

The Letter of the Law

Say What? The Hard Saying of Jesus: Pt.2

We are spending this fall dealing with some of the hard sayings of Jesus – things that make you ask, “Say What?” And we’ve been using the analogy of jawbreaker candy. A jawbreaker is not like a piece of chocolate. It does not go down smoothly. If you swallow it whole it may choke you and if you bite right into it it might break your tooth. The way to get through a jawbreaker is slowly and deliberately. And that’s what we’re doing with some of these teachings of Jesus that look difficult on the surface and potentially hard to swallow.

And the scripture we are going to tackle this morning is found in the gospel of Matthew – the Bible is divided into two parts – the Old Testament and the New Testament and the New begins with four separate biographies – called “gospels” – of the life of Jesus, and they are named for their authors; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

And our text in Matthew today deals with the nature of the sacred scriptures – both old and new. Now, what I am doing in this one sermon, we did in a whole series a few years ago called *A Tale of Two Testaments* and we talked in depth about what it means to read the Old Testament in light of the New.

It’s very nuanced and if you have not heard that – or just need a refresher – I recommend you go to the SWFF.com website and give that a listen. I won’t be able to address all the questions that this passage raises in just one message. But let’s get into it.

Matthew 5:17–20.

17 “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. 18 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.

19 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. 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.”

First of all, Christians say – rightfully so - “I thought we were saved by grace. What in the world is Jesus doing saying, ‘Not a stroke of the law can be disregarded. It *must* be fulfilled. In fact, if you don’t do a *better* job of fulfilling the law than the scribes and the Pharisees, you’re not even going to go to heaven.’” Does that fit in with everything else you’ve been hearing me say? How does that fit in with the rest of the Bible? It’s a hard saying.

This is a really fascinating passage. It's an important passage - it tells us a great deal about the Bible itself. And it's going to tell us three things. It's going to tell us the whole Bible is absolutely true (that's verse 18); but it's all about Jesus, not about us (that's verse 17); and if you learn to read it that way, it changes your life (that's verses 19 and 20). It changes everything. That's the three points. Let's look at them

First of all, The whole Bible is absolutely true. In **verse 18**, Jesus is telling us something about the Bible. He says, "*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.*" Now, before we get into what's weird about this, let's clarify what we're talking about – specifically what does he mean by "the Law"? Most people hear that in relation to the Bible and immediately think of the what? The Ten Commandments, the laws of Moses. But if you read more carefully, you'll see the word "Law" in verse 18 is a synonym for "Law and Prophets" in verse 17.

And all the commentators know what Jesus is talking about is not the formal, technical Law, but the Scriptures themselves, the whole Scriptures. In **John 10:34**, Jesus says, "~~Jesus answered them,~~ *“Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are ‘gods’ ’?”*

Now Jesus is quoting there from Psalm 82, which is a hymn, it's a poem, but Jesus calls it "your Law."

And what that means is it's typical to use the word "Law" for the *whole* of Scripture, so Jesus is not talking about the Ten Commandments, per se. He is talking about the *whole* of the Scriptures. He's talking about History and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Proverbs *and* the Law – the Pentateuch, the first five books. He's talking about all of it.

And when you realize that, suddenly you realize verse 18 is giving us a theology of Scripture. It's giving us a view of the divinity and authority of the Scripture that is as high as it can possibly be. It can't be any higher. It's astonishing. Look at Jesus' view of the Scripture. I can break this verse 18 into three additional pieces, and he tells us three things about the Bible.

First of all, he teaches us about (A) The inspiration of the Bible. By inspiration, I mean he says, "*...until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will...disappear...*" Now this word "disappear" happens twice. It's the word "pass away". He says heaven and earth may pass away, but the Scriptures will not.

There's another version of this statement in **Luke 16:17** (NAS), when Jesus says "*But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.*" Now, what's this mean? If *nature* can pass away and the Scripture not, if the Scripture is more *enduring* than nature, then it's not a natural book. That means to say the Bible is not a product of nature. It's a product of super-nature. It's supernatural.

See people tend to always say, "Well, the Bible is a great book." Maybe they'll say, "It's the greatest book, but it's *just* a human book." Not according to this. Jesus says it transcends the life of heaven and earth. Nature might burn up and the law still be there, the Scripture still be there. So the first thing he's teaching us is the Scripture is supernatural. It's divine. It's from God. It's written by human beings, but it's from God. That's not all though.

