

Greatness in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #3 - Pastor Gary Combs - April 6, 2025 - Matthew 5:17-20

INTRO: Good morning church! We're continuing our sermon series today entitled, KINGDOM LIVING. It's an expositional study of Christ's Sermon On the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. We've called this series KINGDOM LIVING because the Sermon on the Mount is a call by King Jesus to live under His rule and reign as His kingdom citizens!

Trans: In our text this week, Jesus transitions from His discussion of the character of Kingdom citizens (the Beatitudes), and the influence Kingdom citizens are to have in this world (salt/light), to those whom He calls great in the Kingdom of Heaven. He says that greatness in the Kingdom is connected to how we view the Bible, its commandments and how we view righteousness.

He's already told us that "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" are blessed and they "shall be satisfied" and that they're blessed because they will be "persecuted for righteousness sake." But He hasn't really defined what He means by righteousness. Well, now He's about to remedy that. Not only that, but as John Stott has written:

This paragraph is of great importance not only for its definition of Christian righteousness but also for the light it throws on the relation between the New Testament and the Old Testament, between the gospel and the law." — Joh Stott (John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p.73)

In other words, Jesus is going to reveal to us what how He views the Bible! In today's passage, Jesus begins to explain His view of Scripture—the Law and the Prophets—and how we as Kingdom citizens should view it too. Because greatness in the Kingdom is connected to our view of Jesus and Scripture! As professor Russ Bush said:

"What you think about Jesus will ultimately influence what you think about the Bible. Your theology of the 'living Word' (Jesus) and the 'written Word' (the Bible) go hand in hand." — Russ Bush (As quoted in Danny Akin's commentary, *Exalting Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 34).

Need: Do you struggle with reading and understanding the OT? Many struggle with how to balance the tension between law and grace. They wonder: "Do we have to obey the OT laws now that we have the NT?" "Doesn't the NT say that we're no longer "under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14)? Yes, it does. But does that mean we no longer need the OT and its laws? And if we do, what purpose do they serve? How should we view them? How does Jesus our Savior view them?

Trans: Indeed, if we are to consider Jesus our King, then we must look at the Bible through His eyes!

BODY: In the gospel of Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus called those who saw the Bible through His eyes great in the Kingdom of Heaven. We can be among those whom Christ calls great in the Kingdom. How can we be among those whom Christ calls great in the Kingdom? The text gives three marks of those whom Christ calls great in the Kingdom.

Read text: Matthew 5:17-20 (ESV) 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 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

THOSE WHOM CHRIST CALLS GREAT IN THE KINGDOM...

1. Affirm Christ's high view and fulfillment of Scripture.

EXP: (17-18) In other words, they see Scripture as Jesus sees it. How does He see it? He sees it as pointing to Him as its fulfillment (17) and enduring and perfect ("not an iota, not a dot") as long as heaven and earth "until all is accomplished" (18). The Law pointed to Him and He perfectly embodied its righteousness.

"Abolish" (17) (καταλύω, *kataluō*) - to dissolve, destroy, demolish; abolish.

"Law or the Prophets" (17) (νόμος, *nomos*) or (προφήτης, *prophētēs*) - By this Jesus is describing the Tanakh, the whole Old Testament.

"Fulfill" (17) (πληρώω, *plēroō*) - to make full, to fill up, i.e. to fill to the full; to consummate, to carry into effect, bring to realisation, realise.

Greatness in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #3 - Pastor Gary Combs - April 6, 2025 - Matthew 5:17-20

"For truly, I say" (18, 20) (ἀμὲν γὰρ λέγω, *amēn gar legō*) - He began with the Beatitudes in the 3rd person ("Blessed are the poor in spirit"), continued with 2nd person ("You are the salt/light") and "now he changes to the authoritative first person and uses for the first time his distinctive and dogmatic formula of 'I tell you'" (Stott, 73).

"Heaven and earth" (18) (οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, *ouranos kai hē gē*) - all creation. The universe.

"Pass away" (18) (παρέρχομαι, *parerchomai*) - to pass away, perish.

"Iota...dot" (18) (ἰῶτα, *iōta*) - iota is the smallest Greek letter. Dot is the smallest stroke, punctuation or accent. "Not even the minutest part of the law shall perish." — Strongs "Jot or tittle" (KJV).

"Pass from" (18) - same word as pass away. The authority of Scripture will not pass away until "God fulfills every promise and prediction in its pages" (Charles Quarles, *Sermon*, p. 99).

"Accomplished" (18) (γίνομαι, *ginomai*) - to be made complete, finished, accomplished.

ARG: **Jesus is the fulfillment of the moral law** (by living sinlessly), **the ceremonial law** (as the perfect sacrifice), **and the prophetic writings** (as the promised Messiah). Paul affirms this in Romans:

Romans 10:4 (NIV) Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

ILL: **After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples:** (*Tell story Luke 24:13-43*)

Luke 24:44 (ESV) ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

APP: Kingdom greatness begins by affirming Christ's high view of Scripture and recognizing that He alone fulfilled its requirement of righteousness. We do not earn God's favor by rule-keeping but by trusting in Christ's perfect righteousness.

2. Obey Christ's commandments and teach them to others.

EXP: (18-19) Jesus upheld the absolute authority of Scripture. Not even the smallest letter or stroke of a pen will pass away until all is accomplished (18). Those who obey and teach His commandments will be called great in the Kingdom (19). Obey Scripture as Christ empowers you!

