

What Did Jesus Believe About the Bible? Matthew 5:17-20

Russ Bush was my teacher in “Christian Philosophy” when I was a seminary student. It was one of the hardest classes I have ever taken, but it was also one of the most rewarding.

One class period in particular still stands out in my mind. The topic was the Bible’s inerrancy, infallibility, and authority. As he carefully and meticulously laid out his argument, Bush made the statement, “the issue of biblical authority is ultimately a question of Christological identity.” He went on to clarify, “What you think about Jesus will ultimately influence what you think about the Bible. Your theology of the ‘living Word’ (Jesus) and the ‘written Word’ (The Bible) go hand in hand.” Even as a young seminarian I intuitively sensed Bush was saying something very important. Now after many years in ministry, I am absolutely convinced he was correct.

On June 14, 2000 Southern Baptists, the denomination that I am a part of, met in Orlando, Florida. The most important issue on the agenda was the consideration and adoption of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000). The following statement, rooted both in Scripture and the language of historic Baptist confessions, was overwhelmingly adopted:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

From its initial presentation, however, this statement ignited a firestorm of protests among a small but vocal segment of Southern Baptists.

During debate a pastor from Texas said to the astonishment of thousands “that while the Bible is true and trustworthy ... the Bible is still just a book.”² Later in a telephone interview he told *Baptist Press*, “As I shared, I believe the Bible is a book that God has given us for guidance. It's a book that *points us* to the truth. We're not supposed to have a relationship with a book.” These comments, confused and misguided as they are, were mild, in comparison to what others said. In an editorial in the *Baptist Standard*, the state paper of Texas, the following was written:

If the Bible alone is our primary guide, then all parts of the Bible receive equal weight. It is a flat Bible. For example, the words of Moses, Jesus and the Apostle Paul are equally authoritative. If, however, Jesus is the guide to interpreting Scripture, then Jesus' words and clear actions take precedence over their apparent discrepancies with other Scripture

¹ Scriptures which attend the article are: Exod 24:4; Deut 4:1–2; 17:19; Josh 8:34; Ps 19:7–20; 119:11,89,105,140; Isa 34:16; 40:8; Jer 15:16; 36; Matt 5:17–18; 22:29; Luke 21:33; 24:44–46; John 5:39; 16:13–15; 17:17; Acts 2:16ff; 17:11; Rom 15:4; 16:25–26; 2 Tim 3:15–17; Heb 1:1–2, 4:12; 1 Pet 1:25; 2 Pet 1:19–21.

² T. Starnes, “6 Words: ‘Defining Moment’ between Conservative & Moderate Baptists,” *Baptist Press*, June 21, 2000, 2.

passages, such as the Old Testament codes and some of Paul's admonitions.

Some Scriptures, especially portions of the Old Testament, clearly stand in paradox to Jesus' life and teachings, also recorded in Scripture. Other passages, such as Paul's writings, seem to be at odds with each other, and Jesus' words and actions clarify and separate the timeless and universal from the culturally specific.

Baptists who place Jesus over the Bible still affirm the full authority of the Bible upon their lives. They do not exalt personal experience over Scripture; rather, they base their decisions upon Scripture. But some passages are paradoxical; they say different things about the same subject. In those occasions, Jesus-first people look to Jesus for help in understanding what the biblical norm means for help in applying the Scripture to their lives.

After this rather convoluted argument and poor exhibition of sloppy theology, the editor concludes:

So, the SBC leaders—who trumpeted "biblical inerrancy" as a battle cry to gain and implement control of the convention during the past 20 years have -- a high view of Scripture, after all. In fact, it's higher than we thought. Rather than a Trinity, they worship a defacto Quartet: Father, Son, Holy Spirit and Holy Bible, with the Bible acting as the arbiter of the other three.

This is dangerous, for several reasons.

First, it refutes orthodoxy—which asserts the primacy of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit—by exalting the Bible to near-divinity and supplanting the influence of Jesus.

Second, by elevating a thing, as precious and authoritative as the Bible is, to such lofty status, it at least implies idolatry, the worship of something other than God.

Third, it denigrates the influence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to work in lives and guide them toward God's will.

Fourth, it begs a vital question: Who then is to provide the authoritative interpretation of all Scripture?