Secondly he teaches us about (B) The plenary inspiration. That's what the theologians call it. Plenary means the whole. And Jesus is so vivid. He says, "*...not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen...*" Some of you may recall that the old King James says, "*Not a jot or a tittle.*" And what the English is trying to get at is the fact that Jesus actually says, "Not the smallest letter and not the smallest *part* of a letter can be disregarded or will pass away." Of course he's not talking about every *English* letter. This plenary inspiration is in regard to the *original* manuscripts. What Matthew actually wrote down, – manuscripts we don't have anymore.

Now the smallest Hebrew letter, by the way, was the *yod*. It was about the size of a comma. The second word he uses is *kerai*, which means a serif. Do you know what that is? It's just the little stroke of a pen that's on the letter. For example, it's like the little hook at the end of a letter that makes it a "g" if it goes one way and makes it a "q" if it goes the other way. So what Jesus is saying here is the Scriptures are not just divinely inspired, but every *letter* is divinely inspired and every *part* of a letter is divinely inspired.

But then lastly, he's talking about (C.) The authority. Not just inspiration, but authority. Because he says every part of the Scripture will be, not just true, but *accomplished*. Heaven and earth won't pass away until it's all *accomplished*. See the Scripture is to be *done* - not just believed, not just ascribed to, not just applauded, not just appreciated. It has to be done. It *will* be done.

Deuteronomy 29:29, says "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but **the things revealed** belong to us and to our children forever, **that we may follow all the words of this law.***" Meaning that everything we need to know about God – which is not the same as everything about God - has been revealed to us so that we can *do* it.

There's not a thing in the Bible that isn't there that doesn't have authority. Jesus quotes Psalm 82, which is a poem. It's not even written by David. It's written by Asaph. We don't even know who he is. It's a psalm. It's not part of the Law, and yet Jesus quotes it, he bases his identity on it in John 10, and he calls it "your law." Why would he call it the law?

What Jesus is saying is every part of it, the poetry, the history, the narratives, every part of it we are under. We must bring our feeling, our thinking, our doing, our very selves...How we are and who we are have to be brought under the authority of the Bible. And so what he's saying here is a most astoundingly *high* view of the Bible. He is saying, "I believe in the divine, supernatural authority of every single bit of it."

Somebody says, "Well, isn't it true, though, even though God wrote the Bible that human beings put it together?" Have you heard of the canon? I don't mean the big cannon, like bang, bang. The canon – with one "n" not two - is the books of the Bible that are in the Bible and that were included in the Bible. And it is true, of course, that both the Old Testament and the New Testament, at a certain point the believing community came together and decided which of these books were divinely inspired and which ones weren't, which ones are in the Bible and which ones are not.

And a lot of people over the years have said to me, "Well, yeah, maybe God wrote the Bible, but human beings put it together. And what if they made a mistake?" Well, what's intriguing, what's fascinating about this verse is yes, of course, Jesus is only talking about the Hebrew Scriptures – that's what existed in his day - *but* the Hebrew Scriptures had already been through a canonical process. The believing community had gotten together and decided *these* books are inspired by God and *these* books are not.

What does that mean? Here's what it means. Jesus does not just simply believe God could give us perfect, authoritative truth through the process of human authorship. These things were written by human beings, but God so controlled the process of human authorship that every jot, every tittle, is divinely inspired.

But what is he looking at? He's looking at the Old Testament, which has already been through a canonical process, which means Jesus Christ also believes God can bring us absolute truth through the process of human *recognition* of the Scriptures. The process of putting the Scriptures together and the process of writing them was so controlled by God, according to Jesus, that what you have - every jot, every tittle, every letter, every part of the letter - you can know is God's Word.

You see, you just can't say, "Well, yeah, God wrote it, but human beings put it together." You know, the DaVinci Code conspiracy argument. No. Human beings wrote it, *and* human beings put it together, *all* under God's inspiration. The Westminster Confession of Faith states, "The Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek, being immediately inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence **kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic so as in all controversies of religion the church is finally to appeal unto them.**" And Jesus shows us right here he has no problem with that. So what does that bring us to?

