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Matthew 5:17 - 5:20 (Part 2)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg analyzes Matthew 5:17-20 in this discussion, presenting an interpretation of Jesus' words regarding the significance of the Law and the prophets. According to Gregg, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. While the ceremonial and ritual modes of the Law were transformed into a new spiritual mode, the moral laws, such as the laws of love, remain in place. Gregg argues that by obeying God's laws, Christians demonstrate their commitment to God, even more than the scribes and Pharisees, who simply followed the letter of the Law.

Transcript

Today I want to continue talking about a passage that we only scratched the surface of last time, and that is in Matthew 5, verses 17-20. I'm sure we won't get through all of these verses even in this session, but I want to read them again because they are one block of material from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, He should be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Alright, well last time we talked about verse 17. Do not think that I came to destroy the law of the prophets.

I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill. That's just the beginning of what he says here. And in case you were unable to catch it last time, I suggested to you that Jesus fulfilled the law in two ways.

The moral law, we are told elsewhere in scripture, both by Jesus and by Paul. The moral law is fulfilled when we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. That is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul said that in Romans 13 and in Galatians 5, and Jesus said it himself in Matthew 7-12. So when we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, that is the fulfillment of at least the moral law. What that means is of course if we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, we won't commit murder or adultery.

We won't steal, we won't lie about people, we won't violate their rights or whatever. And so we will live a life that is morally pleasing to God if we love our neighbor as ourself. Now we can't do that on our own, and therefore the Spirit of God, whom Jesus came to give us, and whom he does give us, has come to produce this love as a fruit of the Spirit in us, says Galatians 5-22.

The fruit of the Spirit is love. And Jesus of course also has allowed us to know his word and to walk in his Spirit day by day. And Paul said that in Romans 8-4 that we fulfill the righteous requirements of the law when we walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.

So Jesus did come to fulfill the law, and he did fulfill the moral law by first of all living in perfect love, and secondly by giving us his Spirit so that we could do the same. Now there's another part of the law though that Jesus fulfilled, and we also talked about that. There are the ritual, ceremonial laws.

The laws that have to do with the way the sacrifices are offered. The laws that have to do with what was clean and unclean, what you could touch, what you couldn't touch. What days you had to keep as special days, and what pilgrimages you had to make and when.

Those laws in the Old Testament obviously have nothing to do with whether you love your neighbors, love yourself or not. You could love your neighbor to bits and still not keep special holy days. You could love your neighbor exactly as much as you love yourself and still eat pork.

And therefore there are certain laws that commanded and forbade certain behavior to the Jews, which were not moral in their nature, at their core. They were merely symbolic of something spiritual that was greater than themselves. The laws themselves were expendable and could be changed and sometimes were in the Scriptures.

But that is because they were not moral. They did not embody behaviors that one would have to do in order to show that they love God and love their neighbor. They were symbolic of spiritual realities.

Now Jesus came and fulfilled those spiritual realities. Every time a Jew offered a Passover lamb, he was doing something that was symbolic. It was predictive.

Every Passover lamb that was ever offered by the Jews was predictive of Christ, our Passover, who was sacrificed for us according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 5. So likewise with every other ritual of the law, these things pointed forward to spiritual things. So Paul says, for example, in Colossians 2, 16 and 17, let no one therefore judge you with respect to food or drink. He means restrictions on those things such as the Jewish law gave.

And he goes on to say, or festival days or new moons or Sabbath days. He said these

things were a shadow for the time being, but the body is of Christ. Now what he means is that Christ is the substance and the body.

The shadow was all these rituals that kind of pointed in the direction of him, but they were not substantial in themselves. They were just symbolic actions. Now Jesus fulfilled those too, of course, because insofar as those actions predicted him, he was the fulfillment of what they predicted.

Just like when the Old Testament prophecies predicted him, he was the fulfillment of those. And so Jesus fulfilled the law in two ways. He fulfilled the ritual ceremonial law by being the very thing that they anticipated, by being the person and inaugurating the spiritual realities that they symbolically portrayed and anticipated and predicted.

Now he also, of course, fulfilled the moral law by loving and giving us his spirit to make us love it so that we fulfill the law as we walk, not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit, Paul said. Now, having said all that, let's consider this next verse, Matthew 5.18. Now this is a tricky one. He says, 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.

Now part of this is hard to understand only because of the vocabulary. The word jot and the word tittle are not well-known words in our English language. The jot, actually more probably the yod, is a Hebrew letter.

It's the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It's something like our letter I. And in the way the Hebrew alphabet was written, the yod was the smallest letter. And so Jesus, when he says not one yod will pass, he means not the smallest letter in the law.

And of course, what he's really suggesting is the smallest detail of the law. And likewise, when he says or tittle, not one yod and not one tittle. Well, what is a tittle? A tittle is not a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, but it is actually a pen stroke that differentiates one letter from another.

As in our English alphabet, a capital O and a capital Q are almost identical with the exception of a single pen stroke that makes the Q different than the O. Well, that little pen stroke that differentiates between one letter and another is a tittle. Or at least in the Hebrew alphabet, that's what it would be. Many of the Hebrew letters look very much like each other and differ from one another only by a slight pen stroke.

