

Do the Rules Matter?

BOB HEERSPINK

Expectations are part of life. We have expectations to meet at work, with family, and maybe personal expectations we hold for ourselves. What can be most frustrating are the times when we feel expectations are imposed by others. Some people think that it is the Church that has come up with all the rules associated with the Christian faith today; but is that really true? Did Jesus have expectations for his followers? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, one of the saddest moments in my ministry was the time when one of my parishioners came up to me and she said she was going to leave the church. She was leaving, she said, not because she didn't love Jesus – she did – but she said: I just don't measure up around here. I am just not good enough. Everybody here has their act together but me. It was like she was saying: I just cannot follow all of the rules you people have. I love Jesus; I just cannot stand the expectations of the church.

DAVE BAST

Well Bob, I think that is something we have probably all experienced. You know, there is the Law in the sense of God's commandments for our lives; and then there are the laws that we sort of create culturally in an unspoken way, and sometimes very openly; we apply them on people and we say: Well, actually, you need to conform. You need to fit in. You should be of our socioeconomic level. You should follow the rules that we have sort of created – the unwritten laws of our community about what you do and you don't do...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, absolutely. I think the Church has to be very careful that the expectations it lays on people are expectations that grow out of true discipleship, not something merely of the cultural mores that they have created to form their own community.

DAVE BAST

Well, and today in our culture there is a widespread rejection of, not just expectations, but fundamental behaviors. I just read a news story the other day that said the majority of young people in our culture – our society today – reject marriage. They no longer think it is necessary. We don't need a ceremony...

BOB HEERSPINK

It is obsolete.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we don't need this contract that commits us to this; we can just move in and out of relationships, and if we choose, that is enough.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I suspect a lot of them might say: Yes well, that would be okay with Jesus. You know, the Church may have a problem with that, but not Jesus, because people have this notion sometimes that Jesus was really freewheeling; you know, he really wasn't hung up with rules...

DAVE BAST

Yes, he just loved everyone.

BOB HEERSPINK

He didn't care how people lived.

DAVE BAST

Yes, as long as you loved, you were fine.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is as though Jesus was an anything-goes guy compared to the Church.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think that is something that we should check against scripture. What does Jesus himself say? We have been talking about the Sermon on the Mount in recent programs, and there Jesus sort of lays out his ethics – his expectations, if you will, for our lives; and there is a particularly pertinent passage from Matthew 5:17-20... Well, let me read it a minute; Jesus is speaking to his followers, and he says:

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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

BOB HEERSPINK

I think those words would be a pretty big shock to a lot of folks who think Jesus doesn't care about the way people live.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Jesus the lawless one; Jesus the free-love guy.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, I think Jesus actually understood. He knew that there were going to be people who pushed his teachings in that direction. I think there were people doing that already in the First Century.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so he says to them: Hey, listen; if you think I've come to just trash this whole thing and just throw it out the window and you can do whatever you want, you've got another think coming because I came to fulfill the Law and not to abolish it; and unless you are greater in your obedience – your righteousness – than the Pharisees and the scribes – the teachers of the Law – you will not go to heaven.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now we've got to explore that some, because what is Jesus really saying? It almost sounds like Jesus says: Well, let's forget about grace now. Let's just go back to being saved by doing good; and that cannot be right.

DAVE BAST

Do we earn our way into heaven by keeping the Law? Is that Jesus' teaching here? Well, if it is, we've got a major problem, don't we, with the rest of the New Testament?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we will come back and explore that some more right after this break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Okay, Bob; we have just read this great passage where Jesus says: I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. I think we need to explore a lot of those terms. Let's start with that *fulfill* idea; what is he getting at?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; it is a strange thing to say, isn't it? You would think Jesus would come along and say: I have come to *do* the Law...

DAVE BAST

To obey it.

BOB HEERSPINK

To obey it.

DAVE BAST

To obey the commands.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; which he did do. I mean, he perfectly obeyed the Law; but *fulfill* the Law... Does that mean he fulfilled it by his life; by his ministry; that he somehow in his work of the cross and empty tomb fulfilled the Law; or does it mean he came to intensify it? To make it even stronger than what it is?

