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Not to Abolish But to Fulfil (Matthew 5:17-48)

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Jesus teaches concerning the fulfilment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount.

Within this episode I mention Glen Stassen's article 'The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-7:12)':

<https://jbburnett.com/resources/matthew/stassen,%20Fourteen%20Triads.pdf>.

I also advertise Simon Gathercole's book 'The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke': <https://amzn.to/2OqEFQD>.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the sixth in my series on the Gospel of Matthew. Today we're looking at chapter 5, verses 17-48, where Jesus teaches concerning the Torah and its continuing significance. He declares at the very beginning that he has not come to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets.

The law and the prophets stands for the entirety of the Old Testament. All that body of material can be comprehended under one of those two headings. Now, within this

section, he focuses particularly upon the importance of the law.

But the theme of fulfillment is one that pervades the entirety of Matthew's Gospel. We've already seen the importance of it at the beginning, and it comes to the foreground again at the end. Jesus is the one who fulfills the words of the Old Testament prophets.

He fulfills not just the prophets, but he fulfills the law. The focus here then is upon the law. And it's not entirely clear what fulfill means within this context.

Allison and Davies discuss a number of the potential meanings that it could have. So here is their list. It could be to add to, or rather that Jesus has not come to abolish nor to add to the law.

It could be taken in that particular sense. To establish the law, that's the second possibility. To fulfill the law is to establish, to reaffirm.

It could mean to obey the law, that Jesus fulfills the law by obeying it, by perfectly obeying it. That's another alternative meaning. Jesus is the one who's sinless.

He obeys the law in each particular respect, and in that respect, he fulfills it. Another possibility, by completing it, to bring in a more glorious form of it. Now, that's a more prophetic, eschatological realisation of the intent of the law, so that it may be succeeded by something even more glorious.

The sixth alternative is by exposing and perfecting its central intent. Or seventh, by enabling others to meet its demands. Or eighth, by bringing in a new righteousness of love.

Or ninth, by the eschatological fulfilment of being its definitive meaning. That Christ fulfills the law as the one who comes as the word, as the one who fulfills the meaning and the intent of what the law was always about. It was always pointing to Christ.

It was always, as it were, a silhouette of the one who was about to come. Now, Davies and Allison suggest the fifth and the ninth meaning are the ones that we should probably emphasise most. That Christ comes to complete it and to bring in a more glorious form of the law, and that he is the one who eschatologically fulfils its definitive meaning and intent.

Christ fulfils the prophetic intent and the content of the law and the prophets by realising what the law itself could not, or did not, yet achieve. Paul talks about this within his epistles in places like Romans, that Christ has enabled us to fulfil the righteous requirement of the law. He came in the flesh.

He died bearing the punishment of sin of the law. And then he also, through his spirit, works the fulfilment of the law in us. So maybe that's part of what's meant here.

But there seems to be a broader meaning than just Christ giving us his perfect righteousness or something like that, which has often been a reading that people have adopted within a more Protestant, Lutheran or Calvinist approach. I think there's something more going on here. The law and the prophets are not abolished, but fulfilled and accomplished.

Now, they reach through this their intended destination. This was always what they were about, where they were pointing towards, what they were driving towards. They aren't merely reaffirmed.

It's not as if Christ is just republishing this, having a new print run, as it were, of the law to say, this isn't going to go out of print, guys, that this is reaffirmed. We're going to underline its importance. That's not what Jesus is doing.

By fulfilling the law, he's doing something beyond that, I believe. He's bringing the law and the prophets to their full destination, where they were always driving at, so that their full central intent would be realised. We'll see this as we go along.

The truth and the divine authority of the Torah is underlined, but in a way that reveals them to be transfigured in Christ. So it's not just reaffirming what has always been the case, saying, guys, just go back to Moses and we need to keep Moses more fully and be more committed in this way of the law. Rather, there's a transformation that realises the intent of the law, and the law actually comes to fruition.

This is as if the tree of the law is finally bearing its fruit. This is what it was always wanting to do. The fulfilment, then, is not just about their perpetual continuance, but about something of an arrival at an intended destination.

Jesus' statement makes clear that the law and prophets were never a static and timeless body of revelation, but they're always straining forwards towards something eschatological. They're always straining forwards towards something that would be realised, a way of life that would be embodied within the people. And that's part of what the kingdom brings about.

It brings about a realisation of what the law and the prophets were always hoping towards, always hoping for and intending. The written law is a creation. God has given the written law as a creationist finger writing on tablets of stone, but even its smallest elements, jots and tittles, have the same sort of continuance and power and permanence as heaven and earth themselves.

So Jesus can say, So heaven and earth passing away, jots and tittles from the law passing away. This comparison of the law and heaven and earth is something that we see in places like Psalm 19, where the psalmist can reflect on the one hand upon the heaven and the earth and the speech that the cosmos gives as the stars, sun, moon,

give forth their speech from the heavens, but then also upon the law that God's word is perfect. And as you reflect upon that, you're hearing his speech too.

And so those two things held together within the Psalms are also held together here. They both have a fixity and a strength as a witness to God's truth and they're held alongside each other. The fulfillment of the law can lead to a transformed relationship with and hermeneutical posture towards the law.

So as the law is transformed and our posture towards it, we don't just relate to it in the same old way. And one of the things you'll see in Jesus' teaching as we go through the book of Matthew is that Jesus reaffirmed the law, but in a radical way that doesn't just radicalize the law to say, oh, you can't keep this. This is impossible to keep.

Here's your escape route. This is the alternative. But no, he shows something about this was always the intent of the law.

And there are ways in which the law is brought back to its original intent in the light of the original creation, but then also in the light of the age to come. And so Christ presents his followers with a new way of posturing themselves towards the law that reaffirms the law, but in a surprising way. So we can see indications of this within Jesus' teaching on issues such as divorce, for instance, where he can relativize Moses' permission of divorce without simply opposing it.

So on the one hand, he can say that Moses gave you this permission, but he can say that that's out of the hardness of your heart. It was not that way from the beginning. And so he reaffirms the law, recognizing that permission that was given, but presenting the law within the light of the age to come and the original status of the creation and how marriage was established in the state of man's innocence.

