

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 5:17 - 5:20 (Part 1)



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this portion of his discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, Steve Gregg discusses the often-misunderstood passage of Matthew 5:17-20. He emphasizes that the loyalty and reverence for the law and prophets in the Old Testament scriptures are tantamount to the reverence for God himself. Gregg points out that Jesus did not destroy the laws in the Old Testament but fulfilled them, setting an example for followers. Additionally, he distinguishes between ritual and moral laws and explains how they relate to New Testament teachings.

### Transcript

Today we come to a very difficult but very intriguing portion of the Sermon on the Mount, that famous sermon of Jesus that is recorded in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. And the passage that we have before us, I believe, is very often misunderstood. But I must confess it's not entirely clear what the correct understanding is. It's easier to misunderstand the passage than to understand it.

But I'm going to give us my best shot. I have, of course, considered it a great deal over the years, the 30 years that I've been teaching. My favorite material has been the Sermon on the Mount.

And I have taught through the Sermon on the Mount more times than I could ever dream of counting. And therefore, of course, I've encountered whatever difficulties exist with the present passage over the years for about almost three decades. And I've done everything I could to research it and to think about it, meditate on it, compare Scripture with Scripture, and so forth.

And I will still confess there are difficulties involved in understanding some of the wording of the passage. I will read the passage for you, and then I will tell you what I find to be difficult about it. And then I will explore what I consider to be its meaning.

This is found in Matthew chapter 5, beginning at verse 17. Jesus said, Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

For assuredly I say to you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law until all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. But whosoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Now here we have Jesus making a comment, probably the definitive comment, about what relationship his teaching and his mission has and bears to that of Moses who had given the law some fourteen or fifteen hundred years earlier. The law and the prophets, of course, were the scriptures of the Jewish people, and Jesus and all of his listeners on this occasion were Jewish people.

They had been raised with a reverence for the law and the prophets. They knew that the law, which was given through Moses, God's greatest prophet of the Old Testament, and of course the prophets, people like Samuel and Isaiah and Jeremiah and those people, that these men were spokesmen from God, and that the law and the prophets, which comprised the Jewish Bible, were the words of God, given through inspired writers. Therefore, loyalty to and reverence for law and prophets in the Old Testament scriptures was tantamount to reverence for God himself.

And so every person who loved God, among the Jewish people at this time, would of course feel an obligation to be loyal to and to revere the law and the prophets. Now there were times when Jesus said things and did things that made him appear, to some at least, to be at odds with the law and the prophets. This was illustrated, for example, in John chapter 8 when the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus and they brought to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery.

And it says specifically they were trying to trap him. They said, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. Moses said that she should be stoned to death.

What do you say, Jesus? Now Jesus was in a position, of course, either to agree with Moses or to disagree. And without going on to Jesus' answer, which is well known, Jesus said, let him that is without sin cast the first stone at her. And by this brilliant answer he managed to save her life.

Yet the question itself is interesting because it seems that the Pharisees assumed that Jesus and Moses might not be on the same page. They said, Moses said we should stone her. What do you say? As if challenging him, if he dared, to say something contrary to what Moses said.

Well, this question would have never come up unless Jesus was perceived at least by some as being an opponent of what Moses said or at odds with what Moses said. And

that being so, we see that there would be critics of Jesus in his own day who would say that he and Moses were not the same, that they were not saying the same things. And that therefore, since Moses was a known prophet and Jesus at that point in time was still an unknown entity, loyalty to Moses would require Jewish people to reject Jesus.

Because he was seen as contrary to Moses in some cases. There were many times when Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath which Moses had given. Of course, it was the Lord's Sabbath, God gave the Sabbath, but Moses was the one who gave them the law that contained the command to keep the Sabbath.

And Jesus frequently seemed to break it. And his disciples did too and he seemed to defend them. Now, this kind of behavior gave the impression that Jesus and the law were on two different wavelengths.

And therefore, it would raise serious questions as to whether Jesus could really be from God if his teachings and behavior were so contrary to those which God was known to have given through the law and the prophets. Now, Jesus' own disciples, of course, were being addressed in this comment in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was preaching to his disciples and he wanted them to understand that he was not, in fact, some kind of opponent to the Jewish law.

He said, do not think that I came to destroy the law and the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. Now, obviously, to fulfill the law and the prophets would be a positive mission.

It would put him in a positive relationship with the law and the prophets. Whereas, destroying or abolishing the law and the prophets, which he said he did not come to do, would put him in a position that was adversarial toward the law and the prophets. So, Jesus makes it very clear right at the outset, do not think that I have come as some kind of an adversary to the law and the prophets, as someone who is coming to undermine them or to reject them or destroy them.

I am not. I am coming with a positive relationship to them and that positive relationship is I have come to fulfill them. Now, this statement that Jesus said he did not come to destroy the law and the prophets is one that I believe many Christians have given a wrong interpretation and application to.

There are many Christians who would like to put Christians in general under certain laws of the Old Testament. One of the ones that is most frequently brought up in certain circles is that of the Sabbath. There are many Christians who believe that keeping a Saturday Sabbath, a Sabbath day Sabbath, since it is indeed commanded in the Ten Commandments, is an obligation that falls upon Christians.

