



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew -- TRANSCRIPT

“The King, the Scriptures, and the Righteousness that Saves,” Matthew 5:17-20

We’re turning, for the Scripture reading, to Matthew chapter 5 and reading verses 17 through 20. Matthew chapter 5 and verse 17 through verse 20.

“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

May God’s blessing rest upon the reading of his word.

What did the Lord Jesus Christ teach about the Bible? This text, that we are looking at this morning in our continuation of the study of the Gospel of Matthew enables

us to go a long way toward answering that question. And it’s a ringing affirmation of the complete authority and the total reliability of the Scriptures.

One of the leading preachers of the east has written something in one of his books on the Gospel of Matthew which is so true to life in our theological seminaries today that I want to repeat it. He has stated the fact that it is not at all uncommon in our seminaries today for a young man to be taught that if he stands firm on the high view of Scripture, as the church in previous ages has always done, he runs the danger of “bibliolatry,” or Bible-worship. That is, he runs the danger of actually worshipping the Bible instead of the Lord Jesus Christ and placing it on a pedestal which even the Lord Jesus himself did not assign to it.

This argument against the traditional view of the Christian church on Scripture sounds valid to some persons, and even seems pious. But it is misleading. It surely is. Christians do not worship the Bible. Christians reference the Bible only because Jesus Christ referenced it, and only because it is through the Bible that we come to the true and authoritative and reliable information concerning the Lord Jesus. We do not worship the Scriptures; we worship the Christ of the Scriptures. And this is a very misleading comment, though it is a true comment to our theological seminaries, in that there are many men who are saying in our theological schools, we must not hold to the traditional view of the Scriptures that the church has held down through the centuries, because that view does trend to bibliolatry.

We want to say right now, we do not worship the Bible. I do not know of any Christian who worships the Bible. I do not know of any Christian in the past who has ever worshipped the Bible, but I do know that the great mass of Christians down through the centuries, the great body of genuine believers in Jesus Christ, have revered the Scriptures. And they have revered the Scriptures in that they have held them to be the only reliable guide to the information that we have concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore they are of the utmost importance for us. We believe that the Scriptures are

important because Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, believed that the Scriptures were important.

And in fact, we can say on the authority of our Lord Jesus himself, that if we do not believe the Scriptures and believe that they are an accurate representation of the ministry which he has had, we cannot possibly believe in our Lord Jesus Christ himself. He said in his day, when the Old Testament had been completed, “For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me. But if ye believed not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” So we cannot possibly believe in the words of our Lord Jesus if we do not at the same time believe the words of holy Scripture. It is impossible for us to say, “I do not think the Bible is reliable, but I do believe in Jesus Christ.” Our Lord Jesus is the authority for rejecting that view.

There is a second thing that we learn about this passage, and that is that it is one of the most important of the whole of the Bible concerning the doctrine of inspiration which has to do with the manner by which God gave the revelation to us. And the memorable words of verse 18 compel us to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ held a doctrine of biblical inerrancy. That is, that the Bible does not contain error. He said, “Verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” And incidentally, in the Greek text, at this point, the statement “shall in no way pass from the law” is one of the strongest ways of expressing a negative prohibition. So that the Lord Jesus is saying in the strongest language that he can possibly use that nothing from the word of God shall pass away until it has all been fulfilled, even down to the meaning and sense of the jots and tittles of Scripture, which we shall talk about later on.

And finally, in verse 20, the Lord Jesus stresses the utter inadequacy of human righteousness. “I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (the highest level of human righteousness), ye shall in no case (again, he uses that same, strong expression in the Greek text) enter into

the kingdom of heaven.” There is no way for us to inherit the blessings of the eternal relationship with the Lord Jesus, which we speak of as heaven and the possession of the presence of God, other than through the imputed righteousness which comes to us as a gift from God when we acknowledge that we do not have the righteousness that avails before God of ourselves.

Only in that way shall we ever be acceptable before the divine tribunal, for it requires a perfect righteousness to find acceptance before God. The Lord Jesus anticipates in this remark the statement that the Apostle Paul will make in Romans chapter 3 and verse 24 when he says that we are justified freely through his grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.