If Scripture stands over Jesus, then the teachings and actions of Jesus are inadequate.³

A Louisville, KY, pastor would add, “Not all Scripture rises to the full level of Christ.” Later the “BGCT Seminary Study Committee Report” said the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) makes the Bible “equal to God.” Even *Christianity Today* chimed in, saying the 2000 statement “is poorer without the rich Christo-centric language of the earlier statement.”⁴

What should we conclude from the above observations? Have we who affirm the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture “demoted Jesus” and improperly elevated the Bible to a status “equal to God”? Though there are numerous and profitable avenues we could pursue to refute this accusation, I want to examine what I believe to be the most important one. I want to ask and answer the question, “What did Jesus believe about the Bible? What was our Savior's view of Scripture?” After all, as the early Clark Pinnock rightly says, “Unreserved

³ M. Knox, “Editorial,” *Baptist Standard*, June 19, 2000, 5.

⁴ Editorial, “Do Good Fences Make Good Baptists?,” *Christianity Today*, August 7, 2000, 26.

commitment to Jesus requires us to look at the Bible through his eyes.”⁵ So, let’s call to the witness stand several statements made by our Lord, but in particular, let’s see what he said in Matthew 5:17–20 and the Sermon on the Mount. A careful examination of this text reveals four basic truths concerning Jesus’ view of the Bible.

I. Jesus Believed the Scriptures Point to Him 5:17

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the theme of God's kingdom (Matt 5–7). Matthew 5:17–20, in particular, serves as the introduction to the “six great antitheses” of 5:21–48. They also explain how we can live out the beatitudes of 5:3–12 and be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13–16).

Matthew 5:17 introduces us to the high view of Scripture held by Jesus. There Jesus says, “Don’t assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” Clearly what he has in mind here is the Old Testament Scriptures. Nevertheless, what Jesus *affirmed* about the Old Testament He also *promised* concerning the New Testament. In John 16:12–15 Jesus said,

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He

⁵ C. Pinnock, “The Inspiration of Scripture and the Authority of Jesus Christ,” in *God’s Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), 202.

hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.

Several points should be made regarding Jesus' view and use of Scripture.

First, Jesus introduced teachings that were new and striking. Indeed, as John 7:46 states, "No man ever spoke like this man." Some have concluded that His teaching constituted a decisive break with the Old Testament Scriptures. "Not so," says Jesus. "Do not assume, think (or consider) that I came to destroy (annul, abrogate, disintegrate, demolish) the law." J. A. Alexander notes the idea is that of "the destruction of a whole by the complete separation of its parts, as when a house is taken down by being torn to pieces."⁶ Jesus says I did not come to tear apart or dismantle the law and prophets (a reference to the OT Scriptures of His day). I did not come to *destroy* (repeated for emphasis) but to fulfill. Note that the antithesis is not between "abolish" and "keep" but between "abolish" and "fulfill." The Scriptures find their fulfillment, their intended goal and purpose, in the life and ministry of Messiah Jesus. He is that to which they point. He is the One they predict and anticipate. James Boice puts it like this, "the Bible is about Jesus and ...he is its fulfillment in all ways. He fulfills the moral law by his obedience, the prophecies by

⁶ J.A. Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1860; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 126.

the specifics of [his] life, and the sacrificial system by his once-and-for-all atonement.” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, 81).

Second, Jesus provides not only an emphatic denial but also a positive declaration concerning the purpose for his coming—he came to fulfill the Scriptures. He came, as the Son of God, to complete what had previously been delivered in bits and pieces by the Old Testament prophets (see Heb. 1:1–2). To set Scripture aside was never His agenda. To bring them to fulfillment and fruition is why He came.

Don Carson has it right when he says,

Jesus fulfills the entire Old Testament in many ways. Because they point toward him, he has certainly not come to abolish them. Rather, he has come to fulfill them in a rich diversity of ways.... Jesus does not conceive of his life and ministry in terms of *opposition* to the Old Testament, but in terms of *bringing to fruition* that toward which it points. Thus the law and the prophets, far from being abolished, find their valid continuity in terms of their outworking in Jesus. The detailed prescriptions of the Old Testament may well be superseded, because whatever is prophetic must be in some sense provisional. *But whatever is prophetic likewise discovers its legitimate continuity in the happy arrival of that toward which it has pointed.*⁷

That our Lord would have affirmed that “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation” (which concludes the *Baptist Faith and Message* 2000 statement on Scripture) can hardly be questioned. Listen

⁷ D.A. Carson, *Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 37. Emphasis added.

to Him elsewhere in Scripture:

John 5:39: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me.”