And bringing those two things together and presenting that in the context of his kingdom teaching, we have a different way of relating to the laws concerning divorce. It's not as if Moses is just abolished. It's not as if Jesus says, that doesn't apply.

It's not true, guys. This, I'm disagreeing with Moses. He doesn't disagree with Moses.

Rather, he puts Moses in a very different van, places the reader in a very different vantage point relative to Moses than they may have had before. The passing away of heaven and earth that is referred to here is the consummation of all things associated with in the following verse or later on in that verse until all is accomplished. Heaven and earth passing away until all is accomplished.

And some have suggested that this is referring to AD 70 or something like that. Perhaps part of it there. I think it maybe stretches a bit further.

The point is, however, that the law has a mission and it won't pass away until that

mission has been completely accomplished. It is part of the created order and it has a mission, but it's not going to just disappear from the scene. It's not just been abolished.

It's going to arrive at its destination. And in arriving at its destination, it will be transformed and transfigured in some sense. So the mission is fulfilled in Christ in various ways.

The law dies and the law rises again in a new form. This fits in very well with Matthew's emphasis upon fulfillment. Christ fulfills the meaning of something like Hosea 11 verse 1, not by some literal meaning of Christ being the Israel that was called out of Egypt in the book of Exodus.

He fulfills it by realizing what that deliverance from Egypt was always pointing forward to, always anticipating. Christ is the true son. He's the one who's going to bring the deliverance from the greater Egypt.

And that helps us to see that the original deliverance from Egypt was always pointing towards this. This was always its central intent. It's the same with the law.

The law is fulfilled not just in the literal obedience of the law in the way that the Pharisees and the scribes might argue for, just keeping every single jot and tittle in the sense of a legalism that's focused very much upon strict prescriptive approaches to obedience. It's not that. It's fulfilled in something that transforms and goes beyond and realizes the full intent, the greatest purpose of the law.

And we'll see that as we go along. The law retains its authority in the kingdom. And I think this is one of the reasons why I'd be cautious of arguments that say that heaven and earth passing away refers to AD 70 or something like that.

The law retains its authority in the kingdom because we see in verse 19, 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. So this continues its force.

The law continues its force into the kingdom of heaven. But yet I would argue that its continuance of its force is not in the old manner that you might think of in terms of legalism, but in a new manner whereby it's taken up into a new form of life. It's transfigured.

And so there's a symmetry between also the way that people treat the law and the way that they will be treated. So on the one hand, people who treat the law as a light thing will be treated as light themselves, having little status within the kingdom of heaven. And on the other hand, those who give the law weight will have great honour in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' project here is not a liberalising one. It's one that actually places incredible weight upon the continuing authority of the law and not just in this narrow legalistic sense, this sense of we must obey each one of these 600 odd commandments, but in a way that says we must recognise that the law was always working towards something deeper and greater. And we must follow the spirit of the law, not leaving the letter of the law behind, but recognising that the letter of the law is something that should guide us towards the fulfilment of its spirit.

Jesus discusses greatness in the kingdom. And in the next verse, he focuses upon entrance to the kingdom, which will only be enjoyed by those whose righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. So the righteousness here, many people have thought about this in Protestant terms as the righteousness of Christ imputed to our account.

I don't believe that's the case. I think it's referring to concrete conduct. And this concrete conduct is something that he goes on to unpack, what this means.

And it's something that, on the one hand, contrasts with the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees. And on the other hand, it contrasts with this legalistic approach to the law that is more concerned with one's personal status avoiding sin rather than actually participating in the redemptive righteousness of God. And so to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to seek the righteousness of God, these concepts, I think, refer to a different mode of righteousness than merely keeping a set of commandments.

The point is to realise the purpose of the commandments, which is more than just keeping them in a very narrow legalistic sense. The point is to drive through to their intended destination. And so as we keep the law of God, as we are those who pursue the righteousness of God, we're those who are pursuing God's will and seeking God's will through the commandments, not just seeing the commandments as means by which to avoid judgment for ourselves.

And at this point, I think it might be worth taking a step back to think about another aspect of this particular section, which is not commented upon enough, but is worth reflecting upon. And that's Jesus' use of the language, I have come. So we've seen Jesus presented as the Messiah.

We've seen him presented as the Son of God. We've seen him presented as the King of the Jews. And there's various arguments for that presented within the first four chapters.

And here we have the first occurrence of a form of expression that occurs on several occasions within Matthew and elsewhere in the Gospels. And that's the expression, I have come. And the expression is important because it refers to some mission or some way of characterizing Jesus being on the scene or arriving on the scene that invites questions when we look at it closely.

So many have passed over this, seeing it just as a sort of idiomatic expression that a prophet might say, I have come to do this, that and the other. But it seems to be something more. And as we look closer, I think it will reward that sort of attention.

One of the questions to ask is, come from where? Is Jesus referring to coming from Nazareth or coming on his prophetic mission or as the Messiah? It's not entirely clear at first. And in the statement of verse 17, Jesus is referring to something a bit grander than just something you might refer to as coming from Nazareth to do. Jesus says, I do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. That doesn't seem to be just referring to coming from Nazareth, nor even coming as a prophet. Jesus seems to be referring to something that's a grander mission.

But then on the other hand, saying I have come seems to relate to something that precedes the coming. That the coming was something that Jesus did, which implies that there was a time before the coming. And that is an interesting detail.

So at the very least, we're probably dealing with something. I mean, he's talking about the mission of fulfilling the law of the prophets. And this is something that seems to comprehend all that he's doing.

He's teaching and he's going to act in a way that fulfills the meaning of the law of the prophets. We've seen it from the very beginning of his ministry. And so what is the coming that leads to that particular action? If that action comprehends almost the entirety of his earthly mission, where is the coming from? At the very least, we're probably dealing with something akin to the coming of Elijah in the person of John the Baptist.

