



## **“Authority”**

**by Timmy Fearer**

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If you're new, setting up this story today, Jesus has been overwhelmed by the crowds, the sheer numbers of them, the sudden success of it all. It's getting way too big for him. He cannot do it alone anymore. He never intended to do it alone and so he pulls away from the crowds at the beginning of Matthew chapter five. His inner circle comes with him up the side of a mountain. He sits down, begins to teach, and he begins to give his ministry away to those people around him, because he just can't do it all by himself. This was his plan all along.

The first thing he's saying to them is, “If you want to be with me, if you want to be a part of what I'm doing, and have a share in it, and do the things that I'm actually doing, you've got to change the way that you think. You've got to think like I do, believe like I do, see the world the way that I do.” And he starts off with this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, they get the kingdom of heaven – not the rich, not the beautiful, not the powerful, not the privileged, per se. There's room for them, if they finally look in the mirror and just see all the ugliness there and that they need God.

He continues then with these eight words of blessing, these Beatitudes, which we were in for two months, January and February. It's the story of a transformed life. It's the story of how God works

in the world, how he works in your life, and wants to work through your life to be a change agent and an agent for the kingdom of God in this world. Jesus was redefining reality in the Beatitudes. He's saying this is how the world really works.

Last week, we then circled back again and saw Jesus declaring a new identity – first reality, then identity. He said, “You Beatitude people, you're the salt of the earth and you're the light of the world. That's your new identity.

And Jesus is going to spend a lot of time talking about community. That's our “Together” series that we begin the Sunday after Easter, three weeks from now, April 7. We'll have a booklet like we did for the “Blessed” series. It will be available as a hardcopy and it'll be available online.

Reality, identity, community is coming but, before we get to community, in between that and identity (from last week), Jesus is going to talk to us about authority. If Jesus is going to begin telling us how to live our lives in this community series that he's going to move into, by what authority does he do this? He's going to tell us, and his authority must then be our authority.

So, here's the summary of the message today: **If you want to be great in God's kingdom, if you want to stay salty with me and keep your lights shining brightly with me, read the Bible. Read the Bible the way I read it. Read it with me in mind. Be guided by it and adhere to it.**

We're going to take the scripture passage today piece by piece and walk through it. This is what Jesus says:

## Matthew 5:17

*<sup>17</sup> Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*

So, do not let yourself suppose for one second that I have come to abolish, that is, demolish, overturn, undermine, nullify, degrade the law and the prophets. And when Jesus says the law and the prophets, he's talking about the Hebrew Bible. That is what we call the Old Testament. That's all he had on his hands. He knew it. He spent hours and hours in it. It just shaped everything that he said, thought, and did.

That Old Testament is often divided into just three parts, three buckets, you might say. And the first part is referred to often as the law. That would be the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Those first five books are often referred to as the law. Then the second part, the prophets, that's a real big bucket, the historical books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, and then what we understand as prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets. Then there's a third part that Jesus doesn't mention here, often called the writings. That would be Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, those kinds of books.

Jesus is using “law and prophets” to summarize the whole scripture. He says, “Don't think that I've come to abolish the Bible. Don't think that.”

It reminds me of a sign I saw on a garage door years ago in Newport Beach, California – Balboa Peninsula. Summertime is packed with people, a parking nightmare. You could call it Parkageddon. This awful thing. “Where can we put our cars so

we can get to the beach?” The sign on this garage door told the story of the homeowners and their cars being trapped in their own garage because some desperate tourist parked their car in front of it. Instead of “No parking,” the sign said “Don't even think about parking here.” Don't even think about it.

I saw a similar sign on a golf course, along the fairway of the first tee in Santa Cruz, California. I played this golf course when I was a golfer. I'm not really a golfer anymore. The sign on this back fence told a story of scores, maybe hundreds of golfers, looking for stray tee shots, trampling the flowerbeds, invading the privacy. The sign just said, “Forget about your ball.” Forget about it. Don't even think about looking for it.

Jesus is saying “Don't even think about it. Forget about this idea that I have come to degrade the scriptures. Now, you may already be asking yourself why is Jesus so concerned to make a big point about this, that he's not an enemy of the Bible? Apparently there have been some people who were accusing him of that, undermining it. He's going to mention some likely culprits of those who would be accusing him of that.

Even before we get to that, one reason he could be receiving this criticism is that Jesus Christ is big on grace and mercy. You can see it in his words, in our Beatitudes series – just full of it – see it in his actions, the way that he treated people, what he did for them. And because that was and continues to be true – Jesus is that way with us – some people could miss the fact that Jesus is also big on obedience. He's very much committed to placing our lives under the authority of God's life-giving commands in the scriptures. This is all part of God's mercy and grace for us.