John 17:17: “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

Luke 24:25–27: “Then He said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?’ And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

Luke 24:44–45: “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.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”

This truth that Jesus Christ is the theme of the entire Bible is well-captured in the anonymous poem, “I Find My Lord in the Book”:

I find my Lord in the Bible wherever I chance to look,
He is the theme of the Bible the center and heart of the Book;
He is the Rose of Sharon,
He is the Lily fair,
Wherever I open my Bible the Lord of the Book is there.

He, at the Book’s beginning, gave to
the earth its form,
He is the Ark of shelter bearing the brunt of the storm,
The Burning Bush of the desert, the budding of Aaron’s Rod,
Wherever I look in the Bible I see the Son of God.

The Ram upon Mt. Moriah, the Ladder from earth to sky,
The Scarlet Cord in the window, and the Serpent lifted high,

The smitten rock in the desert, the Shepherd with staff and crook,
The face of my Lord I discover wherever I open the Book.

He is the Seed of the Woman, the Savior Virgin-born;
He is the Son of David, whom men rejected with scorn,
His garments of grace and of beauty the stately Aaron deck,
He is a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.

Lord of eternal glory whom John, the Apostle saw;
Light of the golden city, Lamb without spot or flaw,
Bridegroom coming at midnight, for whom the Virgins look.
Wherever I open my Bible, I find my Lord in the Book.

II. Jesus Believed the Scriptures Were Perfect in Every Detail 5:18

While Matthew 5:17 affirms a *promise-fulfillment* understanding of Jesus' view of Scripture, not a *promise-abolish* paradigm, verse 18 provides the Christological and theological rationale. "For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished." Jesus introduces verse 18 with a note of personal authority that transcended the authority of all other teachers. The word *amen* variously translated as "assuredly," "truly," "I tell you the truth," or "for I assure you" alerts us that the words that will follow are of paramount importance and authority. R.T. France calls this "Jesus' own signature" since we know of no other teacher using it (quoted in Boice, 82). The phrase occurs 31 times in Matthew's gospel. The phrase "until heaven and earth pass away" means until the end of the age, as long as the

present world order persists. “The smallest letter” or jot (*iôta*) is a reference to the *yod*, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, similar in shape to our apostrophe. One “stroke of a letter” or tittle (*keraiā*) is the smallest projection or part of a Hebrew letter, similar to that which distinguishes our “F” from a “P”, or “P” from an “R”. The phrase “will by no means” (*ou mē*) is a double negative used to emphasize that God’s law shall not “never” pass away until all is fulfilled. In the Lukan parallel we read, “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail” (Luke 16:17).

Jesus affirms the reliability and truthfulness of the Scriptures in the strongest possible language. He is not saying that the Old Testament contains some truth or that it becomes truth when men and women have a significant encounter with it. As he affirms in John 10:35, “the Scripture cannot be broken.” Again, as He proclaims in His High Priestly prayer to the Father in John 17:17, “Your word is truth.” The New Testament scholar H. C. G. Moule says it well, “[Jesus] absolutely trusted the Bible; and though there are in it things inexplicable and intricate that have puzzled me so much, I am going, not in a blind sense, but reverently, to trust the Book because of Him.”⁸

I am no fan of liberal/anti-supernatural theology or destructive biblical

⁸ R. Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 223.

criticism. I am unimpressed with its worldview, biases, and skewed methodologies. Still, we can learn even from those with whom we disagree, and sometimes a breath of scholarly fresh air and honesty blows our way from this camp. When it comes to what Jesus and the Church believed about the Bible, some moderates and liberals would do well to listen to some of their heroes:

Rudolf Bultmann: “Jesus agreed always with the scribes of his time in accepting without question *the authority of (Old Testament) law* ... the idea that Jesus had attacked the authority of the law was wholly unknown to the Christian community.”⁹

Emil Brunner: “The doctrine of Verbal Inspiration was already known to pre-Christian Judaism and was probably also taken over by Paul and the rest of the Apostles.”¹⁰

Kirsopp Lake: “It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind; it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians: How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of the Scripture? A few perhaps, but very few. No, the fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he; and I am sorry for anyone who tries to argue with a fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The *Bible* and the *corpus theologicum* of the Church are on the fundamentalist side”.¹¹

Four notable examples are cited elsewhere by another author:

⁹ R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. L.P. Smith and E.H. Lantero (London: Scribner, 1958), 61, 63.

¹⁰ E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 107.

¹¹ K. Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton, 1926), 61.

