

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (5)

Jesus And The Law

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In our previous study we saw that after Israel had repeatedly broken the terms of the Sinaitic Covenant, that God promised a new and better covenant, not only for Israel, but indeed for the whole world. When Christ Jesus came announcing God's Jubilee Year had finally arrived in himself, and that the new covenant was now being inaugurated, a clash with the 'establishment' was inevitable.

Jesus claimed authority over the Sabbath itself, not just the hypocritical and restrictive practices that had grown up around its observance. Jesus made it quite clear that as the eschatological Son of man he is the Lord of the Sabbath. He thus believed that the Sabbath day itself was a shadow pointing to himself as the ultimate reality, for he alone would give *the Shabbat-rest* for our souls --- "**Come to me and I will give you Shabbat**" (Matt. 11:28) he claimed.

As the eschatological Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus made it quite clear that all who followed him as their Messiah were sons and daughters of a new Kingdom order, and that like their Lord, they too were free from the old covenant requirements and obligations, of which the Sabbath was the sign.

Now, in response to what I wrote in that previous study, I can anticipate a few objections --- perhaps a few gasps of horror, if not howls of protest! In this study I will address one these sincere concerns.

JESUS CAME TO FULFILL THE LAW, NOT ABOLISH IT.

A seemingly convincing argument for keeping the Sabbath day runs like this: Jesus himself said, "**Do not think I came to destroy the Law, or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill**" (Matt. 5: 17). Then he promised that, "**Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished** (Matt. 5: 18). Doesn't this sound like Jesus believed the Law of the Ten Commandments form the unchanging moral fabric of God's world right on through to the end of this evil age?

Therefore, so the argument goes, since Jesus was a Torah-observant Jew and kept the Ten Commandments --- including the Fourth about Sabbath observance --- why are we even discussing the question of sabbath-keeping? Don't you want to be a faithful follower of Jesus? What gives anybody the right to say there are only Nine Commandments now? Surely all the moral laws Jesus upheld have not changed one iota. So why wouldn't his followers do likewise and seek to fulfill all the Law? Fair question. It deserves a good answer.

TWO OPPOSING INTERPRETATIONS

So, what did Jesus mean when he said he came **not to destroy the Law or the prophets, but to fulfill?**

1. Those who suggest Jesus was teaching the continuing validity of the Ten Commandments --- including Sabbath-keeping as the sign of that covenant --- take Jesus to mean we are to keep on practicing, keep on doing the Law of the Ten Commandments until the end of the present Age; that is, **until heaven and earth pass away**. To teach otherwise, they interpret, is to contradict Christ himself who said that not even **the smallest letter or stroke** of the written Law would be removed until the end of time!
2. The alternative 'take' on Jesus' assertion is to understand that **the Law** will remain in force until he himself has accomplished and fulfilled it completely. This amounts to a personal guarantee from our Lord, that nothing in all God's creation, nothing in heaven and earth, is going to divert him from completing his Messianic mission, until all that is written about himself is accomplished. Everything written about him in **the Law or the prophets** will be accomplished!

Which interpretation is the correct one? And how do we resolve the debate? Well, the answer is not as difficult as we may think. The way forward is to see how these terms **the Law** and **fulfill** are used by the author Matthew himself. The Bible is always its own best interpreter. And certainly Matthew who wrote this Gospel will be consistent when he uses these terms. Let's see! ¹

THE METHOD

All we need to do is take a Bible concordance and look at each verse where our key words **the Law** and **fulfill** occur in this Gospel of Matthew. Ready, set, go!

THE LAW IN MATTHEW

1. Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them, for this is the Law and the prophets (7:12).

The Jews divided their Old Testament into three sections --- Law, Prophets and Psalms (or Wisdom literature). When Jesus uses the description **the Law and the prophets**, he is referring to the whole Torah, the books of Moses in association with the prophets. And there is no doubt the Ten Commandments with its Deuteronomic applications are intended. Here certainly, the expression **the Law** cannot be limited to just the Ten Commandments.

2. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John (11:13). Once again, **the Law** refers to the whole Torah of the covenant of law because it is joined to **the prophets**. More than the Ten Commandments is in view.

3. Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent (12:5)? Here Jesus is quoting from **Leviticus 24: 5-9**, part of the Deuteronomic Law, which outlines the duties of the Levitical priests. Thus, in this context, the Ten Commandments are again not directly referenced.

4. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And he said to them, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. And a second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (22: 36-39).

Here the first quotation is from **Deuteronomy 6:5** and the second from **Leviticus 19:18**. The Ten Commandments are not directly referenced.

5. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the prophets. (22:40). Observe again that the term the whole Law and the prophets dictates that the term **the Law** is not limited to the Ten Commandments.

6. Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the Law: justice, and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others (23:22). Please note again, **the Law** cannot refer to just the Ten Commandments. **The Law** Jesus refers to here is the whole Torah of the covenantal law under Moses.

Summing up so far. This is the total list of all Matthew's verses where the term **the Law** appears. When we add them to the first occurrence in Matthew where Jesus asserts that he **did not come to destroy the Law** we must see that there are strong and consistent reasons for understanding **the Law** to mean the whole Torah --- the books of Moses including the Deuteronomic code, as well as the prophetic Scriptures. **The Law** in none of these verses means the Ten Commandments by themselves!

Or, as Ratzlaff beautifully summarises;

¹ It was Dale Ratzlaff in his *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az. USA, 2003 pp 266 who I think best uses this key method to resolve this discussion .

Therefore, unless there are strong contextual reasons for interpreting “law” as the Ten Commandments in Matthew 5: 17-19, we must understand “law” as referring to the Torah, the books of Moses, because in *every other* use of the word “law” in the book of Matthew it *never once* refers to the Ten Commandments alone, but *always* to the whole law, or to portions of the law *other than* the Ten Commandments. ²

The conclusion is that **Matthew 5: 17-19** in the context of Jesus saying he had not come to abolish **the Law and the prophets** must surely dictate that our Lord is talking about the whole Torah of the covenantal law which of course, includes the Ten Commandments, but not exclusively.

FULFILL IN MATTHEW

Let’s now look at all the verses in the book of Matthew where he uses the word **fulfill**. Does Matthew use this word to mean do, and keep on doing? Or does he use it to suggest that once done a matter is accomplished and does not need to be done again and again? Let’s see.

1. Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son and they shall call his name Immanuel’, which translated means, ‘God with us’ (Matt. 1:22-23).

Here **fulfilled** is used in reference to the virgin birth of our Saviour, and is an event that occurs just once. As Christian believers we had nothing to do with this event. It happened. It will never be repeated.

2. And [Joseph with Mary and the child Jesus] was there until the death of Herod; that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled saying, ‘Out of Egypt did I call My son’ (2:15).

Jesus came out of Egypt just once. No on-going fulfillment by believers is intended, except to believe it happened.

3. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled saying, ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children’ (2:17).

Again the pattern continues. The prophecy is fulfilled once, with no repetition necessary.

4. And [Joseph with Mary and Jesus] came and resided in a city called Nazareth; that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’ (2:23).

The prophecy was done once and will never be repeated. We have no active part in its ongoing fulfillment.

5. But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted him (3:15).

Jesus was baptised once by John, but here **fulfill** does allow for our obedient practice of this rite. The fact that Jesus says **us** indicates that his followers are also to be baptised so as to identify with their Lord.

6. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles --- The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned’ (4:14-16).

Again, no further action on our part required. The prophecy is done and dusted --- fulfilled.

² Dale Ratzlaff, *Op Cit.* p 267. Italics original.

7. Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord'. But I say to you ... (5:33-34).

Jesus quotes from the Mosaic Law but actually demonstrates his authority over that Law! He says, Moses in the Law of the Torah says this, 'but I say to you ...' thus contrasting his authority over that of Moses.

8. In order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled saying, 'He himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases' (8:17).

Christ's ministry as our sin-bearer will never can be repeated. That's fulfilled history.

9. In order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, might be fulfilled saying, 'Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased; I will put My Spirit upon him and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A battered reed he will not break off, and a smoldering wick he will not put out, until he leads justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope' (12:17-21).

This is another prophecy fulfilled once, never to be repeated again.

10. And in this case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled which says, 'You shall keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull' (13:14-15).

By rejecting Messiah the people in that time and place fulfilled the prophecy.

11. Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'Say to the daughter of Zion, Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted upon a donkey, even upon a colt, the foal of a beast of burden' (21: 4-5).

Only the Messiah could have fulfilled this prophecy once.

12. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way (26:53-54)?

Only Christ could have said this once. It happened in Gethsemane, with no ongoing application.

13. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled. Then all his disciples left him and fled (26:56).

The disciples only could have fulfilled this once historically. No ongoing fulfillment required here either!

14. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled saying, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; and they gave them for the Potter's Field, as the Lord directed me (27:9-10).

The meaning of "fulfilled" is again very clear. Once Judas had betrayed his Lord Messiah for 30 pieces of silver, no more could be added to what was done.

Summing up "fulfill" in Matthew:- This total list of every time Matthew uses our key word shows that he consistently means us to understand that the action performed is a once off, not to be repeated, historical completion of the Scriptures.

Matthew always uses the word **fulfill** with reference to the one-off completion of prophetic accomplishment in relation to Christ and his disciples in that generation. That which had been written about the coming of Messiah in the Law and the Scriptures has all been fulfilled, all done as per every single predicted detail!