With verse 20, we are beginning the second part of the Sermon on the Mount. And this one deals with instruction. The Lord Jesus is, from verse 20 of chapter 5 through the 6<sup>th</sup> verse of chapter 7, giving the body of teaching which he desired to give his disciples who have come to faith in him and who are to live on the earth while he engaged in presenting the kingdom to the Nation Israel.

Now this instruction which he is to give is in two parts. These verses form one part, and then at verse 21 through chapter 7 and verse 6 we have the second part. The first part of his instruction deals with the Scriptural tradition. He talks about the Scriptures, as we’ve been saying. And then in verse 21 of chapter 5 and throughout the remainder of the instruction section, he will deal with the Pharasaic tradition, and he will criticize it in the light of holy Scripture.

Now as we look at the 17<sup>th</sup> verse, we learn immediately that the Lord Jesus is speaking, first of all, about the purpose of his coming. And we want to notice that he says in this verse what he did not come to do, and then what he did come to do. Let’s look first at what he did not come to do: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy.” So before he enters into the content of

his royal ethic, he prefaces it with a word to prevent anyone from thinking that he was an enemy of Moses and the prophets.

He will come down so strong in criticism of the scribal traditions concerning a number of Old Testament passages that someone might gain the impression that the Lord Jesus was rejecting the Mosaic law and the teachings of the prophets. He is not doing that. He says that I did not come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy. So he stresses right at the beginning that he is doing away with Moses and the prophets. He will attack the scribes and he will attack the Pharisees, but he will do it from the true intent and teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures. He will, as we will see from our next studies, he will take the Old Testament and will give it its deepest form of meaning.

In fact, he will really tell us, in the most penetrating and perceptive way what the Old Testament intended to teach all along. And he will point out that the teaching of the Old Testament was personal. It was not simply teaching that was for the collective body of the believers, but it was intended to be very personal. It was intended to touch the inmost part of a man’s life. It was not to be outward. It was not to be ceremonial or liturgical. It was intended to be personal and internal and therefore vital, and not the dead kind of religion that the true religion of the Old Testament had degenerated into at the time the Lord Jesus Christ was here.

So he did not come to do away with the law and the prophets. He came to establish them in the true sense in which they had all along, but which had become buried under the layers of the traditions that the scribes and the Pharisees had poured out upon the Scriptural teaching.

What did he come to do, then? His word for it, is, I have come to fulfill. Now let’s think for a moment about this word, “come,” because this word is a most important word. I think I have already said – I did not go back over my notes on the messages preceding, but somehow or other it seems that I have already said something in this series

about the word “come.” It has a very important relationship to the ministry of the Lord Jesus.

If you’ll read through the New Testament and look at the statements he makes concerning his mission, you’ll discover that he never says what you and I would ordinarily say if we were to describe our lives. We would usually begin by saying, “I was born.” And we would say, “I was born in the State of Texas,” or “I was born in the State of Alabama,” or “I was born north of the Mason-Dixon line,” or something like that. We would describe our beginning by our birth.

Did you know that the Lord Jesus only once – only once, out of all of his references to his coming – only once did he refer to his beginning as a birth. And strange to say—not strange when you think about it—but strange to say the only time when he said that he was born was when he was speaking with Pontius Pilate, the pagan Roman prefect. In John chapter 18 and verse 37, in speaking with Pilate before his crucifixion, the Lord Jesus makes reference to the fact that he was born. There we read, after Pilate has asked him the question, art thou a king?, Jesus answered, “Thou sayest that I am a king; to this end was I born.”

Now Pilate can’t understand that. He does not have any spiritual understanding at all. He’s just like the average American who has nil understanding of spiritual things. So the Lord Jesus accommodates his language to him and says, “to this end was I born,” but then realizing to say he was born creates a false impression if that alone is said, he adds, “And for this cause came I into the world,” as if to suggest what is fitting for you, Pilate, is “I was born.” I was born for this purpose. But what is fitting for those with spiritual understanding is that I *came* into the world.