That pen stroke is a tittle. So when Jesus said not one yod or one tittle will pass, he's simply using a hyperbole that is intended to say not the slightest detail of the law will pass away until it's all fulfilled. Now, when you have a sentence that has the clause until such and such, of course, you're making a statement about a condition that will prevail for a certain period of time and no longer.

So when Jesus said, for assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not one

yod or one tittle will by any means pass from the law, he would be seemingly saying that the law will not change in any respect, in any detail, until heaven and earth pass away. But after that, of course, it will. That's what a clause beginning with the word till would suggest, till heaven and earth pass away.

Now, the problem with this is that there's two clauses in this sentence that both begin with till. Because at the end of it, he says till all is fulfilled. Now, if he says till heaven and earth pass away, not one yod or one tittle will by any means pass from the law until all is fulfilled, then we are left with the impression that all will be fulfilled at the end of the heavens and the earth.

Because both clauses tell about the duration of the reality he's speaking of, which is that not one yod or one tittle of the law will pass. Well, till when? Well, one phrase says till heaven and earth pass away. And the other says till all be fulfilled.

Now, are we to conclude then that until heaven and earth pass away, all will not yet be fulfilled? Well, that might be reasonable to assume, except for certain problems that that raises. And that is that we know that some of the laws have indeed passed. They're no longer relevant.

At least they're not relevant in the way they were. The animal sacrifices aren't being done anymore. Jesus put an end to that for the Christian.

And that would mean that something has changed in the law or in the prophets, because animal sacrifices are in both of those. Now, he didn't say it wouldn't change. He said it wouldn't pass away.

And so we have a variety of ways we could understand this. One way would be to say that all the law is still in force until heaven and earth pass away. And it won't be until then that it will all be fulfilled.

If we take this view, then what do we do with the fact that certain laws seem to be passed away? The sacrifice laws, the journeys to Jerusalem that were required by the law, and, you know, many others. Festival observance and so on. Well, we could say this, and we would not be wrong in saying it, but I'm not sure if this is what Jesus means.

We could say that the laws have not passed away. They have simply changed into another mode, and they continue in their other mode. Now, what I mean by that is that if we speak of the ceremonial laws, those laws that we don't actually keep anymore and are not required to keep anymore, we could say that those ceremonial laws were looking forward to some spiritual reality.

Well, that reality has come, and therefore they have transformed from the ceremonial or ritual mode into their spiritual mode. Let me give you an example. In the Old Testament, God told Abraham that everyone who was not circumcised would be cut off from his

people, and that this law was going to be true forever and ever.

Well, in the New Testament, we're taught that circumcision is not required, but rather circumcision of the heart is what matters. Well, I think we could conclude justly that the ritual of circumcision, physical circumcision, pointed toward the spiritual reality of spiritual circumcision. Has circumcision been done away? Well, in one sense, yes, but in another sense, no.

In the sense of a required ritual, yes. In the sense of the spiritual reality it was talking about, no, it's still with us. We still are required to have our hearts circumcised.

The spiritual reality is still legitimate, still valid. Likewise, the temple. The temple was said to be eternal also.

It was part of the ritual law, but the temple is gone now. However, the temple that the Jews worshipped in, I believe we can find, was a symbol for the eternal temple, the spiritual temple of the Holy Spirit, which is, according to the New Testament, the body of Christ. Christ referred to his own body as a temple when he said, destroy this temple, and in three days I'll raise it up again.

He was referring to his body. Later on, of course, he went to heaven, sent his spirit down to his people, and we became his body, and the Apostle Paul says that we are the temple of God now in 1 Corinthians 3 and again in 1 Corinthians 6. So we are the temple. It's a spiritual temple made up of living stones, according to Peter.

There is no physical temple. There's not a house made with hands that God dwells in. But the house in the Old Testament that he dwelt in was a symbol of something that continues on.

Yes, the ritual mode has ended, but the eternal and spiritual mode has come into existence and continues forever. Likewise, things like sacrifices. Well, have they been done away really? Well, in one sense, yes.

We don't offer animal sacrifices anymore, but the Bible says that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. The Bible indicates that we offer the fruit of our lips as a spiritual sacrifice. Peter says in 1 Peter 2 that we are chosen by God to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Christ Jesus.

So there is an ongoing sacrifice spiritually going on, which was depicted ceremonially or ritually by the Old Testament sacrifices. In other words, the passing away of the rituals of the Old Testament isn't really a passing away of the thing that they meant. The thing they meant continues and will continue to the end of time.

They have simply changed modes. Now, that's one way of understanding Jesus' words. Of course, the moral law will never pass away until the end of time, but the ceremonial

law also hasn't passed away in one sense.

The ritual aspect has, but the eternal spiritual mode abides with us. So we could argue that Jesus is simply saying that when he said, until heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law until all is fulfilled. Another way to understand that would be for him to say that until heaven and earth pass away, no law will pass away until it, that law, is fulfilled.

Now, some laws have been fulfilled already. Some remain unfulfilled, it could be argued. And therefore, the reality remains until the end of the world that until every last one has been fulfilled, it will be in force.

