

Earlier, when we looked at the beatitudes we learned of the writing technique known as “inclusio” in which verses act as bookends that give the theme of the verses in-between them (see notes on Matthew 5:3). Mathew now uses this style once again to bracket Jesus’ teaching about the Old Testament (“the Law and the Prophets”). Matthew 5:17 is the first bookend and 7:12 is the other. In other words, we are entering a new section of Jesus’ teaching (5:17-7:12) in which He relates the Gospel of the Kingdom to the Old Testament but also defines what true righteousness is.

This first paragraph of this section (5:17-20) is divided into two parts: (1) Christ and the Law (5:17, 18) and (2) the Christian and the Law (5:19, 20) (Stott, 69).

**17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.**

**18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.**

"The Law and the Prophets" was a common designation for the entire Old Testament (OT). The "Law" referred to the first five books (Gen.-Deut.) which were written by Moses. The "Prophets" referred to the remainder of the OT.

In what sense did Jesus *fulfill* the OT?

1. Christ fulfilled the OT by being the focal point of all it contained (also see Lk.24:27; Jn. 5:39) and the goal of what it was trying to achieve. He filled out the content of what was revealed in it. According to Matthew 11:13, the whole OT had a basic prophetic function that anticipated Christ. In addition, this verse suggests that a new age began with John the Baptist and Jesus and the age of the prophets ended.

In order to understand how Christ fulfilled the Law we need to understand the ways in which the OT “prophesied” about Him.

**A.** First, the OT pointed to Christ **by direct prophetic statements** (as in Matt. 2:6 and Micah 5:2).

**B.** It also pointed to Christ **through the history** recorded there. Often the events in Jewish history became prophetic pictures that paralleled events in the life of Christ. For example, in Deuteronomy 8 Moses reminded the people that they were tested in the desert for forty years where God allowed them to suffer so that they would learn that man does not live by bread alone (Deut. 8:3). In the same way, Jesus was tested for forty days in the wilderness and when tempted by Satan, He replied, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Though this was quoted from the portion of the Bible the Jews called “the Law”, it was used in the NT in a prophetic sense.

**C.** Lastly, the OT pointed to Christ **through its festivals, ceremonies** (Heb. 9-10) **and the sacrificial system** (Heb. 9:8f; 10:1f.). Jesus was the reality of that which was only seen in symbols and shadows prior to His arrival.

2. Christ also fulfilled the OT Law by perfectly obeying its precepts.

In short, because the whole Law pointed to Christ, He certainly did not come to get rid any of it (not even the smallest letter or stroke); rather, He viewed His life and ministry as bringing the contents of the OT to the fullness of expression (Carson, 144).

**19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**

**20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

"Then" in verse 19 introduces the deduction that Jesus draws from the enduring nature of the Law. It also reveals a vital connection between the Law of God and the Kingdom of God. Because the Law is enduring, greatness in the kingdom is measured by conformity to it. *However, since the Law anticipated Jesus, the nature of how the commandments are practiced has changed with His coming.*

A Christian's relationship to the Law has long been debated. Some believe that we are under obligation to the moral aspects of the Law (or the Ten Commandments) but are free from the civil and ceremonial elements. This sounds good at first, but the fact that Jesus said "not the smallest letter or stroke will pass away from the Law" makes this view problematic; the words sound much more all-embracing than would be allowed by an exclusive reference to the moral law (Carson, Sermon, 37). In addition, though it may be helpful to break the Law down into ceremonial, civil, and moral teachings, such categories didn't exist in Jesus' day. In many cases it is impossible to discern moral laws from others. If "moral" means that which is fundamentally right and wrong then the whole law is moral for whatever God says is fundamentally right and whatever he forbids is fundamentally wrong. Another problem is simply in how to apply this. For example, why do so many believers ignore the command to keep the Sabbath which is one of the Ten Commandments? Aren't they breaking the moral law by doing so?

I believe there is a better solution.

In Romans 10:4 it says that Christ is "the end of the Law." Like Matthew 5:17, Jesus is the point of culmination of the Law of Moses; He is its goal. However, He is also its end in that He brought to a close that period of time when the Law would be the rule of life for God's people (Matt. 11:13; Moo, Continuity and Discontinuity, 207).

This is fleshed out in the other writings of Paul.

In Galatians, Paul is combating the Judaizers who insisted that the Law still played a central role in Christian life. In 5:1 he calls the Law a "yoke of slavery" and says that Christians are called to live in freedom (Gal. 5:1). Then in 5:2-4 his insistence that circumcision is no longer necessary makes it clear that the Law was no longer an absolute standard of conduct.

"But how, then, can Christians know what is right or wrong; will not 'freedom' bring irresponsibility, license, and immorality? It is this objection that Paul confronts, beginning in 5:13: 'You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge in the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love.' Verse 14 then explains why love is so important: the love command (Lev. 19:18) fulfills the whole law" (Moo, Continuity and Discontinuity, 209).

Here the word "fulfill" is the same word found in Matthew 5:17. Just as Jesus fulfilled the Law by bringing it to its intended goal, so love accomplishes the goal of the Law.

Christians are not bound in obedience to a written code, but are to have an attitude of love that fulfills the Law. This is not just semantics. It is by loving others and by submitting to the Spirit that the Law has been fulfilled (see Moo, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 210 ff).