In conclusion, Jesus believed in the strongest terms, in the supernatural, divine authority of every single piece of the Bible, which means Jesus believed, when God writes, His pen never slips and His ink never fades. God's pen is indelible. And Jesus didn't just believe this; he *lived* it. He didn't just believe this as an intellectual construct; he absolutely based his *life* on this. Look through the Gospels, and you'll see it. When Jesus is confronted by Satan – we looked at this two weeks ago - what does he do? He says, "It is written..." Every time Satan comes at him, Jesus responds with Scripture.

When the Pharisees or the scribes or human beings attack him, what does he do over and over again? "It is written..." When Peter starts swinging his sword around in the garden of Gethsemane, what does Jesus say? "I don't think that's a good idea"? He says, "No, Peter, don't do this, because then the Scriptures won't be fulfilled." He based his entire life on the Scripture.

Not only that, it's like his mind and his heart were so completely saturated with the Scripture, it was almost like he was a filled cup, and it was just always sloshing out every place he went, because it was always on his mind, always on his heart, always on his lips. Not only in his life but in his death...on the way to Calvary, he's quoting Hosea 10:8 to the women who are weeping.

And on the cross...Oh on the cross. I am sorry to use this illustration, it's a little jarring I know. But imagine yourself in a terrible car wreck. You come to, you're still in the car, you look around, and all of your family is dead. What do you do? I'll tell you this. Whatever you do, you don't say, "What *should* I say? How *should* I act? What *should* I cry out?" Oh no. At a moment like that, a moment of extremity, there's nothing left but the unvarnished, instinctive you, just you, who you are in yourself, who you are instinctively. That's all you are, and that's what you scream.

Now when Jesus Christ was on the cross - as scary and weird and horrible to say as this is - the fact is Jesus on the cross was in a worse situation than waking up in a car wreck, seeing all your family was dead. Jesus Christ was going down into hell, literally. And on the cross he screamed, but what did he scream? He screamed the Bible. He screamed Scripture. That's who he *was*. He screamed Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He cried Psalm 31:5, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit..."

Jesus Christ didn't just believe in the authority of the Bible; he lived it. It was the very basis of his life. It was the source of his life so you can say if you cut Jesus Christ, almost *literally* he bled Scripture, because at the moment of extremity, that was who he actually was. *Everything* was done through the grid of the Scripture. *Everything* was done through the power of the Scripture. That's how high Jesus' view of the Bible was. Unbelievable.

Now before I move on to the second point, it's very important. Is that *your* view of the Bible? Do you consider it that important? Do you have the same view of the Bible as Jesus does? Because there is no way to follow Jesus Christ unless you accept his view of the Bible. Now wait. I am not saying you can't be a saved Christian if you don't believe in the divine authority and plenary inspiration of the Scripture.

What makes you a Christian is faith in Christ. Period. But having said that, could it possibly be consistent to follow Jesus and say, "I'm following Jesus, but there are parts of the Bible I don't accept"? I want you to know the *average* person I talk to today says, "Oh, I follow Christ. I follow Jesus. I really believe in him. But the Bible is a man-made book and you can't take it all that seriously."

Is it possible to say that and be consistent? Of course not. Don't kid yourself. I've had people say, "Well, of course, Jesus believed in the complete authority of everything single thing in the Bible, every jot and tittle. He was a first-century Jew. He was a man of his time. But I live in the age of science, so I follow Christ, but I just don't have that same view of the Bible." If you say, "I follow Christ, but I don't believe what he said about the Bible," you're not just rejecting *one* of his beliefs. What you're doing is you are rejecting the very *basis* of his life.

Jesus subjected his life to the Bible. Now, he clearly *interpreted* the Bible, and in many ways he interpreted it *differently* than the religious leaders of his time. I'm not saying you have to let the fundamentalists chain you up with their rigid interpretations anymore than Jesus did. But, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, you do have to *submit* yourself to the authority of Scripture.

You have to pray and say, “God, I subject myself to your truth, and your Word is your truth, so would you lead me through the Holy Spirit to understand how you would have me apply the scriptures to my life.” That means you have to be willing to let the Bible contradict you – even some of your deepest convictions. Doesn’t that make sense?