So, he's correcting a popular misconception here. He's countering what you might call a disinformation campaign against him that somehow he's loose with God's law, that he's soft, he's squishy on God's commands. "Some are accusing me of this but don't you think this. Don't you think for one second that I'm here to undermine the law and the prophets."

This misperception of Jesus is widespread still today on our island. "God loves me so much. He accepts me just the way I am. It's just all grace and mercy and forgiveness. What a beach party this is! I do what I want. I'm just me and I'm not going to change, but God just loves me the way that I am. And I love committing sins; God loves forgiving them. Really, it's a great arrangement."

It's not all grace and mercy and forgiveness. It begins with grace and mercy and forgiveness. It ends with grace and mercy and forgiveness, and that's all the way through it, but God loves you. He loves you so much. He accepts you the way that you are. That's right, but he also loves you too much to let you stay the way you are. It is His will that each one of us learn obedience, because that's part of his life-giving gift to us, the transformation of our lives.

So, Jesus says, "Don't think for a second that I've come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not. I've come not to abolish, but to fulfill the law and the prophets. I've come to fulfill the scripture, to fill it full by my own perfect obedience, by taking the law one step further, to take it a step deeper, to bring something new to it that has not been seen, consistent with the old, not contradicting the old, but surpassing and fulfilling the old."

As I was reading this some time ago, I was reflecting on this is kind of like when I was a little kid. In our home, we had a little television. Some of you are seasoned as I am, old enough to know. We only had one TV in the house and it was a small, 18-inch black and white Zenith television. Everything we watched on that little TV was in black and white, with a limited number of channels.

Think about Jesus' words in this way, keeping that in mind. In his ministry, Jesus is taking what is in black and white. You could even think in terms of the printed page of the Scripture – white page, black print – which is already beautiful and already works very well as life-giving, but it's like an old TV show or an old film from the 1950s. Jesus is taking what is in black and white, and he's colorizing it. He's bringing the color of his own life, his own obedience, the color of his interpretation and fulfillment, and he's putting this brand-new color on a big, high-definition television screen. Jesus is saying, "Listen, I'm not against the book. You can't understand me or my life apart from my commitment to the book. If you want to be my people and be a part of what I'm doing and do the things I'm doing, you must become a people of the book, as well – keeping me in mind, reading it the way that I read it. I'm making so much more of it."

As our passage continues, he tells us why he's so committed. This is what he says:

#### **Matthew 5:18**

<sup>18</sup> *For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*

He starts with this: "For truly I tell you." This is Jesus' way of saying, "Listen up. Underline this. Don't miss this." And now my paraphrase: "Not one itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny detail of the law.

Now he's using the word "law" differently. He's referring now to the Commandments of Moses, which we know as the 10 Commandments, which Jesus is going to start commenting on in our "Together" series – life with God, life with people. How do you live with God? How do you live with other people? He's saying not one letter, not one stroke of the letter of that law will pass away.

Jesus is speaking in exaggerated terms here. You are going to see, as we move through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exaggerates a lot in order to get our attention and to make a point. He says, "Not one little, itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny part of a letter is going to pass away until heaven and earth, all creation, passes away. Again, he's speaking in exaggerated terms there. He's saying the most solid things that you can think of – the earth and the heavens – they will pass away first. When everything in the scripture is fulfilled, when God's agenda is all wrapped up and completed, when God's history draws to a close and there will be no more use for the law – that is, Jesus' deeper teaching on it – at that time, a new heaven will be opened up, a new earth, it'll all come together. There will be no more need for the law because all relations will have been put right, and it will be a new world. Bottom line: just as the old hymn says, "On Christ the solid rock I stand." Now Christ the solid rock says, "The law of God, this life-giving Word of God, this message of the law is so solid. It's more deeply rooted, more constant, more securely fixed, more enduring in the order of things than the earth itself, than the ground that our

sanctuary is resting on right now. All of this will pass away before the word of God ever passes away. Jesus is saying, "This is what I believe. So don't think I've come to dismiss this. Don't think I've come to degrade it. That's foolish. I've come to lift it up. I've come to fulfill it, show you what it's really about.

