

Slide #1 (title slide)

INTRO – AN “IMPOSSIBLE” HIGH JUMP

On July 27th, 1993, something happened in Athletic competition that has been impossible to match in nearly 30 years. A Cuban man, Javier Sotomayor, set a world record in the high jump, clearing 2.45 meters. That is a tad over 8 feet. With my shoes on, on tiptoe, I can just touch that height.

Imagine someone running and leaping over this so that no part of their body touches. Amazing. Someday someone will break that record, but the fact that it has stood for nearly 30 years proves what an extraordinarily rare person it took to accomplish that.

Slide #2

Today the sermon is titled, “What to do with impossible” because we are going to be looking at something that is truly impossible.

OUR CONDITION

When people think about God and his law, they tend to fall into one of two categories: **The dismissive or the despairing.** The dismissive either blow God off, or their responsibility to him. The despairing either try intensely hard or just give up.

When it comes to our relationship with God and how he wants us to live with his laws, God wants us to learn a different path.

THE MAIN IDEA

We need to understand what the entire Bible teaches when it comes to an important topic: **How does a Christian live with God’s law?** The Bible is a book of law. It’s replete with commands to follow God and also replete with failure to follow God and also of God’s forgiveness. But just because God

forgives, we cannot think that we do not need to live according to his law. That is what we are going to see today and hope that this will enable you to have a new understanding of God and his laws.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

We are progressing through the book of Matthew. We like to preach through books in order, maybe not touching every single verse, but substantially covering the entire book. Matthew was written primarily as a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament being the Jewish Bible, the only Bible that Jesus had, because the New Testament had not been written yet. It is of course about Jesus and he is the “bridge” between the Old and New testaments. He is what makes the Old Testament make sense and he is what the New Testament explains.

Matthew shows that Jesus was the Messiah and King that was promised and prophesied about in the Old Testament. He was a descendant of King David from 900 years earlier, and many prophecies told that a Messiah or deliverer would be sent by God.

But there was something unexpected. This was not just a man who would come to deliver his people Israel from the Roman oppression, but he was actually God come to do what no man could do.

The Jews in Jesus’ day would have a difficult time understanding Jesus. He was supposed to be a deliverer to deliver them from their enemies, but as we have seen in the pronouncement of the Angel in chapter one, that he would instead, and more importantly save the people from their sins. Because of this, to many he would be a disappointment, because they wanted him to do something else.

Last week, we spoke of how the other various events of Jesus life, in chapters three and four of Matthew point to him being the promised, prophesied King of Israel. It is clear but understated.

In the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7 is called, Jesus is defining the rules and principles of how things will operate in his Kingdom.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 5:17–48 (ESV)

¹⁷ *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

²¹ *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

²⁷ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed*

adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

How does a Christian understand the requirements of God's law?

It seems obvious first of all that Jesus is taking the requirement of the law and clarifying them in such a way as they seem even more impossible than they were before.

Jesus had his detractors. He broke the rules or traditions of the Pharisees (or the religious teachers) as they had defined them. He healed (and thus "worked") on the sabbath – the day of rest - on more than one occasion. That "ticked off" the Pharisees. He also associated with tax collectors and "sinners" as the Pharisees called them. He allowed other infractions of the law as interpreted by the Pharisees.

In this passage, Jesus is taking the teachings of the Pharisees about the Laws of God and comparing them to what he said, "You have heard it said... But I say to you." And then he shows that the real truth is even more "strict" than what the Pharisees taught. Jesus as God, handles the law with authority. Now what matters is not just the actual physical act, but also what is happening in your heart. By lowering the level that an infraction of God's law occurs, he is raising the bar on our ability to fulfill the law.

As an example, let's say that the UCF track athletes that compete in the Pentathlon had to be able to jump 6 ½ feet to be on the team. We already said that the world record is 8 feet. You have to be able to clear 6 ½ feet before the coach will even work with you. In the case of God's moral standards, it is as if Jesus moves the bar up to 20 feet! An impossible height!

²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

²⁷*'You shall not commit adultery.'* But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

⁴⁶*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ...* ⁴⁸*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

And also, ²⁰ *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus raises the bar by lowering the level at which we actually should recognize our sin. If we think that we are not sinning, then we do not see. Sin begins in the heart and God sees the heart. Sin against God is not merely the act of murder or adultery or hating an enemy. But it is what is in the heart that matters and what God sees.

