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Ministry of the Word

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by Vincent Gannon

**Scripture:** Matthew 5: 17-20

**Subject:** Part 24 – The Believer and The Law

*17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. 19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*

We often hear a familiar statement these days - *"I am a New Testament Christian and I am saved by grace, I am not under the Law"* But if you take that stance, then I would have to ask you, *how would you actually explain what Jesus said in these verses?* A professor of Law at Harvard University, Harold J. Berman, prior to relativism, finding a foothold in the church, wrote the following: *"When men break away from the idea of an authoritative religion, and even from the concept of God, they break away from the possibility of absolute truth. Their only remaining resource is existential relativism, a slippery, unstable, and ever changing base on which no authoritative system of law and morals can be built".*

That's exactly what we are witnessing today in our society as many have turned their back on God. In relativism, there is no room for absolute truth. Maybe Pontic Pilot was the first relativist in the bible when he asked *'what is truth?'* Up until these verses, Jesus had taught the Kingdom's constitution and about the Kingdom's citizen's, now the King begins to talk about Himself. This is the first personal reference of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. He is declaring that He is the Messiah as He declares that He is the one who will fulfil all the Law's requirements. He is positioning the Believers and the Law in light of Him.

The law of the eternal Sovereign God had already been given to Moses and revealed to man, and in particular to the nation of Israel. Jesus states that He did not come to change it, alter it, renovate it or compromise it, but to fulfil it and to uphold it; and *the reason for this?* Because it is God's perfect, eternal, infallible Word. The Jews in those days had shifted from the Torah, as people today have shifted from the Bible. With these movements, the sure and unchanging word of God is seen as too absolute, too fundamental, too rigid, and even some would say too judgmental as it does not accommodate the sin of man. *So what has been man's solution to this?* They change the word of God, discredit it, they manipulate it to accommodate their lifestyle by leaving out certain parts, and intentionally interpret it to suit themselves, preaching that one interpretation is as good as another and that there is no place for dogmatism. Some even attack the authority of Scripture, and not just the interpreters.

Take a step back and think of this logically. *How can you know the God of Scripture if you disregard, dismiss or don't take all of Scripture earnestly and absolutely?* If you do not take the whole Scripture seriously, then you have just made up your own God. It is impossible to worship God in the right way, as He wants us too (John 4v24), if you don't believe in the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Jesus spoke the absolute truth because He spoke Scripture and He taught Scripture. His truth and Scripture are one, there is no difference. Jesus made it abundantly clear, right from the outset of His ministry, that His authority and truth, and that of Scripture are inseparable and the same. Let's look at the following verses in the Bible:

The first is John 6:63 - *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.*

Now John 8:28 *"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*

and further down, verse 42 - *"Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me."*

Stay in John, chapter 12:49-50 - *"For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak."*

and John 14:10 - *"Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."*

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Now turn to Hebrews Chapter 4:12 - *“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”*

John says it all in chapter 1, that the word became Flesh and lived among men. Jesus said over and over again that God’s revealed Word is truth and this truth is conveyed with absolute, divine authority. It is in that authority that He came to teach and preach. It is to that authority that Jesus our King commands His kingdom citizens to bow and obey. Paul writing to Timothy said of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16.

*“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

So let’s turn back to verse 17 - *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.*

Jesus warned, *‘do not think’*, so that the listeners would not get the wrong conception about His teaching. As most traditional Jews considered the rabbinical instructions to be the proper interpretations of the law of Moses, they perceived that Jesus was going to do away with the law or relegate it to minor importance as Jesus did not scrupulously follow the traditions, for example - extreme Sabbath observance, as we see in Luke 13 when Jesus healed on the Sabbath and Matthew 12 when they picked corn in the field on the Sabbath. From the outset, Jesus wanted to inform His hearers so there would be no misconceptions about His view of Scripture. It is noted that throughout the gospel of Matthew, more than the other gospels, Jesus repeatedly uses Scripture to contradict and impeach the superficial and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.

That word *‘abolish’* in the Greek is “Katalud” which means to utterly overthrow or destroy, and it is the same word used for the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:2; 26:61) and of the death of the physical body in 2 Corinthians 5:1. The basic meaning of the word is to tear down and smash to the ground, to obliterate completely. In several places, as here, the word is used figuratively to indicate bringing to naught, rendering useless, or nullifying (see Acts 5:38-39; Romans 14:20). Jesus was not going to do that to God’s law.