DAVE BAST

So you are saying there is a difference between obeying the Law or keeping the Law and fulfilling it, as he says here?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I think there is more...

DAVE BAST

We are certainly not meaning to deny that he obeyed the Law.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

He said on one occasion to the very Pharisees and teachers of the Law: Which of you convicts me of sin?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And there was deafening silence throughout the crowd. Nobody could; but *fulfill* is more than that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, yes; and that is not the way we typically describe the Law, but...

DAVE BAST

Maybe that is the question we need to look at: What does he mean by *Law*? That word suggests to me commandments.

BOB HEERSPINK

It does. It is the *Torah*, but in the text he also says: I have come to fulfill the Law and the *Prophets*...

DAVE BAST

Yes; now we are getting a little bit broader idea. I mean, Law and Prophets is shorthand for the Old Testament – for the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, for the Bible as Jesus knew it: I have come to fulfill the Bible – the word of God. So, that is a little bit broader, isn't it? I mean, there are prophecies, obviously, in the prophets. He fulfilled them by being the one of whom they spoke.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think that means that when you look at the text – this text – he is not simply saying even: I have come to just give you some more rules to keep. He is really saying something about what *he* does in his ministry with regard to that Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

Well, if you break down the elements of the Old Testament – of the Hebrew Scriptures – what do we find? We find laws certainly, and he obeyed those; so in a sense, that is fulfilling. He kept the commandments of God perfectly. He never broke any of them. He was the opposite of Adam and Eve, who disobeyed the commandment of God; but there are ceremonies in the Old Testament, rituals. He fulfilled those in the sense that he was the One to whom they pointed. The Lamb of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it is why we don't keep those ceremonial laws anymore. We don't perform the ceremonies; we don't sacrifice lambs at Passover because Jesus took all those laws, the ceremonial laws that pointed to his coming, and filled them, as it were, to overflowing with meaning by the very acts of his life.

DAVE BAST

That is why Hebrews says there is no longer any need to make sacrifices for sin, because Christ did it once for all; and Paul points to the promises of the Old Testament that are also fulfilled by Jesus. He says in 2 Corinthians Chapter 1, for example: All the promises of God find their "yes" in him. Everything that God has promised for us as individuals and for the whole world is going to be brought in and through Jesus. He is the fulfillment in that sense.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and then he says: I fulfill the Law and the Prophets; so when he says that, Dave, what comes to your mind as to what that means?

DAVE BAST

What I have just been saying. I mean, he is the subject of the Bible – of the Old Testament as well as the New; and it is all pointing to him in one way or another; and he is the reality of which they speak in the Law and the Prophets.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, he is not just thinking of a certain prophecy here and there; he is really saying...

DAVE BAST

No, it is bigger than that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Take the whole thing and see how I fulfill the entire Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

So, I haven't come to *abolish* it, he says.

BOB HEERSPINK

I am not tossing it out the window.

DAVE BAST

Right. So for us, we don't reject the Old Testament either, and just say: We are New Testament people. We see the whole thing as the book of Christ – the book that is about Jesus.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I just see this as an incredibly powerful affirmation of the Old Testament. You know, the Old Testament was Jesus' Bible; and sometimes we as Christians don't understand that. We have this notion that the Jews had the Old Testament; we have the New Testament; but Jesus says: You really need, if you are going to be part of my Church – if you are going to be my follower – you have to take seriously that Old Testament. It just isn't thrown out the door.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but Bob, it is a little bit more complicated. You know, when we read this passage: I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them, I thought of another text later in the book of Ephesians... Well, let me read it. It is Ephesians 2:14, 15:

For he – Christ – himself is our peace, who has made the two one, and has destroyed the barrier – the dividing wall of hostility... I know you love this text, Bob, I've heard you preach on it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; I have preached on it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; listen:

¹⁵By setting aside in his flesh... or it could be translated: By abolishing in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. So, what is it? Jesus said: I didn't come to abolish the Law. Paul says he abolished the law with its commands in his own flesh when he died on the cross.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, obviously they cannot be contradictory, but okay, how do we bring those together?