So he uses of his coming the word “come,” or “I was sent.” Now this word “come,” or the word “I was sent,” is a word that expresses the voluntary character of his coming. He came. Not, simply was sent; he came. And furthermore, it expresses the fact that he was a preexistent being. He came.

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If I were to say to you, “I came to Believers Chapel,” you would understand me to mean that I existed before I came here, and I existed in a breathing form of life. But if I were to say, “I was born in Believers Chapel,” of course you would understand what that meant.

When the Lord Jesus said, he came or was sent into this world, he implies by that that he existed before he came, and he existed before he was sent. And that, of course, is the teaching of holy Scripture: he did exist as the preexistent and eternal second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son.

Now only a divine being can arrange his birth and death, and the Lord Jesus has arranged both his birth and his death. He came at a specific moment in time which the Trinity worked out in the councils of eternity, so that Paul can write in Galatians chapter 4, “In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under law, that he might redeem those under law.” So he came at the express will of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit. And then when he died, he died at the precise time and in the precise way in which he intended to die. Only a divine being can arrange his birth and arrange his death. And this all testifies to the majesty of the Son of God.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could arrange our birth and arrange our death? I would like to have been born in the land of Palestine about the time that some of the apostles were born, and have had an occasion to be acquainted with them and our Lord Jesus. But I did not arrange my birth, and I do not arrange my death. I do not know where, exactly, I am going to die. I feel like the uneducated country fella who said, “If I knew where’s goin’ to die, I’d never go near the place.” [Laughter] I cannot arrange my death, I cannot arrange my birth, because I am a human being and a fallible human being. I do not have control of my destiny, but the Lord Jesus is a person who has control of his destiny.

And when you think for a moment about the majesty of this statement that the Lord Jesus has uttered, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am

not come to destroy but to fulfill.” Now, of course, this is a very authoritative kind of saying. We notice that immediately, that the Lord Jesus speaks with authority. But I notice another thing about him which, it’s strange to me that the critics of our Lord have never been able to take advantage of. Never has there been a religious teacher who spoke so much and so perpetually about himself as did the meek Lord Jesus Christ. If I were looking for something to criticize our Lord and to throw back upon their heels (the proponents of the Christian faith), I might want to throw up to them, “Why, how can the Lord Jesus be what you say he is when all he does is talk about himself?”

Isn’t it strange that no other religious teacher ever spoke so perpetually about himself as the Lord Jesus Christ? About any other person we would say, “He’s vain; he’s egotistical; he’s arrogant; he’s conceited or overweening.” If I only spoke about myself when I preached, I wouldn’t have an audience too long, of course, but if I did have an audience, you would be going out saying, “Dr. Johnson is really a conceited, overweening”—and you would probably add another noun or two after those adjectives.

Because for a person to always talk about himself, that is an arrogant way of addressing people. But the Lord Jesus did precisely that, and the striking thing is—I’ve never really gotten over this—but the striking thing is that the world at large that does not know him does not criticize him for doing that. In fact, deep down in the human consciousness, implanted by God, is the conviction that he’s right to do it, even when they don’t accept the things he says.

Now this statement says a couple of other things, too. There are two assertions here that don’t lie on the surface, and you have to think about it for a moment to get it. You’ll notice that when he says, I have not come to destroy the law or the prophets, I have come to *fulfill* them, is a claim for sinlessness. No one could possibly fulfill the law of Moses who is not a sinless individual. The law of Moses is the most beautiful expression of the character of God that we find through the whole of the Old Testament. That’s why it is important that people learn the Ten Commandments, because they are an

expression of the character of God. And the Lord Jesus claims here that he has come to fulfill it.

Now, a man who fulfills the law must be a sinless man, because Paul tells us that the law was given to point out that we are sinners. It was intended to bring conviction so that we would return to Christ. But the Lord Jesus is the only person, incidentally, who ever lived up to the law, but he claims that he has come to fulfill it. That’s an implicit claim for sinlessness on his part.