So at the very end of the Old Testament in our English ordering in the book of Malachi, we told that the prophet Elijah will come before the great day of the Lord. And John the Baptist comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah. And he comes not just as a guy from the wilderness or a guy from the hill country of Judea, but as a man sent from God in the fullness of time.

He's an advent of a prophetic figure of a figure that's been prophesied in the Old Testament. So as the advent of a prophesied faith, he comes as Elijah. Jesus talks about him as the Elijah that was to come.

And so the coming of John the Baptist presupposes a sort of typological persona or person, Elijah, that transcends the bounds of a single lifespan. So you have Elijah in the Old Testament. Then you have Elijah, as it were, caught up into heaven.

Elijah represented as a figure involved in redemptive history. And then Elijah is going to come again. Elijah is going to come again before the great day of the Lord.

And so John the Baptist comes in the power and the spirit of Elijah. And so that coming is something that's related to a character that's been around long before John the Baptist was born. John the Baptist representing a coming presupposes that there's a connection between John the Baptist and a person or persona that preceded his birth, that preexisted his birth.

Now, I don't believe that John the Baptist is literally Elijah, but he comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah, as Elijah acts in the spirit and the power of Elijah, as the spirit of Elijah descends upon him in the mantle. Now, this, I think, gives us some clue as to what the weight of Jesus' expression, I have come, might be. Close attention to Jesus' reference to his coming is something that Simon Gathicall gives in his book, *The Preexistent Son*, which is a very thought-provoking book on the question of Jesus' preexistence within the synoptic Gospels.

So he observes that the expression, I have come, is used on various occasions by angels to describe their coming on a mission from heaven. So in Joshua chapter 5, the commander of the army of God has come. He describes himself that way.

In Daniel chapter 9, we see the man Gabriel, he made me understand speaking with me and saying, oh Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. And then later on in chapter 10, fear not Daniel, for from the first day that you had set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard and I have come because of your words. The prince of Persia withstood me 21 days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me for I was left there with the kings of Persia and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days.

And so the use of that expression, I have come, is used by angels to refer to a mission that they've been sent upon. It's used to refer by the angel of the Lord uses it of himself. In Exodus chapter 3 verse 8, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters.

I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians. So it seems to make more sense of the way that Jesus uses this expression, particularly when we think about some of the contexts in which it's used. So for instance, in Luke chapter 12 verse 49 to 51, I came to cast fire on the earth.

I would that it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptised with and how great is my distress until it is accomplished. Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

So in that passage, Jesus refers to coming to cast fire on the earth and then coming not to bring peace on the earth, but division. And so coming in that context seems to refer most naturally to coming from heaven to earth. And so even within that particular

expression, which we're inclined to pass over without much attention, Jesus seems to be referring to an advent from heaven to earth and implying his eternal pre or some sort of heaven at the very least, some sort of heavenly pre-existence.

Later on in chapter eight, demons will ask Jesus whether he has come to destroy them before the appointed time. Again, come from where? And it makes most sense to read this as coming from heaven and recognising such a significance to Jesus' words, even in a place like this, where it may not be the most forceful use of that expression. It helps to clarify something of the import of what Jesus is saying.

Jesus is coming in an eschatological significant advent and as an intentional act, he comes to earth and part of his purpose in coming is to fulfil the law and the prophets, to bring them to their intended destination. This is what they were all about. And Christ comes as this eschatological figure to realise their intent.

And so at this point, there's a movement into discussion of particular teachings associated with the law. And there's a movement, I think, through the second table of the 10 words. So in Deuteronomy chapter five and in Exodus chapter 20, we have the 10 words or what many would more typically know as the 10 commandments.

And there we have no other gods before me, not making a graven image, not taking the name of God in vain and remembering Sabbath day on a father and mother and not committing murder, adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness and not stealing, bearing false witness or coveting. And as we go through that, it can be divided into two tables. The first five concerned with vertical relationships or relationships with God can be summarised under loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

And then the second half can be summarised in more horizontal relationships, loving your neighbour as yourself. And in this section here, Jesus seems to move through the second table of the law. So he starts off with murder, then he moves to lust and adultery in that context.

Then he moves to divorce. And in Deuteronomy, in the ordering of the 10 commandments, in the larger body of teaching material from chapter six to 26, the subject of divorce is connected with stealing. In chapter 24, it comes under that heading.

In the next one is with oaths connected with bearing false witness and then with vengeance, which is connected with the 10th commandment, coveting. And then finally, Jesus deals with the summary statement of the second table, which concerns loving one's neighbour. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.

It's that which summarises the second table. So Jesus seems to be purposefully

developing his teaching here in relationship to the teaching of the law itself. It's a very carefully structured passage.

Like so much in Matthew, when you look closely, you can see that there is great design and structure within it. And that is in part, clue to its meaning. And so like putting together a puzzle, when we pay attention not just to the picture, but to the shape of the pieces, it makes more sense how they all fit together.

And so pay attention to the shape of the pieces here and the order in which they're occurring, because this is playing out the order of the law. And Jesus is teaching concerning these principles. How are we to understand Jesus' teaching concerning the law? It's often treated as a set of antitheses.

So Jesus has the original teaching of the law, and then he presents his radical teaching in contradistinction to that of Moses. So Moses said X, but I say Y to you. And Y is this sort of radicalised teaching of the law that internalises it and often, and for many people, it puts it beyond our reach.

This is just showing how vast and great and exalted a standard God has given us in the law and how beyond sinful humanity it is to keep the law. And as we see the limitations of ourselves in the light of this great standard of the law, we should be driven to an understanding of our guilt and our need for a saviour, and we should turn to Christ. That's a very common Protestant reading, an evangelical reading of the Sermon on the Mount, and I think it's exactly wrong.

It's something that may have good theological convictions and it may have good theological points at its heart. It's trying to maintain things that are theologically true, but exegetically it doesn't work. And I think it misses something of a positive intent of the law here and the way it's people are being encouraged to obey the law here.

And this is what the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees actually looks like. Now, many have contrasted Moses and external action and what Jesus does is highlight the internal reality. Now, that's not quite right either.

