jesus makes this promise: “*Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*” But now, if you were hearing this on that mountainside, perhaps you’re thinking, “OK, Jesus is not a revolutionary. He’s telling us to be like the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, the conservatives who are strict on God’s rules and commands. So we should follow them and be righteous like them, correct?”

Jesus says, “No! *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.*” Your jaw drops. Your heart sinks. Our righteousness needs to *surpass* that of the Pharisees and law-teachers? But they’re the gold standard of righteousness; they even make a show of how obedient they are!

In the rest of this chapter Jesus went on to show what he meant. The Pharisees and law-teachers were good at the letter of the law, but they so often missed the point. In the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, God doesn’t just condemn murder and hitting people; anyone who calls someone “You fool!” is “in danger of the fire of hell” (v. 22). God doesn’t just condemn adultery with the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment; anyone who lusts “has already committed adultery...in his heart” (v. 28). In sum, Jesus tells us: “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (5:48). Perfection! We try our best but we know we’re not perfect. How could we hope to gain righteousness when perfection is the standard?

Look again to that Master Teacher, Jesus. Listen again to how he spoke: “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” He came to fulfill every commandment, every law of the Bible. He came to do that for you and me, and for all sinners. And Jesus did, he did not sin once. Jesus came to fulfill every prophecy about him that promised he would save his people from their sins, by being born of a virgin, by suffering, by dying. Listen to these gems from Isaiah 53, for instance: “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Is. 53:4,5). Jesus fulfilled that on the cross. You and I are healed, forgiven. And so another prophecy, from Jeremiah, is fulfilled in Jesus: “This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.”

That was Jesus’ mission: Not revolution, but fulfillment of all these scriptures, and so he’s the fulfillment of our righteousness. By his sinlessness and by his sacrifice, we are now considered righteous, holy in the eyes of God, and saved by him. As we disciples continue to listen to our Savior, for the rest of our lives, let’s be sure of our own mission. Like Jesus, we are not here as revolutionaries to set things straight in society. We are here to proclaim the Fulfiller of the Law and the Prophets, to share his message until that time comes when everything is fulfilled, and as he promises, we will be with the Lord forever. Amen.