And that is the way some people would perhaps understand this statement. So that the ceremonial laws that are fulfilled are gone, but other laws like those of the moral laws, well, they're going to be continuing with us until we're in our resurrection bodies. Now, there are other ways that some people have taken this statement, but they get to be harder and harder to justify as we get further and further out here.

I mean, the statement that until heaven and earth pass away, these laws won't fade until they're fulfilled, has been thought by some to mean that it's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one of these laws to pass away before it is fulfilled. I heard one teacher suggest that meaning once, and it does have something in its favor because in Luke, Jesus used that expression. He said it's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one jot or one tittle of the law to fail.

So it's really hard to know for sure Jesus' precise meaning. But in saying that, it's easy to come up with wrong meanings. It's hard to come up with the right one, perhaps.

We can think of several suggestions, candidates for the right one, but the wrong ones can be come up with much more easily. And I think sometimes Christians come up with the wrong one. And they say, you see, Jesus said that the law is in force until heaven and earth pass away, that he didn't come to destroy it, and therefore all the laws are still with us.

And of course, they usually say this in order to enforce one particular law, namely the Sabbath. But they might want to enforce some others too, like dietary laws, don't eat that, don't eat that. But even these people don't do all the things the law required, and therefore that meaning cannot be held consistently unless we're going to build a tabernacle, put altars in it, ordain Levites, bring our animals there to sacrifice, and do all the things that the law required.

It seems clear that Jesus was not saying that all the law is going to continue until the end of the world, because he also said until all is fulfilled. And we know that Jesus came to fulfill it, and he did not fail to do so. Therefore, I believe that Jesus has essentially

brought the ceremonial law to a ceremonial end, but it's not a passing away of the law, it is rather a transformation of the law from a ritual into a spiritual reality in Christ.

And likewise, the moral laws are simply the laws of love of your neighbors yourself. When you do that, you fulfill the law. I said this passage was difficult when we started it, and I don't pretend that I've removed all the difficulties by my few comments.

I don't claim to know everything, and for that reason, I don't want to suggest that my answers here are the only ones that make any sense. But this is the way that I feel these verses can be understood as clarified by later statements, both by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. Now, there is still difficulty with another part, and that is, whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Now, what does that mean? Does that mean that we must do and teach all of these laws, even the least of them, or we'll be the least in the kingdom of heaven? I'd like to suggest to you a meaning that makes more sense to me than that. Jesus was talking to men who were living under the Old Covenant, and as such, they were required to do everything the Old Covenant required.

Jesus, I think, was saying this, until these laws are fulfilled, you are obligated still to do them all. Don't think that my coming here is somehow just abolishing these laws. You Jewish disciples of mine who live under this Old Covenant, you need to do them.

You need to obey God. You need to obey these laws as long as they're in force. And if you don't, you will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven.

However, of course, this would change once Jesus instituted the New Covenant, which he did in the upper room some three years after this, or two years after this. So, it would really just pertain to the status of the law until Jesus brought in the New Covenant, and his disciples are informed that they are required to do what the law requires, because they were Jews living under the law. Now, one reason I think that this is a valid way of looking at what he says here, is because a little bit later, just a few verses later, in verse 23, he says to his disciples, Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, now he's talking about going to the temple and offering an animal at the altar, he says, and you there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. He's talking about offering animal sacrifices. We know that the disciples of Jesus today are not required to do that.

The New Covenant has brought an end to that system. But, Jesus' disciples at that time

were Jews living under the Old Covenant, and therefore he assumed that they were going to do what the Old Covenant required, bring animal sacrifices to the temple. Now, since that assumption exists in chapter 5, verse 23 and 24, there's no reason to doubt that it existed in the same chapter in verse 19, that to his disciples who at that time lived under the Old Covenant, they should not feel themselves liberated from the requirements of the Old Testament law, at least not until all is fulfilled.

And that, I think, is what he's saying there. In verse 20, he says, 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, the scribes and Pharisees kept the law meticulously, outwardly.

How could your righteousness exceed theirs? Well, it could in sincerity, and that's the point. You couldn't do more religious things than the scribes and Pharisees did. They were full-time religionists.

But you could do it more sincerely. Your righteousness could be more heartfelt. It's possible that you could easily serve God in a way that was more pleasing to God if you simply loved Him, because the scribes and Pharisees didn't love God.

They only religiously did outward works. Jesus said that later on in John chapter 5. And so, what he's telling his disciples is keeping the law, at least so long as the law is in force, which would be until Jesus fulfilled it, is a requirement, that Jesus wasn't coming to slacken people's duties to obey God. As a matter of fact, he wanted them to obey God even more than the scribes and Pharisees did.

The only way you could do that would be if you not only kept the law outwardly, but you did so with a better spirit, and greater sincerity, and greater love for God than the scribes and Pharisees did. And for anyone who loves God, that would not be a hard thing to do, because the scribes and Pharisees were notorious hypocrites. Well, we're going to continue on with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount next time.

However, we're out of time again today. This keeps happening every day. And so, tune in again tomorrow, and we will continue.

Thanks for joining us.