

*Research Article*

# “Higher Righteousness” For Kingdom Living: An Exegetical Analysis of Some Key Terms in Matthew 5:17-20

**ABSTRACT**

No biblical text has had greater impact on Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Within this Sermon is Matthew 5:17-20 which forms both the thesis paragraph of the Sermon and the key to appreciating Matthew’s teaching on the relationship between Jesus’ teaching and the Old Testament (OT). This passage concludes with Jesus’ profound demand from his disciples to exhibit “higher righteousness” than the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees before they can enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20). Within the context of Jesus’ audience, the scribes and Pharisees were considered the standard of righteousness in the society during Jesus’ time. For this reason, one wonders what the quality and character of this “higher righteousness” might be. Attempts to address this issue have provoked lots of debate among scholars. This paper, through a critical examination of some key words in the passage, seeks an understanding of this “higher righteousness.” The paper found that by “higher righteousness, Jesus demands a kind of righteousness that is not merely external, but a true inner righteousness based on faith in the word of God.

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**INTRODUCTION**

No biblical text has had greater influence on Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount. One cannot overemphasize the role this part of Scripture has played in shaping Christian ethics. For James H. Burtness “There is no section of the Bible which has been so quoted (by non-Christians as well as Christians), worked over, commented upon, argued about, taken apart and put together, preached and taught, praised and scorned as has the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>2</sup> Warren S. Kissinger points to a general agreement among scholars that the Sermon is a compendium of the teachings of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> In John R. Stott’s view this Sermon is “probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed.”<sup>4</sup> Considering the amount of literature published on this discourse, one cannot help but to agree with these scholars. Indeed, there is no doubt that this Sermon has a unique fascination. The intense fascination it generates derives from a widely held consensus that it is one of the main biblical texts which gives the foundation of Christian discipleship<sup>5</sup> and that it contains “the pure uncorrupted expression of the will of God as it agrees with the Law and prophets, i.e., as it always was.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> James H. Burtness, “Life-Style and Law: Some Reflections on Matthew 5:17,” *Di* 14/1 (1975): 1.

<sup>3</sup> Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*. (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), xi.

<sup>4</sup> John. R. Stott, *Sermon on the Mount* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount: Four Legitimate Readings, Four Plausible Views of Discipleship and Their Relative Values* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), 217.

At the heart of the Sermon is Matthew 5:17-20 which serves as the thesis paragraph for Jesus’ teachings. This passage concludes with Jesus’ profound assertion that it is required of those who enter the kingdom of heaven to exhibit a higher righteousness than the righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes (Matt 5:20). As the study will show, this passage aims at addressing the inadequate righteousness of the scribes’ reading of the Commandments and the inadequate righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes in their religious and devotional practices. Nonetheless, the demand raises a lot of difficulties because the Pharisees and the scribes were known to exhibit the strictest observance of the Law in Jesus’ time. Consequently, this statement has provoked many questions about the purpose and meaning of the higher righteousness. What does Jesus mean by “better righteousness?” How can such righteousness be attained? This study conducts an exegetical analysis of some key terms in Matt.5: 17-20 to clarify, among other things, how Jesus’ fulfils the Law and the Prophets and the nature and character of the “higher righteousness.”

## Background of Pharisees and Scribes

The term Pharisee in the context of the current study refers to the Jewish sect that gave Judaism its distinctive feature and definition until the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE. Other sects that existed in Israel include the Sadducees, the Samaritans, the Essenes, the Zealots, the Qumran community and the Hasmoneans. Not mentioned in the OT, the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Apocrypha, the name “Pharisee” is known to have emerged from the Aramaic word *peris*, *perisayya* (equivalent to the Hebrew word *pharash*) which means “separated” or “detached.”<sup>7</sup> This suggests that Pharisees regarded themselves or were regarded as the “separated ones.”<sup>8</sup> They detached themselves from the apparel and the customs of the general society and from the cleric who were considered corrupt. They also separated themselves from Gentiles who were considered as sinners. The Pharisees were thus, Separatists or Puritists. This gave them the opportunity to devote themselves to the study of the Torah and to avoid any type of impurity proscribed by the Levitical Law.

