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### **Matthew 5:17-48**

#### **Christ, the Law, and Our Obedience**

No matter how long you have been a Christian, you've probably wrestled with this question before: *What do we do with the Old Testament?* The New Testament explicitly reveals to us the *gospel of Jesus Christ*, God's grace to us by which we are *saved through faith!* The New Testament very clearly spells out the gospel of Christ and the fundamentals of our faith; it is only natural, then, that we gravitate towards spending more time in it, especially earlier on as Christians. But over and over again, the New Testament *affirms* the revelation of the Old Testament as God's equally *authoritative, inspired, infallible Word*. In fact, it repeatedly *quotes* and *alludes* to the Old Testament, and encourages us to look back to it as Christians!

But when we do so, we're often faced with a lot of challenges in understanding, interpreting, and applying it, aren't we? At first glance, it can seem somewhat foreign to the gospel of grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, what do we do with the Old Testament commands, laws, and regulations? In short: *How do we put our Bibles together? As Christians, what is our relationship to the Old Testament?*

There have been *wrong examples* of how to answer this question over the years:

1. Some have effectively ripped the Old Testament from the pages of their Bibles. They might give *lip service* to it as God's Word, but practically, they view it as completely irrelevant to the Christian life. They never read it, or if they do, they view it as largely disconnected from our lives as Christians. Such a view is not an option for Christians.

2. Others, in reacting to such a view, have *overcorrected*, and thus flattened out the two Testaments. They rightly view the Old Testament as God's Word, just as much as the New; this is good! But they try to draw a straight line from the Law to our lives today, so that we effectively *are still to live as those under the Law*. Yet the New Testament explicitly refutes such a view.

How, then, does the Bible itself teach us to put the Old and New together? How do we, as Christians, rightly read, understand, and obey *the entirety* of God's Word?

In **Matt. 5:17-48**, we see how *both Testaments* fit together: ***it all centers around Jesus Christ!*** Here, Jesus tells us that he by no means does away with the Old Testament - he *fulfills all of it*. And this means that he also authoritatively shows and teaches us *how we are to live in light of his fulfillment*. As Christ fulfills the Law of the Old Testament, this doesn't mean the Law ceases - it means we live under *the Law of Christ*, which the Old Testament points to.

First, Christ tells us how this relationship works. Secondly, he gives **six examples** of what this looks like in our lives.

### **I. Christ Fulfills the Entire Old Testament, Including the Law (vv.17-20)**

In verses 17-20, Jesus affirms that the *entirety of the Old Testament* is God's *valid, authoritative Word*. He begins, in verse 17, by declaring he came *not "to abolish the Law or the Prophets...but to fulfill them."* This phrase, "*the Law and the Prophets*," is often used in the NT as a shorthand way of referring to the entire Old Testament (which wasn't a phrase they used yet).<sup>1</sup> In verse 18, Jesus continues the thought but simply refers to "*the Law*." This can *also* be a shorthand reference to the *entire* Old Testament. For example, in **John 10:34**, Jesus says, "Is it not written in your Law?" and then immediately quotes *Psalms* 82. Likewise, in **1 Cor. 14:21**, Paul quotes *Isaiah*, then says it is written in "*the Law*." Clearly, the N.T. writers can use this to refer to the entire Old Testament. So then, when Jesus refers to the "*Law and the Prophets*" and "*the Law*" in **vv.17-18**, he is referring to the entirety of the Old Testament scriptures.

He is making it very clear that he *did not* "come to abolish" the Old Testament. On the contrary, Christ came to *fulfill* the Old Testament scriptures. Since the beginning in chapter 1, Matthew has been making this point, but here we see it *explicitly stated*: Jesus Christ stands at the very *center* of God's Word, the Bible; all of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, *point to, center around*, and are *fulfilled in* Jesus Christ! In order to rightly understand, believe in, teach, and obey the Old Testament, then, we must rightly understand it as *pointing to* Christ, in whom it is fulfilled.