H.J. Cadbury, Harvard professor and one of the more extreme New Testament critics of the last generation, once declared that he was far more sure as a mere historical fact that Jesus held to the common Jewish view of an infallible Bible than that Jesus believed in His own messiahship. Adolf Harnack, the greatest church historian of modern times, insists that Christ was one with His apostles, the Jews, and the entire early Church in complete commitment to the infallible authority of the Bible. John Knox, author of what is perhaps the most highly regarded recent life of Christ, states that there can be no question that this view of the Bible was taught by our Lord Himself. The liberal critic, F. C. Grant, concludes that in the New Testament, 'It is everywhere taken for granted that Scripture is trustworthy, infallible, and inerrant.'¹²

When we survey our Lord's teaching in the Gospels we discover that the judgments of these scholars is confirmed. Jesus consistently treated the historical narratives of the Old Testament as straightforward records of fact. He referred to Abel (Luke 11:51), Noah (Matt 24:37–39), Abraham (John 8:56), Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt 10:15, 11:23–24), Lot (Luke 17:28–32), Isaac and Jacob (Matt 8:11), the manna (John 6:31), the wilderness serpent (John 3:14), David (Matt 22:43), Solomon (Matt 6:29, 12:42), Elijah (Luke 4:25–26), Elisha (Luke 4:27), Jonah (Matt 12:39–41), and Moses (Matt 8:4), among others. Nowhere is there the slightest hint that He questioned the historicity or accuracy of these or any other accounts.

¹² K. Kantzer, "Christ and Scripture," *His* 26.4 (1966), 16–20. Emphasis added.

It is interesting to note that Jesus often chose as the basis of His teaching those very stories that many modern skeptics find unacceptable (e.g., Adam and Eve, Noah's flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jonah). For Jesus, Scripture was the final court of appeal in His disputes with the Pharisees and Sadducees. In His battle against Satan in the wilderness, Jesus cited scriptural statements as arguments against which no further argument was possible (Matt 4:1–11). Jesus might set aside or reject the Rabbinic or Pharisaical interpretation of the Old Testament (cf. Matt 5:21–48), but He never questioned its authority or truthfulness.¹³

Again, the early Pinnock saw this clearly when he wrote,

Jesus' doctrine of inspiration receives expression in the Sermon on the Mount. Before setting forth his ethical instructions, Jesus explained his intention. "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5:17). Evidently he does not want us to think that the thrust of his teaching is to violate or even to devalue Old Testament revelation. The saying which is also contained in Luke (16:17) has an entirely genuine ring to it. Jesus' enemies were eager to pin an "antinomian" label on him if they could. Therefore, Jesus made it clear that the object of his criticisms was not the Bible, but the traditions which the Rabbis had built as a fence around it, traditions which in practice enjoyed an authority actually higher than the written Word. He assures us that his confidence in the divine character of Scripture does not stop short even of its smallest elements. "Not an iota, not a dot, will pass" (Mt. 5:18). He issues a stern warning: "Whoever then

¹³ For a detailed view of Jesus' view of biblical authority see J. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (v. 19).¹⁴

Therefore, liberal scholar James Barr is incorrect when he writes,

Jesus took Jewish scripture as it was, as his contemporaries did, and he used it as they did in this respect, as a source through which authoritative intimations of divine truth had been given. Thus if Jesus refers to a passage in Exodus or in Deuteronomy with the words “Moses said,” it is quite mistaken to read this as if he was placing his own full messianic and divine authority behind the assertion that these books were actually written by the historical Moses. No such question entered his head and there is nothing in the Gospels that suggests that his teaching was intended to cope with it. Historical questions interested him little.¹⁵

Jesus said, “Not a jot or tittle....”

Professor, Alan Culpepper, is wrong when he says,

Jesus had remarkably little to say about the nature of Scripture... [and that] Jesus demands [in the Sermon on the Mount] a standard of righteousness higher than that set by the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of the Pharisees.¹⁶

The traditions of the Pharisees yes, the Hebrew Scriptures no! Our Lord said, “Not a jot or tittle....”

Professor Frank Stagg is off course when he says,

Those who say the Bible is inerrant are lying... [and] inerrancy misses the point. If we follow Christ we recognize variant perspectives; we see

¹⁴ Pinnock, “The Inspiration of Scripture and the Authority of Jesus Christ,” 205.

¹⁵ J. Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 11.

¹⁶ R. A. Culpepper, “Jesus’ View of Scripture,” in *The Unfettered Word: Confronting the Authority-Inerrancy Question*, ed. Robison B. James (Waco: Word, 1987), 26–27.

competing perspectives. You can't go north and south at the same time and Jesus didn't try to. He affirmed much but He rejected much.¹⁷

The Savior said, "not a jot or a tittle...."