Furthermore, in Romans 6:14 Paul says, “For sin shall not be master over you, for *you are not under Law* but under grace.” To be under the Law must mean to be under its moral rule. This is why NOT being under the Law is such a concern. If we are not under the moral law of the OT what is going to keep us from sinning? Paul asks this very question: “What then? Shall we sin *because we are not under Law* but under grace?” (6:15) The answer, of course, is an emphatic “NO!” but not because we really are under the Law in some sense. Rather we are not to sin because we are slaves of God and righteousness (Ro. 6:16-18). The Law plays no role in the sanctification process (cf. Gal 3:2b-3). In fact, just the opposite is true: the reason we can have victory over sin is because we *aren't* under the Law anymore (Ro 6:14).

This idea fits well with Romans 6-8 where Paul “consistently employs the metaphor of slavery, freedom, and the transfer from one power to another to denote the state of the believer. Thus he speaks of the believer dying to sin and becoming joined to Christ (6:1-11), being set free from sin and being enslaved to God and righteousness (6:15-23), dying to the Law (7:4), being set free from it (7:3, 5) so as to be joined to Christ (7:4), and being released from the sphere of the flesh (7:5; 8:9) and placed in the sphere of the Spirit (7:6; 8:9). That Paul would be designating another such transfer from one regime to another by speaking of Christians as no longer under law but grace fits into this overall argument very nicely” (Moo, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 211).

Further light is shed on this subject in Galatians 5:18 where Paul explains, “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” In this case, the “if” clause is stating the reality of the situation; if you are led by the Spirit (and you are), you are not under the Law. Paul is saying that all believers are in fact being “led by the Spirit,” though this does not mean that they are all walking by the Spirit. In this case “under the Law” designates a position that is antithetical to that of a believer. “Under the Law” must therefore refer to the rule of life that dominated the old age but was terminated with Christ.

This leads us to one last point. In Galatians 6:2 it says, “Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the Law of Christ.” Although it is much debated what “the Law of Christ” is, it is clear that Christians are not “lawless.” It seems that the Law of Christ is referring to the demands that God makes on all believers since the coming of Christ. We “fulfill the Law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) by exercising love (Gal. 5:13-15) and keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:18).

***In summary:***

With the coming of Christ believers are no longer living under the regime or power of the Law, but under the power of the Spirit. We are no longer under the Mosaic system in any sense of the word. However, this does not mean that we are not under any moral system, but obedience to the Law is now properly practiced by submitting to its fuller meaning brought by Christ (Matt 28:19). We fulfill the Law as it is viewed through the lenses of Jesus and His teaching through the power of the Spirit.

The greatness in the kingdom in Matthew 5:19 is determined by obedience to Jesus' teaching since that teaching fulfills OT revelation, but greatness is also determined by our faithfulness in teaching this truth to others (also see

Matt 28:19). But more than that, entrance into the Kingdom is only given to those whose righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and Scribes. This righteousness is given substance in the verses that follow.

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The question naturally arises, if the believer is not under the Law in any sense of the term (ceremonially, morally, or civilly), then what is his standard of conduct? How does he determine what pleases God?

The Law is no longer the rule of life, Christ is. And if Christ governs our lives then Christian's conduct is determined by His will not external commandments. This is not to say that the Law is no longer important for the will of God is found in the Scripture which includes the Law. II Timothy 3:16 says that "all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." Notice how sweeping Paul's statement is. He says "All scripture . . . is profitable." "All" means that every part – even the Law of Moses with its moral, civil and ceremonial elements – are to be used for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that we may be adequate, equipped for every good work. We are not under the Law, but because the Law is inspired it is full of valuable doctrine and lessons for us.

James says that the Bible is like a mirror by which we able to see ourselves as we really are (Ja. 1:23-25). Our thinking and conduct should be molded by the Word of God. Though the Law is abolished (II Cor. 3:11, 13) it still remains part of the mirror of the Word of God and as such is profitable to us. But our conduct is also molded as we look in the mirror at Christ. From Him we learn that we ought to walk as He walked (I Jn. 2:6), suffer as He suffered (I Pet. 2:21), love as He loved (I Jn. 4:9, 10; 3:16) and keep His commandments (Jn. 14:21, 23) as He kept His Father's commandments (Jn. 14:31).

To be sure there is a progress in revelation and the believer's expression of faith varies in different ages; some things are superseded; some may be abolished; some things are more important than others. But all things are governed by the will of God as revealed in the Scripture and the person of Christ.

Such freedom is fearful to some. If we are not under some type of code, wouldn't some take this freedom as license to sin? Surely some will. Even in Paul's day people argued "let us do evil that good may come." (Ro. 3:8a). Paul said, "Their condemnation is just" (Ro. 3:8b). Elsewhere he also admonishes us to not use our liberty as an opportunity for the flesh (Gal. 5:13).

For the true Christian, however, the doctrine of grace is not dangerous for only the grace of God can give life, transform, and empower us to please God. Those who desire to sin by using grace as an excuse only demonstrate that the grace of God is not in their lives. If it were, there would be accompanying signs of a transformed life.

We are not under Law but under grace. Grace is the only environment in which the will of God can be most fully realized in the Christian life.