

Jesus: The Fulfillment of the Law & Prophets

(Matthew 5:17-20)

By David R. Maas

Matthew 5:17-20, “Think not that I came to dismantle the law or the prophets; I came not to dismantle but to fulfill. For I am declaring to you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, one iota or one stroke shall certainly not pass away until all comes to pass. Whoever, therefore, loosens one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, he will be called least in the kingdom of the heavens; yet whoever may do and teach, this one will be called great in the kingdom of the heavens. For I am declaring to you that except your righteousness abounds more than the scribes and the Pharisees, you will certainly not enter into the kingdom of the heavens.”

— Overview —

A perennial question that plagues the church is the relationship of the Christian to the Law of Moses. Does the Law or *Torah* remain in force for disciples of Jesus? If so, is the whole Law still in effect or only parts of it? Are Christians under the “moral” but not the “ritual” Law? Are there eternal consequences for failure to keep the Law?

In recent decades several new sects have materialized that contend the Law (or parts thereof) is still in force. This includes the relatively new Hebrew/Hebraic Roots Movement. While they usually do not insist obedience to the Law is necessary for individual salvation, some do claim conformance to the Law is needed for a more complete Christian faith. After all, did not God Himself give the Law as part of His eternal covenant with Israel?

Often cited to validate this position is **Matthew 5:17-20** which appears to constitute evidence that the Law is still in force for disciples of Christ. After all, Jesus did not come “to dismantle” the Law. Did he not admonish disciples that their righteousness must exceed even that of the scrupulously *Torah*-observant Pharisees? This text thus becomes Jesus’ confirmation of the continuing validity of the Law and the subsequent sections of Matthew chapter 5 are seen as his intensification of the Law’s requirements.

— Exposition —

In **Matthew 5:17** Jesus stated that he did not come “*to dismantle* the law or the prophets.” The Greek infinitive rendered “dismantle” is a compound of the Greek verb

luō (“to loose”) and the preposition *kata* (“down”), literally “to loose down” hence “dismantle” (*kataluō*).ⁱ The verb was used for “dismantling,” “disassembling” or “pulling down” a tent. This is the same verb used in **Matthew 24:2** by Jesus for the **destruction** or “pulling down” of the Jerusalem Temple.

Christ’s statement that he came not “to dismantle” the Law is repeated in the second half of **verse 17**: “I came not **to dismantle**, but **to fulfill**.” This clause uses two infinitives neither of which has an object in the Greek sentence (“to dismantle,” “to fulfill”). The clause is intended to present the reader with a sharp contrast. Contrary to what some might have alleged, Jesus came not “to dismantle” but “to fulfill.” The contrast is clearer in the Greek text which uses the strong adversative *alla* or “but” (*i.e.*, “**but** to fulfill”). But **fulfill what?**

Jesus referred to **both** “the Law” and “the Prophets.” This was a summary clause commonly employed to refer collectively to the Scriptures of Israel. Note the following examples:

Matthew 7:12, “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is **the law and the prophets**.”

Matthew 11:13, “All **the prophets and the law** prophesied until John.”

Matthew 22:40, “On these two commandments depend **all the law and the prophets**.”

Luke 16:16, “**The law and the prophets** were until John.”

Acts 13:15, “After the reading of **the law and the prophets**.”

Romans 3:21, “**The law and the prophets**.”

In **Matthew 5:17** Jesus did NOT say he came to “affirm,” “confirm,” “renew” or “reconstitute” the Law, but instead “to fulfill” **both** the “Law and the Prophets.” “Fulfill” in **verse 17** translates an infinitive form of the Greek verb *pléroō*, which means “to fulfill, to fill to the full, to make full.”ⁱⁱ Thus Matthew presents Jesus as the **fulfillment** of “the Law and the Prophets.” He is the Messiah sent to fulfill God’s covenant promises to Israel.

The presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures is a key and repeated theme in Matthew’s Gospel. Indeed, Matthew structured his gospel to present Jesus as **the messianic figure who fulfills all the Law and the Prophets**, often in unexpected ways.