Jesus emphasizes the danger of mere external action and the hypocrisy that can hide behind mere external action. And so he highlights integrity, the marrying of the internal and the external, the internal intent and the external action and how they should be married together. So that's certainly the case within Jesus' teaching.

But much of what he advocates are external actions. And as we read through this, I think we'll see something of that. Alternatively, many people, many Protestants as I've noted, have said that Jesus is so radicalizing the law precisely to show that it cannot serve for our justification.

If you are looking for justification from the law, you will not find it. Now, that's true

enough, but that's not what Jesus is arguing here. And I think in such a fixation upon the question of justification, we can often miss that much of the biblical teaching is premised upon a recognition that we're not actually treating the law and obedience and works righteousness as the basis for justification.

But once we've understood that, this is how we treat the law. And so I think it's recognizing this is not for justification. That's not the point here.

The point is rather this is what it looks like to be people who have a righteousness that exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. This is what kingdom obedience looks like. And to note that against the internal external opposition that Jesus typically focuses upon action, not merely an internal state, is important.

Jesus then is calling for the marriage of internal and external. The integrity of true obedience and also for something that goes beyond mere avoidance. And many people have thought about the law primarily in terms of avoidance.

So you avoid disobeying this and avoid disobeying that and avoid doing this, that and the other. And if you avoid all of these things, that's what righteousness looks like. Jesus is presenting a proactive practice of righteousness as the way to pursue integrity.

Now, this is something that fulfills the law. And it gets back to what we've been talking about earlier in terms of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. And that righteousness being the will of God that is redemptive righteousness.

It's not just a righteousness in terms of purity of life. That's part of it. But it's redemptive righteousness.

This is a righteousness that is active and transformative. A righteousness that takes the initiative. A righteousness that sets things right.

And often when we think about righteousness, we're so focused upon not disobeying. And that's our definition of righteousness. But one of the liberating things of, I think, a Protestant understanding of righteousness is that it frees us to think in terms of a proactive, external, proactive and form of righteousness that's taking the initiative and doing good works.

Not in order that we might validate ourselves or justify ourselves or get ourselves on the right footing with God or over against our neighbor. But out of love. It's something that takes the initiative.

It's something that engages in transformative practice because it is enjoying right standing with God. It's not trying to earn that. We're not fixated on our own status.

There's often a danger of a certain Protestant understanding that we become fixated

upon the question of our own righteousness and not pursuing that by works. That we lose something of the extra specter character of true righteousness, which is driven by love. And in that extra specter character of true righteousness, we're not actually focused upon our own justification.

Because that's something we receive as a gift and we're no longer preoccupied with that question. And so rather we act as those who are participating in God's own redemptive righteousness within the world. So we are setting things to rights by the way that we act towards our neighbor, by the way that we act when other people abuse us.

And that is a very different approach to righteousness than those, I think, that focus merely upon the law. Here is this forbidding thing that we could never keep. Jesus is teaching a redemptive practice of the law.

And I think that it can be borne out as we looked at more closely. So one treatment of this that I found very helpful, and I think it was David Field that first alerted me to this article. It's Glenn Stassen and the 14 Triads of the Sermon on the Mount.

It's an article from the Journal of Biblical Literature. I think it's 2003. And he argues that first of all when we read the treatment of Jesus of the law and we read you have heard that it was said and then but I say unto you, we generally read that as the law says X but I say Y and Y is some radicalized teaching of the law.

And he argues that that's not actually the case. When we look more closely that does not actually work. So it's not an antithesis and it's not a dyad.

It's not a kind of this, not this but that. It's more a matter of a triad. And so he argues this through actually paying attention to the text itself and saying think about this in terms of a dyad and then think how it breaks down.

So for instance read the first section. You have heard that it was said of old you shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says you fool will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to court lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you you will never get out of there until you're paid the last penny. Now what people miss when reading that is that it doesn't follow if you're thinking about that merely in terms of a dyad.

It makes the interpretation very clumsy. Note that when Jesus, Jesus doesn't give a prohibition. He doesn't say you have heard it said you shall not murder but I say to you you shall not be angry.

Now there may be an implication of that there but that's not what Jesus says. Rather Jesus states a state of affairs. He's presenting a fact and what he's presenting is a problem.

The person who is angry with his brother, the one who's insulting his brother and the one who's calling his brother fool is someone who's liable to the judgment that is associated with murder. And as you look through it you then notice that Jesus gives what some people have seen as examples but the examples don't follow if the prohibition is don't be angry. What Jesus says is be reconciled to your brother, leave your gift at the altar, come to terms with your accuser.

Now those are not responses to, those are not things that are illustrations of not being angry. It's more subtle than that. So what he argues is that there is a triadic structure and the way that it works is that Jesus gives a traditional teaching then he gives a vicious cycle and then he gives a transforming initiative.

Now best to understand this not in terms of a strict literary structure that you'll always see these three in a row nor is it the case that you will always see them in that particular order. Rather the point is the structure of Jesus' argument and this is such a structure that there will be occasions where one of those elements will just be implicit, it will be left out and the reader is supposed to know the structure and imply or infer the element that's removed. And what's happening here I think can also be highlighted by the fact that there are three parallel statements connected with the judgment.

So we'll be liable to judgment at the end of verse 21 and then the various statements of liability to judgment in verse 22 and then at the end of verse 25 the liability to punishment there. So there are three different statements and it makes sense to read it as a triad rather than a dyad. And so what Jesus is doing is presenting first of all here's the traditional teaching but there is a vicious cycle and you can see that you have the traditional teaching over here, it's the good teaching of the law but now there's this vicious cycle that's undermining that, that's making it difficult for you to keep that and now here is the transforming initiative.

And so Jesus presents an alternative to either just the thesis or the antithesis. So he's not saying or he presents an alternative to the traditional teaching if you're just focusing upon that don't do this. And if you're on the other hand caught in that vicious cycle here is the transforming initiative that is the true alternative.

