The Door You Can't Climb To

MATTHEW 5:17-20 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

Jesus sets the bar impossibly high, higher than the most careful rule-keeper you know, and then he hands you the very righteousness he's demanding because he kept every bit of the law you never could.

Opening Lines

Picture the most disciplined, religiously serious person you've ever met. Now hear Jesus say that's not enough to get in.

Before You Teach

- Goal: The room should feel the door swing from 'climb higher than the Pharisees' to 'it's already been opened from the inside.' They leave knowing the exceeding righteousness isn't a taller ladder, it's a gift.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the extended background on scribes-versus-Pharisees distinctions if time is tight. You only need one line: these were the holiness professionals, and Jesus said they fell short.
- Where the moment lives: It lives in the gap between verse 20 (impossible standard) and where Christ meets it. Don't rescue people from the weight of 'you will never enter' too fast; let them sit in the impossibility before the gospel lands.
- Your prep: Be able to say Romans 10:4 from memory and connect it to 5:20 in one breath. Know the difference between 'fulfill' and 'abolish' cold, because someone will ask if the Old Testament still applies.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening — the show-of-hands (4 min). Read 5:17-20 aloud (2 min). Teach 'fulfill' with the empty cup (6 min). Questions 1-3 with the whole room, calling on your three-weeks-silent person for one of them (18 min). Land verse 20 into Romans 10:4, let it sit (5 min). Commitments drill — 'This week I will,' you first (8 min). Close in prayer over their actual words (2 min). Transformation lives in questions 1-3 and the pause after verse 20. If short, cut the scribes/Pharisees background to one sentence.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group opening — the most serious person you know (5 min). Read the passage (3 min). Teach 'fulfill' with the cup (7 min). All 5 discussion questions, slow, everyone talking

(28 min). Read Romans 3:21-22 and Jeremiah 31:33 into question 5 (5 min). Commitments drill, you first, one concrete action each (9 min). Prayer over their named commitments (3 min). Transformation lives in questions 4 and 5 where the gift and the response meet. If short, cut question 3.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening — 'can I run a strange verse past you?' (3 min). Read 5:17-20 together (2 min). Say the cup image in one sentence (3 min). Questions 1, 4, and 5 only, back and forth (14 min). One line of gospel: the standard is impossible, so Christ became the gift (3 min). Each of you name one 'This week I will' out loud (4 min). One-sentence prayer, spontaneous, over what was said (1 min). Transformation lives in question 4 — where does the righteousness come from. Cut nothing; just go shorter on each.

Commitments, Not Summary

Here's a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach, and this week we drill it deliberately: end on commitments, not summary. Most teachers close by restating what they just taught. Don't. Instead, close by asking each person to say out loud one specific thing they will DO before next week. A summary lets people nod and leave unchanged. A spoken commitment puts their name on something. This week, level one: at the end, go around and have every person finish this sentence out loud — 'This week I will...' — with one concrete action from tonight. Not 'I'll try to be more righteous.' Something a camera could film them doing. You go first (that's week 1's drill, go first and go real). Watch how naming it out loud in front of others changes whether it happens.

Why This Passage Matters

This is one of the hardest verses in the Sermon on the Mount, and most rooms have never had it explained without either fear or a shrug. Some in your room secretly believe Christianity is a scoreboard: keep the rules, stay clean, hope it adds up. Verse 20 blows that up. Jesus names the gold-standard rule-keepers of his day, the people everyone assumed were shoo-ins for the Kingdom, and says their righteousness isn't enough. If your room hears only that, they'll leave crushed. But that crushing is the setup. The same Jesus who raised the bar out of reach is the one who kept the law from the heart, every stroke of it, and now credits that record to anyone who trusts him. The impossible demand becomes the gift. That's not a footnote to the gospel, it's the hinge of the whole Bible. You get to be the one who walks a real person from 'I can never be good enough' to 'it was never about being good enough.' There are few things you'll ever teach that land with more relief than this one. Don't waste it.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach this, do the central exercise on yourself. Take one command you've quietly filed under 'least' — the small one you excuse. Maybe it's how you speak to your spouse when you're tired, or the way you cut someone off in conversation. Sit with it this

week and actually try to keep it perfectly, from the heart, not just outwardly. You'll fail by Tuesday. Good. Now you know in your body what verse 20 means: even the small stuff is beyond you when it has to come from a clean heart. When you stand up to teach, you're not reporting on a doctrine. You're testifying that you tried to climb this week and couldn't, and that Christ already stood where you fell.