No continual doing is required by Christians today in any of Matthew's references, with the single exception --- the baptism of Jesus, which is meant to be an ongoing model for our obedience.

We are not to --- indeed cannot --- fulfill them any more. From Matthew's consistent usage of our key terms, how then should we view Christ's words in **Matthew 5: 17-19**? Unless there is overwhelming internal contextual evidence to the contrary, we must surely conclude that Jesus is saying the Law will remain in force until he himself has fulfilled it all.

John's Gospel confirms this by recording at the crucifixion, **After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been fulfilled [accomplished], said, 'I thirst' (John 19:28)**. It was after this one prophecy still unfinished was accomplished, that Jesus was able to shout triumphantly from the cross as he breathed his last, **"It is finished! It is accomplished! It is done! It is fulfilled" (John 19:30)!**

We are next told that when the Roman soldiers had broken the legs of the two criminals on either side, and when they came up to the central cross of Jesus, that they did not break his legs **so that the Scripture might be fulfilled (John 19: 36)**.

We are justified in concluding then, that Jesus' statement that he did not come to **abolish the Law or the prophets, but to fulfill** is his own belief that his Father's prophetic word concerning him will perfectly come to pass. It is also his own personal guarantee, that nothing in all God's creation, nothing in heaven and earth, is going to divert him from completing his Messianic mission, until all that is written about himself in **the Law and the prophets** is accomplished. Not **one iota, not the smallest stroke** will be left undone. I cannot improve on Ratzlaff's conclusion here,

When we let Scripture be our interpreter, the meaning of this passage [Matt. 5:17-19] becomes evident. Notice how it fits perfectly into the context. In the book of Matthew we find this passage coming soon after Jesus gives His "blessings" on the mount. It comes *just before* the six times he says, "You have heard ... but I say unto you."

In the context it is evident that Jesus is taking authority to Himself greater than that of old covenant law. It would be very easy for his listeners to conclude that He was completely doing away with the binding nature of the old covenant. This he will do, but not before He *completely fulfills* the prophecies, types and shadows which pointed forward to His work as the Messiah and Savior of the world which are recorded in the law. Therefore, the law must continue *until* He has *accomplished* everything.³

CHRIST IS THE END OF THE LAW! (ROMANS 9: 30 to ROMANS 10:11)

Let's briefly look at one passage where this matter is met head on ... **Romans 9:30 to Romans 10: 11**. Right in the middle of this section we read this crisp assertion: **Christ is the end of the Law (10: 4)!**

Before we can arrive at the staggering implications of this statement, let's take a step back and look at the overall context first. (I suggest you take a few moments to read these verses carefully.) The key word in this whole section is **righteousness**. It occurs *eleven times* in these few verses.

We read that the Jews **pursued a law of righteousness with zeal**. Yet, in spite of all their intense loyalty for keeping the old covenant law, righteousness before God eluded the vast majority of them. Why? The answer is that they **did not pursue it by faith**, but instead ended up boasting in their law-keeping. Which is to say, Israel ended up trusting in their law-observance, and not in the gift of righteousness that God gives to the one trusting in Him for grace and mercy. They had forgotten that,

If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4: 2-3)
And ...

³ Dale Ratzlaff, *Op cit.* pp 272-272 Italics original.

The promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified (Rom. 4: 13-14).

Trusting in their own law-keeping to make them righteous, they ended up rejecting God's Son and their Messiah. Keeping the details of the Law blinded many to Messiah in their very midst. ⁴

The huge surprise in all this, is that Gentiles who did trust in Christ Jesus and what God did through him, ended up enjoying the very righteousness before God *without* obedience to the old law! Gentiles received the gift of God's grace through the righteousness based on faith! What was misunderstood by Jews, was being joyfully received by the Gentiles! No wonder the apostle said this provoked the Jews to jealousy (Rom. 11:11)!

The implication is that Israel chased the Law rather than the righteousness based on faith. Human works, even good moral works, raise the barrier of pride between God and men, whereas the faith that casts one solely on God's mercy offered through Christ causes one to draw near empty-handed and to cry out, "God be merciful to me the sinner!" ⁵ Works of the law were not worthless, and the Law was righteous (Romans 7: 12), but the Law cannot give life!

The first surprise of the Gospel of Christ then, is that, **Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law (Romans 9: 30-31).**

Confident that by works of righteousness it could establish and justify its existence before God, Israel was no longer open to what God alone could give. This resulted in pride, or as Paul would say, "boasting." Faith, on the other hand, means coming before God with empty hands and admitting that our works, however good they are, are not good enough. Faith looks only to God's mercy and forgiveness Faith directs one's attention to God and others and frees one from preoccupation with self and the merit of works. ⁶

The result of all this is that the apostle Paul is heartbroken over his countrymen's rejection of God's way of righteousness through Messiah who fulfilled the old law perfectly for them! Yes, Paul acknowledges they do have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. **For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes ... (Rom. 10:2-4).**

We have now arrived at this key and arresting statement: **Christ is the end of the Law.** What does it mean? There are two possibilities. Either **the end** means the culmination or the completion of a process --- such as when we say the end of the birth process is the arrival of a beautiful baby. Or **the end** can mean the termination or the cancellation of something --- such as when we say the end of the king's reign saw the last of his draconian reign of terror.