Not much is known about the origins of the Pharisees. There is no consensus as to the precise time they first appeared. The prevailing idea is that the Pharisees had their roots in the group of Jews called the Chasidim or the Hasidim. The Hasidim emerged in the 2nd century BCE when the influence of Hellenism on the Jews was very strong and many Jews renounced their faith and adopted that of the Gentiles. According to Josephus, the Pharisees, Essenes and Sadducees existed during the reign of Jonathan (144-139 BCE).<sup>9</sup> They were probably the successors of the Assideans (the “pious”), a party that originated in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in revolt against his heathenizing policy. In such a circumstance, the Hasidim rose and insisted that the Jewish ritual Laws must be observed strictly. Calmet claims that the existence of these sects cannot be higher than 184 BCE.<sup>10</sup> Later, they got representation to the Jewish Sanhedrin— that is, the Supreme Court and legislative body of the Jews and were very effective in it. The Pharisees were the most numerous and powerful sect of the Jews in the time of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

The religious activities of the Pharisees were based basically on the written Torah and the oral Torah. On the surface, the Pharisees could be considered as exhibiting extraordinary righteousness. First, they contended for a very strict interpretation of the Law and a very strict adherence to that Law. They were extremely accurate and minute in all matters appertaining to the Law of Moses most especially regarding the observance of the Sabbath as a holy day in which no work should be done. Second, the Pharisees were not like other people were— in externals they were singularly good. Third, they used all the means of grace. They fasted often and much (twice in every week); they attended all the sacrifices; they were constant in public and private prayer, and in reading and hearing the Scriptures. Fourth, they paid tithes and gave alms of all that they possessed (even mint, dill and cumin, see Matt. 23:23).

Scribes and Pharisees are overlapping but not identical parties. Scribes were professional interpreters of the Law for practical application, while Pharisees were a reform movement aimed at following every aspect of it meticulously.<sup>12</sup> Both groups were diligent in keeping the Law and showed great devotion to it. Among the scribes were found the Pharisees and Sadducees, and only a small proportion of the Pharisaic group was composed of scribes.<sup>13</sup> The scribes were men who spent all their time teaching and expounding the law to the people.<sup>14</sup> They were the jurists who administered the law and thus, they were the great authorities on God’s Law. They lived all their lives studying and illustrating Scriptures. They were the ones responsible for making copies of the law for others and they did it very

<sup>7</sup> Walter A. Elwell (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 913.

<sup>8</sup> Elwell (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 913.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* Volume 2 (Philadelphia: Desilver, Thomas and Co., nd), 144. <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=pMUVAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq>

<sup>10</sup> As cited in Horne, *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, 144.

<sup>11</sup> Horne, *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, 144.

<sup>12</sup> R.T. France, “The Gospel of Matthew” in *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 188-189.

<sup>13</sup> Sherman E. Johnson, “Matthew” in George Arthur Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. 7 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 293.

<sup>14</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 201.

meticulously.<sup>15</sup> They were very knowledgeable and had a reputation for being accurate interpreters of the Law. The scribes and the Pharisees were in many senses the most outstanding people in the society. Children learning from them were supposed to hold them in a higher esteem than they would their parents.<sup>16</sup>

That the Pharisee and scribes were considered the standard of righteousness in the society is not in doubt. According to Sherman E. Johnson “There was no finer standard of righteousness in the ancient world than the Pharisaic, with its emphasis on personal holiness and social responsibility.”<sup>17</sup> For John Wesley, Pharisaic righteousness is “a righteousness which, in many respects, went far beyond the conception which many have been accustomed to entertain concerning it.”<sup>18</sup> To be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees would have been ridiculous, unless a different interpretation of “righteousness” was given. With such positive description of Pharisaic and scribal righteousness, how could Jesus tell his disciples: “unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”? Obviously, Jesus’ statement came as a surprise to a lot of his audience. In order to appreciate and apply Jesus’ statement, it is important first, to understand how Jesus defines “the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” and second, to understand how Jesus defines the form of righteousness he expects from his disciples.