In verses 17 to 19, Jesus focuses on the pre-eminence of Scripture as God’s perfect, eternal, and wholly authoritative Word. Jesus demonstrates this in three ways; it is authored by God, it is affirmed by the prophets, and it is accomplished by Christ.

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It is very important to note that each and every word of Jesus was clearly, carefully, consciously as well as conspicuously weighed out. The Lord Jesus says; “*assuredly*” meaning this is certain. This was no rushed sermon, this was a divine declaration both to the Jews as well as to His disciples. The disciples (which includes you and I) are to have a very high regard for the Scriptures, because God is speaking through His Word, through every part of it. The jot is the smallest Hebrew letter (yodh) and the tittle is a pen stroke or brush stroke or projection that distinguishes one letter from another. It would be like a dot that differentiates an “i” from an “l”. Jesus taught the Word of God—the Scripture are the very Words of God.

How long will the Law last? The Law will last as long as the universe lasts. But there is something interesting. The words of Jesus will outlast the universe. Heaven and earth will pass away but the Words of Jesus will never pass away. The point of verse 18 is that the law exists in the present world. Jesus is in effect saying, all the Hebrew Scriptures are important, even the parts that seem unimportant. Read it with respect, and be prepared to obey even its most insignificant commands.

In verse 18 Jesus declares the authority of the Scripture; and in verse 19 He teaches us that we have a responsibility to obey the Bible. Does Jesus invite the believer to be a law breaker? The answer is absolutely No. In Christ we receive salvation, in Christ we are free from condemnation, and in Christ we are given the power to obey what we were powerless to obey!

In the original language Jesus says, “*So whoever loosens up even one of the least of these commands, and so by his behavior, teaches others to do the same, will be called “least” in the kingdom of heaven*” (Bruner; p.169). *What are the least of the commands that Jesus is making reference to? What is Jesus suggesting? Unimportant passages in the Old Testament?* Jesus has already made it clear that the whole of the Scriptures are important. Paul puts it this way in Romans 3:31; “*Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.*”

In what way? We place the Law on a more solid foundation, and on a firmer footing. We do not regard it as a means to salvation or justification or sanctification or glorification—but rather as proof of justification!

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As we go through the Gospels we find that the primary concern of every religious Jew who came into contact with Jesus was what He understood of the Law, Moses and the prophets. It was not about what the Torah taught, they had added to that and were in the process of changing it to suit their traditions. Strangely they actually interpreted Jeremiah 31:31, which says *“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”*, to teach that God’s new promised covenant would dissolve the old and would bring in a new more user friendly moral law.

The film, “Fiddler on the Roof” got it right; it was all about tradition not the truth. Remember these traditions of the Rabies were the ways of men. Instead of setting people free, they led them into bondage, and into the boundaries of human accomplishments, within the confines of man’s abilities and resources. They tied the peoples hands with ceremonies and rituals, and blinded them with doctrines of man. The rabies traditions lowered not just the standards of God’s scriptural teaching, but almost erraced the need for God’s grace, mercy and even love. The whole system of self-righteousness is about elevating man’s own imagined goodness. Many from a Catholic background know exactly what I am saying, and from that Jesus has set us free.

It did not take long before the religious leaders realised that Jesus did not fit into any of their categories. Yet, they noted that Jesus held a very high regard for the Law but taught it contrary to their traditions. His teachings did not lower the standard but actually brought it to the place where it should be, and lived it to the glory of God as our example. The Law and the Prophets represent what we now call the Old Testament, which as you know, was the only written Scripture at that time of Christ. We see this in Matthew 7:12. *Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.* Also in Matthew 11:13 and Matthew 22:40.

Even Luke says the same in Luke 16:16: *“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.*

We find similar references in John 1:45, Acts 13:15, and Acts 28:23.