Now, as Jesus draws his teaching to conclusion, we get a "therefore." What do we do with what he just said? This is what he says:

### **Matthew 5:19-20**

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever [that is, whoever of you] breaks one of the least of these commandments [now he's reaching forward to what he is going to unpack in the 10 Commandments three weeks from now], and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven [you're still in but you are going to be kind of down there]; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven [Which do you want?]. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you [here is the warning], unless your righteousness [we've heard that in this series, haven't we] exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees [The Scribes were the biblical, legal scholars. The Pharisees were very popular Bible teachers. People liked them. These are the ones who were accusing Jesus that he was not a Bible person and was undermining the scriptures.], you will never enter the kingdom of heaven [Well, that made them mad, didn't it?].*

We, at First Prez Honolulu, we are a people of the Book. Any church worth its salt, (I'm reaching back to last week) will be a people of the Book, thoughtful readers of the Book. One thing we really value here is, let's get educated, let's read this

thoughtfully, let's understand what it's really about, what it's really saying.

A few weeks ago at our final Wednesday night WAKO dinner, I sat next to a woman who had been coming about a month. She said, "I'm really liking it here. You know, it's really hard to find a church that believes in the Bible." And I said, "Isn't that sad?" But there's a lot of truth to that.

We're a church that believes in the Bible. We read it and we consider it and we honor it and we try to walk according to it. We're a people of the Book because the Lord we worship, the great head of the church, Jesus Christ himself, was and is a person of the Book. What was true 2,000 years ago, is still true today. It is not easy to be a people of the Book. You're not going to get support in this from your neighbors. God bless them. You're not going to get support in this from the public schools, or even many private schools these days. You're not going to get support from the workplace or from the government or from media. The currents of the culture are running against the Book. Jesus says never mind that. Mind this: If you, by your disobedience, loosen the blessed hold of these commandments – the blessed hold they have on your life and on your conscience – if you disregard even the least of these, if you degrade them, relax them, and their authority in your own life, then that's a great offense to God.

You know something, church? The reason it's a great offense to God is because disobedience ultimately hurts you and it hurts your neighbor, and God cares about you and He cares about your neighbor. The law is a gift to lead you in the course of righteousness, lead you into life. It's not the source of righteousness, but it is the course of

righteousness that you can live by. You disregard those things, it offends God because it runs counter to life. It runs counter to his kingdom, what his kingdom is about. "You're not acting like my disciple," Jesus says, "and so you're going to be called least in the kingdom of heaven, and maybe you're not even going to be in." But if you take the scripture, if you take the commandments seriously, and you show that, by your obedience or your attempt to live according to them, you're not only in the kingdom, but you're going to be called great in the kingdom. So here's the choice: if you neglect and disregard and belittle the scripture, you're going to become little. But if you make the scripture great in your life, you're going to become great. So which do you want? Again, Jesus lays out this choice.

Let's say again our summary of this message today: **If you want to be great in God's kingdom, if you want to stay salty with me and keep your lights shining brightly with me, read the Bible. Read the Bible the way I read it. Read it with me in mind. Be guided by it and adhere to it.** In short, obey it.

Let me show you an image.



What is that? It's salmon. It's more than just salmon. It's in a marinade in a plastic bag. Think of



the Bible this way. The Bible is like a good marinade and you are that beautiful filet of salmon, line caught, wild caught, not farm raised. You're the best there is, but you get in that bag with that marinade and it begins to flavor you and change the taste. It doesn't deny or disregard the good taste of the salmon by itself. It just makes it better. The Bible is like that. It's like a marinade that you sit in and saturate yourselves in. It begins to change and flavor your life.

A few weeks ago, I think it was during our "Blessed Are the Meek" message, I mentioned Abraham Lincoln, our 16th President. He marinated in the Bible a lot. He was not a baptized Christian, as far as we know. He never joined a church. He never made a public profession of faith. Exactly what he believed in detail remains a bit of a mystery. But he was a Bible reader. We know that by at least two pieces of evidence. 1) During his presidency, at one point, he attended a midweek Bible study at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. That was just some blocks from the White House. He'd go there midweek. He would not sit with the congregation in the sanctuary. He would sit off the sanctuary behind a closed door in a hallway and listen. 2) The other piece of evidence is the diaries of his guards at what is now called The Soldier's Home. It's a national site three miles outside of DC. He and his family would spend summers there. He would have that as his retreat. The guards, who stood guard over him, in their diaries noted that he was a daily Bible reader. He would open the scriptures in the morning and read. And you can see that in his written words, in his speeches. If you listen to the second inaugural address that he gave, it's packed with scriptural phrases and allusions. You'll see the Sermon on the Mount in that second

inaugural address. He said of the Bible, at one point, "It is the best gift God has given to man."

