



Group Study: The Fulfillment (Matthew 5:17-20)

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think Jesus meant when he said he came to "fulfill the law and the prophets" rather than abolish them?
2. How does Jesus' teaching challenge the religious leaders' understanding of righteousness?
3. What are the "weightier matters of the law" that Jesus emphasizes, and how can we prioritize them in our lives?
4. What does it mean to be "perfect" (or whole, complete, mature) as our heavenly Father is perfect?
5. How can we practice Jesus' transforming initiatives in our personal relationships and communities?

Good Faith Bible Study

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"The Fulfillment"

Matthew 5:17-20

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In this podcast, we're going to talk about what it means for Jesus to "fulfill the law," what kind of righteousness Jesus calls for, and how to help your Bible study group think about the kind of community that this teaching shapes. We'll also talk about a few ideas for discussion questions and how to handle those tricky moments when someone says, "But that sounds impossible!"

So let's get started. We'll start with v. 17, where Jesus says, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

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The idea that Jesus came to do away with Torah, the old law, is a common misconception—especially in traditions that split the Old and New Testaments too cleanly. We’ve talked a lot about the “metanarrative” of Scripture—the “big” overarching story of the Bible. And to tell you the truth, that concept has been one of the most helpful to me as I have studied Scripture.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is saying that the law—and the prophets—are not outdated. They’re not irrelevant. Instead, Jesus is the embodiment of what they were always pointing toward. He’s not getting rid of the old covenants. Jesus is showing what it looks like to live them out, fully and faithfully.

Here are a couple discussion questions that you might consider as you prepare to teach, or you might bring these to your group. What do you think it means for Jesus to “fulfill” the law and the prophets, rather than abolish them? How does Jesus’ life reflect the heart of God’s covenant, of God’s law?

Now as we move on to v. 18 and 19, Jesus sounds very serious: “Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

Now, this can feel kind of legalistic—like we’re bound to every part of the law forever. But remember, Jesus isn’t talking about rigid rule-following. He’s pointing to the enduring vision of God’s covenant: a vision of a people shaped by justice and mercy and faithfulness.

When we keep the “least” of the commandments, we’re lining up with God’s purposes. And when we teach others to do so—even keeping the small things of the law—we are helping to form a covenant community.

What are some of the “small commandments”—seemingly minor actions—that reflect God’s larger vision of justice and mercy? Your group might come up with some biblical examples, and you might find some examples of these faithful actions in your own community.

But then in v. 20, Jesus says something surprising—at least, it was surprising for his original audience. Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The scribes and the Pharisees were experts in the law; they were respected in the community as being especially faithful to God. They were known for keeping those “small commandments,” as I mention in the lesson. So what is Jesus saying here?

He’s critiquing religion that is only performative—where we check all the boxes but we miss the heart. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus calls out the Pharisees for tithing even their herbs ... but neglecting justice, mercy and faith. Keeping the “small commandments” is important, as we learn in v. 18-19. But so is living true to the heart of God.

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What Jesus models for us is deeper than rule-keeping—it's transformation from the inside out. It's the kind of righteousness that shapes not just behavior, but identity.

How can our righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees, not in quantity, but in quality? What does it mean to prioritize justice, mercy and faith in today's world? What does that look like in your own community?

You'll notice that this week's lesson ends with jumping ahead to the end of Matthew 5, on to v. 48, where Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Even though v. 48 isn't part of the text for this week, it may be helpful for your Bible study group to spend some time considering the perils of perfectionism. It's kind of hard to avoid, when we read v. 20's command to "exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees" and v. 48's command to "be perfect."

I don't know about you, but every time I have heard that verse in my life, a little voice inside my head says, "If you don't do more, be more, serve more, you'll never measure up."

We need to talk about that voice.

In faith communities, perfectionism can feel like a virtue. We spiritualize it. We call it "pursuing holiness" or "being set apart." But more often than not, perfectionism isn't about holiness—it's about fear and shame.

I'm sure you've heard of Brené Brown, the research professor and bestselling author. She makes a really helpful distinction here. She says:

"Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame." (Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection, 2010, p. 71)

In other words, perfectionism is a shield. It says, "If I just get it right—morally, emotionally, spiritually—I'll be safe. I'll be loved. And I'll belong."

I know that I've been there. How often do people in our Bible studies—or people in leadership—feel like they can't admit that they're struggling or that they've messed up? How hard is it to admit that we don't understand? That culture of perfectionism doesn't create wholeness. It creates masks and burnout. And in the end, it pushes people away from the very grace that Jesus came to embody.

Faith isn't about getting it right. It's about a relationship. I know that you've heard that before. And it's about relationships—especially covenant relationships—that are built on trust, vulnerability and grace.

So, when Jesus says, "Be perfect," what does he really mean?

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As mentioned in the lesson, the Greek word here is *telios*. It doesn't mean flawless. It means complete. Whole. Mature. Jesus uses the same word again in Matthew 19:21, when he tells the rich young ruler, "If you want to be *telios*, go sell your possessions and give to the poor."

If you read the rest of that story, you'll see that the man had kept the commandments. He had the performance part down. But Jesus invites him to something deeper: a life of surrender, of justice, of mercy. The kind of life that reveals the whole heart—not just a perfect record.

What if we redefined what it means to be perfect? Remember that Jesus is not calling us to never mess up. He's calling us to mature—to become people who love like God loves. That's the perfection Jesus describes. It's not flawlessness; it's fullness.

When Jesus talks about "exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees," he's talking about growing toward wholeness. Jesus is calling us into a process—not into pressure or prideful performance, but a maturing faith. A growing community that keeps choosing grace, again and again.

Here are some questions for your group:

What if this teaching in Matthew 5 isn't about achieving perfection or being better than somebody else, but what if it's about becoming whole—together, in community?

Where have you seen this kind of transformation take root in your own life or in your own faith community?

Where have you felt pressure to be perfect in your faith? Where does that pressure come from? And what would it look like to be more honest, more vulnerable and more whole instead?

Here is the heart of the matter: This passage isn't about making people feel inadequate or setting up unrealistic or legalistic expectations. It's about pointing people to the kind of life that Jesus opens up—a life where we don't just avoid harm, but we actively choose good. A community where relationships are healed, dignity is honored, truth is trusted, and love goes the extra mile.

Jesus didn't tear down the law. He shows us how to live it more deeply—in covenant, community and mercy.