Professor Henlee Barnette is simply wrong when he declares:

- 1) The Bible is errant with many self-contradictions.
- 2) The Bible has errors in the field of science.
- 3) The Bible is not historically accurate.
- 4) The Bible is errant as to cosmology.¹⁸

Again, our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Not a jot or a tittle...."

III. Jesus Believed the Scriptures Are to Be Obeyed and Taught 5:19

A completely true and trustworthy Bible should be treated with the utmost care. It should impact how we obey it and also how we teach it. Jesus has told us in verse 18 that the authority of Scripture will not pass away until "God fulfilled every promise and prediction in its pages" (Quarles, 99). Now in verse 19 he tells us this authority applies and is relevant to the smallest details, "the least of these commandments (see for example Deut. 22:6-7 and a commandment about a bird nest!). To "break" even a little commandment, and to teach others to do the same, has serious consequences. To teach others that portions of God's word are no big

¹⁷ R. Hargus, "Retired Seminary Professor Advises Baptists to Use Bible as Jesus Did," *Baptists Today*, May 23, 1996, 8.

¹⁸ H. Barnette, "The Heresy of Inerrancy Continues to Plague Southern Baptists," *Baptists Today*, September 21, 1995, 16.

deal is a very big deal. You “will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” James 3:1 reminds us, “Not many should become teacher, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment.”

The Bible teaches degrees of punishment in hell (Matt. 11:20-24) and it also affirms, like here, degrees of position and reward in heaven (cf. Matt 25:14-20).

Obeying God’s Word and teaching others to do the same is no trifling matter. You doubt that? Then hear the words of the Savior and the Scriptures!

John 14:15 – “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

John 15:10 – “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.”

1 John 2:3 – “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.”

1 John 3:24 – “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”

1 John 5:3 – “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

Like a train and its tracks, Scripture provides the tracks that guide the Christian life. Love for Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit provides the energy to power

the engine and move us forward. Spurgeon encapsulates verse 19 in a simple prayer: “Lord, make me of this thy kingdom a right loyal subject, and may I both “*do and teach*” according to thy Word! Whether I am little or great on earth, make me great in obedience to thee” (*Commentary on Matthew*, 43).

IV. Jesus believed the Scriptures Focus On the Heart and the Spirit of the

Law

5:20

- The Scribes and Pharisees were admired and highly respected in Jesus’ day.

His words in verse 20, quite simply, would have been shocking. They would have taken peoples breath away. This is not hard to understand with a little historical homework. Quarles provides a nice summary of the two:

“The “scribes” (5:20) were highly trained experts in the interpretation and application of the law. They normally began their training as children and continued their studies until formal ordination at age 40. The scribes were greatly respected by most Jews of the day. When scribes walked down the streets in their distinctive robes, others would stand in their honor, greeting them with titles like “rabbi”, “father,” or “master.” Hosts typically offered the scribes the seat of honor at banquets” (23:6).

“The “Pharisees” were members of a movement in Judaism that was committed to meticulous observance of the law. They particularly emphasized matters such as tithing, ritual purity, and Sabbath observance. Scribes and Pharisees belonged to two distinct groups. Serving as a scribe was a profession. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were a Jewish sect. Some scribes were Pharisees, and the Pharisees likely chose their leaders from among the scribes. The scribes and Pharisees

shared in common a commitment to the study and observance of the law.” (pgs. 100-101).

- So, what did Jesus mean when He said our righteousness must exceed theirs for entrance into the kingdom of heaven? In many ways the antitheses of verses 21-48 tell us, especially verse 48 and the call to “be perfect.” With their 248 regulations and 365 prohibitions to fence and protect the law, their righteousness was still only skin deep. It was outward and external. If verse 19 warns us about the dangers of lawlessness, verse 20 warns us about the deadly dangers of legalism. A Christian’s righteousness is not skin deep. It goes to the heart. It is internal and spiritual. It is seeking first, from the heart, the kingdom of God and His righteousness (6:33). Quarles is again helpful here showing us, in all its beauty, what “surpassing righteousness” is and what it look like.