And not only that, he says that he has come to fulfill the law *and the prophets*. In other words, he has come to advance the revelation of God. He has come to show us the true meaning of the Old Testament, and how it all found its ultimate fulfillment in him. In other words, he claims to be in advance of the teaching of Moses and the prophets. An amazing claim on the part of the Lord Jesus. It’s amazing that we’re not repelled by the tone of the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

And furthermore, he will go on to say, as he speaks to them, I want to say to you that the words I say to you, you must yield allegiance to them. And he adds words in order to stress it. “And verily I say unto you,” he says, as if to suggest that my unsupported word is given as the surest light regarding the dark future that you can possibly have, and my simple, unsupported utterance has the most imperative authority of any utterance at all. Those are amazing claims that the Lord Jesus makes in this magnificent statement. The majesty and yet humility of our Lord Jesus; it was humble, of course, for him who was the Son of God to take his place in the line of Moses and the prophets. But it was majesty to claim to fulfill them.

Now what does this word “fulfill” mean? I’ve alluded to this, but I need to say something specifically about it. It has been given two senses by interpreters. It has been said that it means “to accomplish” – I’ve come to accomplish the law and prophets. And by that is meant he has come to perfectly satisfy the demands of the law by dying under the judgment of the law. His obedience to the law is the expression of that which is

necessary for our forgiveness of sins. And so, many have felt that when he says he is come to fulfill the law, that that simply means he has come to substitute, he has come to die under the judgment of God. He has come to bear all of the sins of the broken law which you and I have committed. And by his own obedience, he has come to make it possible for believers to have everlasting life. The Apostle Paul does say that the Lord Jesus came and he was obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

Now that meaning may be well-included in the statement that our Lord makes, but I don’t think that it really satisfies all of it. There is another meaning of the word, *pleroo* which is the Greek word that is used here. Not only to accomplish, but it also means “to fill with content” or “to fill with meaning.” And we have some instances of this sense in the Gospel of Matthew. In chapter 13 and verse 48, it simply means they’re “to fill” – reference being to the filling of a net with fish – and then in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter and the 32<sup>nd</sup> verse, it is used of “filling up the judgment of those that have gone on.” So the idea is to fill with content, to fill with meaning. It means to complete the guilt of, for example, in that last passage. And I’m inclined to think that is the primary meaning that the Lord Jesus gives the word here, because he says, he’s not come to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

Now, the prophets are not known for their moral utterances, so much as they are for their predictions of the Messianic glory that is to come, that touches the first and second coming of the Lord Jesus. And since the 18<sup>th</sup> verse does refer to the prophecies, because it does refer to things that are going to be fulfilled in the present time on into the future and the eternal state, it would seem that we must have here, then, a reference to the prophecies.

And then, finally, in the rest of this chapter, he will take the Old Testament law, and he will give it its deeper meaning. So, I think that it is far truer to the text to say, I have not come to destroy the law or the prophets, I’ve not come to destroy, but to fulfill

as meaning to fill with content, to show us the ultimate meaning of all of those statements in the Old Testament.

One of the earliest Christians, Theophilect, said many centuries ago that “the Lord Jesus filled up Moses and the prophets as a painter fills the sketch of a picture that he has made.” So the Lord Jesus came in order to fill in the portrait that Moses and the prophets had painted. They had, from the beginning, in Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15, and the first promise of the Redeemer to come, the seed of the woman that should crush the serpent’s head – they had begun a long line of teaching which went through the Old Testament, and the Lord Jesus has come as the fulfillment of it.

He’s the fulfiller of Genesis chapter 3 verse 15. He’s the fulfiller of Genesis chapter 22, when Abraham offers up Isaac, looking forward to Christ. He’s the fulfiller of the prophecies of Genesis 49. He’s the fulfiller of the prophecies that are implicit in the sacrifice of the lamb at Passover time. He’s the fulfillment of all of those Messianic promises of the Old Testament, which reach their climax in the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Book of Isaiah – magnificent unfolding of anticipation of the Redeemer to come. That is what our Lord is thinking about when he says, “I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill”—to fill out the meaning of all that has been written. And it reaches its climax in the penal satisfaction, atonement which he accomplished when he died under the punishment of a holy God for the sins of sinners. He hath been made sin for us, he who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

It is an amazing thing to me – it still is amazing to me – that men who seek to interpret holy Scripture can still find interpretation of the word of God that omits that very important doctrine. It’s not very important in the modern mind to say that the Lord Jesus came as an innocent substitute and died under the punishment of a holy God, for the world about us loves to think about “God is love,” and Christians fall into that trap. They are constantly singing about the love of God, and they never sing, hardly ever, about his holiness and about his justice. And so we gain a one-sided impression of God.