But it's not just about knowing the Bible. People who only know the Bible, who've not been changed by it, not been transformed by it, can be brutal with the Bible. They can use it as a blunt instrument, as a weapon, as a means of control. Some of the Scribes and the Pharisees in the passage today were doing that with the scriptures. There are some conservative Bible churches that are pretty mean and we're not interested in being a church like that. If the message of the Bible doesn't get in you and change you and flavor you like a good marinade, then it becomes a tool of ugly, repressive, and proud religion. We don't want to have anything to do with that here.

So, you get into the Bible so it gets into you. Let its words shape and guide you so you can follow the Crucified One and be like him, in all of his freedom, and all of his strength, and all of his courage, and in all of his beauty, and become great in the kingdom. That's the invitation today.

I love this story of the young man who was just getting started in business. He wanted to be as successful as he possibly could. He heard of this retired, elderly man in the community who had been remarkably successful in business. So, the young man went to see the old man, and the young man asked the old man, "What's the key to success?" The old man answered, "Good decisions." The young man followed up. "How do you learn to make good decisions?" The old man answered, "Experience." The young man asked the obvious question, "How do you gain experience?" And the old man said, "Bad decisions."

Do you know what the good news is today? Jesus Christ wants to save you from bad decisions and move you straight into good decisions and success in life in his kingdom, if you just listen to and learn from and do according to what the Scriptures say. The Bible is this big, thick book and it's full of teaching and full of stories of those who love God and those who didn't love God. We learned so much from it. What Jesus is doing here is he's giving us the Cliff Notes. Sermon on the Mount is the summary. One elder said in a church where I was the pastor years ago said, "The Sermon on the Mount is the constitution and bylaws of the kingdom of God." This is how you live in the kingdom. It's been given to us. Sit in it. Soak in it. Let it flavor your life.

Let me leave you with this. I was on a plane in November of 2019. I was returning from visiting Turkey. I go there every year, having served there as a mission worker for eight years at one point. It's a long flight. From LAX to Istanbul, it's 13 and a half hours. So, I liked watching movies, going to and coming back from, and on this particular flight, I came across a movie entitled "The White Crow?" I'll tell you there are some questionable parts there. It's rated R, so don't say, "The pastor is telling us to go see R-rated movies now." It is the story of the young Russian ballet dancer, Rudolph Nureyev. He was the greatest dancer of his generation. The movie is about his formation and then the lead up to his defection to the West in Paris in the early 1960s. That is really a dramatic scene. In the movie, at an early point in his training, Nureyev's teacher, Alexander Pushkin, asked Nureyev the question, "Why dance?" And Nureyev stumbled around looking for an answer, really none of them good, that he came up with. Then Pushkin then said, "Dancing is not about technique. It's not about

form. It's not about jumping higher and getting a reaction from the audience. That's not why you dance." He said, "You dance to tell a story."



So, the question is what story do you want to tell? Many people never asked the question, "Why live?" But the answer is the same: it's to tell a story. So, what story do you want to tell?

The story we tell here, in this gathering every Sunday, and in every day during the weekend, and in all that we aspired to do and be in this church, is the story of the triumph of a crucified God, who walked out of his own grave. The Bible, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, teaches you and me how to tell that story with our lives. It teaches us how to dance. So I say, hey, let's dance! Don't be a wallflower. Get up out of your chair and let's dance.

Let's read the summary again of this message. **If you want to be great in God's kingdom, if you want to stay salty with me and keep your lights shining brightly with me, read the Bible. Read the**

**Bible the way I read it. Read it with me in mind.  
Be guided by it and adhere to it.**

Of course, we do have our spiritual dance steps of the week. Here they are. Here's what I want you to do this week, on at least three days this week.

#### **SPIRITUAL STEPS OF THE WEEK:**

1. Listen to or read through the entire Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapters 5-7. Don't rush your reading of it.
2. Make a mental or written note of what overall impact this experience is having on you.
3. Ask yourself each time, "What is God saying to me?"
4. Ask yourself each time, "What do I want to say to God?" (Then, go ahead and say it.)

Friends, let's dance. Let's not sit around. What story do we want to tell? It's right here.

Let me pray for us. Father, we really don't want to waste time. We want to just enjoy this dance with you. You've sent the greatest dancer of all time to teach us the steps and he's inviting us onto the platform to be with him and tell his story, to tell your story, Father, your glorious story. Give us what we need to dance like we've never danced before, in the name of Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One. We pray in his name. Amen.