Let me ask you a question. How will Jesus ever talk to you about that conviction? How will Jesus ever be able to talk *back* to you about that? How will Jesus ever be able to *get* at it? How can you be sure you even have the real Jesus Christ if you’ve created a Jesus Christ who can’t **talk back to you** at certain places?

When you say, “I don’t believe that,” what you’re really saying is, “There are some things in my life, there are some beliefs, some convictions, I will *not* let Jesus at.” Because how could Jesus get to you except through the Bible? In other words, it’s really, really quite impossible to say, “I follow Christ, but I don’t accept his view of the Bible,” which is a way to say, “I don’t accept his whole way of living.”

On the other hand, let me suggest if you want to face *anything* at all, have the Scripture *in* your heart the way Jesus did. Jesus didn’t just face death, face suffering, face hell, face Satan...He didn’t just face them. He faced them *down*. How? Well take a look at the cross. Remember last week - when Captain Ahab was going down for the last time, still he raged at Moby Dick, “...from hell’s heart I stab at thee...”

But Jesus Christ on the cross was literally descending into hell and with his final breath, what did he say? “My God, my God...” That’s the language of covenant. That’s the language of trust. That’s the language of intimacy. He was still calling God, “My God” in spite of the horrendous suffering.

How in the world was he still able to trust at a moment like that, still able to love God at a moment like that, still able to obey at a moment like that? It was Psalm 22. It was the Scripture. You can face anything if you have this view of the Bible and if you use the Bible the way Jesus did. Do you have that view, or are you picking and choosing? Are you sifting through Scripture, deciding what you like and what you don’t like, or are you letting Scripture sift through you, deciding what it doesn’t like and what it does like? Which is it?

So Verse 18 is telling us it’s *all* true, every bit of it’s true, *but* that’s not all he tells us about the Bible. In fact, if you stop with verse 18 and say, “That’s what I believe. I believe the Bible is totally authoritative in every bit, we have to obey it, and we have to come under its authority,” that just makes you a Pharisee, because the Pharisees believed that. The Pharisees had the very same view as Jesus on that.

The Pharisees had the same view of the *nature* of Scripture, which is what you have in verse 18, but they did not have the same view of how you *interpreted* the Scripture, which is what you have in verse 17, because Jesus doesn't only say, "I want you to know the Bible is absolutely and wholly true," he also wants you to know it's all about him, not about you.

This is the second point; The Bible is all about Jesus, not about us. Because in **verse 17**, he says, "*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.*" Verse 17 is telling us something new. And this is something the Pharisees did *not* agree with. That is what Jesus is saying. Now he's talking about the Old Testament, obviously the whole Bible, but even the Old Testament.

He says, "Everything in the Old Testament is actually about me, and you're not going to understand it unless you read it christo-centrally, unless you learn to see *everything* in the Old Testament is pointing to me. If you don't understand that, if you believe in the absolute authority and inspiration and plenary inspiration of the Scripture and you don't understand how to *read* it, it'll just make you a Pharisee."

You know what's amazing to me is there are a lot of people in the church who read it exactly the way Jesus said the Pharisees read it. And as a result, they are actually using the Bible in a harmful way. Do you know what this word "fulfill" means? It means literally "filled". Jesus is not saying, "I did not come to abolish the law, but I've come to *confirm* it." No, he didn't just say he came to confirm it. He came to *fulfill* it, to fill it full, which means to *change* it. It's a very, very interesting point.

On the one hand, what it really means is when Christians come to the Old Testament, we know Jesus has fulfilled it so much that *some of it* no longer actually hits us in the same way. We *don't* observe the "clean laws" because Jesus is our cleanliness, because the "clean laws" were all about him. We don't do animal sacrifices anymore. Why? Because *Jesus* was the sacrifice to which they all pointed, and because of *his* sacrifice, we don't do that anymore.

Here's a big one: we don't kill our enemies anymore. Even though the Hebrew Bible is filled with bloody vengeance. But that too was all pointing to Jesus. Because it's like God was saying, "Ok, you killed all your enemies, how did that work out? More of them popped up and they hated you worse than ever." No, Jesus fulfilled all that – not by killing – but by *dying* for his enemies. This is the new way.