### Jesus’ View on Pharisaic and Scribal Righteousness

Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees gives us his description of the righteousness they exhibited. First, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was inconsistent with and contradictory to their own profession. In Matt. 23:1-4 Jesus pointed out that even though the scribes and Pharisees taught the truth, they did not consistently practice it. They exhibited hypocritical righteousness, teaching one thing and practicing the other. They set double standards—in public they gave the impression that they were keeping the Law but in their privacy they broke virtually every commandment they demanded others to keep. In effect they were saying to their audience “Do as I say, not as I do.” Second, the righteousness of the Pharisees was “all show no substance.” The Pharisees performed righteous acts in public places with the primary motivation of appearing holy, godly, righteous to others and hence receiving their attention (Luke 18:11, 12). They wore splendid religious garments that separated them from others, and they delighted in having places and titles of honor (Matt. 23:5-7). Third, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was untrustworthy, deceitful and dishonest (Matt. 23:16-19). Moreover, Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of the teachers in that they neglected justice, truth, purity and holiness of heart (Matt. 23:23-24). Their scribal faithfulness to the Law was therefore selective. Finally, the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees consisted of legalisms which distorted the true spirit of the Mosaic Law. There was no longer a deep abiding love for the God behind the Law and commandments. The Law was being kept as a matter of tradition, and not as a matter of deep moral and ethical conviction. And this led to the religious devotion of many of the Jews in Jesus’ day to be shallow, superficial, and trivial. In doing all these, the Pharisees thought they could match God’s standards by keeping all the outward rules. Since they were able to keep the Law strictly they “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9), they were confident of their own righteousness and they looked down on everybody else. Self-centeredness and selfishness made them blind to their own faults. The foregoing is well captured in the words of Albert Barnes: “Their [Pharisaic and scribal] righteousness consisted in outward observances of the ceremonial and traditional Law. They offered sacrifices, fasted often, prayed much, were punctilious about ablutions [ceremonial washings], and tithes, and the ceremonies of religion, but neglected justice, truth, purity, and holiness of heart.”<sup>19</sup>

### The Context of Matthew 5: 17-20

The term context means “the sentences, paragraphs, chapters, surrounding the text [Mt. 5:17-20] and related to it.”<sup>20</sup> Broadly speaking, we may define two contexts, which are overlapping: (1) The Gospel of Matthew and its theology and (2) the pericopae surrounding Matthew 5:17-20, that is the Sermon on the Mount. The idea of the Sermon’s division into three has been unquestionably accepted by many scholars. Dale C. Allison’s tripartite division of the Sermon are Torah (5:17-48), Christian cult (6:1-18) and the Social issues (6:19-7:12).<sup>21</sup> The passage under consideration falls within the immediate context of Matt. 5:21-48 (the so-called Great Antitheses). The Antitheses describe how the righteousness of Jesus followers can exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Matt. 5:17–20, is comparable to Lev. 18:1–23 and Eccl.

<sup>15</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 201.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, “Matthew”, 293.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, “Matthew”, 293-294.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1, (New York: G. Lane and C. B. Tippet, 1845), 228. <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=0Xf1J-hgyWEC&pg=PA230&lpg=PA230&dq>

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1, (New York: G. Lane and C. B. Tippet, 1845), 228. <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=0Xf1J-hgyWEC&pg=PA230&lpg=PA230&dq>

<sup>20</sup> Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downer's Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1989), 16.

<sup>21</sup> W. D. Davies, “Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991), 283-309, 295.

3:1–9, a summary or declaration that heads a section consisting of various particular cases or instances.<sup>22</sup> The section (5:17-20) performs two functions:

Negatively, 5:17–19 anticipates an incorrect interpretation of 5:21–48, namely, that Jesus came to jettison the Law irrespective of fulfilment. Positively, 5:20 announces what 5:21–48 is all about: the righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees is one that breaks the mold of Judaism and articulates a norm of behavior germane to the new, Christological/eschatological state of affairs.<sup>23</sup>

The passage closes the discussion of how strictly Christians must obey the Mosaic Law (5:3-16) and introduces the next section where Jesus will show how the Law, as it was then followed, was wrong (5:21–7:12).