The Law was referred to by the Jews in four different ways. One in a limited sense to the Ten Commandments, secondly to the first five books of the Bible or the Pentateuch and thirdly, in its broadest sense, the rest of the Old Testament. The fourth was what they called the Oral

Law, and they were eventually written by the different rabbinical schools and it was their most favourite as you will see. In Jesus' day—there were two main schools of Rabbinic thought; the school of Hillel, and the school of Shammai. It had thousands of detailed and external requirements. Both schools in Jesus' day agreed that there were 613 commandments given in the Law. These rules and regulations that were handed down to them addressed specific circumstances but they completely obscured the Word of God that they were supposed to interpret. You see this in the statement Jesus makes in Matthew 15:3-9:

*“He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”— then he need not honour his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honour Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”*

On the surface it seemed that these traditions made the Law of God more difficult to keep, but in reality, for most, it made it easy because they were only external things. The word ‘hypocrite’ as you know comes from the Greek word “actor”, and the religious Jews were like Hollywood full of actors. Sure it demanded a great deal of effort, but no heart obedience and no faith in God. For example, in addition to the command ‘to rest on the Sabbath’ they added that carrying a burden was a form of work, thereby breaking this command. Then they determined what constituted a burden. Since it was not possible to anticipate or provide for every contingency, much time was spent arguing about such things as whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out on the Sabbath with a needle stuck in his robe, or whether moving a lamp from one place in a room to another was permissible.

Some strict interpreters believed that even wearing an artificial leg or using a crutch on the Sabbath constituted work and argued about whether or not a parent could lift a child on the Sabbath. They decided that to heal was work, but made exceptions for grave situations. But only enough treatment to keep the patient from getting worse was allowed; he could not be fully treated until after the Sabbath. It was the keeping of such external petty detail that had

become the essence of religion for the scribes and Pharisees, and for many other Jews as well. To the strict orthodox Jew of Jesus' day, the law was an overabundance of extra-Scriptural rules and regulations. It was all head and no heart.

Yet the phrase *'the Law and the Prophets'*, was always understood to refer to the Jewish Scriptures themselves, and not the rabbinical interpretations. This phrase is used some fifteen times in the New Testament (see Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16; Luke 24:27 and 44), when reflecting the common Jewish understanding. Therefore when Jesus said, "***Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets***", all Jewish hearers would have known that He was referring to the Old Testament only.

As you know, the Law of God was collected into three parts: the moral, the judicial and the ceremonial. The moral law was to regulate behaviour for all men and women. It is based on the Ten Commandments. The judicial order was for Israel's operation as a unique nation and the ceremonial law was given to structured Israel's worship of God. What Israel received was from God but they played fast and loose with it. The judicial and ceremonial laws were subsequent legislation given to Moses. So when someone argues about the Law, we have to try and define which aspect is it.

Matthew does not qualify his use of the Law so we are safer to assume that it is the whole Law. Jesus said He did not come to abolish it but to ***FULFIL*** it, *what does that mean?* He came to fulfil all the types and patterns, all the symbols and pictures, and all the prophecies that point to Him. Jesus came to accomplish and fulfil every aspect and every dimension of the divinely written word. Jesus said, as recorded by Luke, in Luke 24:44:

***Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me."***

The prophets of God affirmed the Scriptures through their prophecies. There is no criticism, or confusion by the prophets in relation to God's revelation. All the warnings, admonitions and predictions were directly or indirectly based on the Mosaic Law. God's revelation to all His prophets was an extension to His law. They expounded on the three aspects of it only. The moral, judicial and ceremonial. You will read of how they spoke about idolatry, lying, stealing,

turning away from the one Holy and true God. The warnings were to kings, rulers, and the people to keep the law of God and not to turn away or abandon it, on account of the consequences. Clearly the work of the prophets was to proclaim the Law of God and reveal to all the heart of God, to His people. The number of Old Testament verses and quotes in the New Testament amount to 250 but if you add to that partial quotes it brings it to over 1000.

As interesting as the law of God is and it can be terrifying as well, none-the-less, the main trust and truth of the verse is that Christ came to fulfil it. His own words, *“I did not come to abolish but to fulfil...”* But how? In His incarnation, in the work of the Holy Spirit through the church, in His coming again, Jesus fulfills the moral, judicial, and ceremonial law. The Old Testament is completed in Christ. All that God intended was and will be accomplished by our Saviour and we see the complete picture in the coming King and His kingdom. Jesus fulfills every detail of the Law.

Jesus Himself tells us in the Gospels five times that He is the theme of the Old Testament. The first one is right here in our reading, and, in Luke 24:27 and verse 44, also in John 5:39 and of course Hebrews 10:7. You would have to admit that God’s Word is amazing. He did all of these things, not simply by “doing” but more importantly, by “being” the Laws fulfilment. He did not simply come to teach and example the law, He was it fully. Nor did He come to teach righteousness and to model it, He came as divine righteousness. What He said and what He did reflected who He is. Let’s look at how Christ fulfils these three aspects of God’s law.