When Jesus says, “I’ve come to *fulfill* the Old Testament,” he means on the one hand, “Because I have come, you *can’t* read the Old Testament the way you used to,” but on the other hand, it also means the Old Testament and the Bible can never be just abolished. You just can’t lay it aside. You can’t say, “Well, it doesn’t count anymore. I don’t have to listen to it.”

To get rid of it *or* to read it exactly the same way as before Jesus came is wrong. There is an amazing balance here. And what he’s actually saying is, “I have filled it.” He’s using the illustration almost like a cup being filled. Think about a cup being filled with water and think about Jesus in the Old Testament. Jesus is the liquid, and the Old Testament is the cup.

Let’s say you need a drink and I have this cup. Now on the one hand, the cup is of no purpose unless it’s bringing you the water. An empty cup will not quench your thirst. On the other hand...well, if I fill *my hand* with water but have no cup – first of all, gross! – but there’s not going to be much water left when it gets to your mouth. You need both the vessel *and* the substance.

So hear what Jesus is saying. On the one hand, he says, “You are not going to actually be able to understand me unless you know the Old Testament.

You’re not going to be able to grasp *me* unless you know something about priests and kings and prophets and temples and tabernacles and sacrifices. You’re not going to have a good grasp on me unless you understand the Old Testament. But on the other hand, you will *never* understand the Old Testament unless you see absolutely everything in it is about me, not about you.”

The point of *every* story, the point of every regulation, the point of the ceremonies, the point of the bread, the point of the sacrifices, the point of *all* of that was to show us Jesus. The point of every prophet was to show us the ultimate Prophet who brings us the ultimate truth, which is the gospel. The point of every priest was to point us to the ultimate Priest, who brings us all the way into God in worship. The point of every king was to show us the ultimate King, who leads and protects us completely.

After his resurrection, Jesus encounters some of his disciples and it says in **Luke 24:27**, “*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*” He said, “Guys, this Bible you have read since your youth, it’s not about you. It’s about me. Every part of it.”

You say, “What did he mean?” Let’s get practical quickly. For instance, if you read the story of Moses, there is Moses, working for the liberation of the oppressed, leading the people through the Red Sea. Or the story of David. There’s David standing before the giant, not afraid, living by faith. Now you can read those stories as if they’re all about you.

You can say, “First, look what they did. Secondly, I must do that too. Thirdly, then God will reward me.” That’s how you read it. And frankly, that’s how most people read it, like a Pharisee. Most people who read the Bible, they believe verse 18, but they don’t understand verse 17. And they read the Bible like that.

They say, “Do you see how David lives? Do you see how Moses lives? I’m going to live like that, and then God will bless me.” Right? And then you’ll get out in life, and you’ll be crushed because if you actually *do* sometimes accomplish like that, you’ll feel superior to other people. And if you *don’t* live like that - which you generally won’t - you’ll be crushed and despondent.

But Jesus says, “You don’t understand Moses unless you see Moses is pointing to a greater Moses than Moses, and David is pointing to a greater David than David.” Look, Moses worked for the liberation of the oppressed. Why don’t you and I? Why are we so cowardly? Why are we so selfish? Why?

“Well, we need to just try harder to be like Moses?” No! First, you have to see Moses is pointing to a greater Moses. We just talked about this recently. You know in Luke 9, on the Mount of Transfiguration, no translation can do this right because it wouldn’t make sense in English. Do some of you remember? Moses appears, and Jesus starts talking to Moses.

And in English it says they were discussing Jesus’ “departure” from Jerusalem, but that’s not what the Greek text actually says. In the Greek it says they were discussing Jesus’ “exodus” from Jerusalem. It’s an intentional way of showing that Moses and Jesus were agreeing on the fact that Moses’ exodus was just a *picture* of the greater exodus.

Jesus is the true Moses who leads us out of the ultimate bondage to sin and death. How? Not by walking *through* a sea, but by going *under* a sea and being destroyed by the sea of justice and wrath so we can walk through unscathed. And until I begin to see the greater Moses than Moses that Moses points to, until I realize what he has done for me, until I am amazed by it, until I rejoice in it, I will be in bondage to my own fear so I won’t be able to be like Moses.