### Exegetical Analysis of Some Key Terms in Matthew 5:17-20

Matthew 5:17-20 emphasizes the centrality of the Jewish Law to the morality of the kingdom being proclaimed; a theme that will continue throughout the antitheses that follow (verses 21-48). Jesus begins this section by denying that he had come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (verse 17). It is likely that Jesus was accused of abolishing the Law or the Prophets and so he used this occasion to correct this erroneous impression. Such an accusation might have come from the Pharisees whose popular notion was that Jesus was undermining the Law or the Prophets by his teachings,<sup>24</sup> something unthinkable to the Jew of his day. Sharing this view, Schweizer is paraphrased as saying that this verse “is likely Matthew’s own creation to argue against a position that Jesus supplanted the Law.”<sup>25</sup> The Greek word *katalusai* translated “abolish” could also be translated put down, demolish, annul, nullify, make void, do away with etc.<sup>26</sup> Grammatically, *katalusai* appears to be an infinitive of purpose (in a dialectical construct opposed to *pleroo* with the strong adversative *alla* (but). The term indicates the antithesis of Jesus’ purpose in coming. In each of the three other uses of the term in Matthew (24:2, 26:61 and 27:40), the verb denotes “causing something to no longer stand.”

The Greek word *pleroo* (translated fulfil) actually means “to fill up” or “to fill completely.”<sup>27</sup> While the basic meaning (fulfil) is not in dispute, it is very debatable as to what *pleroo* connotes in its use as an infinitive of purpose expressing something about Jesus’ mission. The Greek could be a translation of the Aramaic *osip* (to add to), a view favored by Jeremias.<sup>28</sup> Again, *pleroo* is the equivalent of the Hebrew *qum* (*heqim* or *quiyym*), meaning establish, make valid, keep a promise, confirm a promise, or hold to words.<sup>29</sup> Scholars have debated endlessly the meaning of the word “fulfil” in the present context. Concerning the meaning if this word, different commentators offer differing viewpoints: it refers to “a new depth of insight into what the Law requires”<sup>30</sup>; “to expound the true meaning and intent of the Law”<sup>31</sup>; “[to] bring them to their divinely intended goal”<sup>32</sup>; “bringing something to its designed end”<sup>33</sup>; “give the true or complete meaning to something”<sup>34</sup>; “to complete the Mosaic Law by bringing a New Law which transcends the Old Law.”<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most important consideration is Matthew’s broader use of *pleroo*. Matthew uses this verb sixteen times in statements that are almost exclusively Matthean. B. M Trout categorizes these usages into three.<sup>36</sup> First, it has been used in its basic sense of “to fill up” (13:47; 23:32). The second use, the salvation-historical use, refers to situations where Matthew sees an event which transpired in the OT as having reached its historical climax – its fulfilment – in the life, ministry, or death of Jesus, a sense, in which ‘fulfil’ means that what was anticipated has now been “filled up”. The third use occurs in the phrase, “to fulfil all righteousness” (3:15). This reference is especially important since it is found in precisely the same aorist infinitive form as in 5:17. The most convincing of various suggested meanings to “fulfil” is that it “refers to Jesus fulfilling prophecy” because “of the sixteen occurrences of *pleroo* in Matthew; thirteen have prophecy or the prophets as the subject. Of the three remaining one is unrelated (cf. 13:48, above) and one is also related to prophecy (23:32)”, thus making it highly likely that OT prophecy is in view in 3:25 too.<sup>37</sup> Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1

<sup>22</sup> Allison, “Structure,” 432.

<sup>23</sup> Don Garlington, “The Better Righteousness”: Matthew 5:20” in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.4 (2010) 479–502, 480.

<sup>24</sup> The “Law and Prophets” likely refers to as much of the Old Testament canon as was recognized within Judaism.

<sup>25</sup> See James Manuel Gomes, *The Contributions of Scholarly Methodology to Matt. 5:17-48 for the Popular Conception of Sacred Scripture: Matthean Redaction and Literary Style as Dramatically Hyperbolic in Moral Pedagogy* (Unpublished Master’s Thesis University of St. Michael’s College, 2013), 102.

<sup>26</sup> See, William Edwy Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1. (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), 83-85.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett H. Branscomb, *Jesus and the Law of Moses* (London: Smith, 1930), 226-228

<sup>30</sup> John Nolland, “Gospel of Matthew” in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 219.

<sup>31</sup> Charles H. Talbert, “Matthew” in *Paideia Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 81.