*The first one - is the Moral Law.*

This is God’s foundational code to all. No one except Christ fulfills this perfectly by His perfect righteousness. Every single commandment He obeyed as man and met every standard, in thought word and deed, by His way of life. “But what about the Sabbath?” that is part of the Law is it not? Nine of the ten commandments are repeated in the New Testament as commands to the Church. The moral law of God has not changed. The only commandment which is not repeated is the Sabbath commandment; which was given as a sign to Israel (see Nehemiah 9:14). What is this saying to us? The essence of the Sabbath is surely an observance to holiness, but this was not what the rabbi’s later made of it. Their emphasis

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was on rest, not working. Look again, it was a provision meant to remove the heart from earthly endeavours and to turn it towards God.

Because Christ fulfilled all righteousness and has become our righteousness, the purpose of the Sabbath ended at the Cross. The Sabbath was an Old Testament symbol but now we have the reality as believers. All of God's children have entered into that rest as we read there in Hebrews 4:1-11. For the believer it's not one day of the week that is holy, but it is in fact, every day that is the Lord's day.

We see in the book of Acts that the early church met every day to worship Acts 2:46. However before long their primary or main meetings were held on the first day of the week as we read in 1 Corinthians 16:2 and it came to be called the Lord's day as we see in Revelation 1:10. This was on account of its association with the resurrection of Jesus. That day was and is to stimulate us to holiness every day as Hebrews 10:24-25 teaches us.

Paul made it clear that there was no longer any special day of worship as we read in Romans 14:5-6 and also Colossians 2:16-17. Sunday is not the "Christian's Sabbath" is simply the day that most Christians observed since the New Testament times. We must not forget that the moral aspect inherent in the Sabbath law is the heart of true worship to God. When the Jews got caught up with the day and what was done or not on that day, they had surely missed the boat. Not once but twice they missed it, by denying Jesus Himself.

#### *The Second - is the Judicial law.*

This law or aspect of the law was given by God to one people only, and that was Israel. They were after all, the chosen, by God Himself. The judicial law encompassed laws relating to agriculture, settlement of disputes, diet, cleanliness, dress and other aspects of everyday life that had special standards that God gave to His chosen people. These were not the standards of the world but they set them apart. Yet they wanted to be like the world in every way. Even with the judicial law, they were guilty of breaking it time and time again, as we read the Old Testament.

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The special position that these people had with God was not appreciated by them, even in the time of Christ. That judicial law however was fulfilled by Jesus on the Cross and all the handwriting of ordinances was blotted out at the Cross as we see in Colossians 2:14:

*having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*

His crucifixion marked Israel's ultimate apostasy in the final rejection of their Messiah - see Matthew 27:25 and John 19:15. This caused an interruption in His dealings with His people as a nation. The judicial law passed away and as a nation they no longer adhered to it. One day very soon He will redeem them and restore them as we read in Romans 9:11. Presently, the church has been grafted into the vine, and we too are His chosen people on earth, as 1 Peter 2:9-10 tells us.

*Thirdly - we come to the Ceremonial law.*

Remember that at the heart of the ceremonial law was sacrifice and worship. As the perfect sacrifice Jesus brought all other sacrifices to an end. When Jesus was on the Cross, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom, as we see in Matthew 27:51. Christ Himself was the new and perfect way into the Holy of Holies, and any person that is redeemed can come into the true Holy of Holies by the blood of Christ. It is all laid out in Hebrews 10:19-22. The Levitical order of sacrifices was abolished by the Once and for all sacrifice of Jesus. Yes, the temple stood until 70 A.D., but after Jesus' death, all those sacrifices counted for nothing. The sacrifices prior to the Cross were only pictures that pointed to Calvary. Those sacrifices had no power to cleanse from sin, they were pointers given by God to the truth of Hebrews 9:11-12.

The ceremonial law ended because it was fulfilled. The shadows and pictures had given way to the reality of Scripture being fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus did not permit the old way to continue even by way of remembrance. On the last night at the feast of Passover, He took bread and wine, instituting a new way to remember His new covenant, through his death, resurrection and his coming again. His sacrifice was completed never to be repeated in any shape or form.