Until I see the greater Moses than Moses that Moses points to, I'll never be able to live like Moses. Or David. I can say, "Well, I'm going to be really courageous like David," but you'll get out there and you'll be afraid of failure, you'll be afraid of loss, you'll be afraid of disapproval, and you'll say, "Why can't I do it?" It's simple, because David is pointing to a greater David who went up before the *real* giant, the giant of sin and death. And he didn't go just at the *risk* of his life, but at the *loss* of his life. And He went as our representative just like the historic David so his victory is credited to us.

And only when I see the greater David than David has slain the *real* giants, only when I see he has slain the only disease that can really get me, the only debt that can really get me, only when I see he has done that will I get over my fear of loss and my fear of disapproval. Only when I see the greater David to which David points will I ever even begin to live like David.

In other words, when you read the Bible as if it's all about you, there are always three points to your sermon. "This is what *they* did. This is what *you* should do. Then *God* will bless you." But when you read it as all about Jesus, you always have four points to your sermon. It goes like, "This is what *they* did, but *you'll* never do it, but there was *One* who did it perfectly, and if you'll let him *He* will do it through you."

See the reason you can't live like David or Moses or Samson or Abraham or [fill in the blank] is because you haven't really based your life on *what* He did, because right at this moment you're not either rejoicing in it or you're just not acting as if it's happened." They did it, you *can't* do it, but there's One who did. And to the degree you understand and grasp that, you'll be able to actually start doing it yourself. Is the Bible all about you or is it all about Jesus? Which is it?

Just for gender balance here, let's do Esther. It's very, very important. You have to start reading the *whole* Bible this way. See if you read Esther for the moral of the story, if you read Esther in a pharisaical way, if you read Esther "verse 18 only, not verse 17," not seeing it's pointing to Jesus...

How do you read Esther? Well this is how I learned it back in Sunday School. Esther was a powerful queen. She was in the palace. She had money and power, ah, but she *risked* her money and her power and used it to serve God and to serve her people and to work for justice. And therefore, if *you* have money, if you have power, you should be generous with your money.

You should not be afraid to risk the loss of your power and your status by standing up for Christ in your office or whatever your situation is. You too, like Esther, should be willing to risk losing the palaces so that you can be like Esther. But why *don't* we? We're not doing that. Do you know why? Because we're not going to remedy that by just trying harder to be like Esther.

We have to see the One to whom Esther points. There was somebody who was in the *real* palace, heaven. And what did he do? He didn't just *risk* the loss of it; he *actually* lost it. Why? So that you could be accepted into it. And I'll tell you the reason why *I* have a lot of trouble sometimes risking the status or power I have by doing risky things is because I'm forgetting the palace that I have guaranteed for me because Jesus lost it. Don't you see? I'm not going to be able to live like Esther until I see the greater Esther to whom Esther points.

So do you see what Jesus is saying so far? He's saying, number one, everything in the Bible is true – v.18. But number two, it's all about me, not about you. And that leads us to the only way number three can be accomplished.

The third point is; The Bible changes your life.

Verse 20 says *if* you start to live like that, when you learn to read the Bible christo-centrally, it will push you into a righteousness and a godliness *beyond* that of the scribes and the Pharisees. “*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.*” Ooh, that's a hard saying, isn't it? That's a jawbreaker.

Well, let's spend some time with it. Let's get to the layers. And you have to put it in context – you have to do that will *all* scripture by the way – so where is Jesus saying this? Matthew chapter five is part of The Sermon on the Mount. Which is all about contrasting the kingdom of God – or the kingdom of heaven – with the kingdom of earth. Religion belongs to the earthly kingdom but Christianity is about the heavenly kingdom. The whole point of Christianity is that it *isn't* just another religion. And when we *make* it one, treat it like one, it's just awful.

So on the next chapter, Matthew 6, it says when you give to the poor, don't do it like the religious elites who do it so they will be honored by others. It says when you pray, don't make a big public spectacle of it like the religious elite who are just trying to get attention.

Do you see what's going on? Religious people and Christians - people who read the Bible as if it's about them and people who read the Bible as if it's about Jesus - they *both* pray, they both give to the poor, they both seek to obey the Ten Commandments, but in an utterly different way.

The Pharisees are outside in. They're doing these things on the outside because they're insecure on the inside. They need approval. They don't know God loves them. They don't know God will bless them. They're doing everything they can on the outside hoping to fill up the emptiness on the inside.