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is the question; because there is a sense in which he *did* abolish the Law. We just said we don't make animal sacrifices; that was part of the Law.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, he abolished the Law as a way in which we come into God's presence, especially the ceremonial law pertaining to Passover, to all the feasts and festivities; laws pertaining to clean and unclean; all these things that...

DAVE BAST

The kosher laws – food laws.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, right. Keeping those laws for an Old Testament believer was a way in which he came or she came into the presence of God; and that now was fulfilled in Jesus, so the road by which we come to God today is Christ.

DAVE BAST

You could also say that keeping those laws for the Jew in the Old Testament was the way that he or she kept themselves separate from the Gentiles – from the scum of the world, so to speak; and Paul says: You know what? All those walls have been abolished in Christ. He has broken all that down by fulfilling them – I think he would say – in a more profound sense.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I sometimes think when we go to Paul and we see the word *law*, for us so quickly we go to Exodus 20 – we go to the Ten Commandments; and it almost sounds like Paul is throwing the Ten Commandments out the door. You know, when he talks about law, he is really talking about something much more broad, and he is really focusing on those issues that were being brought by the Judaizers who wanted to keep all the ceremonial law in the New Testament Church. That is really what he is focusing on. Paul doesn't throw morality out the door, and Jesus doesn't throw morality out the door. Right here he says it: Don't think I've come to abolish the Law; I fulfill the Law, but even with regard to the moral Law, that is still in effect.

DAVE BAST

And that is why he goes on to say we had better be keeping that Law. We had better be paying attention to it unless your righteousness is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, and they were the people who were renowned for their righteousness; so, what does that mean? I mean, we have to somehow do more... do better? These were the people who had, what was it, six hundred fourteen different commandments that surrounded the basic ten to make sure they didn't break them?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think it is that kind of a text, Dave, that a lot of Christians wrestle with because we have this tendency in our Christian life to begin with grace and then slide over with those kinds of texts to say: Okay, now it is up to me. You know, Jesus got me so far, now I have to be this super righteous person whose righteousness exceeds that of the religious leaders of Jesus' day if I am going to make it into heaven; and then we mess ourselves up big time.

DAVE BAST

And then here comes the Church, then, with all of its extra rules and expectations that we dump on people.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, we are going to have to come back to that and ask really what is Jesus saying here? What really does it mean to have a righteousness even greater than the scribes and Pharisees? We will be back in a minute.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back. I am Dave Bast, along with my partner, Bob Heerspink, and this is *Groundwork*; and Bob, we just looked at Jesus' command, essentially, to his followers: Your righteousness has to be greater than that of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees or you won't go to heaven; and we would like to know a little bit more about what he means there.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think it helps, Dave, to see where the Sermon on the Mount goes from these verses. Jesus really lays out six different examples of how he approaches moral law. He really takes the Law and he intensifies it. He drives it to an internal level, and I think that is because his kingdom is here. I mean, we cannot lose the fact that this is life in God's kingdom. I would like to just read the last of those examples.

DAVE BAST

So, we are talking about Matthew 5 and what he goes on to do in the rest of the chapter after he talks about that greater righteousness; then he goes on to illustrate with a number of the Ten Commandments, really. He makes reference to them...

BOB HEERSPINK

He really talks about the greater righteousness...

DAVE BAST

And illustrates what he means, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; so here is the last one: ⁴³You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy," ⁴⁴but I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

DAVE BAST

That is actually the characteristic formula that he uses: You have heard that it was said; and when he says that, he then quotes from the Law in the Old Testament; but *I* say to you, which is a rather startling thing...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, that is the big shock there because a rabbi would say: Well, you have heard it said of old, and then typically a rabbi would say: But there is another teacher over here who would say this.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so a rabbi is balancing teachers with teachers...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Jesus is balancing the word of God with his own pronouncement; almost as though he has the right to proclaim God's Law directly himself...

BOB HEERSPINK

He says: I am the Lawgiver.

DAVE BAST

Yes! Wow, how about that?

BOB HEERSPINK

And he can do it because of how he has fulfilled the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

Maybe he *is* the Lawgiver.

BOB HEERSPINK

He *is* the Lawgiver.