Aaron was the first and foremost high priest of the Old Covenant, but he could not compare with the great High Priest of the New Covenant. Aaron entered the earthly tabernacle, but

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Christ entered the heavenly. Aaron entered once a year, Christ once for all time. Aaron entered beyond the veil, Christ tore the veil in two. Aaron offered many sacrifices, Christ only one. Aaron sacrificed for his own sin, Christ only for the sins of others. Aaron offered the blood of bulls, Christ His own blood. Aaron was a temporary priest, Christ is the eternal one. Aaron was fallible, Christ infallible. Aaron was changeable, Christ is unchangeable. Aaron's sacrifice was continual, Christ's was final. Aaron's sacrifice was imperfect, Christ's was perfect. Aaron's priesthood was insufficient, Christ's is all-sufficient.

Nor could the Tabernacle and Temple compare with Christ. They each had a door, whereas Christ is the door. They had a brazen altar, but He is the altar. They had a laver, but He Himself cleanses from sin. They had many lamps that continually needed filling; He is the light of the world that shines eternally. They had bread that had to be replenished, but Christ is the eternal bread of life. They had incense, but Christ's own prayers ascend for His saints. They had a veil, but His veil was His own body. They had a mercy seat, but He is now the mercy seat.

Nor could the offerings compare with Christ. The burnt offering spoke of perfection, but Christ was perfection incarnate. The meal offering spoke of dedication, but Jesus was Himself wholly dedicated to the Father. The peace offering spoke of peace, but Jesus is Himself our peace. The sin and trespass offerings spoke of substitution, but He is our Substitute.

Nor could the feasts compare to Christ. The Passover spoke of deliverance from physical death, whereas Christ is our Passover who delivers from spiritual death. The unleavened bread spoke of holiness, but Christ fulfilled all holiness. The first fruits spoke of harvest, but Jesus rose from the dead and became "*the first fruits of those who are asleep*" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The feast of Tabernacles spoke of reunion, but only Christ is able one day to gather all of His people together in His heavenly house forever.

From Genesis 1:1 through to Malachi 4:6, the Old Testament is Jesus Christ. It was inspired by Christ, it points to Christ, and it is fulfilled by Christ.

In verse 20 - Jesus said -

***For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.***

According to Jewish Tradition the scribes and Pharisees kept the most minute details of the Law. They may have started out right and ended up wrong! Like so many people who love God and love God's Word, they began to focus on the definitions of the Law rather than the principles of living for the Lord. The scribes and Pharisees argued that since the Law was divine in origin (given by God to Moses); every rule not explicitly stated must somehow be implied. They developed a passion, not for God but for defining the rules and the regulations! How can a person gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven? Our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees!

Jesus uses hyperbole (exaggerates a point to make a point) to drive home the truth—that external righteousness or religious observances will not provide an internal reality that allows entrance into Heaven or the Kingdom of God.

What is the righteousness that God accepts? Perfection. But before you panic and before you despair, God accepts perfection, a perfection He is willing to impart to the imperfect sinner who is willing to trust Christ! The Lord God will impute this righteousness to those who accept His Son as Saviour. In 2 Corinthians 5:20-21; Paul writes; ***“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He (God) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”.***

What does true faith, saving faith in Christ accomplish? Acceptance by God. And a practical righteousness that Jesus will describe in the rest of His sermon.

Unlike the religious leaders Jesus knew what the Law really meant and what the Law really required. The Lord Jesus will make sure that people understand that obedience to the Law was not something simply external; but internal. The Lord Jesus demonstrates that no sinful human being could ever obey its commands as Jesus interprets and applies the Law. Paul expanded this idea and remind the Galatians that the Law's purpose in part is to convict the sinner of sin and the need of Christ as Redeemer and Righteousness as we read in Galatians 3 verse 24: ***“Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith”***

The law only pointed to righteousness, but Christ gives us righteousness, His own righteousness. The judicial law and the ceremonial law were fulfilled and set aside. They ended at the cross but the moral law fulfilled by Christ is still being fulfilled through His disciples. Because Christ fulfilled the law, so can those who belong to Him. God sent **“His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”** (Rom. 8:3-4).

When we walk in the Spirit we fulfil the righteousness of the law, because Christ in us fulfils it with His own righteousness which He has given to us.

**Amen.**