One day the Pharisees asked Jesus,

Matthew 15:2–3 (ESV)

²*"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."* ³He [Jesus] answered them, *"And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"*

Matthew 15:19–20 (ESV)

¹⁹*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.* ²⁰*These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."*

Jesus raises the bar by lowering the level at which we actually should see that we are sinning.

If we are honest, we know that we cannot stop lusting by trying, we cannot stop hating by trying, we cannot love our enemies by trying. Apparently so important is the issue that Jesus said it would be better to cut off a hand rather than sin. He is not expecting us to actually cut off a hand, but using a Hyperbole to show how important it is.

So, I ask, “What do we do with impossible?” The question remains.

This is where I feel that I need to embark in some teaching that is theological and complex and nuanced. The reason is because there is not often a good understanding among Christians about how to understand the gospel and the law. Consequently, Christians, including us, are confused and try various approaches to reconcile what the Bible is saying about a nuanced subject. I have seen people literally ruin their lives over this. There are splits in denominations and what we would say are “cults” over this issue. And deep down inside of us there always seems to re-emerge this tendency to always revert to trying to please God by our own efforts – something the Gospel teaches us is impossible.

As I said before, people will tend to either be “dismissive” or “despairing” over God’s law. God does not want us to be either of those. So instead of going deeper down in the text, I feel that we need to go “up.” We need to see what the whole Bible says about the subject of God’s law in order to understand what we are supposed to do about it.

Ok. Here we go. When we look back at the Old Testament law, it was given by Moses in Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy and Numbers. These are the five books of the law. Also, there are the prophets and poetic books that are also authoritative. They show God’s promises, his character and prophecies. There are many prophecies in the Psalms for example about the coming of Jesus and his role as King.

So, we can see that there are three basic categories of law and this is important to understand.

There is the moral law. These are things like the Ten Commandments. They have to do with how we live with man and God. “Thou shalt have no other God’s before me”, “Thou shalt not steal,” or murder or commit adultery or covet.

Then there are the civil or social laws. If your ox gores another ox or gores a man this is what you do. If a man steals a sheep, this is the retribution. It also shows how the poor were to be treated, and so on.

Then there are the ceremonial laws that show how God is to be worshiped. These include the priests and the tabernacle or temple and the sacrifices. All of these are very specific, and it is said that there were 613 laws that God prescribed in the Law of Moses.

So now let’s look at verse 17 in our text. Jesus says this about himself in response to his detractors...

¹⁷Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

The iota refers to the smallest of the Hebrew letters that the Old Testament was written in. The “dot” refers to almost an ornamental part of Hebrew letters, sort of like a “serif” is on a font.

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Jesus is saying that all of it must be fulfilled. The issue that we have is that we tend to think that he is speaking about what “we” must do. But in fact, there are parts of the law that only Jesus can fulfill. These are the prophecies and the ceremonial laws.

I read an article by a man named Anthony Charles and he said, “The law is what we do and the Gospel is what Christ has done for us.”

When Jesus said the words in this passage, the sermon on the mount, the work that he came to do was not yet finished. Jesus came to die on the cross for us in order that there could be a new basis for us entering the kingdom of heaven. That is God’s forgiveness of all of our sins on the basis that Jesus fulfilled them for us and also died to take the penalty of our sins or non-compliance to God’s laws.

That is the message of the gospel and Jesus and the apostles are very clear that this is the only basis for our salvation. We are saved by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law.

Galatians 3:23–26 (ESV)

²³Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [or tutor], ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

Romans 10:4 (ESV)

⁴For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Peter in the first Christian speech said this to the Jews in Jerusalem,

Acts 2:23 (ESV)

²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

Acts 2:37–38 (ESV)

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is the really good news of the gospel! God sees our guilt and invites us to come to Christ by faith anyway, so that we can be forgiven!

It reveals that we cannot keep the law and that rather we are justified by faith in Christ.

Acts 15:10–11 (ESV)

¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial laws. That is why it would be wrong to keep doing them. So, the Old Testament ceremonial parts of the law are done away with because Jesus “fulfilled” them. We don’t have to sacrifice animals and we don’t make offerings the ways the Jews had to. This includes the holidays and other observances.

Jesus will also fulfill all of the prophecies about him, but not until he comes again and sets up the heavenly kingdom of God.

... not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

There are three parts of the law (moral, civil and ceremonial), there are also three functions of the law:

Pedagogical, or teaching us about God's righteousness.