"Relaxes one" (19) (λύω, *luō*) - to loose one bound, i.e. to unbind. To lessen the authority or application of.

"Least" (19) (ἐλάχιστος, *elachistos*) - smallest, least in size; in amount; in importance.

"Commandments" (19) (ἐντολή, *entolē*) - a commandment.

"Teaches others" (19) (διδάσκω, *didaskō*) - to teach one; to impart instruction; instill doctrine into one

"Kingdom of Heaven" (19, 20 - 3x) (βασιλεία, *basileia* - οὐρανός, *ouranos*) - God's sovereign reign and rule over all creation, which is both a present spiritual reality and a future physical fulfillment. It is inaugurated through Christ's first coming, advances as people submit to His Lordship, and will be fully realized when Christ returns to establish His eternal reign. The kingdom is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit and is entered through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

"Does them" (19) (ποιέω, *poieō*) - to do, to act rightly, do well; to carry out. To obey them, follow them.

"Great" (19) (μέγας, *megas*) - great, splendid.

ARG: **Jesus equates loving Him with obeying Him.**

John 14:15 (ESV) If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Greatness in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #3 - Pastor Gary Combs - April 6, 2025 - Matthew 5:17-20

John 15:10 (ESV) If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

This raises the question: are Christ's commandments distinct from Old Testament law? OT Law is in three categories: 1) Moral, 2) Ceremonial and 3) Civil. Moral laws are perpetual, revealing the character of God and showing us how to treat both God and man. Ceremonial laws have to do with temple worship, holy days, and the sacrificial system. Civil laws have the effect of setting the Jews apart as God's peculiar people. Jesus fulfilled all three categories of the Law. The moral law still applies as the standard of righteous living, but we obey it out of love and gratitude rather than obligation. The ceremonial and civil laws are no longer binding because they pointed to Christ, who has accomplished their purpose. Christians now live under the Law of Love, which calls us to love God and others through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments (moral law) with the Great Commandment (Law of love):

Matthew 22:37-39 (ESV) ³⁷ "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

ILL: I spent the Summers of my HS years working for my Uncle Basil's guttering business. The last Summer I was 16 and he no longer worked with us. But I still followed how he taught us because I loved him.

APP: Do you cherish and obey God's Word? Greatness in God's Kingdom is tied to our faithfulness to Scripture and to sharing it with others in the power of the Holy Spirit. Spurgeon prayed: "Lord, make me of this thy kingdom a right loyal subject, and may I both "do and teach" according to thy Word! Whether I am little or great on earth, make me great in obedience to thee" (Spurgeon, *Exposition*, p.25). May we pray as he did!

3. Rely on Christ's righteousness to enter the kingdom.

EXP: (20) Jesus makes a startling statement: Unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will not enter the Kingdom.

"Righteousness" (20) (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosunē*) - right with God, approved of God. Refers to the kind of true, heart-transformed obedience that surpasses the external, rule-based righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It's a righteousness that comes from a transformed heart, leading to love for God and others.

"Exceeds" (20) (περισσεύω, *perisseuō*) - to exceed a fixed number; to be greater than. "Jesus is not talking about beating the scribes and Pharisees at their own game, but about a different level or concept of righteousness altogether." (Quarles, 103).

"Scribes" (20) - experts in the Law, ordained at age 40 after years of study, responsible for copying, interpreting, and teaching Scripture. They were highly regarded for their knowledge but were often criticized by Jesus for their rigid legalism and hypocrisy (Matthew 23:2-3 "they preach, but do not practice").

"Pharisees" (20) - a religious sect devoted to strict observance of the Law and Jewish traditions. They emphasized external righteousness but missed the heart of God's commands. Jesus rebuked them for hypocrisy (Matt 23:25-28 "you clean the outside of the cup, but inside full of greed and self-indulgence").

"Will never enter" (20) (εἰσέρχομαι, *eiserchomai*) - no entrance, not allowed to come into the Kingdom.

ARG: **We are made righteous through faith in Jesus.**

Romans 3:21-25 (ESV) ²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Greatness in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #3 - Pastor Gary Combs - April 6, 2025 - Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus took our sin and offers His righteousness.

2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

ILL: **This righteousness avoids the two ditches of license and legalism. It is the Law of Love.**



The Pharisees, “With their 248 regulations and 365 prohibitions to fence and protect the law, their righteousness was only skin deep. It was outward and external. If verse 19 warns us about the danger of lawlessness, verse 20 warns us about the deadly danger of legalism. A Christian’s righteousness, however, is not skin deep. It goes to the heart. It is internal and spiritual. It is seeking first, from the heart, the kingdom of God and his righteousness (6:33)” (Akin, 46).

APP: Kingdom greatness is about true righteousness. How do we surpass the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees? Not by trying harder, but by receiving Christ’s righteousness and living in the power of the Holy Spirit. We must seek His righteousness, which is an authentic, heart-level obedience to God.

CONCLUSION: Greatness in God’s Kingdom is not about an outward rule-keeping kind of righteousness, but about faith in Christ, obedience to God’s Word, and a heart transformation that makes us right with God.

Those whom Christ calls great in the Kingdom ...

- 1) Affirm Christ’s high view and fulfillment of Scripture.
- 2) Obey and teach His commands.
- 3) Rely on Christ’s righteousness to enter the Kingdom.

Let us therefore not worry about pursuing greatness, but pursuing Christ instead. For when you “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33).

Let’s pray.