And if you as a Christian are not a Sabbath keeper and you say to one of these people,

well, we are not under the law, we are under a new covenant, we are under grace and therefore we are not under the obligations of the law. These people are likely to say something to you like, well, Jesus said he did not come to destroy the law. And of course by that statement they think that they have established the point that Jesus wants us to keep the law of the Old Testament.

Well, there are laws of the Old Testament that Jesus certainly put his stamp of approval upon. In fact, in the verses immediately following our present passage, he does speak a great deal about some of the laws and states exactly what is right about them and what was wrong in terms of the Jews' understanding of those laws at that time. Jesus was not against the law.

But to say that Jesus did not come to destroy the law is not saying the same thing as if we were to say Jesus came to perpetuate everything in the law. It's interesting that those who wish to use Jesus' statement here in order to obligate Christians to keep the Seventh-day Sabbath, they say, well, see, Jesus did not come to destroy the law and by that they mean he did not come to destroy the Sabbath law. Yet they themselves know very well that there are many laws in the Old Testament which are no longer to be kept.

For example, we don't offer animal sacrifices anymore. We don't go to the temple in Jerusalem anymore. It's a good thing we don't have to because it's not there.

There hasn't been a temple there since 70 A.D. We don't have to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem anymore, and yet the law required all of those things and many, many others. Now, there are many things in the law that we clearly have no obligation to do. The question then becomes, well, what did Jesus mean then when he did not come to destroy the law? Did he not bring an end to certain laws that were required of God's people to observe? And if so, let us say maybe some laws are retained and some are, let's say, no longer with us, then how do we decide which ones we are to keep and which ones we're not to keep? This is why, as I said, this is a difficult passage.

Exactly what did Jesus mean when he said he did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it? Now, I believe that Jesus' own words later on are going to answer that question for us. And later in the Sermon on the Mount, even in chapter 7, I think we will find the answer. But let me say that the rest of the New Testament also provides an answer.

And what we find taught in the rest of the New Testament, and it is certainly taught by Jesus as well, is that the laws of the Old Testament fall into at least two categories. We could even find three categories, but for the purpose of understanding this passage, we can simply examine two of these categories. One category of the laws is the law that gives a moral standard for God's people to live by.

Now, a moral standard is always unchanging if it's legitimate. And the reason for that is morality is based upon God, who he is, God's unchanging character. Any behavior that is

unjust will always be immoral for the simple reason that it goes against the justice of God's own character.

Any behavior that is unfaithful will always be immoral because it goes against the faithfulness in God's character. Any behavior that is unmerciful or impure or uncompassionate is morally wrong. Why? Because it goes against the compassion and the justice and the mercy and all those things in God's character.

The point is that God has always required his people to be imitators of himself in terms of their character. It says in Ephesians 5, verse 1, be imitators of God as dear children. And that's what God desires.

Whatever he is like, whatever would be in keeping with his nature and his character is good. And such things are good for us too. But whatever would go against the character of God and against his nature would be evil.

And such behavior is evil for us. And that can never change for the simple reason that God cannot change. God's character does not change and therefore morality, which finds its basis in God's character, can never be changed either.

And for that reason, certain behaviors that the Old Testament law identified as immoral, of course those behaviors remain immoral today. Jesus forbids them as well. It is wrong to murder because that's an act of injustice.

It is wrong to commit adultery because that's an act of unfaithfulness. It is wrong to do these immoral things because things that are truly immoral are always immoral. And those moral laws are fulfilled in a certain way.

And I'll tell you how Jesus said they are fulfilled. In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus put it this way, in Matthew 7 and verse 12, this is in the latter part of the same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them. For this is the law and the prophets.

Now notice, Jesus said, I didn't come to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Well, how are the law and the prophets fulfilled? Well, whatever you want men to do to you, do that also to them. For that is the law and the prophets.

Now, Paul picked up that same idea and repeated it very clearly in a passage like Romans chapter 13. You'll find it. Romans 13, 8 and following.

Paul said, O no one anything except to love one another. For he who loves another has fulfilled the law. Now remember, Jesus said he came to fulfill the law.

Paul says, He that loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false

witness, you shall not covet. And if there's any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. So Paul's interpretation of Jesus' words would seem to be that the fulfillment of the law comes when we love others as we love ourselves.

You see, that's the same thing Jesus said in different words when he said, what you would have others do to you, you do that to them. That's the whole law and the prophets. Well, what is he saying? Love your neighbors as you love yourself.

What do you want people to do to you? Well, whatever it is, it's because you love yourself. Well, do that to them. Love them the way you love you.

That's what the whole law and the prophets is. Likewise, Paul said this in Galatians 5, 14. He says, for all the law is fulfilled.

There's that word again. In one word, even this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now, Jesus said he didn't come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.

And all the law is fulfilled in one word. Paul said it twice, once in Romans, once in Galatians. And Jesus said it himself in Matthew 7, 12.

It is love your neighbor as you love yourself. That fulfills the law. Now, the law of God is fulfilled in the disciples of Jesus through what Jesus has come to do.