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God is a holy and just God. And not only have we sung about it, but we’ve convinced the world that God loves and loves and loves, and holiness is entirely omitted. And now, even, in the secular songs, God-is-love appears, because that’s a great deal of comfort who realizes deep down in his heart that he’s out of relationship with God.

Professor William Barkley, a very gifted commentator, whose books contain a great deal of help for Bible students – unfortunately, however, a liberal commentator – has written concerning these words of the Lord Jesus, “That is, to say, he came to bring out the real of meaning of the law”—it would be wonderful if he would go on from that and explain in Scriptural terms what was the real meaning of the law. But he asks the question, “What was the real meaning of the law? Even behind the scribal and oral law there was one great principle which the scribes and Pharisees had imperfectly and mistakenly grasped. The one great principle was that in all things, a man must seek God’s will, and when he knows it, he must dedicate his whole life to the obeying of it.”

He goes on to say that “Jesus came to fulfill reverence and respect for the law.” All that Professor Barkley is saying is that the Lord Jesus came to give us reverence and respect for the law, and to tell us that man’s responsibility is to seek God’s will, and that when he knows it, he must dedicate his whole life to the obeying of it. Now that is rank Pelagianism—salvation by good works—and the gifted commentator has missed the whole point of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. But unfortunately, that is all too common.

I am trying, I am trying, with my prayers and with my exhortations and expositions to bring you to the place where you can read something like that and say, “Ah, that’s heresy! That is not true to the word of God and it does not do the saints good to hear it.”

Now having said that, the Lord Jesus speaks of the abiding authority and inviolability of the Scriptures. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Notice the verse begins with a little “for.” This explains why he did not come to destroy the Old

Testament. He did not come to destroy the Old Testament because the Old Testament is authoritative and enduring. And he begins by saying, “Verily I say unto you.”

Did you know that no teacher at the time of our Lord Jesus ever began his statements by saying, “Verily I say unto you.” We have no record in ancient Judaism of any teacher who prefaced his remarks by saying, “For verily I say unto you.” And as John says, he said, “Verily, verily I say unto you.” He claimed the utmost authority for the utterances he was giving. He speaks in a unique way.

Now he speaks here of the abiding authority first. Till heaven and earth pass, not one jot or tittle shall in no way pass from the law until all shall be fulfilled, even up to the time of the eternal kingdom. In other words, this statement of our Lord is still applicable today. Not one jot or tittle shall pass from that Old Testament till everything in it be fulfilled. But in the Old Testament, we are told about the eternal state. We are told about the future, from our time. So, our Lord’s statement is still a valid statement. It is, in effect, him saying that the Old Testament has force for us today.

Now what does he mean when he says, “Not one jot or one tittle shall in any way pass from the law”? These are references by our Lord to the Hebrew letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The little word, “jot,” is the Greek translation of a word that refers to the Hebrew, *yodh*. It was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It looks, in the Hebrew script, like our comma except that in a line of Hebrew letters, it stands at the top of the line rather than on the bottom line as our commas in English are placed.

It was a small letter, and not only that, it was known for its dispensability, only indispensable if we wanted to spell accurately, but not really indispensable. It could be omitted, and the sense of the words would be much the same. So it is an insignificant letter of the alphabet to which he refers.

And then he refers to the tittle, which was a little projection that goes beyond the line, which was the only means of distinguishing some letters from another. Now, in case there is someone in the audience who has an Authorized Version – a King James Version

– I’m going to ask you to turn to Psalm 119, and we’re going to look at something here in the authorized version which is not found in some of the modern versions because, well, I won’t say why; I don’t want to offend you. You may have one of those modern versions, probably [laughter]. But, it’s evident they did not think it was worthwhile. I think it was worthwhile to put these things in.