This proposition is borne out by the Old Testament citation formula used by Matthew. In the following examples the Greek verb *pléroō* is employed to present Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture:

Matthew 1:22, “All this took place **to fulfill** what the Lord had spoken by the prophet” (**Isaiah 7:14**).

Matthew 2:15, Jesus remained in Egypt until the death of Herod “**to fulfill** what the Lord had spoken by the prophet” (**Hosea 11:1**).

Matthew 2:17, “Then **was fulfilled** what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah” (**Jeremiah 31:15**).

Matthew 2:23, Jesus dwelt in Nazareth so that “what was spoken by the prophets **might be fulfilled**, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’,”

Matthew 4:14, Jesus' ministry in Galilee was so that the words "spoken by the prophet Isaiah *might be fulfilled*" (**Isaiah 9:1-2**).

Matthew 8:17, Jesus' healing activities are "*to fulfill* what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah" (**Isaiah 53:4**).

Matthew 12:16-21, Jesus charged his followers to not make him known. "This was *to fulfill* what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah" (**Isaiah 42:1-4**).

Matthew 13:14, "With them indeed is *fulfilled* the prophecy of Isaiah..." (Jesus here uses an intensified form of *pléroō* – *anapléroō*, "to fill up to the fullest").

Matthew 13:35, Jesus spoke in parables "*to fulfill* what was spoken by the prophet" (**Psalms 78:2**).

Matthew 21:4, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a colt was "*to fulfill* what was spoken by the prophet" (**Zechariah 9:9**).

The preceding examples demonstrate Matthew's emphasis on *the theme of fulfillment in the ministry and teachings of Jesus*.ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew structured his presentation of Jesus' teachings to highlight this theme. This is demonstrated by two additional factors.

First, in each of the preceding quotations Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers to cite the specific Old Testament passage in reference to Jesus. Second, Matthew's citation formula is virtually unique among the three synoptic gospels. Mark never uses this formula to introduce Old Testament passages and it occurs only once in Luke (**4:21** citing **Isaiah 61:1-3**). Only John's gospel uses this "fulfillment" formula several times, though always with passages different than Matthew (**John 12:38, 13:18, 15:25, 17:12, 19:24, 19:36**).

The Old Testament citation formula used more often in all three synoptic gospels is: "it is written" (*gegraptai*). For example, **Mark 1:2** refers to the arrival of John the Baptist being according to what "*is written* in Isaiah the prophet." Matthew also uses "it is written" to introduce Old Testament quotations but in each case does so using material he has in common with Mark, Luke or both (**Matthew 4:4, 4:6, 4:7, 4:10, 11:10, 21:13, 26:31**).

Thus Matthew's theme of "fulfillment" is deliberate and integral to his overall presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament Scriptures of Israel.

In addition to Old Testament quotations Matthew also uses *pléroō* in a summary fashion. For example, in **Matthew 3:15** when John the Baptist hesitated to baptize Jesus, he responded "it is fitting for us *to fulfill* all righteousness." In **Matthew 26:54-56** Jesus stated that his arrest and impending death must take place, not only so "that the scriptures *be fulfilled*," but also "that the scriptures of *the prophets might be fulfilled*."

In **Matthew 5:18** Jesus declared that "until heaven and earth pass away, not an *iōta*, not a stroke, will pass from the law until all comes to pass." At first glance this appears to affirm that the entire Mosaic Law is to remain in force until the end of the existing space-time continuum. However, the time element is not the end of the universe but "*until all comes to pass*." This essentially reiterates Christ's point in **verse 17**, "I came to fulfill." "Come to pass" translates the common Greek verb *ginomai*, meaning "to

become, to come to be, to come to pass.” The jurisdiction of the Law for how God’s people are to live remains valid until it is fulfilled.

Some argue the reference to “one *iōta* or one stroke” indicates Jesus was a rigorist about even the smallest detail of the Law, not unlike Pharisees (**Matthew 5:18**). But this must be weighed against the Jesus presented in Matthew’s Gospel. For example, the Scribes and Pharisees objected to his more “liberal” stance on the Sabbath day (**12:1-14**). After Jesus healed a man with a withered hand *on the Sabbath* the *Torah*-observant Pharisees “took counsel on how they might destroy him.”

