

## WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN TO DO WITH THE LAW OF GOD?

**Matthew 5:17-20** - "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."

The way Jesus phrased His statement in **verse 17** ("Do not think that...") suggests He expected people would have wrong ideas about His relationship to the Old Covenant. Jesus wasn't just giving **information**. He was confronting **error**. Although His public ministry had just begun, the authorities already had serious concerns about His supposed attitude to the law.

In Mark's gospel, both the Sabbath picking of corn and the Sabbath healing of the man with the withered hand had already taken place at the time Jesus uttered the words of our text. The religious leaders had serious questions about what Jesus was doing. Knowing this was in their minds, Jesus made some basic claims about **His relationship to the law as revealed in the OT** and the **kind of righteousness He had come to proclaim**.

### 1) JESUS HAD THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE VIEW OF THE OT SCRIPTURES

**Matthew 5:18** - "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." Jesus makes clear the OT Scriptures were not swept away with His coming. They had the binding authority of God Himself. They weren't to be tampered with or belittled in any way.

It's of special notice that, in Jesus' mind, the authority and inspiration of the OT text **extended to the actual formation and punctuation of the words and letters themselves**. The OT didn't **become** God's word when it came to life for me or when it met some particular need in my life. The inspiration was **carried in the words and letters of the text itself**. This tells us a great deal about how Jesus viewed the **nature** of the Scriptural text. It wasn't just the **ideas** or the **thoughts** that were divinely protected. It was the words - even the punctuation.

Jesus treated all of the accounts of the OT as genuinely true in the plainest, most simple sense of the term. He was absolutely forthright and unembarrassed as He sited, frequently with direct quotation, the OT accounts of **creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, Jonah and the whale, Sodom and Gomorrah**, and all the writings of **Moses in the Pentateuch**. There was never a trace of question about these things in His mind. He didn't debate them. He assumed them.

### 2) JESUS SAID HE HAD COME TO "FULFILL" THE LAW

**Matthew 5:17** - "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."

He didn't come to **"abolish"** or even **distort** the law. This is still a common misconception about Jesus. Usually people think Jesus cared little for the law because the law they're thinking of is the **distortion** of the law in the lessons and teaching of the Pharisees of Jesus day. The Pharisees had reworked the law into **245 commandments and 365 prohibitions**. They had bent it into something that would suit their religious power-purposes yet still leave their greed and pride untouched.

Notice also that the law had become something **essentially negative**. It was more about what you **didn't do** than what you **were inside**. This is always the path of organized religion when Jesus is left on the outside of the life.

Jesus fulfilled the law in **three ways**:

- a) **First, He fulfilled the conditions of the law in His own Person** - Paul says Jesus was **"born under the law"** - **Galatians 4:4** - "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law."

He submitted to the conditions of life under **our own fallen condition**. He was baptized by John in a baptism of **"repentance"** though He was sinless. He fulfilled the **demands** of the law perfectly in the **righteous way He lived**.

Jesus also fulfilled the **requirements of the law in His death on the cross** - **Romans 6:23** - "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus died because the demands of the law could not simply be ignored. Paul says there were **wages** owing due to our guilt. Our sin is real because the law of God is true and absolute. The law is where the demand of punishment comes from. And that punishment couldn't be swept under the carpet.

- b) **Second, some of the OT laws were fulfilled in Christ in the sense that they were only temporary signs and reminders of His Incarnation and death and resurrection**. Jesus **"fulfilled"** these laws in the sense that it was always Father God's plan that these

laws terminate in Christ's redemptive work. The book of Hebrews tells us that many of the OT laws were designed to point to Christ's death - **Hebrews 10:3-4** - "**But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. [4] For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**"

These are very important verses. Those sacrifices were never **designed** to permanently remove our sin. Those sacrificial laws were properly **fulfilled** when their meaning was fleshed out in Jesus Himself (**see Matthew 5:18b** - "**...until all is accomplished**").

- c) **Third, Christ fulfilled the deepest intent of the law** - He will say more about this later on in His sermon. The law wasn't just about **murder**. It was about the **hatred in the heart** that caused the murder. It wasn't just about **adultery**. It was about **desires in the mind** that led to the adultery. In other words, Jesus came to **fulfill** - to **fill up the total meaning and design of what God had intended in the law in the first place**. He came to take the law to its proper conclusion.

The point here is Jesus always **deepened** those laws. He never neutered them or flattened them out. He breathed into those moral laws their deepest and intended meaning.

The Apostle Paul fills out the intended meaning of Jesus' teaching on this point - **Ephesians 4:28-32** - "[28] Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. [29] Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. [30] And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. [31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

### 3) **THERE IS A KIND OF HEART NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND BOTH THE FULL INTENT OF THE LAW AND THE MISSION AND MINISTRY OF JESUS**

**Matthew 5:19** - "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."

In short, the person who doesn't have regard for the law of God, or who treats it with careless attention isn't taking **Jesus** seriously, and isn't destined for the kingdom of God. To leave no doubt about this Jesus deals with **greatness** in the kingdom in **verse 19** and **entrance** into the kingdom in **verse 20** - "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Properly understood (remember points a, b, and c from section 2) and viewed from the lens of the Person and work of Jesus Christ, the law has ongoing function in following Jesus. It's important that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, I make clear to everyone that **obedience to God is a crucial element of following Jesus**.

My open recklessness with righteousness in the name of grace, my hypocrisy and impurity of heart, and my indifference to the standards of God for holy living can make it hard for people to understand what Jesus Christ is all about, and why He is so important. So Jesus gives a special warning, not only about our **own** attitude to the law of God, but to the way we teach and influence **others**, either with our words or actions:

**Matthew 5:19** - "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." We can actually become accountable for the sins of others.

### 4) **JESUS TEACHES ABOUT A KIND OF RELIGION THAT ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH**

**Matthew 5:20** - "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Pharisees paraded a religion of outward appearance. But their hearts were as dirty as ever. Jesus said that made them nothing more than "**hypocrites**" (**see Matthew 23:25-32** for a fuller treatment of this theme). Here we see Jesus' assessment of any system of **mere moral reform without inward new birth and transformation**. Their religion wasn't motivated by anything but **pride**. It had nothing to do with **devotion to God** or **love for man**.

This is what religion (any religion) will always become when it's **severed from salvation through Jesus Christ**. The mind of the Spirit comes through Christ Jesus - **Romans 8:6-8** - "For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

True, the law can't **produce** this inward change, but the **need** for this inward work will never be grasped where the law hasn't been valued and properly understood.