And this emphatically refers to *the whole O.T.* - "*Not an iota, not a dot*" not the smallest letter of the alphabet, not the dot of an "i" or the cross of "t," "*will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*" Every bit of it points to Christ, as the eternal, unchanging, unerring, authoritative Word of God. Therefore, it does not err; it does not go unfulfilled; it is not dismissed or brushed

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Mt. 7:12; 11:13; Lk. 16:16; Acts 13:15; Rom. 3:21.

under the rug - *it is an important part of GOD's revelation to us and the unfolding of redemption!* And it all hinges on the person, life, teaching, work, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus Christ! Some of the Old Testament scriptures have already been fulfilled, some are being fulfilled, and some will be in the future - yet we can rest assured, *all of God's Word will be fulfilled in Christ!*

The life, gospel ministry, and teachings of Christ do not *undermine* or *go against* the Old Testament scriptures, laws, or prophecies; he is not deviating from what God had previously revealed. This means we cannot say, "Moral obedience is just an Old Testament thing; if we say that there are moral requirements and rules, then that's just legalism!" No, that is emphatically *not* what Christ says. The gospel is not a removal of all moral commands. Nor can we, as Christians, consider the Old Testament irrelevant or misguided; it is the *infallible, authoritative Word of God!* How long does it's authority continue as valid? "*Until heaven and earth pass away*" (v.18). This is why it is still essential and important for us to read, teach, preach on, and understand the Old Testament. We cannot dismiss or ignore it; it is not irrelevant for our lives or less important for us as believers. And we see its importance and purpose *as we see how it points to Christ and is fulfilled in Him; we must read the O.T. as centered around Christ and His gospel.*

And that means that in order for us to rightly understand *what the O.T. means* and *how it applies to us today*, we must rightly understand *how exactly each part points to and is fulfilled in Christ.*

This means that *the Law*, including the Law of Moses and the Old Covenant commands from God, also point to Christ and are fulfilled in Him. As we later see in **Matt. 11:13**, "*all the Prophets and the Law prophesied.*" The Law itself, including the moral commands of God to Israel, *point to Christ* as well. THIS means we can only fully understand the Law by seeing it in relation to Jesus; and our relationship to it must be understood in terms of our living *after* its fulfillment in Christ.

What, then, is our relationship to the Old Testament in light of Christ's fulfillment? Does this mean that Christ *does away* with the Law altogether? Does this mean the Law was wrong and he has come to *fix it*? Not at all; as he says, "*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.*"

We must still obey. But how? By *putting ourselves back under the Law of Moses? NO*. We do not obey as *those under the Old Covenant Law*. After all, *Christ has fulfilled the Old Covenant; Christ fulfilled the Law of Moses!* As his people, we are not under that covenant or Law anymore. We still obey the Old Testament laws and commands, *but we do not obey in the same way as those who were under that law*; we obey as *those who are in the Law and Covenant of Christ*, understanding that Christ has fulfilled them.

For example, we can look at the Sacrificial system: God gave Israel many laws and commands about how to offer sacrifices, so that blood was shed to atone for sins. People were commanded to follow strict rules about *what, when, and where* to sacrifice. But the point was never the *blood of a lamb* could actually atone for our sin. Rather, it all points to Jesus, the true Lamb of God, who died as a sacrifice and rose again to *make atonement for sin, once and for all!* So then, we do not obey the Law by going out and slaughtering a lamb at the temple; but we *do* obey by realizing that Christ, the true lamb of God, has provided the true sacrifice for our sins, once and for all! We obey by *trusting and believing in the gospel*.