Jesus was certainly no rigorist on issues of ritual purity. His first recorded act in Matthew after the Sermon on the Mount was the healing of a leper (**Matthew 8:1-4**). The healing occurred when Jesus *touch*ed the leper. According to the Law doing so rendered one ritually defiled. Likewise, when a woman with an issue of blood touched the hem of Jesus’ mantle, rather than render him “unclean” contact with Jesus resulted in the woman’s healing (**9:20-22**).

Jesus was notorious among his more *Torah*-scrupulous contemporaries for his table fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners.” Significant in this regard is his declaration in **Matthew 15:11**, “not that which goes into the mouth defiles a man; but that which comes out of the mouth defiles a man.” This response followed the objection of Scribes and Pharisees to disciples eating with unwashed hands. If nothing that goes into a man “defiles” him, then Jesus effectively negated the religious rationale behind food purity codes (**Leviticus 11:1-47**). This was not the act of a *Torah* rigorist.

In **Matthew 5:19** Jesus stated, “Whoever *loosens* one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, he will be called least in the kingdom of the heavens.” “Loosen” translates the Greek verb *luō* (“to loose”), which has the sense “loosen” or “relax” in this verse. At first glance this appears to support the scrupulous observance of even the minutest point of *Torah*. As before this understanding must be weighed against what Jesus does elsewhere in the gospel account.

Often overlooked in Matthew’s gospel are the examples Jesus gave of certain of his contemporaries who “relaxed” laws by means of scrupulous compliance to even the smallest literal detail, including by the Scribes and the Pharisees.

In **Matthew 23:16-22** Jesus critiqued Scribes and Pharisees who used legal loopholes in the Law to invalidate sworn oaths. Similarly, in **Matthew 15:3-6** Jesus blasted Scribes and Pharisees who found justification in the details of the Law to justify keeping property from their parents. They thereby “invalidated the word of God” through their strict adherence to its details, thereby circumventing the Law’s clear intent that children honor parents. The Scribes and Pharisees found such dodges through painstaking examination of the Law’s smallest details.

In **Matthew 5:20** Jesus insisted that the righteousness of his disciples “must abound more than *that of* the scribes and the Pharisees.” Some take this to be an admonishment for even stricter observance of *Torah* than that of Scribes and Pharisees, that Jesus called for an even more meticulous keeping of the Mosaic Law though he used them as the starting point of his comparison.

The Greek verb rendered “abound” means just that. It is verb with an original sense “overflow” as when a river overflows its banks (*perisseuō*). It is used here with the adverb *pleion*, meaning “more, much more, more than.”

In the Greek sentence in **Matthew 5:20** there is no word corresponding to “that of” of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus was not holding the Scribes and Pharisees up as an example or starting point for righteousness. Instead he contrasted his demands with the practices and teachings of the Scribes and Pharisees. The sentence more correctly reads, “your righteousness abounds more than the scribes and the Pharisees.” Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees Jesus called his followers to overflow with the genuine righteousness of his Father, one that far exceeded anything practiced or taught by Scribes and Pharisees.

In **Matthew 5:21-48** Jesus gave six contrasts that present concrete examples of precisely what he meant by a righteous that exceeded that of the more scrupulous *Torah* observant Jews of his day. Jesus began each contrast with a citation from the Law of Moses followed by his authoritative interpretation of it. Unlike Scribes and Pharisees Jesus did not explain a passage by reference to historical precedent or oral traditions. Instead he interpreted based on his own authority, beginning each explanation with “yet ***I indeed*** am declaring to you.”

In each of the six contrasts Jesus used the emphatic Greek first person pronoun, *egō* (“I indeed” or “I myself”), followed by the present tense form of “declare” (*legō*). The emphatic pronoun emphasized his authority and the Greek present tense signified *ongoing* or *continuous action*. Thus the interpretation by Jesus constituted the final authoritative and permanent meaning of the Law; ***it represented God’s original intent***.

