

# Commentary and Lesson on Matthew 5:17-48

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## IV. THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW. 5:17-48.

### A. The Introduction. 5:17-20.

1. Jesus **honors** the Law. "Do not think that I have come to abolish [kataluō] the Law or the Prophets" (v. 17a). (Some of his opponents indeed supposed that he was doing just this.) "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means [ou mē] disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (v. 18). He has not come to tamper with the Law or to remove the least part of it (in v. 18 he refers to the **yodh**, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and to the tiny projection that distinguishes the **daleth** from the **resh**). For Jesus the Law is sacred, not to be abused or damaged.

2. Jesus **fulfills** the Law. He comes "not to abolish the Law or the Prophets...but to fulfill [plēroō] them" (5:17). The sense is twofold (so too Robert Banks, Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition, 207-10).

a. Jesus **completes** the law. He views the law in eschatological perspective. That is, he expounds it within the context of his foundational message about the dawning Kingdom of God (4:17, 23). As **plēroō** covers both the Law and the Prophets, it does not mean "fulfill" merely in the sense of bringing to pass certain prophecies, or merely in the sense of keeping certain laws. In this context it includes the idea "to fill up," "to complete" (thus NEB). The OT revelation ("the Law and the Prophets") is not complete in itself. To understand Moses and the prophets correctly, is to recognize that the Age of Law has been superseded by the Age of Messiah (cf. 11:12-13). Far from abolishing a building partially constructed, Jesus brings it to completion. By inaugurating the kingdom, Jesus brings the OT to its **appointed goal**. On this sense of 5:17, see Joachim Jeremias, NT Theology, 1: 83-85.

b. Jesus **realizes** the law. By his teachings and his actions, he perfectly expresses all aspects of the covenantal relationship to which God summoned his people through Moses (and the prophets). To alter the figure used under a., in Jesus an OT design is for the first time realized in an actual building.

### 3. Jesus commands his followers to **obey** the Law.

a. The Law's abiding relevance. "The Law" of 5:18 is the Mosaic Law, as is clear from the immediately preceding reference to "the Law or the Prophets" (v. 17). Jesus commends "whoever practices and teaches these commands" (v. 19), i.e. those of the law of v. 18. The injunction of v. 19 (where the language is universal and unqualified) applies to disciples just as surely as to anyone else. The "righteousness" to which Jesus calls them, v. 20, is the very quality of life to which the Mosaic Law summoned Israel. The antitheses of 5:21-48 ("You have heard that it was said... But I tell you") point not to a difference of subject (Jesus does not replace but exegetes the law) but to a change of time (the Eschaton has dawned) and of teacher (Yahweh has come to expound his own law). The inaugural of the Kingdom, and the arrival of the Messianic King, bring the age of Law to an end, but not the Law itself. The King himself declares that the Mosaic Law in its entirety remains in force "until everything is accomplished [**ginomai**]" (5:18b) - meaning not "until the whole law is kept," but "until heaven and earth disappear" (5:18a), i.e. until God's kingdom is consummated, and his will is done on earth as in heaven (6:10; 24:34-35).

b. The call to renewed obedience. The demand for "righteousness," 5:20, is a call to **rediscover** the OT, and to obey certain existing demands of the law, in face of disobedience to the law by its most scrupulous adherents (v. 20) and the repudiation of the law by antinomian false prophets (7:15-20). As those who honor human tradition in place of God's law (15:1-9), the Pharisees and teachers of the law are in the deepest sense antinomian. Jesus censures them (5:20), not for taking the Law too seriously but for failing to take it seriously enough. They preach but do not practice (23:3); they heed the minutiae of the Law and neglect its weightier matters (23:23). One learns the "surpassing righteousness" of 5:20, not by abandoning the law but by going more deeply into it. Then one discovers its weightier matters, "justice, mercy and faithfulness" (23:23). Then one discovers, at the law's very center, the command to love God and neighbor (22:37-40).

c. The call to radical obedience. In Mt 5-7 Jesus is not expounding a new law. Yet the Sermon is no **deuteronomium**, no mere repetition of OT teaching. The Mosaic Law remains Jesus' "text" throughout; but his exposition is unprecedented, decisive, and conclusive. The dawn of the Eschaton, and the presence of Yahweh incarnate, are realities of such magnitude that Jesus calls his followers to the most radical kind of law-keeping. Mt 5:20 both concludes 5:17-20 and introduces 5:21-48 (**et seq.**). The disciples' "righteousness" comes about by fidelity to the ancient law (the subject of 5:17-19) as interpreted by Jesus

