

The Sermon on the Mount

Learning to Follow Jesus

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“[Matthew 5:17-20 is] the most difficult passage to be found anywhere in the Gospel.”

- Douglas Hare, *Matthew*

Did Jesus ‘set side’ or ‘replace’ the Law of Moses?

Many Christians think so. Consider the words of American megachurch pastor, Andy Stanley:

“Jesus issued his new commandment as a replacement for everything in the existing list. Including the big ten. Just as his new covenant replaced the old covenant, Jesus’ new commandment replaced all the old commandments.

Participants in the new covenant (that’s Christians) are not required to obey any of the commandments found in the first part of their Bibles. Participants in the new covenant are expected to obey the single command Jesus issued as part of his new covenant: as I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Mt. 5:17)

What does it mean to “fulfill” (πληρώω) the law? Whatever it means, it cannot be the functional equivalent of “abolish”!

Three different senses in which Jesus’ *teaching* fulfills the law:

1. by bringing out the true meaning of the teachings found in the law
2. by adding or supplying new content to the law (*quantitative*)
3. by provide the grace necessary to live according to the law (*qualitative*)

Three different senses in which Jesus' *own life and ministry* fulfills the law:

1. in the story of Jesus we find what is promised in the law and the prophets
2. Jesus is obedient to the law
3. Jesus brings the law to its goal and end through his death and resurrection

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt. 5:20)

Those who are fit for the kingdom of heaven will be those who keep the law and understand the true meaning of its teachings. This verse functions as a transition to the ‘antitheses’ in 5:21-48, in which Jesus clarifies what the law actually teaches.

The Law for Jews and Gentiles

Moral Law vs. Ceremonial Law

The earliest Christians understood that Gentiles were not expected to observe the entire law of Moses (see Acts 15:1-35 on the Jerusalem Council).

The Sermon on the Mount was preached by a Jewish rabbi to a Jewish audience, but it is for *all* followers of Jesus, Jew and Gentile. The Sermon on the Mount teaches us how to keep the law.

Compare this to the teaching of popular preachers like Andy Stanley:

“[First century] Church leaders unhitched the church from the worldview, value system, and regulations of the Jewish scriptures. [...] Peter, James, Paul elected to unhitch the Christian faith from their Jewish scriptures, and my friends, we must as well.”

To the contrary, Jesus said that “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter” would pass from the law (Mt. 5:18).