# Chapter 11: Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law

*Matthew 5:17–20*

In Matthew 5:16, Jesus urged his disciples to let their "light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." So far, however, Jesus has not defined precisely what he means by these "good works" that will lead to the glory of the heavenly Father. In this next section, Jesus begins to explain these "good works" in the light of the law. In no uncertain terms, Jesus declares that he has not come to abolish the law, but rather to bring the entailments of the law to their ultimate completion. Indeed, as he will state in the strongest possible terms, *Jesus came to fulfill the law*.

## The Fulfillment of the Law (Matt. 5:17)

This passage begins a seven-part within the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus gives an interpretation of the Law—particularly, an interpretation of the Ten Commandments. The connection is so strong that Frederick Dale Bruner suggestively calls this section the "Christian Heptalogue (Seven Words)," modeled after the *Decalogue* (Ten Words) of the Ten Commandments.[1] We should remember that Matthew has characterized Jesus as the new Moses who gives God's law from the mountain (see Matt. 5:1). So, in this particular passage, Jesus is giving a preamble to his teaching on the Law, before he begins to give exposition for specific commandments.

Jesus begins this section by dispelling a crucial misunderstanding: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (v. 17a). By speaking of "the Law or the Prophets," Jesus is using a common way of describing the entire Old Testament.[2] It is essential for Jesus to insist that he has come to fulfill the Old Testament, since a mistaken understanding here would lead us into a number of errors about the goals and scope of Jesus ministry. Later, this same word for "abolish" (καταλύω; *kataluō*) will appear in the charges against Jesus that he intends to "destroy" the temple (Matt. 24:2; 26:61; 27:40).[3] Just as aa charge that Jesus came to *abolish* the law would have been used to discredit him, so the charge that he wanted to *destroy* the temple led to his crucifixion. First, Jesus must cut off any slander that might arise from those who will misinterpret the next six sections of this Heptalogue.[4] Jesus will next begin giving a counter-cultural and counter-intuitive interpretation of the law, and he wants to begin by insisting on his "full and unswerving loyalty to the law."[5] Second, Jesus does not want to stoke any speculation that his arrival may signal the elimination and overturning of the law.[6]

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[1] Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 1:194.

[2] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 204–05.

[3] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 182.

[4] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:276.

[5] Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 103.

[6] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:275–76.

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Jesus, however, has come neither to destroy the law nor the temple, but to fulfill all that the law, the prophets, and the temple represented. The word "fulfill" here has a twofold sense.[7] First, Jesus came to *fill out* the Old Testament's teaching to its complete sense. Furthermore, this fulfillment extends beyond the person of Jesus in the way that he interprets the full requirements of the law and the prophets for the lives of his disciples. John Calvin takes a timeless principle here for reformation in the church in any age: "If we intend to reform affairs which are in a state of disorder, we must always exercise such prudence and moderation, as will convince the people, that we do not oppose the eternal Word of God, or introduce any novelty that is contrary to Scripture."[8]

Second, Jesus came to *accomplish* all that God promised in the Old Testament, in order to inaugurate a renewed covenant relationship with his people. Thus, this fulfillment goes beyond Jesus' teaching alone, but extends into every part of Jesus' conception, birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.[9] We should remember that this word "fulfill" appears ten times to speak of the ways that Jesus fulfills specific prophecies, at every stage of his life.[10] While the temple *will* be "destroyed/abolished" (Matt. 24:2), Jesus has not come to destroy it, as though the temple were unimportant or even misleading the people of God. Rather, he has come to bring the temple and *all* the ceremonial laws to the proper fulfillment in himself. Calvin writes, "With respect to ceremonies, there is some appearance of a change having taken place; but it was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed. The coming of Christ has taken nothing away even from ceremonies, but, on the contrary, confirms them by exhibiting the truth of shadows: for, when we see their full effect, we acknowledge that they are not vain or useless."[11]

## The Fullness of the Law (Matt. 5:18–19)

In v. 18, Jesus redoubles his emphasis on upholding the law that make this one of the strongest statements he utters in at least four ways. First, he demonstrates the solemn significance of his words by using the introducing his statement with the word "truly."[12] This word (ἀμήν; *amēn*) is a transliteration of the Hebrew word אָמֵן (*ʿāmēn*), and it gets at the *depth* of the law's authority. While this is a common word for affirming what *has* been spoken (similar to the way that we use "amen" when we close prayers), Jesus use of this word as a *preface* to confirm what he is *about* to speak has no

[7] For these senses, see Osborne, *Matthew*, 182.

[8] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:277.

[9] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 206–07.

[10] "In the light of Matthew's use of this verbe elsewhere, and the evident importance it has for his understanding of the relation between the authoritative words of the OT and their contemporary outworking, the sense here is not likely to be concerned either with Jesus' actions in relation to the law or even his teaching about it, but rather the way in which he "fulfills" the pattern laid down in the law and the prophets." (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 182.)

[11] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:277–78.