(5:21-48). This righteousness "surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law," both in that it marks the rediscovery of a quality of obedience which the champions of the law have lost, and in that it marks an intensifying or escalating of obedience owing to the dawn of the kingdom. Jesus' words to the rich young man (19:21), are a call both to **renewed** obedience (the man has yet to honor the twofold command at the heart of the Mosaic Law) and to **radical** obedience (loving God, and being **teleios**, now demands submission to the Lordship of Jesus).

## B. Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 5-6.

After the reference to "the Pharisees and the teachers of the law," 5:20, "there comes first, in 5.21-48, a discourse against the scribes who transmit and explain the 'tradition of the ancients'; then, in 6.1-18, the discourse turns on the 'hypocrites' (in [Mt] this word means the Pharisees, except in a few cases). These verses are no longer directed against doctrinal tradition, but against men who in everyday life made a great show of works of supererogation" (Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, 254). Jeremias finds the same distinction in Mt 23: vv. 1-22, 29-36, against scribes; vv. 23-28 against Pharisees (ibid.).

## C. The Six Antitheses. 5:21-48.

1. The introductory words. Jesus addresses six areas of conduct. Each section begins with the formula, "You have heard that it was said [or, said to the people long ago].... But I tell you...." The first part, in the longer form, shows that the period of the OT is meant; and each of the introductory quotations is, or includes, a statement from the Law of Moses. The second part of the statement includes, in each case, the pronoun **egō**, expressive of Jesus' unique authority. We consider the six sections together.

2. The **internal** dimension of law. The law must not be **externalized**. God's commands embrace inner motives and desires as well as outward actions. This principle is strongly upheld already in the Ten Commandments, by the inclusion of a prohibition against covetousness (Ex 20:17). Reflected here is the awareness that evil actions come forth from the heart (15:17-20; 23:25-26).

a. Sec. 1. Both murder and **anger** violate the Sixth Commandment (5:21-22). Murder arises from anger (15:19a, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder...").

b. Sec. 2. Both adultery and **lustful desires** violate the Seventh Commandment. As Ex 20:17 makes clear, violating the seventh starts with violating the tenth ("thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife").

c. Sec. 4. With respect to oath-taking, it is what is on the **heart** that matters. If before God one has determined in his heart to do a certain thing, a simple "Yes" or "No" is sufficient. "What Jesus emphasized...was that honest men do not need to resort to oaths; it was not that they should refuse to take an oath if required by some external authority to do so" (Stott, Counter-Culture, 102). When we resort to oaths, it shows either that our simple word is not likely to be trusted, or else that we know (or suspect) in our hearts that we are speaking untruth.

3. The **strictures** of law. The law must not be **circumvented**. God's commands must not be watered down or rationalized. In the present passage, Jesus corrects abuses of the Mosaic Law; cf. 15:3-6.

a. Sec. 3. The two major rabbinical schools of Jesus' day differed from each other in their interpretation of the '**ervat davar**' of Deut 24:1, literally "the nakedness of a thing." The school of Shammai, pressing the word "nakedness," understood it to mean strictly sexual sin. The more influential school of Hillel supposed that the provision was much broader, even including such things as the burning of the husband's food. Jesus assails such abuses, v. 32, siding with the stricter view of the Shammaites (cf. Gundry, 91). See the fuller discussion on 19:1-12.

b. Sec. 4. In 5:33 Jesus quotes from the Pentateuch (cf. Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 23:21). Some took this to mean that so long as you were not swearing to a false proposition and not employing the actual name of God (but instead swearing "by heaven," or "by earth," or the like), you need not regard your oath as binding. Says Jesus: One does not avoid a reckoning with God simply by swearing "by heaven" or "by the earth" or "by Jerusalem"; for he is Lord of heaven and earth (5:34b, 35a; 11:25) - as is the Messianic King (5:35b; 28:18). Again, what really matters is what is on the heart. This being the case, one need swear **by** nothing (5:37) - indeed, one need not **swear at all** (5:34a).