Now if you’ll look at Psalm 119, and you have an Authorized Version, you’ll notice that Psalm 119 is an acrostic Psalm. That is, it’s a Psalm arranged in a certain way designed to make it easy for those who read it and studied it to remember. The first word of each of the eight verses begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the *aleph*. And then the next eight verses begin with the *beth*, or the b.

Now when you look at Psalm 119 and verse 73, if you have an Authorized Version, you’ll notice that at the heading of this is the word, *yodb*. And then in the Authorized version that I have, the Hebrew *yodb* is put to the left of it, and you can actually see it. It looks like a comma. If you have a New American Standard Bible, I’m sorry; you are underprivileged. [Laughter] They did not put those Hebrew letters in. Not, presuming that anyone who read English would ever have occasion to look at them, but you see, we do have occasion to look at them. They form a kind of visual aide for us.

Now notice that little *yodb* that looks like the comma. That’s the jot. Now will you look back at verse 9 of Psalm 119, and you will notice the heading is *beth* and then to the left of it is the Hebrew *beth*. It looks like this. If you can look at something backwards, you make a *beth* this way [gestures]. But the line, the bottom line, extends a little bit beyond the vertical line. Now that little extension down at the bottom on the right hand corner of the *beth* is the tittle.

Now the reason it’s called a tittle – we call it, in English, incidentally, a serif – the reason it’s called the tittle is because it’s that which distinguishes it from other letters. Now will you turn with me over to verse 81 of Psalm 119? In verse 81, we have the section in which all the verses begin with a *kaph*. Now look at the *kaph*, and compare it

with the *beth*. The kaph is made like this. [Gestures] This way, this way, a vertical line, and then to the left. But there is no slight extension beyond the vertical line. The only difference between the *beth* and the *kaph* is that little extension beyond the bottom line. That is the tittle.

When the Lord Jesus said not one jot or one tittle, he was saying that all of the letters of the alphabet are important for the sense contained in them. Now, those of you who don’t have anything in your hands, if you can just think about a printed “i” [laughter]. A printed “i” in our newspapers, for example, looks like this. There is a dot, and then there is a vertical line, but at the bottom, there is usually a horizontal line that extends beyond the vertical line, both this direction and that direction. We call that a serif in English. (That is, I call it that; I hope its right.) A serif. Now this serif – spelled, s-e-r-i-f – that serif is the equivalent of the Hebrew tittle.

Now, then, what is our Lord meaning by this statement, then? There shall not pass from the law one jot or one tittle until all be fulfilled. I have in my hands here an article written by a very fine Christian man. He is a Christian man. He teaches in a Christian institution on the mission field. He is a member of a very respected denomination in this country that, generally speaking, is still sound in its doctrines of salvation.

Now this man has written an article called “The Infallibility of the Bible and Higher Criticism.” It is the position of this man, Professor Harry Bohr, that the Bible is infallible, but it is not inerrant. He states, “The Bible is infallible. It is not inerrant in the accepted sense of the word.” Now what does he mean by that? Well, he means that the Bible is a reliable guide in matters of faith and doctrine, in matters that touch divine revelation. But in matters that touch history and science and archaeology and various things like that, the Bible is not necessarily reliable. The Bible does contain errors. It is infallible, and yet, it is not inerrant.

He states on another page that “we should not be afraid to speak of the literal fallibility of the Bible. The Bible is fallible. It does contain errors.” He speaks also about

disparities, and we should not be ashamed to acknowledge disparities where they are evident. We should not be ashamed of seeing time-conditioned contexts as the bearer of truth. This is the position of a number of our evangelical men today regarding holy Scripture.

I wonder if the Lord Jesus would have accepted that. We read here, “Til heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the law til all be fulfilled.” Now many of our evangelical friends, I think, err at this point. They tend to say, “Jesus said, ‘Not one jot or one tittle shall pass from the law.’ Therefore, he believed in a verbal, plenary inspiration with inerrancy.” But what they mean by that is not too clear in their own minds. Because, you see, the jots and tittles have already passed away, in the literal sense. In the Lord Jesus Christ’s day, he did not have the jots and tittles. He had copies of copies of copies, just as today we have copies of copies of copies of copies of the original manuscripts. We do not have any of the original manuscripts.