It is a mirror to us. That is what Jesus is doing in this passage. He is showing that not only outward compliance is what matters, but what is going on inside in our heart also matters. So, it is a mirror to our soul. It shows us how we fail.

John Calvin says this about the law (tense changed): "while it shows God's righteousness, that is, the righteousness alone that is acceptable to God, it warns, informs, convicts and lastly condemns." "For man, blinded and drunk with self-love, must be compelled to know and confess his own feebleness and impurity."

The result of this as Calvin says too, is so that, we could, "dismiss the stupid opinion of our own strength, and come to realize that we stand and are upheld by God's hand alone; that we are naked and empty-handed and flee to his mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness and merit."

The purpose of the teaching aspect of God's law is that it causes us to abandon hope in ourselves and turn to God.

Next there is the civil purpose of God's law. It restrains evil in society. People everywhere know that stealing is wrong, murder is wrong, cheating is wrong, etc. God infuses these things in everyone's heart.

Romans 2:14–15a (ESV)

¹⁴ For when Gentiles [non Jews], who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...

Because all people know these laws, they make civil laws to protect people from other people's sin. There is fear of getting caught or punished that makes society livable. This is the restraining part of the law.

The third function of the law is the Rule of Christ or normative part.

This is a part of the law that only Christians can do because of God's work inside of us. I did not say that Christians do this, but that only Christians can do this...

Calvin says again, "The third use of the law has respect to the believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns."

Because the Spirit of God is in us and remade our hearts, when we put our faith in Christ, we have a new nature that loves the principles of God's law because they reflect his nature. The law is a reflection of who God is and what he loves. We love them because they are right and true. We pray in the Lord's prayer (that we will look at again next week) "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We desire God's will because we know that it is good and God in his nature is good.

CONCLUSION – WHAT DO WE DO WITH IMPOSSIBLE?

Let's wrap this up.

We need to understand the law and we need to understand the gospel or else we will live wrongly in relation to God. This will cause stress and confusion and even attempts to please God on our own power. But it can also cause us to not understand that God loves his law.

People will tend to either **dismiss God's law or despair under it**. Neither of these are what God wants.

Non-believers dismiss God's laws when they live their lives as if God does not exist. Christians can dismiss God's law when they think that "the Law"

is not for them. “They are free in Christ” and do not have to pay any attention to the law.

Non-Christians can despair in the law in that they know that they are true and even believe in God, but labor under their own strength to be a good person or even a good church goer, but they have remained obstinate in their heart and have not turned to Christ in faith. This means that the law’s real purpose, to cause them to turn from their own strength to God and his mercy, has not yet happened.

A Christian can despair under God’s law because they do not understand the gospel and the freedom that we have in Christ. We are not justified by the law and we do not make God happier if we do them. We need to understand that God’s law cannot save us.

But there are two more “D’s” that we need to look at

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A Christian should delight in God’s law.

Psalm 19:7–11 (ESV)

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.

But a Christian also needs to “depend” on God to live the principles of the law.

We need to recognize that to even acknowledge the truth and rightness and beauty of God’s law, it requires a different kind of person.

In order to jump a 20-foot high jump, it would require a different kind of person. Maybe we would have to cross-breed a human and a cricket or maybe a human or a frog, or even a human and a squirrel.

God expects the impossible. He does want us to live impossible lives. Our former Pastor Bill used to always say the “Christian life is not difficult – it's impossible!”

God expects that we live impossible lives. We are to love his law because we love the nature of God. We are to overcome lust and that inward adultery. We are to love our enemies and not murder them in our hearts. We are to live the impossible.

But we cannot do this unless we are different sorts of people. Not natural people, but supernatural people that can leap over sin because of the Holy Spirit that he has put in us.

Even way back in the Old Testament God knew that the answer was his Holy Spirit living in people and this would take place after Christ came and died and ascended to heaven.

Ezekiel 36:26–27 (ESV)

²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

God commands us to live a supernatural life:

Ephesians 5:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, (a command)

Romans 8:3–4 (ESV)

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

God expects that we live supernaturally in his spirit because he has given us everything that we need; The Holy Spirit living in us.

We should love God's law because it reveals to us the perfect nature of God the father. We are grateful that Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the law for us so that we could be saved and free from the burden of the law and we desire to live the principles in the freedom and joy of the Holy Spirit.

Please pray with me.