4. The **ongoing demands** of law. The law must not be **discarded**. Far from making law-keeping obsolete, the dawn of the End calls for more radical obedience than ever; cf. 5:20.

a. Sec. 1. 5:22 sets forth a threefold parallelism: "Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to **judgment**./ Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca' [BAGD, "fool, empty-head"], is answerable to the **Sanhedrin**. But

anyone who says, 'You **fool!**' will be in danger of the **fire of hell.**" (1) The character of Christian fellowship. This v. demonstrates the intimacy and intensity of fellowship in the Christian community (note the repeated "brother"). "The term of abuse which is regarded as harmless though spoken in ill-humor is an offence worthy of death.... This paradox of unparalleled sharpness is designed to bring home to the hearers the terrible seriousness of sins of the tongue in God's eyes and hence to save them from having on their consciences the everyday ill feelings towards their brothers which might appear innocuous but in fact poison relationships. Membership in the coming kingdom of God and its order is demonstrated by taking sin seriously in this way" (J. Jeremias, TDNT 6: 975-76). Cf. the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5. (2) The peril of judging. The term "fool" may amount to a charge that one who professes to be a brother is really no brother at all. Jesus warns that one who makes such a charge, may himself be in danger of the judgment that awaits unbelievers ("the fire of hell"). Cf. below on 7:1. (3) Christians and God. Relationships among believers cannot be dissociated from relationship to God, 5:23-24 (joined to v. 22 by **oun**, "therefore"). The point is not that human relationships are more important than the worship of God, but that these two are inextricably bound together (the one inevitably affects the other). Worshipping God is such a holy exercise that nothing must hamper it. Separation from a fellow-believer does hamper it; so one must seek reconciliation before coming to worship. A further reason why speaking contemptuously of another is so serious, is that he is made in God's image (Js 3:9) - a sin that is specially serious when the person is a Christian, for he is related to God and to me both by creation and by redemption. When that reconciliation has occurred, the resultant worship can be unbelievably free and joyous. (4) The need for swift action, 5:25-26. Having received this teaching, it is vital that a disciple act upon it quickly. There may be an eschatological dimension to these verses: "Settle matters quickly with your adversary," before the coming wrath falls and it will be too late. More generally we may say that the longer a rupture in a relationship is allowed to continue, the worse things become for both parties.

b. Sec. 2. 5:28 underscores the importance of what goes on in the heart. Vv. 29-30 show, by the severity of their counsel, the seriousness of obedience within the Christian community; cf. 19:12b. The church father Origen (3rd c. AD), applying this teaching quite literally, castrated himself. One does not get to the heart of Jesus' teaching by thinking in literal terms. One might pluck out his right eye and still look lustfully on a woman with his left; one might cut off his right hand and still caress an adulteress with his left. The severity of the language is meant to underscore how vitally important it is for disciples to be totally committed to doing nothing to offend their Lord, the Messiah-King (cf. 7:24-27).

c. Sec. 5. The original law (the **ius talionis**), Ex 21:24, etc., was given to curb vengeance (only one eye for one eye). But Jesus does more than reiterate the existing law. He does not say, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, strike him on the right and **only** on the right." Instead he says, "Turn to him the other also" (5:39). Like the teaching of 5:40-42, this response bears witness to the reception and experience of **radical grace** (5:3-12) and - as forthcoming events will show - of **costly grace** (16:21; 20:28). Such a response expresses the very kind of grace and love that moved God to send the Messiah, and that moved the Messiah to save his people from their sins. Moreover, such action on the part of the disciples can have the effect of draining the adversary of his malice. In my judgment we should apply the principle of 5:39a ("Do not resist an evil person") to the very situations illustrated in 5:39b-42. It seems to me invalid to elevate this principle into a full-scale philosophy of non-violence and non-resistance (i.e. "If a man kills your wife, let him kill your children as well"). Respect for life (5:21-22!) requires vigilance in safeguarding one's family and oneself. Disciples must be alive to fulfill this particular commandment.