[12] "In every case…in which this word occurs in the New Testament it introduces a statement which not only expresses a truth or fact—as, for example, 2x2=4 would be a fact—but an *important*, a *solemn* fact, one that in many cases is at variance with popular opinion or expectation or at least causes some surprise." (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 290–91.)

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precedent in rabbinic literature of Jesus' day, or even in the Old Testament itself.[13] Jesus' use of this little word is a part of why the crowds marveled at Jesus' authority when he taught them (Matt. 7:28–29).

Second, Jesus grounds the authority of the law in the permanency of heaven and earth: "the truth of the law and of every part of it, is secure, [so] that nothing so durable is to be found in the whole frame of the world."[14] By this statement, Jesus teaches about the *duration* of the law's authority. Third, Jesus teaches about the *breadth* of the law's authority when he insists that not even the smallest part of the Law can pass away before all is accomplished. The language of an "iota" or a "dot" are both references to the smallest markings in the Hebrew alphabet. An "iota" is literally the smallest Greek letter (ι), but this is a reference to the Hebrew letter *yod* (י), which is even smaller.[15] The "dot" however, is smaller still. This word literally means "horn," and it refers to the smallest little connector within a letter that marks a difference between two similar-looking letters, such as between ה and ח, or between ב and כ.[16] Finally, in the grammatical construction of "will [not] pass," Jesus uses a double negative (οὐ μὴ; *ou mē*) with a subjunctive, which is "the strongest form of negation."[17] This statement addresses the infinite *height* of the law's authority. Absolutely, and in no uncertain terms, Jesus is insisting that the law of God is of towering, enduring, abiding, ongoing moral significance.

If Jesus has come to fulfill the law in its entirety, and not in the least to destroy the law, then it follows that Jesus will have no patience for any diminishing of the full weight of the law. Jesus draws out the implications of this logic clearly: "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" (v. 19). The "relax" or "loosen" refer more to an *attitude* than an *action*: "As the words about teaching men show, the attitude condemned is one of doing away with the commandment in question, regarding it as nonexistent, as null and void. Even to nullify just *one* commandment is serious."[18]

The classic example of this loosening attitude was stated in the first words of the serpent to Adam and Eve: "Did God actually say…?" (Gen. 3:1). Thus, this loosening attitude toward the law would include every example of questioning the law's validity, seeking to create wiggle-room within the demands of the law, trying to "balance" (falsely) our approach to the law, or raising doubts about whether the law really applies to *me*. Within our own culture, we see repeated assurances that the law is just not "reasonable," or that the law is "outdated/outmoded," so that anyone who affirms the ongoing validity of the law is simply on the "wrong side of history."

This attitude was also common, however, among the rabbis of Jesus' day, especially within the ranks of the scribes and Pharisees (see v. 20). Jesus has those religious leaders in mind when he warns not only of the one who relaxes the commandments for himself, but also of the one who "teaches others to do the same."[19] The Pharisees notoriously taught the law in a way that emphasized *external*

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[13] Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 106.

[14] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:278.

[15] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 208.

[16] Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 106; Osborne, *Matthew*, 182.

[17] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 208.

[18] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 110.

[19] Osborne, *Matthew*, 183.

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obedience, while justifying *internal* pride, rebellion, and hypocrisy. Their religion was scrupulously detailed, but only in the areas where others could see what they were doing and praise them for it. Jesus, rather, urges his disciples to seek the approval of *God*, the One who will ultimately *call* some least and others great in the kingdom of heaven.[20]

Regarding the "least" commandments in the law, we should remember that Jesus does acknowledge some distinctions within the law. He himself will speak later about the importance of prioritizing "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23).[21] Even there, however, Jesus will insist that those weightier matters should be done, "without neglecting the others." In other words, Jesus *both* acknowledges that some commandments have greater value than others, and, conversely, that some sins are more heinous than others. Nevertheless, Jesus rejects the conclusion that some may draw that the commands of lesser weight may be safely ignored.

The Westminster Larger Catechism captures these two distinctions well. First, the Catechism affirms that "All transgressions of the law are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others."[22] On the other hand, the Catechism also affirms that even the least sin is worthy of condemnation: "Every sin, even the least, being against the sovereignty, goodness, and holiness of God, and against his righteous law, deserveth his wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come; and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ."[23] We are all *entirely* condemned by God's righteous law; however, not all sins are *equal* in the sight of God.

## The Force of the Law (Matt. 5:20)

We observed earlier that, in the Beatitudes, Jesus offered general principles expressed in third-person statements ("Blessed are those who…"). Then, in Matt. 5:11–12, he turned the application directly toward his disciples with a second-person statement: "Blessed are *you*…." We may observe something similar in this passage. Jesus began by speaking about his own mission to fulfill the law and the prophets, and not to abolish them. Then, Jesus spoke in third-person general statements about the law. Now, in this last verse, Jesus turns the application directly to his disciples in another second-person statement: "For I tell *you*, unless *your* righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, *you* will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20). Notice also the solemnity of the words, as Jesus prefaces them by an appeal to his own authority: "For *I* tell you…."[24]

Who, then, are these scribes and Pharisees? The *scribes* held the profession of teachers of the law, while to be a *Pharisee* meant to be a part of a particular reform movement, "which was devoted to the

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[20] "Back of the two passive κληθήσεται stands God himself. Men may applaud and call him great who in his foolish wisdom, by his practice and his teaching, sets aside one of these least requirements; they admire even those who set aside some of the essentials; but not so God." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 212.)