Bring Your Own Story

- A time you worked hard to look righteous on the outside while something stayed cold underneath — and who, if anyone, saw through it.
- A moment you finally understood that a rule you'd shrunk down to 'least' actually mattered to God.
- SAMPLE — polished version: 'I always thought I was a patient person.' Real version: 'Last Thursday my kid asked the same question four times and I snapped so hard she flinched, and I stood there realizing I'd been faking calm for years.'
- Guardrail: tell it raw, not raw as in oversharing — raw as in unfinished, not the tidy version where you come out looking wise.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Raise your hand if you'd say a person who never lies, never steals, gives generously, and keeps every religious rule is in good shape with God. Hold that. Because Jesus is about to name exactly those people and say it's not enough."

Start with a shared assumption, then break it, so the passage does the surprising instead of you.

SMALL GROUP: "Think of the most religiously serious person you've ever known — the one who really kept the rules. Now imagine being told you have to out-do them to get in. That's the room Jesus is talking to tonight."

Anchor in a felt experience before the text, so the abstract verse has something to grab onto.

COFFEE: "Can I run a strange verse past you? Jesus says unless you're more righteous than the strictest religious people around, you can't get into the Kingdom. Sounds impossible, right? I think that's the point. Let me show you."

Lead with the tension as a real question, so it feels like a conversation and not a lecture.

Teaching the Word

Teach the word 'fulfill' — in the Greek, plēroō. It doesn't mean to keep or to obey. It means to fill something completely full, to bring it all the way to what it was reaching for. Here's the physical picture: hold up an empty cup. The law is that cup — it can hold the shape of righteousness, it can name what should go in, but it can't fill itself. Now mime pouring it full to the brim. That's what Jesus does. He doesn't smash the cup and he doesn't leave it

empty. He fills it, every drop, from the inside. Every commandment was leaning toward him like an empty vessel waiting. So when he says he came not to abolish but to fulfill, he's saying: I am what all of this was pointing at. 'I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.' (Let that sit. Don't rush to fill the silence.)

Discussion Questions

1. When you first hear 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,' what's your gut reaction — hope or dread?

Coaching note: Let people be honest that it feels like dread. Don't correct it yet. The dread is where the gospel gets traction later.

If it stalls: Simple version: does that verse make you feel more secure with God, or less? Just one word.

2. The Pharisees tithed their spice racks and counted their steps on the Sabbath. What made all that effort still fall short?

Coaching note: Steer toward Matthew 23:23 — outside clean, inside cold. They kept the letter and skipped justice, mercy, and faith. Don't let it become Pharisee-bashing; the point is that WE do the same thing.

If it stalls: Have you ever done the right thing with the wrong heart? What was that like?

3. What's the difference between Jesus 'destroying' the law and 'fulfilling' it? Why does that distinction change everything?

Coaching note: Bring back the cup image. Fulfill means filling full, not abolishing. Watch for people who think the Old Testament just got cancelled — gently correct with Luke 24:44.

If it stalls: Yes or no: is the Old Testament still worth reading for a Christian? Why or why not?

4. If the righteousness the Kingdom demands is beyond anyone's reach, where does it actually come from?

Coaching note: This is the hinge. Let someone in the room say 'from Jesus' — don't say it for them if you can help it. Then read Romans 10:4 and let it land: Christ is the target, and the righteousness is credited, not earned.