But in what way do the seemingly “moral commands” of the Law, such as the Ten Commandments or prescriptions in Deuteronomy, *point to* and find *fulfillment in* Christ? Moral commands in the Old Testament point us to the *righteousness of God* and the *moral perfection* such righteousness demands. And Christ fulfills these, in part, by *living out moral perfection*; He never sinned, and he *perfectly obeyed and fulfilled the demands of the Law*. Furthermore, his *life and teachings* reveal the *righteousness of God* that the Law points us to, and what *moral righteousness* looks like for us, this side of Christ. Jesus *lives out* and *authoritatively declares* the true righteousness of God that the Law points to. Therefore, he commands us to *obey the Law* by obeying in light of *Christ’s fulfillment of it, which reveals the true righteousness of God that we are commanded to strive after, imitate, and obey*.

In **v.20**, Christ contrasts our righteousness with the “righteousness” of the scribes and pharisees. They were seen by others in their day as very righteous in their acts; they meticulously followed and taught on the Law of God; and yet, they did so in very *legalistic ways*. They added their own traditions to the Law; they changed what the law demanded to their own benefit, and raised their own traditions to the same authority as God’s word. They hypocritically claimed to be righteous, and yet, *no one could live up to God’s Law*. After all, Jesus makes clear in **v.48**: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.”

No, our only hope for *righteousness* is the ***righteousness of Christ*** that we receive by grace through faith in Him alone! Christ fulfilled the Law on our behalf; whoever trusts in Christ alone will be saved! To trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in our place means we are trusting that *he alone is truly righteous*, and that though we are *sinners*, God declares *the righteousness of Christ* to be our own! This is the good news of the gospel, and it is absolutely *crucial* that we first understand how **Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, including the law, in his life and work on our behalf**. The righteousness of God is perfectly revealed and fulfilled in the life of Christ! If we are in Christ by faith, we are declared righteous by grace! So this emphatically means *we do not* obey in such a way to *earn our own righteousness or salvation*. Our righteousness and salvation depends on the finish work of *Christ's fulfillment*.

And yet, as we've just seen, we are still commanded to *obey*. So what, then, does it practically look like to obey the Law *this side of the coming of Christ*?

Thankfully, Christ immediately gives us *six examples*:

## **II. Christ Commands Us to Be Righteous (vv. 21-48)**

We must look to the teachings of Christ to know what it means to *obey God and live according to his righteousness* now that Christ has come. But that might leave us scratching our heads a bit. *What does this look like in real life? What does it mean for me to obey God and live a righteous life today?* Jesus gives us **six examples** in **vv.21-48**. And these are nothing less than *basic fundamentals of Christian discipleship*.

So let us take a brief look at each of these examples:

### **1. We must avoid unrighteous anger (vv.21-26)**

In **v. 21**, Jesus quotes the **Ten Commandments**, "*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder,'*" and the Law's punishment for murder in **Deut. 5:18**, "*and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.*"

Then, in verse 22, Jesus tells us *what that law points us to*: not just that it's wrong to murder (which it definitely is!), but that the *heart problem that would lead us to even consider murder* is evil and unrighteous. Jesus deals with the *anger of our hearts*. He says that "*everyone who is angry with his brother*" or "*insults his brother*" will be liable to judgment; no, we will

not be put in jail by a human court for such things, *but we will stand before the judgment of God for such sins!* The righteousness of God *condemns hate; a hateful heart is a murderous heart.*

We must *put away unrighteous anger.* Yes, there are forms of *righteous anger*, which Christ himself displays at times; righteous anger is kindled against injustice and evil, for example. Yet we are so easily prone to fall into *unrighteous anger*, fueled by our own sense of pride, selfishness, or malice. We cannot be a people given to *outbursts of anger and yelling*; we cannot *tear one another down*, either to their face or behind their back. Even for us to *think angrily about someone, wish their demise, or desire harm* to come to them, physically or otherwise - all such thoughts are *sin*, worthy of Hell.

Instead, we're called to be people of *love.* We must *forgive* those who wrong us. We must not get angry at someone for disagreeing with, slighting, or offending us. We must *confess* and *repent* of our unrighteous anger. Indeed, we must *acknowledge and confess* the ways that *we have wronged others, causing them to be angry with us*, and we must be reconciled with them, as **vv.23-25** make clear.