This is what true righteousness looks like, this is what righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees looks like. Now this addresses the internal state but it's not

primarily focused upon the internal state, it's also proactive and external. It's something that is not merely ordered around avoidance, not sinning.

So note for instance that when Jesus is teaching concerning your gift at the altar the point is not and just don't be angry with your brother, it's take the initiative and be reconciled with your brother. Or be involved when you have an accuser, come to terms quickly, don't let the sun go down on your wrath, deal with, keep short accounts with people and make sure that you're not in a situation where things can fester. And so this is a very proactive approach to pursuing righteousness, to hungering and thirsting after righteousness, not just sin avoidance which is how many so many people, so many of us approach the issue of obedience to God's word.

We tend to see obedience to God's law as merely avoiding sin rather than pursuing righteousness. And what Jesus is presenting here is a transforming initiative that is characteristic of kingdom righteousness. As you take this transforming initiative you're not just someone who's avoiding murder, you're someone who's bringing peace, you're restoring relationships that have been torn apart, you're someone who's reconciling and that is all characteristic of the kingdom.

And as you work through it it makes a bit more sense I think of what Jesus is teaching. So the transforming initiative is not just don't be angry, it's be a reconciler and make peace and that's where the imperatives are found, not in don't be angry, that's not actually what Jesus says, rather vicious cycle is being angry with and insulting your brother. And so the transforming initiative is being a reconciler and making peace.

Now note that's an external action, this is something you're going to the altar and you're about to leave your gift there, leave and you're about to present your gift, leave your gift there, sort things out with your brother first, then bring your gift. Now that's a very external action but the point is that this is how you deal with that internal state because if you don't deal with that internal state through proactive addressing of the situation of anger within your heart it will fester and it will destroy you and it will lead to murder. And what Jesus is highlighting here is the same thing that was highlighted in Genesis chapter 4 as God speaks to Cain after his gift was rejected.

Now note the illusion here that the gift at the altar and leaving that gift at the altar it's like saying Cain leave that gift at the altar, be reconciled with your brother because by presenting that when you are in enmity with your brother and end up with that vicious cycle of anger against your brother where does it lead? It leads you to murder. So Cain leave your gift, sort things out with Abel and then come to the altar and none of that cycle will set off and I think that is one way of understanding what's taking place here is a proactive action that's being encouraged and so Jesus' alternative is proactive reconciliation and peacemaking. This is acting redemptively, it's what pursuing the will of God and the kingdom of heaven looks like.

And so he moves on to the next commandment which is you shall not commit adultery. Now we've gone through murder, now this is the sixth commandment, this is the seventh and what is the vicious cycle here? It's looking with lustful intent at a woman and that's committing adultery in your heart. Now the point is not that they're the same thing and that's how many people have argued that Jesus is saying we need to radicalise this commandment to recognise that looking lustfully at a woman is tantamount to adultery and therefore we must recognise that we've all fallen short and we must just recognise our guilt.

That's not the point of what Jesus is teaching here although that may be true in its own place. What Jesus is teaching is that there is a vicious cycle. If you want to know the seed and the root of the sin of adultery look for it in that, look for it in the act of looking lustfully at the woman and this is looking with lustful intent.

It's not just recognising that someone is beautiful, it's checking them out and it's that lascivious gaze where you're trying to mentally undress the person or something like that. This is an intentional gazing upon someone and so that is the vicious cycle. How do you get out of that? And so he gives a transforming initiative and that is to take radical action to address the cause of the temptation and note that Jesus' identification of the cause of the temptation or the cause of stumbling is not the person that you're lusting after, it's that thing within you that is causing you to stumble.

So sexual immorality as he presents it here is a sin of the greatest seriousness. It puts your entire body in risk of hell and so what's the alternative? To sacrifice individual members of your body rather than the whole thing. And so the focus here is upon the man's duty in the case without denying that women should not excite men's lust purposefully.

It's a focus upon the duty of and responsibility and the power of the man to deal with his own cause of temptation. That there is something in him that can be taken out and that recognition is one that gives the responsibility and the agency to the person who's struggling with the temptation. And note here again it's not saying just deal with that internal state.

It's saying change the coordinates of the situation so that that internal state can be more readily dealt with and in the same way as leaving your gift at the altar and being reconciled with your brother that's an external action that will address the problem of anger in your heart and not allow it to fester. So removing your eye or removing your right hand is or cutting off your right hand these are things that will help you to address the sin of lust and in these cases I think Jesus is presenting us with a far more subtle account of dealing with sin than we often have. And here I think it's important to recognise the role of wisdom in dealing with sin.

That what Jesus is presenting are not just prohibitions they are wise strategies and

tactics for dealing with the wiliness of temptation the evil one. These are ways to know the ins and outs of our temptations to recognise the triggers the things that excite the problem the causes of our temptation to recognise the cycles that get out of hand and addressing those cutting them off nipping them in the bud. And we're often just not very good at this when we think about sin we often have this highly spiritualised account of sin we don't get down and dirty with the question of how is this actually playing out in my life at what point is this sin triggered what are the things that set me off in my cycle of anger at what point am I most vulnerable to the sin of lust at what point am I most likely to strike out at someone when do I find myself telling lies on what sort of occasions what parts of my life am I hiding from other people and why and this calls for wisdom and knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of the coordinates of our lives and a willingness to use strategy and tactics and very careful sort of martial planning against the sins of our lives and we don't usually do that we often tend to spiritualise an abstract sin and not recognise the channels that it is moving upon and thinking how can I block off some of those channels what are the times that I need to be particularly on my guard how can I create conditions that make it easier for me to resist temptation at those times what about the company that I keep what people should I avoid what places should I avoid what company will actually help me to pursue righteousness and these are all questions that we just do not give enough attention to we have a very shallow understanding of sin often and maybe that's because we just don't want to get that serious about it whereas what Jesus is presenting here is the most serious attitude towards sin that we could have we recognise our entire being is in jeopardy here let's cut off a few pieces to recognise that we can at least save ourselves we may lose our hand we may lose our eye but and Jesus is using hyperbole here but hyperbole that makes a very serious point now if you're dealing with lust it may mean sacrificing your internet connection it may mean cutting off certain context from your life not going to a particular location where you're feeling that temptation most keenly it may mean not keeping certain sort of company and it may mean avoiding certain material some people might find it okay to watch a particular tv show and they can maybe watch it without any sin but that may not be the case for you and if that is the case cut it out be prepared to take radical action against sin and this is not just dealing with your internal state this is a matter of dealing with the coordinates of your life and being wily and cunning in dealing with the ways of the serpent you need to be wiser than the serpent as you're dealing with his wiles in your life and Jesus teaching here focuses upon intimate obstacles this is your own eye this is your own hand the things that are closest to you these things that are the nearest extensions of yourself and it highlights among other things how unsparing we should be in our approach to dealing with sin it's not an approach that will just let your eye off the hook or let you maybe not the best way of putting it but you're not going to just say that it's okay this thing is too close to me to actually deal with or your hand these are things that you must deal with radically no matter how close they are to you the other thing is that Jesus focus upon the causes of sin is very important we often think about in focus upon internal state we focus upon character and many people

