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“THE LAW FULFILLED”

Matthew 5:17-20

? *What place, if any, does law have in the community of grace?* What is its proper role in Christian ethics and morals?

I seldom overhear people overtly discussing this question. Even so, the function of the law is a hot topic. It is a factor in just about every controversial issue that divides the Church: divorce and remarriage, immigration, poverty and wealth, peace and violence, same-sex marriage, you name it.

What place does the law have for people of grace? How does it fit into Christian ethics and morals? When shall we conform to it, and when shall we not?

■ Please turn to Matthew 5:17. The Lord Jesus announces: **“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.”**

📖 **“The Law”** (or Torah) consists of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, with special regard for the commandments contained within them.

📖 **“The Prophets”** is a broad category in the Hebrew Bible. It includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, plus the so-called Minor Prophets starting with Hosea and ending with Malachi, and the books of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings.

Taken together **“The Law [and] the Prophets”** is shorthand for the whole O.T., including books that aren't in the Pentateuch or the Prophets.

“I have not come to abolish” the commandments and prophecies, says Christ, but **“to fulfill them.”** This is a weighty declaration of intent. What does the Savior mean?

📖 The dictionary definition is easy. Πληρωω [plēroō] literally means *to fill, to complete*. Everyone agrees that in verse 17 it is best translated, **“to fulfill.”**

? But what is fulfillment *of the Law and the Prophets*?

Is it *obedience*? Is Messiah saying he came *to comply with* the Law and the Prophets, to *abide by* the Word of God?

♦ Jesus did *obey* the Scriptures. He conformed to the spirit and, for the most part, the letter of the Torah – albeit sometimes in unconventional ways.

Is it *further revelation*? Is Messiah saying he came *to flesh out* the Law and the Prophets, to *illuminate* the Bible in new ways?

♦ Jesus did *reveal the full substance* of the Scriptures. He clarified their meaning and expanded their application in light of αγαπη [agapē] love and the Kingdom of God.

Is it *accomplishment*? Is Messiah saying he came *to achieve the ultimate purpose* of the Law and the Prophets, to *bring the Word to fruition*?

♦ Jesus did *accomplish* the Scriptures. He achieved the decisive purpose of both the Law and the Prophets.

✎ All three are important. All three have repercussions for discipleship. Still, I believe the emphasis is on *accomplishment*. Bringing the Word to fruition entails obedience and facilitates further revelation, but it is larger than both.

☑ As R.T. France puts it, fulfillment means **“the whole Old Testament... [points] forward to what Jesus has now brought into being... his teaching will transcend the Old Testament revelation, but, far from abolishing it, is itself is intended culmination.”**

☑ To quote Scot McKnight, it **“means history has come to its fulfillment in Jesus himself.”** He **“fulfills – in a salvation-historical, theological, and moral manner – what the [Law] and...Prophets anticipated and predicted and preliminarily taught.... The [Old Testament] takes on the face of Jesus.”**

☑ When Jesus of Nazareth announces **“I have come” “to fulfill” “the Law [and] the Prophets”** he is saying, in effect, ‘I am at the center of the Bible.’ ‘I am the reason it exists.’ ‘This book is my story.’ This is extraordinary! Anyone who makes this claim is either (as C.S. Lewis noted) a liar or a lunatic or the Lord.

✎ The implications are staggering. If Jesus has come to fulfill the Scriptures then he has authority over the Law and the Prophets.

His interpretation is definitive. His teaching is definitive. His application is definitive.

{Jn 1:1} This is a consequence, not merely of his mission, but of his very identity. It is no accident that the Gospel According to John begins with these words: **“In**

the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

“The Word” is a title held by Jesus, and it is absolutely bursting with meaning. Among other things, there is this: the Incarnate Word of God, the Word made flesh, is Master of the written Word of God.

■ Messiah continues in Matthew 5:18: **“Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”**

This statement raises a few questions.