“The Gospel of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount in particular offer several descriptions of this surpassing righteousness. First, superior righteousness focuses on the *spirit* of the *law* rather than merely the letter (15:1-6). Jesus’ disciples would not interpret the law permissively, in a manner that sought loopholes which might permit behavior God clearly intended to prohibit or left optional behavior He clearly intended to command. Second, superior righteousness focuses on *internal* matters rather than *external* matters (15:10-20; 23:25-28). Jesus’ disciples were more concerned about the moral purity of their hearts than about the ritual purity of their hands. Third, superior righteousness focuses on more important matters of the law rather than minor

points of the law (23:23). Jesus' disciples were more concerned about matters such as justice, mercy, and faith than about tithing the tiny herbs of their gardens. Fourth, superior righteousness focuses upon manifesting divine *character* rather than merely keeping divine *commands* (5:9. 45. esp. 48). Jesus' disciples would not attain righteousness merely through efforts to keep God's commands. As His children, they would naturally and spontaneously exhibit the character of their Father and give him glory through good works that reflected His holiness (5:16). France rightly claimed, "Jesus is not talking about beating the scribes and Pharisees at their own game, but about a different level or concept of righteousness altogether." (Quarles, 103).

Conclusion

My initial theology was heavily influenced and formed by Clark Pinnock. Few lament his theological disintegration more than I. Earlier in his life, he articulated the crux of the matter concerning the relationship between Jesus and the Bible with crystal clarity:

Shall we follow Jesus in his view of Scripture? In the light of this evidence the question calls for another. How can a Christian even consider *not* doing so? Our Lord's view of inspiration was not an incidental tenet on the border of his theology. His belief in the truthfulness of the Old Testament was the rock on which he based his own sense of vocation and the validity of much of his teachings. The question about the inspiration of Scripture really boils down to the issue of Christology. It is impossible to affirm his authority while at the same time seeking to evade his teachings regarding the divine authority of the Bible. If Christ's claim to be the Son of God is true, his person guarantees the truth of all the rest of his teachings as well. So long as Jesus Christ is confessed, honored, and adored, we may confidently expect a high view of Scripture to persist in the church. And in the light of a considerable defection from that view amongst professed Christians today we boldly appeal for a return to a proper view of the Bible on the basis of the

massive fact of our Lord's doctrine of inspiration.¹⁹

In my early days at Southern Seminary as a dean (1996), I had lunch with a New Testament professor. Even though we held significantly different theologies, he was always gracious and supportive of me and I enjoyed the time of fellowship with him. As we sat down to eat he looked at me and said, "I want to ask you a question and I mean no offense." I replied that he could ask me anything he wished. His question was this, "How did you turn out theologically the way that you are? I mean, why do you think theologically like you do?" I told him I was not offended by the question at all, but I did not think that my answer would be very satisfying. I shared that when I was a little boy, I trusted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. As I grew in the faith, I came to understand that to be a Christian meant to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ and that His lordship should permeate every area of our lives. His lordship included what I should think and believe when it comes to matters of theology, including the Bible. I told him that as I had studied Jesus' view of the Bible, I came to the conclusion that I could do nothing other than hold to its complete truthfulness and reliability as He (Jesus) himself had done. To do anything other than that would be to set aside the lordship of Jesus Christ. That professor simply responded by saying, "I have never thought

¹⁹ Pinnock, "The Inspiration of Scripture and the Authority of Jesus Christ," 215.

of it like that before, but it does make a lot of sense.”

L.R. Scarborough was a great Texas Baptist who succeeded his hero B.H. Carroll as president at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. In his book *Gospel Message*, Scarborough records in moving and memorable words the death of this Texas Titan:

B.H. Carroll, the greatest man I ever knew, as he was about to die, a few days before he died, expecting me, as he wanted me, to succeed him as president of the seminary, I was in his room one day and he pulled himself up by my chair with his hands and looked me in the face. There were times when he looked like he was forty feet high. And he looked into my face and said, “My boy, on this Hill orthodoxy, the old truth is making one of its last stands and I want to deliver to you a charge and I do it in the blood of Jesus Christ.” He said, “You will be elected president of this seminary. I want you, if there ever comes heresy in your faculty, to take it to your faculty. If they won’t hear you, take it to the trustees. If they won’t hear you take it to the conventions that appointed them. If they won’t hear you, take it to the common Baptists. They will hear you. “And,” he said, “I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to keep it lashed to the old Gospel of Jesus Christ.” As long as I have influence in that institution, by the grace of God I will stand by the old Book.²⁰

This is a great statement. It is also a great place to stand. It is an even better place to live. It is the best place to die. Jesus believed the Bible. That is good enough for me. I hope and pray it is good enough for you.

²⁰ L. R. Scarborough, *Gospel Message* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1922), 227–28.