

“Fulfilled?”

Genesis 15:4-7; James 2:20-26;
Psalm 33:4-12; Matthew 5:17-20

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Last week we talked about being salt or flavor, and light. I suggested that we look and think about ways we might be putting the bushel basket on to hide that light. How are we interfering with being salt and light? Salt and light are great metaphors, aren't they? They are ways of thinking about it.

Then there's a step I want to take. It's one thing to think about how I put up barriers. It's another to say, "Is there some way I can do something that helps this happen?" After all, Jesus is going to teach us. What is it Jesus wants us to do? I think at this point, he begins to get to that point. He starts at a basic place. Why is he teaching? Is he teaching to demolish everything that came before, to do away with it? He says, "No, I didn't come to do away with the law and the prophets. I came to fulfill it." In fact, he says nothing is going to be gone from it. That's an incredible statement, a big place to start.

As we hear Jesus and we recognize that he's coming to bring something, what he's bringing is the flavor and the light that we could be, so we need to figure out how to be that flavor and that light. What's one of our first responses? How do we do that?

One of the thoughts I had was that I could get a survey together of all the people I think really display light and display flavor, and survey them and try to figure out how they do it so I can then learn from them how I might do it. There's some benefit to those kinds of things. We do it all the time. In fact, it's one of the directions we've gone in our lives. We look for the research that shows us the answers, and there are ways of learning from that.

But Jesus doesn't say that. So maybe what we do is look at who is famous today. Who are the smartest people today so we can learn from them how we should model our lives after them. We can try to figure out how to become famous for being famous. Perhaps then we'll find the flavor and light we're looking for.

As you might guess, I'm suggesting that just looking to the smart and famous may not be the best use of our time. There's some prevalent thought today that we will be offered as we begin to look for how to be flavor and light.

I was looking at a book that was a New York Times best seller and was offered as one of the 20 best books of the year when it was published. It's called *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story*, and it's about a reporter looking at why we exist. I picked it up this week and was looking at it. I read a part where he had gone to talk to somebody who was a Platonic philosopher and was given a spiel about how it's all because there's this background reality that underlies all the rest of reality. Then he says, "Well, that may be true, and it's pretty heady stuff. It's kind of interesting and you

can get sucked into it. The Christian God would be the same kind of thing. You could say existence is because of God.” Then he goes on to say, “We all know that God is just a projection of human thought, so that’s not true.”

This is what’s offered for advice, and if the advice is that God’s not true, then what is scripture? It might be some ancient wisdom. There might be something there about doing things ethically. What I’m trying to say here is that as we begin to think about what Jesus wants us to be in terms of flavor and light, some of the prevalent thinking around us may not be that helpful. As people who want to follow Jesus, there’s no barrier between us and that thinking. We live in that environment. It is prevalent. It’s not hard to find.

But if we’re going to listen to Jesus, if we are going to move in a different direction, if we have discovered that Jesus does come from a God that exists and is the reason for existence, we can listen to him. And listen to where he starts. He says, “I came, not to do away with the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.” This is a different perspective than our society has. He is suggesting that they had these scrolls on which were written what they called “the law and the prophets;” their scripture. He’s saying there is a scripture that God has offered. We say “scripture” today, but they had all these scrolls because they didn’t yet have a way to put it all in a book.

He is saying God has come to us and sometimes it feels a little bit like God realizes that we learn by different ways. Some of it is by kinesthetic learning. Some of it is by aural learning, hearing. Perhaps some of it is by reading. He gives us a variety of ways to come together, especially in scripture. Jesus says, “Don’t throw it out. Don’t let people tell you that it’s not worth reading. You don’t have to do another research study to find out whether it’s got anything of value in it.” So Jesus begins by encouraging us to recognize that scripture is real, available, and for us.

Now, there are some interesting things he does as he moves through the passage we read in Matthew today. Oftentimes when I have read this, I think he’s talking about the law and the prophets, and it feels like he goes on to say, “Don’t break the law.” Well, we all know what it means to break the law. At least, that’s the way I’ve always thought about it. There are statutes; we know what they are in the books. If I go too fast, I know I’m breaking the law. If I take something from a store without paying for it, I know I’m breaking the law. So when I hear that word “break” there, I think of breaking a particular law. The interesting thing about that word “break” is that it’s not the same word that we use when we say break a law. It’s the same word that’s used when John the Baptist talks about not being willing to untie Jesus’ sandal. He doesn’t feel worthy of untying Jesus’ sandal. That’s the word that’s used here for “break.” Don’t untie it. It seems a direct etymology of the word “loose.” Don’t let loose. So what Jesus is saying is, “Don’t let loose of the law and the prophets.” Don’t let loose of them.