DAVE BAST

Maybe he said it in the Old Testament, and now he is saying in the New Testament as well; and then he goes into our hearts and minds over and over and over: You have heard that it was said: Do not murder. I say to you: If you hate, that is the motivation that leads to murder. You have heard: Do not commit adultery. I tell you, if you look lustfully you are committing a kind of adultery.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, I think with this last one, he really basically wraps it up and puts a bow on it, because he really puts his finger on the ultimate motivator for the ethics of his kingdom; and it is interesting to me how he starts in this text, because he says: You have heard from of old you are supposed to love your neighbors and hate your enemies. Now, actually you cannot find that anywhere in the Old Testament in those words.

DAVE BAST

Well, you can find “Love your neighbor as yourself,” that is in Leviticus...

BOB HEERSPINK

That is right.

DAVE BAST

Which in itself is rather interesting to those who think Leviticus has nothing to say to us as Christians; but the other one: Hate your enemy; that is...

BOB HEERSPINK

That you don't find. You don't find that balance, but...

DAVE BAST

At least not in those words.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; there are texts which seem to imply this, but the Jewish people of Jesus' day lived by this, and I think it is very interesting that when they thought: Love your neighbor, they were really thinking about Jews; and you hate your enemies, and that was really all the Gentiles. So, they were really taking this and saying: You love those who are like yourself. You love Jewish folks; and the rest of the world you can hate; and Jesus says: I am going to turn that around. I am going to intensify this commandment; really going back to who is your neighbor? It is anyone who has need.

DAVE BAST

So in a sense, this is the hardest of all Jesus' commands, and the one where he really turns our normal way of thinking on its head when he says: You know what? My commandment to you is love your enemy; and nobody does that. The very definition of an enemy is somebody that you hate; but then he kind of adds argument to the command by saying: Well, look; even the Gentiles – even the tax collectors – even the pagans know how to love their own – their friends, their family. In modern terms, you know, even Nazis like their kids...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, if that is all you do, how are you different? I just told you, your righteousness has to go deeper. You have to go way beyond the external keeping of the rules. I am concerned about what you are on the inside.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and you see, in this passage, Dave, he tells us how that can happen; and it is not just by trying harder, because he says in this passage: If you pray for those who persecute you – if you love your enemies – you will be children of your Father in heaven because that is what *he* does. He shows love to his enemies. It is being like our heavenly Father that really empowers ethical living for Christians today.

DAVE BAST

This is something that has always struck me about Jesus' ethic and what he is looking for in and from us. You know, go back to that earlier example in Chapter 5: Don't lust, he says. Not only don't commit adultery, but don't lust in your mind; and you know, you and I have both traveled in the Middle East and in Muslim countries, and we have seen... And now they are coming into the West, too, women who are covered from head to foot... And it is so striking to me: How does Islam deal with the problem of men's lust? Well, cover up the woman so that you cannot see her. How does Jesus deal with it? He says: If your eye offends you, cut it out! The problem is in *you* and you have got to get rid of that lust. You need to be pure and perfect, as your Father in heaven is pure and perfect. That is what I am after for you. That is where I am headed.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it gets down to your inner self. It gets down to your heart. It is not just externally keeping the rules; that is what the Pharisees and the scribes did; and the righteousness that God asks of us – Christ asks of us – is righteousness that reflects that of our heavenly Father. It gets down to the core of our being because Jesus just doesn't want to change us and improve a few things on the *outside*; he really wants to get down and transform us from the inside out.

DAVE BAST

Yes; C. S. Lewis has a line somewhere: He is not in the business of making better people, but new people.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

People of an entirely different kind, and if we ask: What are the ethics of Jesus? What is he really about? He is not about rules and expectations. He is not about petty cultural conformity. He is about a radical transformation of our inner beings; something so far beyond our ability to do that we can only do it by his Spirit. That will ultimately make us like him...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is how we will be like our Father.

BOB HEERSPINK

He wants us to reflect our Father in heaven.

DAVE BAST

Thanks Bob; and thanks to you also for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget, it is our listeners asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to life. So tell us what you think about what you have been hearing and suggest to us topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/do-the-rules-matter>

Printed on July 26, 2025