But Christianity is inside out. At the end of chapter 6, where Jesus says, "Don't worry about anything. Why? Because your Father feeds the birds of the air, He clothes the flowers of the field, and surely you know you're more valuable to Him than they are." Jesus says, "*Remember* He's your Father. *Remember* your value to Him through the gospel." What Jesus is saying is, "Don't try harder..." He says, "If you really want to grow and become more and more godly and righteous, don't try harder. *Remember...*"

Understand what God has done for you, understand who you are, and then the good works will flow out. It's inside out. It's not outside in. And that's the reason why there is a kind of religiosity that is

superficial only. It's grumpy. It's judgmental. It's a response to emptiness. And then there's a kind of joy driven righteousness and godliness far beyond anything religiosity can give you. So three points; the whole Bible is true, but it's all about Jesus, not about you, and if you learn to read it that way it will change your life.

Now, as I conclude, somebody might say, "*How* do I do that? How do I learn to read everything in the Bible as if it's about Jesus, not about me, so I get this same beyond-joy driven righteousness? How does that happen?" It's the same way you get to Carnegie Hall. No, I don't mean Uber. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice.

And if you want to know how to read the Bible in a gospel-centered, Christo-centric way so it makes you like Esther, like David, like Abraham, what you have to do is practice, practice, practice. This is why you need sermons. This is why you need to drag yourself in here every Sunday and listen to me. Even if you've been hearing these things longer than me. Do you think a veteran baseball player would say, "Man, I've been hitting a baseball since t-ball, I don't need a batting coach anymore"? Of course not. Even the experts – *especially* the experts maybe – need regular refreshing and reminders.

You need, I need, every Christian needs to practice making the gospel the center of everything. Speaking of experts. Do you know who else is doing it? Let me just show you who's doing it. In **1 Peter 1:10-11**, Peter says, "*Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which **the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing** when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.*" That's Peter saying the same thing Jesus is saying. All the prophets - everything in the Old Testament - was about the future sufferings and glory of Jesus, about the gospel.

And then he says, (v.12) "*It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached **the gospel** to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. **Even angels long to look into these things.***" Now angels are very, very smart beings. So do you know what that's saying? It says angels never get tired of looking into the gospel. There are endless wonders. They're always seeing new things. It's *bottomless*. It's not just some information you memorize, and that's it.

In fact, when it says, "The angels long to look," it's the word *epithymeo*, which is the word that means over-desire, obsession, super-desire. It says the angels are *obsessed* with the gospel. They're *always* looking at it. They can't get enough of it. And if angels are never getting tired of looking into the gospel, what does that tell you?

Here's what it tells you. The gospel has whatever you need. You probably just haven't seen it yet. You say, "Well, I know the gospel." Oh yeah? You *can't* know the gospel. "I'm struggling with anger," someone says. "Well, I know what the gospel is." You need to look. If you are bitter, look into the gospel till it humbles you enough so your anger goes away. If you are depressed, you look into the gospel until you're affirmed enough until your depression goes away.

By the way, when I talk about anger, depression, and other things... Sometimes you just need to get some sleep. Sometimes you need a snack – you're "hangry". Sometimes you need to see a counselor. I heard a guy say, "God healed me of my depression... every morning the Holy Spirit brings me a little pill." I like that. I'm not being simplistic.

What I am trying to say is long to look at Jesus and the gospel, and whether you're tempted, whether you're bored, whether you're depressed, whether you're angry, whatever ails you, learn to practice looking into what Jesus Christ did for you in the gospel until you're changed.

The gospel will give you everything you need. That's what the Bible is all about. Even the hard parts. It's all about Jesus, not about you, and that changes everything.

Let's pray...

Father God, help us to learn to love your Holy Word through the power of your Holy Spirit – the same Spirit that was in Jesus. Some of us are neglecting your Word...some of us are abusing your Word. Neither error will enable us to be engaged in bringing your Kingdom to earth as it is in Heaven.

If we start from below – if we attempt to subject the divine nature to the human wisdom, we will surely be lost. Help us to start from above. Let us subject our human reason to your divine nature. Let us seek to follow your Son Jesus Christ in all we do and think and say. Until we are healed of our darkness and brought into your glorious light. Amen.