



“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Excelling Righteousness

Lesson Subject: Divine standards must govern the Christian’s relationship with other people.

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Topic: Jesus: Teachings of.

What is the relation of the Christian to the law? Some say, “He must keep the law in order to be saved.” Others say, “He is saved by grace but must then obey the law so as to be faithful to God.” Yet others suggest, “He can ignore the law because the law has no meaning to him as a Christian.” Each of those answers is insufficient. Matthew 5:17-26 sets out beautifully the relation of the Christian to the law.

The comments which follow examine the Christian and the law from three viewpoints. (1) Verses 17 and 18 show how Jesus has *"fulfilled"* the law. (2) Verses 19 and 20 show how Christians are to live in the law in Jesus Christ. (3) Verses 21 through 26 show how we are to interpret the law to know its spiritual meaning. Pursue the comments which follow with your Bible in hand and the central truth in mind: “Divine standards must govern the Christian's relationship with other people.”

I. FULFILLING THE LAW (Matthew 5:17,18)

A. Jesus did Not come to destroy the law (verse 17). Jesus used a strong word when saying He did not come to “*destroy*” the law. It was formed by two words in Greek: down and destroy. Put together in their intensive form they mean “to cast down, completely overthrow, destroy utterly, dissolve and abolish.” Jesus said that was not His purpose regarding the law.

“Think not that I am come to destroy the law,” He said. Therefore, Old Testament scriptures have meaning for Christians today. Even its legal portions reveal truth. *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”* (II Timothy 3:16, 17).

B. Jesus did not come to change the law (verse 18). He said, *“Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled”* (verse 18). The *“jot”* is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It is much like the apostrophe in English. The *“tittle”* was the “little horn” or extremity which distinguished certain Hebrew letters from each other. The rabbis placed great importance on those. Jesus used *“jot”* and *“tittle”* to press home the truth that not one single item, not even the smallest detail, would pass away from the law. He did not come to change the law.

If Jesus did not come to destroy the law, and if He did not come to change the law, what did He do in relation to the law?

C. Jesus came to fulfill the law (verse 17). That word *“fulfil”* means “to fill full.” It could be translated “to give full effect to.” Jesus did not *“fulfil”* the law by obeying the law perfectly. He *“fulfilled”* the law by giving the law its fullest possible meaning and spiritual interpretation. Jesus brought the law to its completion, to its greatest possible perfection. In Him we can understand what the law truly meant and what it required.

The law might be classified in two divisions: ritual laws and moral laws. The ritual law had to do with how ancient Israel conducted the ceremonies of her religion. Those ritual ceremonies were abolished in the death and “resurrection of Jesus (Colossians 2:14; Acts 15:24-29). Otherwise, we would be offering animal sacrifices in Christian worship today. The ceremony regarding sacrifice was abolished, but the law requiring the shedding of blood for atonement of sin is still in effect (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22). Only the ceremony ceased; the law behind the ceremony is still in effect.

The moral law needs no ritual. It never changes. Look how Jesus dealt with the seventh of the Ten Commandments. (Compare Exodus 20:14 with Matthew 5:27, 28.) He did not repeal the commandment, but expanded it. We still live under that principle of morality. The moral law of God will be standing when eternity shall bring time to its destined end. That is the righteousness which will characterize the new heaven and earth (II Peter 3:13).

II. LIVING THE LAW (Matthew 5:19, 20)

A. Obey the law. Jesus warned, *“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments . . . shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven”* (verse 19).

What does it mean to *“break”* a commandment? The term Jesus used means “to loosen.” It refers not only to disobeying, but also to loosing them of their force and rendering them not binding. Yes, one breaks the commandments by rebellion against them in personal conduct. But he breaks them also by teaching people not to consider them, to ignore them, to live as if they did not apply. To set aside one of the commandments is to break it.

Such a person will be considered *“least”* (a superlative form of “little,” so “littlest”) in the kingdom of heaven. “The most unimportant person in the kingdom,” Jesus said, “is the one who by word or example takes the meaning and force from the law of God over the lives of men.”

B. Teach the law. Not only is one to obey the law, he is to teach others to obey it (verse 19). We teach both by word and deed (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Children and people unlearned in the Bible must be taught what its eternal principles are and how to apply them to daily life. He who teaches in that way will be considered great in the kingdom.

