

NICNT - Logos

4. Fulfilling the law (5:17–48)

While we shall subdivide this section of the discourse for the purpose of commentary, it is important to recognize its coherence as a concentrated section of teaching on a single theme, the fulfillment of the law. It is the most extensive discussion of this issue anywhere in the gospel tradition, and raises important questions about Yeshua' teaching on how his disciples are to do the will of God. It raises acutely the issue of Yeshua' messianic authority in relation to the existing authority of the Torah and of its authorized interpreters at the time, and illustrates the tensions which were to lead to the ultimate decision of the Jewish leadership that Yeshua was a dangerous influence who must be eliminated. But its tone is not primarily polemical or negative. It sets out by means of a series of graphic examples the sort of obedience to the will of God to which the OT law could only begin to point the way. This radical approach to discipleship goes far beyond the best righteousness that the scribes and Pharisees could envisage (5:20); its goal is nothing less than sharing the perfection of God himself (5:48).

The apparently abrupt change of subject in v. 17 is to be understood in the light of the concept of a new people of God which has emerged throughout the first part of the discourse. The question of the continuity of this people with the old Israel and its institutions will be a recurrent theme throughout the gospel, and the role of the OT law is a central aspect of that question.¹ Here is a presentation of the law of the new covenant, as both in continuity and in contrast with the OT law.²

These verses may be conveniently divided into three main sections:

5:17–20	Fulfilling the law: general principles
5:21–47	Fulfilling the law: six examples
5:48	Fulfilling the law: summary (to be reinforced later by a further summary of the law and the prophets in 7:12).

a. Fulfilling the Law: General Principles (5:17–20)

17 Do not suppose that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 I tell you truly: until heaven and earth pass away not one small letter or a single stroke of the pen will pass away from the law until everything has taken place. 19 So anyone who sets aside one of these smallest commandments and teaches

¹ P. Foster, *Community* 161–164, notes the difficulty commentators have in finding a meaningful link between vv. 3–16 and vv. 17ff, and develops the suggestion of Davies & Allison, 1.481, that these verses aim to answer the objection of other Jews that this new messianic community was in effect rejecting the Torah; cf. also *ibid.* 182–183.

² See the stimulating study by W. J. Dumbrell, *NovT* 23 (1981) 1–21.

others to disregard them⁴ will be called the smallest in the kingdom of heaven; it is the person who does them and teaches them who will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that if your righteousness does not go far beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

While there is a basic coherence of theme in these verses, each verse is in fact making a rather different point, and some interpreters, assuming that a number of originally separate sayings relating to the observance of the law have been brought together here for convenience, have therefore interpreted them in isolation from each other. That is to do less than justice to Matthew's careful compilation of this discourse. Whatever the origin of the sayings collected here, Matthew must have thought that they made coherent sense together, and it is our responsibility to try to discern that sense.

⁴ Literally "teaches people thus;" the sense is that this person not only refuses to accept the authority of the commandments but also teaches others that they may be set aside, disregarded.