today have argued that especially in the context of exposure to sexual sin that truly righteous people have character and virtue and they won't need to set such strict boundaries for themselves and limits for themselves particularly in the context of dealing with members of the other sex or that set or that cultural encouragement of such boundaries should be rejected but this isn't what Jesus says Jesus treats our dealing with sin not merely as a matter of internal character but as a removal of our soul from ourselves of things that are hindrances and those hindrances to be removed are things that are can be part of us but are to be removed from us and this I think it's important to recognize as Jesus talks about the eye and the hand that this is not a matter of making other people scapegoats for our sinfulness the woman made me do it the woman made me look at her that's not actually the case that's the way that Adam justified his sin and this is not what Jesus is justifying here there's a balance to be struck though there's a balance to be struck between recognizing the intimacy of these things that these are part of us but also recognizing that these are things that are in some sense external obstacles or at least obstacles that should be externalized that we should remove them from us and there are certain ways in which we need to recognize things that our society will find very difficult that certain dealings between the sexes for instance that those may be things that are occasions of sin and they should be removed not be and it's not just the case that people have character and that's enough rather character needs to be supported by healthy contexts it has to be encouraged by the removal of occasions for sin we recognize that we are weak we recognize that people are susceptible to temptation and things that cause us to sin no matter how intimate they may be and starting with those things that are most intimate must be dealt with and here I think the focus upon the intimate obstacle prevents us from just treating other people as scapegoats the way that would blame other people for our sins that's not permitted here we need to recognize that these things have purchase upon us and we need to get rid of that purchase upon us primarily more than anything else that's just external to us Jesus moves on to teach about divorce and this is moving from the seventh to the eighth commandment concerning stealing and loosely categorized under the category of stealing I think divorce can be seen in that context he presents the traditional teaching and the vicious cycle but not the transforming initiative I think the transforming initiative is to be inferred from the broader context but also from teaching that we find elsewhere in scripture so he declares it was also said whoever divorces his wife let him give her a certificate of divorce but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife except on the grounds of sexual immorality makes her commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery and so the problem is here that this attitude towards divorce where you can I mean there is a permission for divorce in the law but this permissive attitude towards a divorce is one that fundamentally violates the intent and the meaning of marriage and so for all that may obey the letter of the law is fundamentally violating the spirit of the law and this is something that Jesus gets into in Matthew chapter 19 now what is the transformative action here it's not expressed in that immediate context but Staston points out that it is given to us in first Corinthians chapter

7 and in that place it's attributed to Christ's own teaching to the married I give this charge not I but the Lord the wife should not separate from her husband but if she does she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband and the husband should not divorce his wife and so this is something that Paul represents as the teaching of Christ himself presumably something that he'd heard from those who witnessed Jesus teaching in places like the Sermon on the Mount and this redemptive cycle what's the point here the point is to uphold the intent of marriage as lifelong exclusive union as the joining together of two people so that they become one flesh and not violate I mean you may have that permission within the law but that permission can never become the grounds of permissiveness because the whole intent of the law is the two becoming one flesh and not separating what God has joined together so redemptive practice is not to avoid possible remarriage and if possible be reconciled with the partner that's being that's been separated from you now this needs to be expressed a lot more unpacked a lot more in specific situations and if you're dealing with a context of abuse for instance if you're dealing with a context of desertion and all these sorts of things there will be lots of considerations to take into account but it will help us to recognize that what Jesus is presenting here is not some sort of Christian halakhic teaching some sort of um casuistic understanding of oh this is the legal approach this is what you're permitted to do this is what you must do etc and the point is rather not legalistic prohibitions and permissions but the presentation of the intent and the way of the kingdom which restores and upholds the good intent of the original creation and so the contrast is between a legal permission and prohibition and positive action so what is the difference in posture the difference in posture is treating the law and the permission of divorce in terms of permissiveness and treating the divorce as something that is in opposition to God's intent and the original creation and the intent and the spirit of the law is to bind two people together so that they are united in flesh and spirit and so the redemptive practice is to pursue that to be someone who's not just avoiding divorce even not just avoiding illegal divorce and recognizing the permission given by the law and taking advantage of that permitting divorce for any reason as some Jewish teachers would allow rather it's pursuing the intent of God's joining man and woman together at the beginning and pursuing the faithfulness of marriage and the indissolubility of marriage and that is found through the redemptive practice of being reconciled to one another of forgiving one another of not allowing the sun go down on your wrath and of dealing with your spouse in a way that heals any breaches does not allow these things to develop is characterized by all the redemptive practices that we've seen already that you do not allow anger to become harbored in your heart if you see that your spouse has something against you leave your gift at the altar and be reconciled to them if there is some situation of lust in your life deal with that radically so that something does not come between you and your spouse in all of these different ways Christ is presenting us with a radical way of dealing with sin and it's not just this sort of approach of the law is just so high above us we must throw up our hands and admit surrender we can't keep this thing rather Jesus is presenting us with very concrete ways to act out redemptive patterns in the light of