Jesus has brought us the ability to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. He has come to fulfill the law, not only in himself, but in us. And so the apostle Paul tells us in Romans chapter 8, that since we have received from Christ his spirit, we now fulfill the law.

He says this in Romans 8, in verse 4. He said that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. Notice, the righteous requirements of the law, the moral issues that the law required, they are fulfilled in our lives when we are not walking in the flesh, but when we're walking in the spirit. This is one way that Jesus fulfilled the law.

He gave us his spirit so that we live as he lived. And how is that? We love as he loved. We love others as we love ourselves, and that is the fulfillment of the law.

So Jesus came to fulfill the law in that respect. But there's a second way in which he came to fulfill the law, and we see that when we recognize the second category of laws that you do find in the Old Testament. In addition to those laws that are unchanging and transcendent, and that are based on the character of God and could never be any other way because they're moral in nature, there's another kind of laws in the Old Testament, and those are laws that we would call ritual laws or ceremonial laws.

These laws had to do with symbolic behaviors, offering sacrifices, keeping special festival days, abstaining from touching certain unclean things. These are all symbolic behaviors. They were all related with the way that the Jews were to worship with reference to the tabernacle or the temple.

It was part of the Jewish religion. But these ritual things, we can tell immediately the difference between ritual things and moral things. And that is because a ritual is not something that could never have been done differently without violating the nature of God.

You see, God could never have said in his word, thou shalt steal or thou shalt commit adultery. And the reason is because he'd be commanding something against his own character. It says in Scripture that God cannot deny himself.

And he could only give such commands as agree with his own character because they are moral in nature and he's a morally pure God. But there are commands he gave that, although he gave them one way, he could have given them another way without violating his own nature. For example, when he said that the Jews should go to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times a year.

Well, OK, but what if he had said do it four times a year or one time a year or six times a year? Obviously, he could have done that and it would not have violated anything intrinsic to his purity or his nature or his character. That is to say, ceremonial commands are those that have a certain arbitrariness about them. Now, they're not entirely arbitrary because, of course, God had something spiritual, something eternal that he was trying to illustrate with these rituals.

And, you know, there's no there's probably not an infinite number of ways these truths can be illustrated with rituals. But there's a wide variety of ways they could be. And God could have, instead of telling them to sacrifice a lamb, he could have had them, if he wished, to sacrifice a pig.

But that's not how he did it. He it would not violate his nature, his innate character to have them sacrifice pigs instead of lambs. But he was giving commands to follow certain rituals to fulfill a symbolic necessity.

Jesus is not the pig of God, but the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. And the festivals and the Sabbaths and the other ritual commands of God were all commands that God could have given differently. But he gave them the way he did because there were certain spiritual realities that he wanted them to depict.

Even the whole design of the tabernacle is a good example of this. The whole design of the tabernacle was a reflection of a pattern in heaven. And Moses was, of course, required to make it just the way God said it so that it would not misrepresent that

pattern in heaven.

But at the same time, if God had wished to depict those truths without a tent and do it in some other way, he could have done so without violating his innate character. And therefore, we see the difference between morality and ritual law is that morality could never change without going against the nature and character of God. Rituals could, and sometimes do, because we find in scripture that God sometimes changes the laws.

In Genesis chapter 2 or 3, or actually at the end of chapter 1, God announced that Adam and Eve and their kin were supposed to eat only plant food. But in chapter 9 of Genesis, he tells Noah that they can eat animals now, and he specifically says any kind of animal you can eat. And then later the law comes through Moses and it's restricted to certain kinds of animals.

And then later comes Jesus and says it's not what goes into your mouth that matters, it's what comes out of your mouth that defiles a man. And the New Testament teaches you can eat any animal. Now, you can see that these rules can change.

Why? Because there's nothing in those rules that is innately moral. The command not to eat certain animals is part of the ritual law, and the rituals, by nature, are symbolic of something greater than themselves. The thing that they symbolize may be permanent, but the symbol is dispensable.

And therefore, we have a large number of commands in the Old Testament that are ritualistic, part of ritual Judaism. And these rituals symbolize something more than themselves. You know what they symbolize? They symbolize Christ.

They symbolize Jesus and what he would do and what he would accomplish. And when Jesus came, he fulfilled them in the same way that he fulfilled prophecy. How do you fulfill prophecy? You say that something's going to happen, and then Jesus did it.

So it happened. He fulfilled it. The same thing is true about fulfilling ritual laws.

The ritual law was an acted prophecy. You do this for hundreds of years, but every time you do it, you're predicting something by your action, something about Jesus. And when he came, he did the thing and was the thing that was predicted.

In this way, he fulfilled the law and the prophets. And he fulfilled the moral laws by giving his spirit so that we would love and fulfill the law that way. He fulfilled the ritual laws by dying on a cross, rising from the dead, and establishing that reality toward which the ritual laws pointed.

We'll have more to say about this next time, but my, the time does fly when we're having this much fun. Tomorrow, we'll continue our discussion on these things, on these passages, and hopefully go a little deeper still. Thanks for joining us.



I hope you can be with us next time.