Law has never been God's way for men to be saved, either in the Old Testament or the New. *“By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight. . . . Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”* (Romans 3:20, 28). The purpose of the law was to show people God's standard of righteousness. That would lead them to Christ that they might be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24). When a person has been saved he is changed, but the principles of the law are not changed. *“What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit”* (Romans 8:3, 4). The righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in the Christian. Praise the Lord!

C. Internalize the law. The righteousness which the law demanded was far more than that of the “scribes and Pharisees” who sought so earnestly to keep the law (verse 20). They majored on externals: fasting, feasting, tithing, and observing the Sabbath in strict ritual. But they neglected the application of those principles to seeking God with a pure heart, honoring God with one's substance, and worshiping God in spirit and in truth. The spiritual application of the law must be realized.

The Christian religion exceeds that of the “*scribes and Pharisees*” because it is heart-felt. Evangelical Christianity does not major on beautiful rituals of worship. It is simple singing, praying, teaching, preaching, and sharing. If it is not spiritual in content, it is nothing at all. But it is spiritual! As God said, “*I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people*” (Hebrews 8:10). That is how the righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in Christians.

III. INTERPRETING THE LAW (Matthew 5:21-26)

Jesus gave a part of His Sermon on the Mount to a fulfilling of the law. He interpreted it by giving it the full meaning God intended. A refrain is found six times in verses 21-44. It is, “*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time. . . but I say unto you.*” His interpretation did not change God's law; it only showed the meaning God put in it in the first place.

A. Attitude is as important as action (verses 21, 22). The law said, “*Thou shalt not kill*” (Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:21). Murder was to be met with capital punishment in the death of the murderer (Genesis 9:6). God strictly forbade the act of murder.

Jesus gave that law fuller meaning by forbidding the attitude of anger which motivates the act of murder. “*I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment*” (verse 22). Jesus did not repeal the law forbidding murder. He filled it full of meaning and gave it a wider application. He forbade both the act and the attitude which motivates the act.

Ancient interpreters of the law said, “Watch your actions.” Jesus' fuller interpretation of the law said, “Watch your attitudes which prompt action.” That is how Jesus “*fulfilled*” the law, giving it full meaning. He did not repeal it.

B. Right relations are more important than right rituals (verses 23, 24). The law commanded the offering of sacrifices and the presentation of gifts at the altar of God. (Read the book of Leviticus for details.) Ancient Israel exercised great care to obey the laws regulating religious ritual.

Jesus filled that law full of meaning with this application: “*If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way: first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*”

That means God is not as concerned with right ritual as with right relationship. It is better to delay the ritual in order to get the heart right than to perform the ritual correctly while there is sin in the life. That is Jesus' way

of fulfilling the law.

C. Religious principles must govern daily affairs (verses 25. 26). Jesus said to seek reconciliation with one's brother before worshiping God (verse 24). But what if reconciliation is impossible? What if the "*brother*" reveals himself as an "*adversary*"?

"*Agree with thine adversary quickly,*" Jesus taught (verse 25). To "*agree with*" another means to seek restoration to favor, to repair the injury which has been done. A person exposes himself to many dangers and calamities if he tries to live by a strict rule of law rather than by the principle behind the letter. To refuse to humble ourselves and be peacemakers will cause others to deal harshly with us.

Here is the Christian principle for dealing with offenses: "*Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you*" (Ephesians 4:32).

In conclusion, a word of warning must be given. To say the Bible teaches that the law has been filled full of true meaning by Jesus and is in force today does not place the Christian under a legalistic system. Christians are not bound by legalism in a "letter of the law" system. "*The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life*" (II Corinthians 3:6). It means the eternal principles (expressed in the Ten commandments and other legal portions of the Old Testament) are still valid today. The eternal principles of God do not change.

Here is our relation to the law as Christians: "*being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ*" (I Corinthians 9:21). We are free under the law in Jesus Christ because "*the righteousness of the law*" is being fulfilled in us as we walk in the Spirit (Romans 8:4).

QUESTIONS

1. How is Matthew 7:12 related to this study?
2. How did Jesus teach that the law is permanent in verses 17, 18?
3. In what way did Jesus "fulfill" the law?
4. What makes one least in the kingdom of heaven (verse 19)?
5. What does Romans 3:20, 28 teach about law and salvation?
6. How does a Christian apply the spiritual principles of law to his life?
7. Where does Hebrews 8:10 say the law is in relation to Christians?
8. How can one fulfill the righteousness of the law today (Romans 8:4)?
9. What does II Corinthians 3:6 mean to you?
10. What principle from this study can you put into practice in your life this week?