And this should especially be true among fellow Christians and church members, shouldn't it? After all, Christ uses the word "brother," as in, "fellow disciple," and uses the analogy of *corporate worship* at the temple - in our setting, parallel to *corporate worship* on Sunday, like this morning. If we are going about the act of worshipping God, and the Lord convicts us of *unrighteous anger* lingering in our hearts or in our relationship with someone, we must *immediately deal with it, confess, forgive, and seek reconciliation.*

Next...

## **2. We must not be lustful (vv.27-30)**

Again, Jesus quotes the Ten Commandments (**Ex. 20:14**), then shows us the *righteous heart and intentions* the Law points to. "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (**vv.27-28**). Jesus affirms that *adultery* - the act of cheating on a spouse, being maritally unfaithful, or even pre-marital sex - is **evil**. That statement alone is controversial in our immoral culture today and needs to be boldly underscored by all true believers. But we cannot stop there: Jesus says that *the very heart, attitudes, and desires that lead to adultery* are *sinful and evil.* He condemns the *lust of the heart, eye, and flesh.* To harbor lustful

thoughts, desires, and fantasies in our hearts is to *commit adultery* in our hearts; and though no one else may know, *God knows, and will hold us to account.*

We live in a day and age where *sexual immorality runs rampant* and is even praised. Not only that, but it has become so much harder to fight against and avoid lustful thoughts, desires, and actions. Modesty is ridiculed. Risque advertisements abound. Yet far worse, *access to pornography* is far more accessible than it ever has been - right on our phones, tablets, and computers. And the culture all around us tells us to justify and accept it.

Yet we cannot be fooled! Such thoughts and desires are the heart that leads to *adultery* - such desires *ruin ourselves, marriages, and families.* Lust *powerfully corrupts, twists, and blinds our hearts* - Jesus *twice* uses provocative imagery here to show lust *pulling our “whole body [into] Hell” (vv.29-30).* The language he uses for what our response should be is just as provocative: *“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off....”* He uses hyperbole and exaggeration, but the point is clear and still stands: *we must take our sin seriously, and even go to drastic measure to repent, cut sin out of our lives, and resist temptation.* And we must *especially* take serious, sometimes even drastic, measures in guarding our hearts from lust. Maybe that starts with confessing temptations, or addictions, in your life with another trusted believer. Maybe it means avoiding certain shows or movies; or putting accountability software on our phones and computers to minimize temptation and provide safeguards, lest we fall.

Taking our sin and temptations seriously is not shameful; ***it is absolutely necessary,*** for the sake of our souls.

Likewise,

### **3. We must be faithful in marriage (vv.31-32)**

Divorce is not an option for Christians; we must fight for marital faithfulness. Jesus quotes **Deut. 24:1**, *“Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.”* In that verse, Moses was *not* saying that divorce is ok or that God condoned it. Instead, it was acknowledging that there would be sinful people with sinful hearts who would commit adultery or issue divorces. Deut. 24, then, provides *regulations* for dealing with divorce; it does not approve of it. By Jesus’s day, however, Jewish tradition had turned it into a moral allowance, so that a version of “no-fault divorce” was tolerated in the religious culture. In verse 32, Jesus makes clear that *this is not acceptable* in the sight of God. To divorce and remarry is to *commit*

*adultery*, for a certificate does not terminate the marriage, but *the act of unfaithfulness does*. This is why Jesus qualifies, “*except on the ground of sexual immorality.*”

In our context, “no fault divorce” has wreaked havoc on countless lives, marriages, and families. I’m sure every one of us has loved ones who have been affected by divorce in one way or another. Because of this, I want to spend more time and address the issue more pastorally; but because of time, we’re going to wait until it’s brought up again in our sermon series, in **Matt. 19**. For now, let us simply commit to *upholding and fighting for marital faithfulness in every respect*.