<sup>32</sup> David L. Turner, “Matthew” in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 162.

<sup>33</sup> See B. M Trout, *The nature of the Law’s Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Unpublished Master Thesis Magister Artium, North-West University, 2014), 89.

<sup>34</sup> Trout, “The Nature of the Law’s Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20: An exegetical and theological study”, 89.

<sup>35</sup> William D. Davies, *Christian Origins and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 33-34.

<sup>36</sup> We have gleaned what follows from Trout, “The Nature of the Law’s Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20: An Exegetical and Theological Study”, 89ff.

<sup>37</sup> Trout, “The Nature of the Law’s Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20: An Exegetical and Theological Study”, 90.

allude to the voice from heaven in 3:17, signifying the realization of OT prophecies. Prophecy declares God's will and so to fulfil prophecy is to fulfil righteousness. "To fulfil all righteousness", according to Nolland means: "the concern to prepare for and see it in the kingdom of God as anticipated in Scripture and the Jewish faith."<sup>38</sup> The foregoing leads to one point: "When Jesus says that he has come to 'fulfil' the Law and the Prophets, it must mean what the verb means elsewhere: that Jesus has brought into being that which the Law and the Prophets anticipated."<sup>39</sup>

In 5:18 both sides of 5:17 are affirmed. Jesus has not come to abolish the Law (5:17a); hence no part of the Law will pass away (5:18bc). Rather, he has come to 'fulfil' the Law (5:17b); hence, as the clause in verse 18d suggests, the validity of the Law should be understood in light of its fulfilment. The Law remains; but it is to be viewed in the light of the arrival of the one to whom it pointed. In this verse 18, Jesus makes it clear that even the tiniest part of the law remains valid "until heaven and earth pass away," or "until all things come to pass." 5:18b begins with *eos* which has been shown to have a temporal force and hence to mean "until." The use of the word "until" seems to suggest some end to the validity of the Mosaic Law by virtue of some event or the passage of time. Two alternatives exist as possible interpretations of the first *eos* clause: either the clause signifies "never" or points to the apocalyptic consummation of "this age."<sup>40</sup> The first alternative must be rejected because the text makes it plain that there will be time when the Law will be brought to an end. This paper contends for the second interpretation. The phrase "until all things come to pass" is parallel to "until heaven and earth pass away," but the reason for its insertion is that Matthew wanted to stress that all which the prophets predicted would be fulfilled.<sup>41</sup> The expression "until all things come to pass" does not mean that the Law is in force until all things are accomplished in Jesus' ministry as some people have argued. Such an interpretation contradicts the former condition: "until heaven and earth pass away" which refers to the passing of this age as the parallel text (Matt. 24:35). Augustine<sup>42</sup> contends for Jesus' fulfilment of the Mosaic Law in at least six ways. First, Jesus fulfilled the Law by obeying it. Second, Jesus fulfilled the Law by giving the Holy Spirit to his followers so that they could obey it. Third, Jesus fulfilled the Law by bringing out its true and full meaning. Fourth, Jesus fulfilled the Law by fulfilling its Messianic memory. Fifth, Jesus fulfilled the Law by transforming its ritualistic expression, consequently revealing its true meaning. Sixth, Jesus fulfilled the Law by giving additional commands which broadened and corrected the meaning of the original Law.

The expression *ton nomon hee tous prophetas*, the Law and the Prophets, denote the entirety of the Jewish Scriptures. The inclusion of the Prophets, according to H.D. Betz, is intended to point to the fact that God's will is stipulated not only by the Law but also by the Prophets.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Jesus does not fulfil only the Mosaic Law, but brings the fulfilment of God's entire revelation. For D.A. Hagner, the inclusion of the Prophets is meant to introduce the concept of fulfilment.<sup>44</sup> B. M Trout concludes that "... to understand Matthew's concept of fulfilment correctly, we must understand it in terms of a climax of God's revelation to his people. Jesus does not only fulfil the Law; he is the one to whom every part of the Hebrew Scriptures – Law and Prophets – points."<sup>45</sup> Jesus' fulfilment of the OT covers the smallest of the Hebrew letters.