What about the ceremonial laws that regulate Israel’s system of worship and sacrifice? What about the purity laws that serve mainly to distinguish who is, and who is not, an Israelite? What about the civil laws that were designed for an agrarian, theocratic society? What about the ethical laws that impose extreme penalties, like Exodus 21:17, which prescribes the death penalty for **“Anyone who curses father or mother”**?

✎ First, we are to read verse 18 in light of the Son’s authority over Scripture. The real Torah – the Law *as Jesus teaches it* – is permanent. It is still in effect now.

★ Sometimes he limits the Torah by stripping away non-biblical additions.

The Sabbath is a case-in-point. The Pharisees perpetually criticized Jesus for failing to follow the dozens of rules that delineated which activities were, and were not, lawful to do on the Sabbath.

I said “dozens”. Yet in the Pentateuch there are only three or four distinct Sabbath laws, depending on how you break them down.

The Pharisees were not defending Scripture. They were enforcing their oral interpretation and directives as though they had the force of Scripture.

★ Sometimes the Lord expands the Torah by prohibiting wrong thoughts along with wrong actions.

- For example, verses 21-48 record six teachings in which Jesus uses the form “**You have heard that it was said... But I tell you....**” Each time he names a sinful deed (such as murder), then condemns the attitudes behind those misdeeds as equally sinful.

★ Sometimes the Lord reframes the Torah.

{Mt 22:34-36} Jesus proclaims that unrestricted, unqualified love for God “**is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is... ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**”

The content is not new: he is quoting two pre-existing decrees from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. But by declaring that the Law and the Prophets all hang on these commands, he redefines them as the substance and instrument of ἀγάπη [agapē] love.

When the Lord limits, expands, reframes or affirms the Law as it has already existed, this is the real Torah. It is permanent.

↗ 2nd, how Christ deals with any particular law depends on how it relates to his mission.

The phrase “**until everything is accomplished**” is crucial. It probably means “until what it foreshadows has

arrived.” The Law and the Prophets point to Messiah. He embodies what is foreshadowed in the Hebrew Bible.

This has different implications for different laws. Where the Savior’s intent is to discharge the purpose of a given law on our behalf, it has been retired. Animal sacrifice is the perfect illustration: by his death Jesus perfectly achieved the goal of those offerings, so those statutes are no longer in effect.

{Ex 20:14} But where his intent is for us to fulfill a given law with him, it remains in effect. For example, he has not retired the command, “**You shall not commit adultery.**” Just the opposite, he has expanded it to apply to lust.

No part of the Law “**will by any means disappear ...until everything is accomplished.**”

■ And so we ignore Matthew 5:19-20 at our peril:

“Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and... teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The focus on “**least**” and “**great**” feels awkward, what with the implied hierarchy and seeming

endorsement of competitive obedience. It is essential to read this alongside Matthew 20:26-27: **“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”**

Likewise, Philippians 2:6-11 reveals that the Son is in the highest place and has the greatest name because he became a servant and died on a cross.

“Leastness” and “greatness” in the Kingdom of God look nothing like “leastness” and “greatness” in the kingdom of the world. In the world, everyone strives and scratches and claws to come out on top; meanwhile, in the kingdom of God, the way up is down!

{Mt 23:28} As for the warning in verse 20, it helps to recall the judgment Messiah leveled at many of the Pharisees: **“on the outside you appear... righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”**

{Ro 8:29; Eph 2:9-10} Righteousness is not achieved; it is bestowed on all who are justified by grace. God splices it into our spiritual DNA to conform us **“to the image of his Son.”** He enables us to live in obedience to the Law by his Holy Spirit within us. We are not saved **“by works”**; yet we are saved by Christ Jesus **“to do good works.”**

Once again, it comes down to Jesus. The Son of God is our example and power source. His law will accomplish its ordained purpose in, among, and through us as we see it from his perspective and obey it by his life-giving, transforming presence within.

Matthew 5:17-20 is the Word of the Lord.