What has happened, however, is that instead of letting loose of it, in the religious circles they have codified it into a set of rules so it describes a certain kind of action. It’s hard not to read this passage that way. But if we look ahead a little bit, we see that Jesus

does some things that suggest he doesn't like the way the Pharisees and Scribes have codified the scripture. Can you heal on the Sabbath, for example? He has this argument with the Pharisees. He asks them, "Can you do that? Can you do good on the Sabbath?" They basically would say, "Not if it means doing work." And yet Jesus goes ahead and heals. His disciples are walking through the grain field and they pick up some grain. The Pharisees say they are harvesting and it's against the rules. Jesus says, "The Sabbath is made for humankind. Humankind is not made for the Sabbath." It's the same thing with the law. The law is made for humankind. Humankind is not made for the law, for scripture.

What does he mean when he says he's going to fulfill it? Why does he have to fulfill it? Laws are something you either break or don't break. What's to be fulfilled about a law, accomplished, completed? The word "fulfilled" in the Greek could be translated in all those ways. Scripture is given to us to lead us somewhere. It's to accomplish something. Jesus has already told us a little bit about what it might accomplish. We look back at the beatitudes and we look at the flavor and light of last week. It's to accomplish something, and he's going to show us the way. We are going to follow him. So he's beginning to give us something to do.

One thing we can do is read scripture. We can pay attention to what God has done. We can pay attention to how God's people have interacted with their God throughout history. We can pay attention to where those scriptures go. How many people have read one of the prophets recently? I invite you to do that. Good ones to read are Amos, Micah, and Hosea. I think those are fairly short and easy to get through, so start there.

So as Jesus goes along here he is saying, "I didn't come just to create a set of rules." In fact, he has just called Peter, who was a fisherman. If my memory is correct, fishermen had a job that meant that they couldn't really be good Jews because the very thing they did, working with fish and dead fish, made them impure. They couldn't keep up with the rites of washing themselves in the right way. So Jesus had just called one of these impure people to be his disciple. He's suggesting that the law wants to take us someplace, not create barriers between us, not create one class of people that can't be God's people. Fishermen can't be God's people because they have a job that just doesn't allow them to be. He invited some to be disciples.

Jesus is beginning to encourage us to see that he's going to bring something that is a little different. He's going to help us see in a new way. In fact, the very last line, I think, does that. He says, "Your righteousness has to be greater than the Scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven." It feels, oftentimes, that what it means is that I have to live up to a certain set of rules so that I can get into heaven. Perhaps if you use the Greek word for "virtue" there, that would have been the case. Dallas Willard has a good description of this. Is it all about virtue, or is it about righteousness, and what's the difference? Virtuousness means you have a certain way of being. It becomes a little abstract. You live up to an ideal, and then you know you're right. What's righteousness? There is a sense of rightness in it, of trying to do things right, but how is it defined? It is defined in relationship—our relationship to God and then our

relationship to one another. Isn't that, after all, what Jesus gives as the greatest commandments—to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves? So when he says your righteousness must be better, he's saying you have to open up and participate in this relationship with God that I am bringing you. And truly, when you think about where the Scribes and Pharisees are, it's not too hard to be better in that respect.

So Jesus is beginning to direct us to what we can do. I think of C. S. Lewis writing about entering the kingdom of God in *The Last Battle*. There's a point where it's all over, basically, and the kids are starting to go into the kingdom, and they say, "Let's go farther in and further up." I really think this is what Jesus is beginning to do here. He's saying, "Listen to the word. Listen to what God is doing. Look at how I am going to accomplish this in your life, and I am inviting you ever farther in and further up."

Let me suggest that in society, prevalent thought will often take us onto a broad plain that feels pretty easy, but it tends to be going down and away. Sometimes it feels like it takes us into minefields or to places where all of a sudden you come to precipices. Jesus is inviting us further in and further up as we listen to him and reflect on the scripture, the word God has given us. Amen.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, help us recognize your invitation to come further in and further up, to pay attention to the word you have given us and to see how Jesus is the completion of the accomplishment of that word. Help us hold on to how you speak to us, guide us. Let us follow Jesus further in and further up. Amen.