d. Sec. 6. (1) The statement of 5:43. Only the first part is found in the OT (Lev. 19:18); the second part was inferred from that. (2) The moral distinction. To understand Jesus' teaching here, we must acknowledge that there is real evil, and that we have enemies (they are not really friends who only appear to be foes) bent upon persecuting us (5:11). (3) Radical love. The citizens of the kingdom must follow the model of their heavenly Father who by his common grace blesses the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 45). This kind of love, like his, must be **perfect** (v. 48, **teleioi**). In this context, **teleioi** means not "mature" (God's love does not mature), nor "perfect" (disciples will never be perfect, either in this age or in the age to come), but "**all-inclusive**." Our love, like God's, must know no bounds (see NEB). It is to extend, not just to those who love us (v. 46) nor just to fellow-Christians (v. 47), but to enemies and non-believers as well. For support of this interpretation of **teleioi**, cf. Lk 6:36. Christian love extends beyond the bounds of the Christian community. For Jewish-Christians, the practical lesson was to love the Gentiles as God and Christ did (28:18-20), and also fellow-Jews who persecute them for becoming Christians (10:17).

### **SUGGESTED TEACHING OUTLINE**

Main idea: Jesus kept the Law appropriately, truly and graciously, and taught his followers to do the same.

#### I. Jesus and the Law

- A. Jesus honors the Law
- B. Jesus fulfills the Law
- C. Jesus commands his followers to obey the Law
- II. Following Jesus is following the Law
  - A. Authority: Jesus and Moses
  - B. Internal vs. external dimensions
  - C. Strictures of the Law
  - D. Ongoing demands of the Law

### **SUGGESTED STUDY OUTLINE**

Main idea: Jesus kept the Law appropriately, truly and graciously, and taught his followers to do the same.

- I. Jesus and the Law
  - A. Jesus honors the Law
  - B. Jesus fulfills the Law
    - 1. Jesus does not abolish the Law
    - 2. Jesus completes the Law
    - 3. Jesus realizes the Law
  - C. Jesus commands his followers to obey the Law
    - 1. The Law's abiding relevance
    - 2. The call to renewed obedience
    - 3. The call to radical obedience
- II. The scribes and Pharisees
- III. Antitheses
  - A. Authority: Jesus and Moses
  - B. Internal vs. external dimensions
    - 1. Anger
    - 2. Lust
    - 3. Oaths
  - C. Strictures of the Law
    - 1. Shammai
    - 2. Hillel
  - D. Ongoing demands of the Law
    - 1. Human relationships
    - 2. The heart
    - 3. Radical grace
    - 4. Perfect love

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. To what Law did Jesus refer? How is this evident in the text?
2. What specific things did Jesus do that made it appear that he was abolishing at least some of the Law? In what way did/does Jesus fulfill the Law? What was/is the appointed goal of the Law?
3. For how long must the Law remain intact? Has this point been reached? What does this imply about the modern authority of the Law?
4. What was Jesus signifying when he taught, “You have heard that it was said, but I tell you . . .”? What does this imply about Jesus’ relationship to the Law? What does this imply about the relevance and authority of the Law today?
5. Why must Christians obey the Law? Must Christians obey every Law?
6. What view of the Law was Jesus refuting? What practices of legal adherence was Jesus refuting? Where do you recognize this view and these practices in the church today?
7. What qualities should characterize Christian obedience to the Law? How (and how often) do you consider the Law as it applies to your daily life? How well do you know the actual requirements of the Law?
8. What does Jesus’ lordship have to do with the Law? What does the covenant have to do with the Law?
9. What does it mean to “externalize” the Law? How does one “internalize” the Law? Give some examples from modern life that demonstrate this distinction. Give some examples that demonstrate how one might circumvent the intention of the Law.
10. Why is harmony in human relationships so important to God? What clues does the text provide that demonstrate this? Does this include harmony in relationships with non-Christians? Defend your answer.
11. Why is harmony in human relationships so important to worship? How has your own worship been hampered in the past by strife in your own human relationships?
12. Why did Jesus tell people to cut off their hands and to gouge out their eyes if he didn’t really mean it? How can one prove that Jesus didn’t really mean it?
13. How does one “turn the other cheek” without “going overboard”? How does one know where to draw the line?
14. What is perfect love? How can one demonstrate perfect love today? In what ways is your own love imperfect?

## **QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. If “all” has not yet been accomplished, why do Christians not have to obey certain Laws (compare Acts 15)? If “all” has been accomplished, why hasn’t Jesus returned yet?
2. Could Jesus’ audience understand and accept his interpretations of the Law on the basis on the Old Testament, or did they first have to accept his authority?