Next,

#### **4. We must be honest and trustworthy (vv.33-37)**

In v.33, Jesus gives a general paraphrase of several Old Testament verses rather than quoting one. But his response, in verses 34-36, deals with the way such commands and the act of “swearing oaths” had been grossly mistreated by Jewish teachers. They devised many arbitrary lines of what oaths were “binding” and what were not; if it wasn’t binding, they taught, then one was free to break his word; if he wanted to show he was *really* serious, he could swear by something more closely tied to God. But Jesus points out that *all such swearing is meaningless and deceitful*. We should not *swear falsely*, which is to *intentionally deceive* someone else and lie. Nor should we swear and take oaths and consequently take the name of the Lord in vain, which is blasphemous. If this is the case, Jesus says, we should do away with oaths altogether!

The point of the Law is that we must be *honest people that tell the truth*. We should not lie or intentionally deceive. To make distinctions to ourselves and say, “Well, it’s *partly true*, or simply not the *whole truth*, or only a *white lie*...” such thoughts are the same as the Pharisees; it is *lying and deceitful*. Instead, we must be *characterized by honesty and trustworthiness*. If this is true of us, then *oaths are not needed!* Our word must be honorable, and we shouldn’t even need to convince someone. We should simply let our “yes be yes and our no be no.” Simply *be honest and trustworthy*.

#### **5. We must not be vengeful (vv.38-42)**

In v.38, Jesus quotes **Ex. 21:24**, among other passages: “*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*” This was a law giving the parameters for *justice* law courts; if someone took out your eye, it isn’t just for the punishment to be death. But Jewish tradition took this to *condone* a personal spirit of *vengeance* and *retaliation*. Jesus *refutes* such an understanding. In four drastic

illustrations, in vv.39-42, he makes clear that we, as believers, cannot *retaliate* when we suffer evil, but instead must *patiently endure it and respond in love*. This does not mean we are to be *naively trampled upon*, nor that we are meant to obey each illustration literally in every circumstance. But it *does* mean that we *cannot seek revenge*. If someone sins against us, we *cannot sin back against them*; saying, “He started it!” will not hold up before the throne of God.

Brothers and sisters, we will be wronged and sinned against; we will suffer injustice. But we *cannot* take matters into our own hands; we must trust the Lord. We *cannot* give in to a vengeful spirit; we must forgive that person and love them. We cannot say, “I hope they get what they deserve!” We who have been forgiven much must be quick to forgive.

Likewise,

#### **6. We must love our enemies (vv.43-47)**

In verse 43, Jesus does not quote scripture, but rather a *distorted interpretation* of scripture: “*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*” The Bible doesn’t say that; instead, simply “*Love your neighbor*” (Lev. 19:18). The following verses make clear that this means we must love *everyone, even our enemies and those that hate and persecute us*. As the parable of the good samaritan makes clear, *everyone is our neighbor, even our enemies*. And so, we must be people that *truly love our neighbor, our fellow human being*, even when it is difficult, when they do us wrong, and when they hate and persecute us. After all, God loved us when we were his enemies and sent his own Son to die in our place and save us. How much more, then, should we love *our* enemies? And it will not do to simply say with our lips, “I love them,” or “I forgive them,” but harbor bitterness in our hearts. Let us *pray* for our enemies, that we might truly love them and seek their good, even from above.

As we march through Christ’s commands, they cut us to the heart, don’t they? By the end, surely each of us have been convicted of sin lurks in our hearts and lives. As the last verse summarizes: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” The perfect *righteousness of God* is the standard; *none of us* have lived up to it. As we rightly feel conviction for our sin, *let us repent of it and turn to the cross of Christ*, trusting that *he fulfilled the Law on our behalf and took God’s judgment and wrath against our sin upon himself!* We trust in Christ, believing we will stand before the Lord *righteous* in his sight because of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

And He calls us to live out that righteousness even now, by his grace! So let us believe in Christ as Lord by *striving to obey the Lord and be righteous in all things*.

If you have any questions about this gospel, or if you do believe and are interested in baptism or membership, I would love to speak with. You can come now or find me after the service.