I suggest that the statement **Christ is the end of the Law** carries both nuances. The first idea is that Jesus Christ is the goal or the completion of the Law. It was the Law and the prophets which testified of [the coming] Messiah (Rom. 3:21). God's whole stated plan from the very beginning was that Messiah was coming.

Furthermore, there has ever only been one man in all of history who has perfectly fulfilled all that God's holy law and character is satisfied with. Jesus' own testimony is that he only ever did those things that perfectly

⁴ A classic story illustrating this is the healing of the blind man in John 9 where the custodians of the Law refused Messiah's credentials because he had healed on the Sabbath day. They said, "We know that God has spoken to Moses; but as for this man, we do not know where he is from." These defenders of the old Law pitted Moses against Christ. And they tell the healed man that either he accepts Moses or he is a disciple of Jesus. He cannot do both! They themselves opted for the veil of Moses!

⁵ The context of these words in the parable of the two men who went to the Temple to pray is that, Jesus **told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt ... (Lk. 18: 9).**

⁶ James R. Edwards, *Romans: Understanding the Bible Commentary Series*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1992 pp 246-247

pleased His Father. And God proved He accepted Jesus' testimony by not only saying He was **well pleased** with His Son, but also in that He raised him from the dead. So Jesus perfectly satisfied all the demands of heaven itself. The Law only ever passed one human being as being morally worthy according to all the Law commanded. That's why Jesus is called the perfect Lamb of God. He was spotless before God's Law!

That's why **Christ is the end of the law** for those of us who look to him for righteousness. If we are in Christ the Law has nothing against us. As Scripture says, **God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not counting their trespasses against them ... He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5: 19, 21).**

In this way Jesus is the substance to which the Law's shadow pointed (**Colossians 2: 16-17**). This fits perfectly with our conclusion regarding Jesus' statement in **Matthew 5:17-18**, for Jesus has once and for all on our behalf met all the Law's requirements. And the moment we rest in his finished work, all that he has done has become true of us! We are now **accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6 KJV)**.

The second idea is that Christ dispensed with the old covenant law altogether. This happened when he was nailed to the cross. The old covenant Law with its list of ordinances against us has been annulled (so **Col. 2:14**). You are released from the requirements of the old covenant Law! Jesus has fulfilled it once and for all.

MARRIED A SECOND TIME!

Someone will naturally ask, "But Greg, if Christ has fulfilled the Law, and if we are done with the old Law --- or indeed the old covenant Law can't get its hands on us --- aren't you promoting a carefree, debonaire lifestyle of lawlessness? By what principle are we meant to live now?" We shall deal with this question in the next article, but here in the meantime is a hint ...

Think of a woman who had been bound to a husband for years in a loveless, frustrating marriage for ages. But her husband dies. She then meets the man of her dreams. She gives her heart to him in a new marriage covenant. She is not an adulteress for marrying again, is she? She is free to be madly in love with her amazing husband who delights in her. She joyfully exclaims, "All I want to do is to love my new Man!"

This is the apostle Paul's illustration. He likens trying to keep the terms of the old covenant Law to being married to a husband who has treated us with increasing criticism and harshness. (Paul knew this by experience, having been a zealous Pharisee himself.) Nothing we seem to do completely satisfies his demands. "You're never good enough" he complains. But now, through Christ, we are finished once and for all with the demands of that old husband ... **for you were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead ... (see Romans 7: 1-4).**⁷

The Gospel of Christ announces we are in a new marriage, a new covenant relationship, for Christ has both fulfilled the Law on our behalf and he has annulled the old marriage certificate completely. **Christ is the end of the Law!** He is both fulfillment (completion) and termination (cancellation) of the Law.

Let every demon in hell, let Satan himself at their head, let your own conscience try to condemn you, but now you can rise up and answer: "Yes, the old Law demands that I do this and do that. Quite right. But the Gospel of Christ Jesus says **Christ is the end of the Law** to me. And he appears at the right hand of God as my righteousness!"

Why play in the shadows when you can enjoy the full "Sonlight"!

⁷ To use another of Paul's metaphors, the Law has been like our Tutor, and having introduced us to Christ, has finished his terms and contract of employment (**Gal. 3: 24-25**). We are no longer under the supervision of the old covenant Law. The tutor's role is terminated!