[21] Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 292.

[22] WLC #150. See an extensive list of biblical aggravations that extend the heinousness of sins in WLC #151.

[23] WLC #152.

[24] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 111.

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meticulous practice of the law, with special emphasis on such matters as ritual purity, tithing, and sabbath observance. The two terms thus represent distinct categories, but in practice the aims and lifestyle of the two would coincide closely, with many professional scribes also being members of the Pharisaic movement."[25] They had major flaws, but we should not think that they were careless in every way. Rather, Leon Morris captures both their strengths when he writes, "Both [the scribes and Pharisees] had a great knowledge of trivia (such as the number of letters or words in a given book), which was sometimes coupled with a lack of insight into the real meaning of what was written."[26] Jesus' critique, then, is not for their zeal for the law, but for the limited application they acknowledged in the law. The scribes and the Pharisees both relaxed the law and taught others to do the same (v. 19): "By confining the law of God to outward duties only, they trained their disciples, like apes, to hypocrisy."[27]

Often, Christians define legalism as the sin of *adding* to the law. Jesus, however, shows us that the real sin of the scribes and Pharisees was *subtracting* from the law—not necessarily from the outward requirements of the law, but from the holistic internal requirements of the law. Grant Osborne writes, "The problem is inherent in all legalistic movements: certain patterns are identified with holiness, but they are too easily external (acted out) rather than internal (truly believed and lived)."[28] In this context, it is worth quoting J. Gresham Machen's point again:

> The legalism of the Pharisees, with its regulation of the minute details of life, was not really making the Law too hard to keep; it was really making it too easy. Jesus said to His disciples, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." The truth is, it is easier to cleanse the outside of the cup than it is to cleanse the heart. If the Pharisees had recognized that the Law demands not only the observance of external rules but also and primarily mercy and justice and love for God and men, they would not have been so readily satisfied with the measure of their obedience, and the Law would then have fulfilled its great function of being a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. A low view of law leads to legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace.[29]

Jesus' point, then, is twofold. First, this means that our only hope for salvation is by grace and through faith, and not by works of the law. Everyone falls short of God's glorious, righteous standard! Blessed, then, are the poor in spirit who acknowledge that they have *nothing* to offer God—for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven.

Second, because Christians relate to the law differently. We do not relate to the law as a law of works, for our justification, but as the law of Christ, teaching us how to live (cf. Rom. 3:27; Gal.

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[25] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 189.

[26] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 111–12.

[27] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:281.

[28] Osborne, *Matthew*, 184.

[29] J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 179.

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6:2).[30] Jesus is not only announcing a gospel that we can be *forgiven* for our sins and *counted as righteous* by the gospel of justification. He is also teaching us the true aim of our *sanctification*. As we pray for growth and seek to follow the Lord, he is teaching us how God's standard is far higher than we can even imagine, so that there is always more need for grace, and more room for growth.

## Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus say about his own relationship to the law (v. 17)? What is in view when Jesus speaks about "the Law or the Prophets"? What would it mean to "abolish" the law? Why might some mistakenly think that Jesus had come to abolish the law? What does it mean that Jesus has come to "fulfill" the law? How does this shape our understanding of Jesus' teaching? How does this shape our understanding of Jesus' mission?

2. What does Jesus say about the nature of the law (v. 18)? What should we understand by Jesus saying "truly" to begin this statement in v. 18? What does the statement about the passing away of heaven and earth teach us about the ongoing authority of the law? What does Jesus' references about the iota and the dot teach us about the breadth of the law's authority? What does Jesus insistence that the law will not "pass away" teach us about the height of the law's authority?

3. What would it mean to relax the law (v. 19)? Why should we recognize this as an attitude, rather than an action? Why does Jesus warn so strongly against relaxing the law? In what ways does Jesus here reject distinctions of relative weightiness within the law? In what ways does Jesus affirm distinctions of relative weightiness within the law (cf. Matt. 23:23)? Who ultimately has the authority to call us great or least in the kingdom of heaven?

4. If the scribes and the Pharisees are not righteous enough to enter the kingdom of heaven, then who can stand before God's righteous standard? Do you despair over what Jesus teaches here about your inability to meet God's standard? What are some ways that you have tried to wiggle out of the full weight of the law's condemnation against you? What does God really want from you, in light of your own guiltiness and helplessness before him?

[30] On this point, see Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, ed. Thomas Boston (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009), 46–51.

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