ambitious cycles that everyone else gets caught up into and so what we should be characterized by is not a legalistic halachic approach to the question of divorce for instance there are conditions under which divorce is legitimate and Christians I think can get divorced under certain conditions legitimately and get remarried but but the point of Jesus teaching of the law is that we do not approach the law merely in terms of those permissions and prohibitions but that we focus upon the intent of the law which is to bring redemption which is to set things right to be those that rectify things that have gone wrong and in this situation where marriage is breaking down that should be the approach that we emphasize not just thinking about what are we permitted to do and doing that in a way that neglects the actual intent of the kingdom practice of the law which is to heal what can be healed to reconcile where reconciliation is possible to forgive and to and set things right not to harbor anger in our heart but to forgive one another to love one another and to pray for our enemies Jesus goes on to talk about oaths and the traditional teaching is don't swear falsely but perform your oaths and the vicious cycle is the cycle that occurs presumably in a context of deceit and manipulation we see something of this in Matthew 23 the sort of escape routes that are provided that that are presented as ways to avoid actually keeping your oaths so Jesus talks about the scribes and the Pharisees who will say if anyone swears by the temple it is nothing if anyone swears by the gold of the temple he is bound by his oath now what is that doing it's presenting these escape routes so you can have an out you can have your fingers crossed and as it were say things that are not true but there's some escape routes to avoid the consequences of your words and so oath making in such a context of deceit and manipulation and equivocation is a vicious practice and even if legitimate and oaths are legitimate under certain conditions if you're practicing them in that sort of context it will just lead to destructive relationships and so what Jesus presents as the alternative and this is the ninth commandment here is truthful and transparent speech your yes is yes and your no is no and not being the sort of person who's engaged in dissembling and deceit someone who's always trying to explore wily ways of tricking people with your words and then the final commandment is retaliation and vengeance covetousness the traditional teaching is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and the vicious cycle is often this is often mistranslated it says in many translations including this one do not resist the one who is evil and it would be better translated in terms of the context do not resist by evil means and so the point is the traditional teaching is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth the problem is the vicious cycle for many people is resisting by evil means the eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth becomes a cycle of vengeance and vendettas and retaliation where people are constantly attacking each other to avenge what wrongs have been done to them so what does Jesus teach as a transforming initiative the law of retribution in the old testament was designed to limit vengeance so an eye for an eye not two eyes for an eye a tooth for a tooth not many teeth for a tooth it was designed to limit vengeance to present an upper limit for legal consequence and retribution for wrongs done but Jesus advocates resisting vengeance and accepting rather than giving the second slap so someone slaps you on one cheek the point of that

action being to humiliate you to attack your honor and what you do is you turn your other cheek and what you're doing is rather than giving them the slap back retaliating an eye for an eye a slap for a slap you're saying okay there is a second slap in this situation but that slap is going to be taken by me and by taking that again recognize that you're changing the coordinates of the situation you are putting them in a situation where they cannot humiliate you their slap has not actually taken away your honor and in some ways they're making themselves into a fool they're dishonoring themselves by the way that they're treating you in the same way this is a process of arresting the cycles and processes of vengeance before they even get off the ground and so it takes two to tango in this process of vengeance and if you do not give as you have been given then it doesn't get off the ground notice also in Jesus' practice in John 8 where he points out casting the first stone what does he focus on the first stone because the first stone is the spark that ignites the tinder box of violence once that first stone has been cast every successive stone is so much easier to cast in the same way that slap in response to the slap that's been given to you that is the stone that starts the cycle of vengeance and if you can resist that the cycle of vengeance may not get off the ground at all and so there is the redemptive assumption of the kind of non-violence of not taking vengeance now this is not pacifism that Jesus is arguing for here this is not saying do not defend yourselves in a situation where someone is attacking your family no this is about cycles of honour and vengeance and retaliation and the means to avoid those it's not about rightful self-defense we have every right to self-defense but the sort of although the sort of self-defense that I think many people talk about today which is excessive this desire to stand your ground I'm not sure that that's legitimate in biblical terms I think we should be recognized that we do not want we want to minimize violence and there are some points where we'll have to step back even when there is someone who's unlawful coming into that location just to avoid accentuating violence there are times when we need to be willing to be wronged rather than accelerating and accentuating cycles of violence Jesus is also talking in a context where there were occupying powers the Romans could require someone to carry their load for a number of miles so if a Roman soldier came along and required you to carry his load for a mile you go with him too now what are you doing in that situation among other things you are putting him in debt to you and so he's commanded you that first mile but you've given him the second mile and so he's in your debt and within a sort of gift culture where people were very clearly attuned to that sort of thing that changed the coordinates of the situation considerably it was no longer him that had power over you just commanding you to do something rather you had put him in your debt and in the practice of the kingdom that's one of the things that turns out that there are surprising reversals that occur as we approach vengeance in a redemptive way as we do not take vengeance for ourselves as we give place to vengeance and recognize vengeance belongs to God and there are ways that we can stand back from these things likewise if someone takes our garment we can give them our tunic too we're not those people who are going to fight for everything in a certain degree our willingness to be dispossessed depends upon our trust in God who recognizes those who have been