It is possible that Matthew included verse 19 as a counter to antinomianism in his community.<sup>46</sup> Here, Jesus warns against not only personal annulling of the Law but also teaching others to annul it. The kingdom of heaven stated in verse 20 is also stated here. This passage might be said to speak of life within *ten basileian ton ouranon*, the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus has inaugurated. The focus on the kingdom of heaven in verses 19-20 points to the compatibility of verse 17 with verses 18-19. We must therefore consider the context of 5:19, in particular the two preceding verses to which this verse may be well directly related. That is, the Law and the Prophets pointed to the coming kingdom of God, which is now here in Jesus (v. 17). The kingdom's arrival does not mean disciples can forget about or cease to teach the Law, since all has not yet been accomplished (vv. 18-19).

Finally, verse 20 identifies the goal of the entire Sermon on the Mount in Matthew as surpassing the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness.<sup>47</sup> The conjunction *gar* connects this verse to the preceding statement, completing a string of conjunctions that indicates the unity of this pericope. The term can express cause or reason, explanation (for), inference (so, then), or continuation of a thought. It may be taken as either explanatory ("for") or perhaps inferential ("therefore"). Verse 20 is connected to verse 19 by its focus on *ten basileian ton ouranon*, the kingdom of heaven. For disciples to have good standing in God's kingdom they must not merely uphold and teach the Law (v. 19) in a way that exceeds that

<sup>38</sup> As cited in Trout, *The Nature of the Law's Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Trout, *The Nature of the Law's Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> See William C. Allen, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 46.

<sup>41</sup> Donald A. Carson, "Matthew" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol.8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 145-146.

<sup>42</sup> H.K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), 28-30.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Herminia, 1995), 178.

<sup>44</sup> Donald Alfred Hagner, "Matthew 1-13" in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33a, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 105.

<sup>45</sup> Trout, *The Nature of the Law's Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17-20*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> W.D. Davies & D.C. Allison, "Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew Volume 1: Matthew 1-7" in *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 485ff.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 51.

of the religious leaders of their day, but they must also practise it (v. 20). The foil of the Lord's position is the scribes and Pharisees, especially as to their inferior and inadequate righteousness. They were in his calculus utterly unfit even to enter the kingdom, much less lead others into it. Jesus does not criticise them for not being good but for not being good enough.<sup>48</sup> "Though their multiplicity of regulations could engender a 'good' society, it domesticated the law and lost the radical demand for absolute holiness demanded by the Scriptures."<sup>49</sup>

### Nature and Character of "Higher Righteousness"

First, the "higher righteousness" has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. That verses 21-48 illustrate the greater righteousness demanded of disciples in verse 20 is widely accepted. We may turn to the immediate context of verses 21-48 to determine the sense of the greater righteousness demanded by Jesus. In these verses, Jesus demands more than Moses. As such, those who obey Jesus will inevitably exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>50</sup> There is the tendency of thinking of the "higher righteousness" as pointing to "a religion of achievement." The current paper rejects this idea on the grounds that biblical emphasis on grace makes such an idea unlikely. Again, there are notes within the Sermon which prevent its being interpreted as proposing a religion of achievement. To describe Christianity as even partly a religion of achievement seems inaccurate and misleading. Jesus does not doubt scribal and pharisaic righteousness; he just does not feel it is extensive enough. The Matthean Jesus was not urging his disciples to compete with the scribes and the Pharisees in righteousness. Rather, he was urging them to focus on something greater. Without denying the qualitative dimension of the greater righteousness, Davies and Allison, based on their comparison of 5:20 with 5:47, contend that greater righteousness is "a doing more" and is therefore "a quantitative advance."<sup>51</sup>

The required conduct is not exclusively quantitative: "Instead, Jesus expects, as the antitheses to follow show, a new and higher kind of righteousness that rests upon the presence of the eschatological kingdom he brings and finds its definition and content in his definitive and authoritative exposition of the law"<sup>52</sup> Albert Barnes put it: "The righteousness that Jesus required in his kingdom was purity, chastity, honesty, temperance, the fear of God, and the love of man. It is pure, eternal, reaching the motives, and making the life holy."<sup>53</sup> There is therefore both quantitative and qualitative qualities in the righteousness Jesus refers to.