We have, of course, the best attested document of ancient history. We have no original manuscripts of any ancient document, in any field of study, and we have more of the New Testament and the Old Testament than we have of any ancient writing. We have so many that the science of textual criticism is difficult, not because we have few manuscripts, but because we have so many manuscripts. But it’s still true that we don’t have the literal jots and tittles. What, then, did our Lord mean?

Why, of course he was referring to the sense of that Old Testament passage. And when he said, not one jot or tittle shall pass until all be fulfilled, he meant that this Old Testament was going to be fulfilled down to its minutest statement. Now its minutest statement demands, of course, a verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. And so the text does teach what we think it teaches, although not in the way that many of my good evangelical friends explain it. What he is really claiming here is a comprehensive and minute fulfillment of the written word.

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Now someone might say, “You mean, only the sense of the Old Testament?” Yes, the sense of the Old Testament *written*, because jot and tittles don’t move around in our minds. They are on the pages. And so he is talking about the comprehensive and minute fulfillment of the written word of the Old Testament. Everything in it, down to its minutest point, is going to be fulfilled perfectly. That’s what our Lord is claiming here. Now that implies that inerrant, verbal, plenary inspiration that we were talking about. But, nevertheless, he states it slightly different.

I don’t know why anyone would ever think that the Bible was written by anyone but God to start with. John Flavell, to start with, many years ago said, “Both bad men or demons wouldn’t have written the Bible, because it condemns them and their work. And good men or angels could not have written it, because if good men and angels had written it, the Bible says God wrote it, and the good men or angels who said at the same time that God wrote it would be lying, and therefore they wouldn’t be good men. [Laughter] And so consequently, only God could have written the Bible.

Well now, it is true that the Bible is the product of God through men, and that is why it is going to be fulfilled in its most minute particulars. That’s what he means; not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law until all of it has been fulfilled. I’m not at all sure that you believe the Bible. Do you really believe the Bible? I’m not sure of that. I’m not even sure that I believe it. I hope I do. I pray, O God, often, O God, help me to believe all that is written in holy Scripture. But I’m not really sure I do, because I know that there are many Christians who say, “I do accept an atonement by the Lord Jesus, but I cannot believe that his shed blood has anything to do with the forgiveness of sins.” He doesn’t really accept the Bible.

Or I’ve heard people say, “I accept the ethics of the word of God, and I accept the ethics of Jesus, and I do believe in Jesus, but I do not accept an atonement by an innocent man who died under the judgment of God as a penal satisfaction. I cannot accept that.” You do not believe the Bible, then.

Or, I know Christians who say, “I believe salvation is of the Lord, and I do believe that in some way he knew that I was going to be saved. But unconditional election; election not based upon what he saw I would do, not based upon my good works, not based upon anything other than the determinate will of a sovereign God—I cannot accept that.” You do not believe the Bible. You do not really believe the Bible. You are subjecting the Bible to your own criticism.

There are people who read the Apostle Paul in this way: Paul was a great man, the greatest interpreter of Jesus; I accept what Paul says, but when it comes to those statements about marriage and divorce, I cannot accept them. Then you do not believe the Bible. Or if you’ll say, I do believe what Paul says, I believe it when he says, “Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church.” But when he says wives should obey their husbands, I cannot accept that. You do not believe the Bible. That is just as much in the Bible as the other statement. All of these statements are in holy Scripture. They all stand upon the same foundation of the authority of God, and if we truly believe, then we are standing upon the authority of God. If we pick and choose, our authority is not God, our authority is ourselves.

There are individuals who believe that it is possible for a local church to be organized correctly and have as its head, a pastor. If there is anything in Scripture that is plain, it is that the early church did never have as its organizational head one man who was called “the pastor” as a kind of president of the corporation. If there is one thing that is not taught in Scripture, it is that.