In each contrast Jesus went behind the strict letter of the Law to its original and Divine purpose. “You shall not kill” means much more than not killing, for God intends his children to reject all hatred that leads to murder and other egregious sins. Not committing adultery means much more than avoiding sex outside of marriage. To truly fulfill the Divine intent one must avoid even lust.

Rather than resort to sworn oaths the disciple’s word must be straightforward and honest; his word is to be “Yea, yea; nay, nay,” for what goes beyond is evil. The letter of the Law proscribed “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” for crimes committed against others, a rule for equal justice that at the same time limited how far judicial punishment could go. The punishment must not exceed the crime. In contrast the disciple of the kingdom is to turn the other cheek when victimized by another and “to him who asks, give.”

Rather than loving one’s neighbor while hating one’s “enemy,” Jesus admonishes disciples to love their enemies and pray for persecutors, for in this way they will become “sons of their Father in Heaven,” the same God Who “makes his sun arise on evil and good, and sends rain on just and unjust.” By showing mercy to both good and evil men rather than retaliation or hatred, the of Jesus disciple “becomes complete just as the Heavenly Father is complete.” It is not through more meticulous Law-keeping that a disciple becomes a true son of the Father, but by emulating the mercy and love God shows to all.

In response to a query about what is the greatest commandment, Jesus responded: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like it is this, you shall love your neighbor as

yourself. On these two commandments *hang the whole Law and the Prophets*” ([Matthew 22:35](#)). Similarly in [Matthew 7:12](#) he declared, “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for *this is the Law and the Prophets*” (compare [Romans 13:9](#), [Galatians 5:14](#), [James 2:8](#)).

The “Law and the Prophets” are fulfilled by and in Jesus Christ. The disciple of the Kingdom acquires a righteousness that abounds exceedingly beyond that of the scrupulous *Torah*-keeping of the Scribes and Pharisees, not by adopting even stricter interpretations of the Mosaic Law but by emulating the self-sacrificial service exemplified in the life of Jesus and following his words.

— Summary —

Jesus declared in [Luke 24:44](#): “These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you... *everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled*.” A consistent New Testament message is Jesus is the fulfillment of all God’s past revelations, all His promises find their fulfillment in Christ. Jesus is God’s final word and culmination of His redemptive plans. “The Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came to be through Jesus.” Jesus, the Word become flesh,” is the one who now “interprets” God ([John 1:14-18](#)).

Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount: “Whoever hears *these sayings of mine* and does them, I will liken him to a wise man that built his house upon a rock.” But “everyone who hears *these sayings of mine* and does them not, shall be likened to a foolish man who built his house upon the sand.” *Jesus thus invested HIS words with ultimate authority*, an authority that exceeds even that of Moses. Christ’s interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel was and is the final word. How one responds to Jesus determines one’s eternal fate ([Matthew 7:24-29](#)).

The idea of a Messianic figure whose authoritative word exceeds that of Moses is found in the Law itself. Moses warned Israel that God would “raise up a prophet like me from among you...him shall you heed” ([Deuteronomy 18:15](#)), and “whoever does not heed” this man’s words God will require it of him ([Deuteronomy 18:19](#), [Acts 3:22-23](#)). Among the Jews that most decisively rejected Jesus were those most committed the strictest observation of the Law, the Scribes and Pharisees.

The Author of the letter to the Hebrews declared that previously through the prophets God’s Word was partial, “in many parts and many ways.” Yet now, “upon these last days.” God has spoken with finality “in His Son.” The previous word spoken on Mount Sinai was indeed of Divine origin. Those who disobeyed it “received a just retribution.” But it was incomplete, preparatory and promissory. But if transgression of that earlier revelation resulted in dire consequences, “how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation that was declared at first by the Lord” ([Hebrews 1:1-2](#), [2:1-4](#))?

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Wesley Perschbacher, *New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub, 1990), p. 225.

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- ⁱⁱ Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 670-671; Perschbacher, *New Analytical Greek Lexicon*, p. 332.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Floyd Filson, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (London: A. & C. Black Ltd., 1971), p. 10.