Second, the "higher righteousness" is Christocentric in focus. It is not the Law that distinguishes the disciples from non-disciples, but the "higher righteousness."<sup>54</sup> It is for this reason that Jesus says the righteousness of the disciples must be greater than that of the Pharisees. But how different was the righteousness of the Pharisees from that of the disciples? Bonhoeffer answers, saying, "Their idea of righteousness was a direct, literal and practical fulfillment of the commandment, their ideal was to model their behavior exactly on the demands of the law... Their obedience was never more than imperfect."<sup>55</sup> The disciples also conceived righteousness as a form of obedience to the Law and so no one who failed to keep the Law could be regarded as righteous. Though both groups conceived righteousness as obedience to the Law, the disciple had advantage over the Pharisee in that the former's obedience to the Law is perfect while that of the latter is imperfect.<sup>56</sup> Obedience of the Law by the disciple is perfect because Jesus, one who has perfectly fulfilled the Law and one with whom they live in communion, stands in the gap between him/her and the Law.<sup>57</sup> This means that the disciple is not faced with a law which has not yet been fulfilled, but with one whose demands have already been fulfilled. As Bonhoeffer notes "The righteousness it demands is already there, the righteousness of Jesus which submits to the cross because that is what the Law demands. This righteousness is therefore not a duty owed, but a perfect and truly personal communion with God, and Jesus not only possesses this righteousness, but is himself the personal embodiment of it."<sup>58</sup> The point is that, by calling them, Jesus has become the righteousness of the disciples. Therefore the "higher righteousness" spoken about in this verse, refers to the righteousness of Christ imputed to those who respond to his call to discipleship. The "higher righteousness" is a gift not a personal achievement. Bonhoeffer describes this righteousness further saying, it is righteousness that "consists precisely in their [the disciples'] following him [Jesus Christ], and in the beatitudes the reward of the kingdom of heaven has been promised. It is a righteousness under the cross [belonging] only to the poor, the tempted, the hungry, the meek, the peacemakers, the persecuted— who endure their lot for the sake of Jesus."<sup>59</sup> The "better righteousness" differs from that of the Pharisees in that it is

<sup>48</sup> Carson, "Matthew", 147.

<sup>49</sup> Carson "Matthew", 147.

<sup>50</sup> Davies & Allison, "Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew Volume 1: Matthew 1-7", 498.

<sup>51</sup> Davies & Allison, Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew Volume 1: Matthew 1-7", 500.

<sup>52</sup> Hagner, Matthew 1-13, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical on the Gospels*, 66.

<sup>54</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 124.

<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 124.

<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 124.

<sup>57</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 124.

<sup>58</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 125

<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 125.

completely rooted in ones fellowship with Christ who alone fulfills the Law.

Finally, the better righteousness is the one that is practiced by the one who teaches it, though it goes beyond rules in search for principles. Having obtained righteousness through salvation in Christ, disciples are obligated to live according to the standard that God's righteous demands. The disciple cannot say and do not (Matt. 7:21) and cannot do things to be seen by people (Matt. 6:1). He/she cannot neglect any commandments of God's Law (Matt. 5:19). Yet again this is impossible without the help and guidance of the Lord. Not only are the disciples dependent on the Lord to receive His righteousness but must also remain dependent upon Him to live a life according to His righteousness.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has pointed out that Jesus' teaching is not inconsistent with that of the Law and the Prophets. Yet, his teachings are different from the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus came not to abolish the Law or to soften it but to help us keep it. Jesus demanded a kind of righteousness that was not merely external but a true inner righteousness based on faith in the word of God. It also established that, one cannot have a right relationship with God apart from His righteousness and the only way that one can obtain His righteousness is through the only begotten Son. In addition, the study has shown that in this passage, Jesus is contrasting the external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees with the interior righteousness that proceeds from the heart and which is to characterize his followers. Jesus is telling his disciples how to be righteous but not how to look righteous. This is illustrated in Matthew 5 in Christ's teaching about anger and murder (Matt. 5:21-26), lust and adultery (Matt. 5:27-32), oaths and truth telling (Matt. 5:33-37), retaliation (Matt. 5:38-42), and the love of enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). In each of these areas, the concern is for internal righteousness and sanctity surpassing external performance.

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