But there are individuals who say, I can accept the Bible, but I can’t accept that. I don’t know if you really believe the Bible. That is so plain and so clear. And when we read in the very next verse about the inviolability of Scripture, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments,”—I grant that that’s not as important as the atonement. I grant that’s not nearly so important as the doctrine of unconditional election. But nevertheless, it is one of the least commandments of the word of God at

least, and he said, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.” Salvation may not be at stake, but your place in the kingdom of heaven, the rewards that Christians have, is at stake.

O that God would give us a mind to obey his word, to listen to his word, to accept it as the authoritative, totally reliable, holy Scripture. I pray for myself constantly that that may be so, and I pray for you, that you may respond to the word of God as the word of God, and attempt to follow it completely. Exhortation takes time. I should not exhort. [Laughter]

The 20<sup>th</sup> verse is the concluding verse. I must stop. Here, the Lord Jesus speaks about the righteousness that men must have. And the “for,” again, looks back to the preceding context, verse 17, and gives the kind of righteousness that saves, “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees,”—you know what that means, my dear, common citizen of the United States? That means except your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the ordained preachers of the land, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

What was the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Why, it was the righteousness of punctilious observance of the outward commands of the Mosaic law. Furthermore, they had loaded the law down with numberless human traditions, and they obeyed them, too. They were the religious leaders of their day. They were the people who were looked up to by the people of God as the reverends of their day. Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means, the Lord Jesus says, using again that strong way of expressing a prohibition, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven.

How, then, shall we get into heaven? Why we get into heaven the same way that the vilest sinner gets into heaven: by pure grace, that’s how. We get into heaven by imputed righteousness that is given us when we acknowledge that we cannot have any

righteousness of ourselves that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

It’s then that God, revealing the righteousness that comes through Christ, brings us to the knowledge of himself.

So when we get to heaven and knock on – they’re not pearly gates, incidentally [laughter], this is a figure of speech – when we knock on the pearly gates, and St. Peter opens them we say, “Stand aside, Peter, this is my place.” Why? I have the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Well, enter Lewis. You have it, truly.

That is what you need. The righteousness of God through Christ, only that righteousness shall attain for us entrance into heaven. Human righteousness cannot save. How may we attain it? The Lord Jesus doesn’t say definitely here, but he implies it when he says, “I have come to fulfill the law.” That’s what he did. He died, and made it possible for a righteousness to be available for those who would believe.

Well, the application’s obvious. If our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees, it’s quite obvious that the righteousness we obtain from good works will not help us. The righteousness that we obtain from joining the church will not help us. Even being a member of Believers Chapel will not help you, will not get you to heaven. The righteousness that comes from being baptized will not get us to heaven. The righteousness that you think you are earning as you are sitting at the Lord’s table, even every Sunday, will not gain you entrance into heaven. The righteousness that you may think comes from education or from culture or from any other type of benefaction to humanity—any type of good work at all shall not get you to heaven.

And the greatest testimony to this outside of our Lord is the Apostle Paul, a man who was blameless with respect to the law, but who said when the truth came home to me, I counted it but refuse. And then wrote about, “Not by works of righteousness, which we have done, but according to his mercy he has saved us.” And he has saved us that we might glorify his grace.

“The King, The Scriptures, and the Righteousness that Saves” by S. Lewis Johnson  
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So I conclude, that the only hope of any individual is the hope of which the hymn-writer spoke, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness / I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name. On Christ the solid rock I stand / all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

Upon what are you standing? Upon your own righteousness? Does it exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees? No. You are helpless and hopeless and headed to a Christless eternity. May God bring you to conviction and to reception of the righteousness offered through Jesus Christ and his atonement. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are so grateful, Lord, for holy Scripture, for by grace through faith are ye saved, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, that he hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

O Father, we do pray again that through the Holy Spirit, Thou wilt bring enlightenment and understanding to any in this audience who may think that through their own efforts they shall attain to everlasting life. Enlighten them. Bring them to the place of speechlessness before the great requirements of the justice and holiness of God, and then, O God, lead them to the foot of the cross to receive what they cannot earn.

May grace, mercy and peace go with us as we part.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.