If it stalls: Think of a gift you didn't earn but got anyway. What did it feel like to receive something you couldn't have paid for?

5. If your standing with God is Christ's record and not yours, why bother keeping even the 'least commandments' at all?

Coaching note: This is where free grace meets real obedience. Steer toward gratitude, not fear — we do and teach the commands because we love the One who kept them for us. Jeremiah 31:33: the law written on the heart. Let the room wrestle honestly here.

If it stalls: When someone gives you something huge and undeserved, does it make you want to be careless with them, or careful? Why?

Questions You May Hear

"So does the Old Testament law still apply to Christians or not?"

Jesus says not one stroke of it passes away, so it's not scrapped — it's fulfilled in him. He

kept it perfectly on our behalf, and it still shows us God's character and reveals our need; we just don't earn our standing by keeping it.

"Who exactly were the scribes and the Pharisees?"

The scribes were the professional copyists and interpreters who preserved Scripture letter by letter and ruled on how to apply it. The Pharisees were a lay movement so serious about the law they built extra rules around it — and to ordinary people, no one looked more righteous.

"How can Jesus demand a righteousness that exceeds theirs if that's impossible for us?"

Because it is impossible if you're climbing a ladder — and that's the point. The exceeding righteousness isn't a stricter version of theirs; it's Christ's own record, earned by him and credited to everyone who trusts him. Romans 3:21-22 calls it 'a righteousness of God apart from the law.'

"What does 'least in the Kingdom' versus 'great in the Kingdom' mean — are there ranks in heaven?"

Jesus is warning against treating any of God's commands as small and teaching others to shrug them off. The contrast is honor and dishonor within the Kingdom; the deeper point is that even the 'least' command matters to God, so our obedience matters too.

For Experienced Leaders

- After class, run the roster in your head: who was PRESENT and silent for three weeks running? Not who was absent — who was there and said nothing. A person can quietly fade for a month inside a room that never noticed. Next week, plan the one specific question only that person could answer from their own life ('Marcus, you manage a team — how does the least-commandment thing land at work?') and route it gently to them. That pulls someone back better than any general warmth.
- When you hit verse 20's weight, resist the urge to rescue immediately. Give it a full beat. The relief of the gospel only feels like relief to people who first felt the demand.
- If someone turns this into Pharisee-bashing, gently redirect: 'The scary part isn't that they were hypocrites — it's that they were the good ones, and we do exactly what they did.' Keep the mirror pointed at the room.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around the room and have everyone finish this out loud: 'This week I will...' — one concrete action a camera could film. You go first. Point them to the take-home actions on the handout if they're stuck.

Close by praying out loud over the exact things people just named — the specific 'least commandment' each person is going to keep, the specific heart-motive someone confessed. Don't reach for a written prayer; saying their own words back to God is what makes them believe he heard.

If you run out of time: If the room is still chewing on question 1 or 2 and it's real, stay there. Better to feel the weight of the impossible standard honestly than to rush to the gift and have it feel cheap.

Midweek follow-up: Midweek, text each person one line: 'How did the least commandment go?' Nothing more. It tells them you meant it when they named it out loud.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/5-17-20/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- The most religiously serious person I've ever known kept these rules well:
- One command I've quietly filed under 'least' (small enough to excuse):
- 'Fulfill' means to fill full, not to destroy. In my own words, what did Jesus fill full?
- If my standing with God is Christ's record and not mine, one thing that changes for me is:
- This week I will (one concrete action, something a camera could film):

Take-home actions:

- Take that one 'least' command and keep it once this week when it costs you — answer with patience the next time you'd normally snap back at someone in your house.
- Before your next kind act, pause and pray, 'Lord, let me do this to please you, not to be seen.' Aim underneath the behavior, where only God looks.
- Think of a friend drifting into a habit you both know is wrong. Over coffee or a text, gently name it and point them back to Christ — because to teach them is to love them enough to speak.

Thank God that Christ kept every letter of the law you never could, and counts it as yours.