abused so this avoidance of the cycle of vengeance is in part this willingness to be dispossessed because we know the God who provides for all and we recognize that as we place ourselves in his hand and as we follow the way of his kingdom he takes care of his children he's not going to reject those who follow his way and even though we may feel that we've been wronged as we put our trust and put our case in his hands he will hear us the call then is summed up in that great commandment that sums up the entirety of the first table of the second table of the law to love your neighbor as yourself and it says you've heard that it was said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy that hating your enemy being in addition but Jesus goes on to unpack here what he gives is not the same order of the traditional teaching the vicious cycle and then transforming initiative he reverses it here so it starts off with the traditional teaching love your enemy and then goes into the transforming initiative love your enemies pray for them be someone who is a son of your father who is in heaven recognize the earlier expression blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God that's that association with God's character that God is the one who loves his enemies God is the one who shows compassion and kindness to those who attack him and those who hate him and so as we are the sons of our father in heaven we will be characterized by the same love for enemies recognize again that this is a way that is only possible in the light of who God is that God is in control and this is not the sort of practice that is strategic non-violence or something like that and the belief that this actually leads to positive results when practiced within a merely materialistic universe now there are certain ways in which non-violence can be strategic and i've mentioned a couple of those along the way but there is something more to this this is a theologically oriented practice it's a practice built upon the recognition that God is acting in that righteousness looks like the practice of God's own redemptive work within the world so as we pursue righteousness we're pursuing the way of our father we're pursuing the practice of our God who gives shalom who establishes peace he's the God who makes peace who reconciles with his enemies he's the God who does not indulge in cycles of vicious vengeance that are designed merely to about ego and these sorts of things he's a God who is good to his creation and we should express that same pattern in our dealings and in so doing we become those who participate in God's work of setting things right within the world and this righteousness which is greater than that of the scribes and the pharisees is a participation in the eschatological redemptive righteousness of the kingdom of God that God is acting in history and his people participate in that and note that this is contrasted with the vicious cycle of those who just love those who love them there's no reward for them there's nothing about that practice that really changes everything anything there's no reward for them they're not changing anything and yet if you take the transforming initiative you can be reconciled with enemies you can establish peace and this is a calling then to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect we're supposed to take on the character of our father and to be perfect is here i think to be mature to fulfill the intent of the law not merely the external form not just ticking the boxes but obeying and pursuing the spirit of the law that we are those who make peace we are those who

establish reconciliation we are those who are at pursuing the righteousness of the law in its deepest intent and here i think that this is the way of the kingdom that we see in Christ himself note that Christ himself is struck Christ himself is stripped of his robe Christ himself is forced to walk a path that he does not want to walk and yet Christ loves his enemies and prays for them this is the way exemplified in Christ and he calls us to take up our crosses and to follow him on the path that he himself has walked so the way of the kingdom the way that avoids these vicious cycles is a way of transforming initiative a way that is exemplified primarily within the cross and a way that as we walk we'll find that we're walking in footsteps of our savior himself now this approach to the law is not some radical new teaching in a way that overturns everything that's been taught before it actually brings it to its fulfillment and Jesus making that declaration as we look back through the old testament i think he could present you with so many different examples of how this is a fulfillment of the law's actual intent if you look through the law for instance you'll see it climaxes in the 10th which concerning concerns covetousness the concern of covetousness brings the light to bear upon the internal state the state of desire and that is something that transforms our perspective on all the commandments this is in many ways what Jesus is doing here he's showing the vicious cycle that is revealed by the 10th commandment it's the same thing as Paul says that he would not have known sin had covetousness had it not been for the law and covetousness was that which exposed something of the reality of sin more generally and there that commandment of covetousness sheds the light upon the internal state whether that's the state of lust that's cultivated in the heart whether it's the anger against our brother whether it's that desire that hungering for vengeance whether it is the approach of resisting reconciliation with an alienated spouse whatever it is this is where Christ places the attention to and calls us to recognize that vicious cycle the vicious cycle that's rooted in the heart and to commit ourselves to transformative practice then recognize the way that the law is summed up not in a series of do not do this that and the other in the way of external action but in the call to love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind strength and your neighbor as yourself it calls for an internal adjustment of your heart and posture of heart towards God and neighbor it's a positive injunction an injunction to actually pursue the good of your neighbor in positive ways note also the way that the law is summarized in Deuteronomy so you have in chapter 5 you have the summary commandments of the 10 commandments the 10 words and then in chapter 6 to 26 you have loosely ordered by the 10 commandments a series of passages unpacking implications of each commandment one by one you get to chapter 26 for instance and what is the way that we unpack the commandment not to covet it's by celebrating a feast inviting all these people who are needy within your location expressing your thanksgiving to God for all that he has done for you as a people and then also for you as a person the way that he has blessed your household and then as you've invited these people being generous to them expressing your thanks to God and in generosity to neighbor enjoying contentment and joy in his presence and their presence now that is how you deal with the practice of covetousness now recognize that

what Deuteronomy is doing there is precisely the sort of thing that Jesus does here what it does is not give you just a you shall not that almost accentuates the vicious cycle nor does it just give you some sort of legalistic out some permissive way that you can avoid things or just an external commandment rather it's calling you to a positive practice that will address the vicious cycle and fulfill the true intent the positive intent of that prohibition and so rather than just not coveting you become someone who practices generosity thanksgiving and contentment and as you practice those virtues you'll be someone who's no longer feeling covetous in the same way and this is something that again is found in the Old Testament Jesus is taking the Old Testament teaching concerning the law and it is informing his own approach to the law as he's teaching concerning the law he's only bringing out what's there already but he's bringing it out in a way that shows in his ministry this is what will be realized and through his ministry through the gift of his spirit this will be fulfilled the true intent of the law not just a legalistic set of commandments finally um note the wisdom literature and the psalms wisdom literature is about taking the law inside ourselves recognizing the patterns of the law recognizing the way that the law needs to be fulfilled through recognizing the wiles of sin and so rather than just saying do not commit adultery it's saying look at the adulterous man look at the way that sin finds its first incipients in temptation and how it develops to its full height and then deal with it at the root and recognize where it develops and deal with it there and in the psalms it's recognizing that the law needs to be internalized the law needs to become a matter of meditation and delight the law is a matter of song we sing the law and so we're not just declaring the law as some external commandments that we must obey and maybe even just give external assent to it should become our delight and our meditation all the day we're chewing this over and this is something that becomes a positive impulse of life and delight and this is what Jesus is teaching is the way of the kingdom that this internalization of the law this radicalization of the law is not just to place the law beyond our reach but to make the law something that's intimate driving for us something that animates the entirety of our lives and as we recognize the true wise approach to the law the way of the kingdom we'll realize that it's a way beyond the vicious cycles that so often characterize our lives i hope this has been of help if you have any questions please leave them on my curious cat account if you'd like to support this and other podcasts and videos like it please do so using my patreon or my paypal accounts god bless and thank you very much for listening