

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 pen³ will pass away from the law until everything has

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.

³ ἰῶτα represents *yôd*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, written above the line and sometimes little more than a dash; it was sometimes optional in spelling. κεράια (“horn”) perhaps denotes the small projection (like the crossing of our letter t) which distinguishes some Hebrew letters from others

taken place. 19 So anyone who sets aside one of these smallest commandments and teaches 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 beyond⁵ 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.⁶

It is these verses more than anything else in the gospel that have fostered the impression that Matthew took a very conservative line on legal observance, believing that the Christian disciple was bound to continue to obey all the commandments of the Torah just as much as, or indeed more meticulously than, those Jews who had not followed Yeshua.⁷ Verses 18 and 19 taken on their own can certainly give that impression.

If that is what Matthew intended, the interpreter must face the fact that this teaching is out of step with the overall thrust of NT Christianity and with the almost universal consensus of Christians ever since, at least with regard to the more ceremonial aspects of the OT law, particularly its sacrificial provisions.⁸ The Letter to the Hebrews is clear that these can have no

of similar shape, but may refer to some other small feature of writing; G. Schwarz, *ZNW* 66 (1975) 268–269, argues that it refers to the letter *waw* which was similarly inconspicuous and sometimes optional.

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.

⁵ περισσεύω πλεῖον is literally “to abound/overflow more than....” The phrase is stronger than simply to “exceed;” they are not in the same league. J. P. Meier, *Law* 108–109, finds an eschatological connotation in περισσεύω: it relates to the new age as compared with the old.

⁶ On the other hand, H. D. Betz, *Sermon* 167–173, probably goes too far in describing this section as a carefully composed set of “four principles” formulated in contrast with Pharisaic interpretive rules such as the seven *middot* of Hillel. Once the verse numbers are ignored, these verses do not read like four parallel “rules” (note the οὐν and γάρ of vv. 19 and 20).

⁷ This view, which was once the dominant interpretation, is expressed more recently by R. Mohrlang, *Matthew 7–26* (especially pp. 8–9, 16–19), who concludes that “for Matthew, the law in its entirety remains a valid and authoritative expression of the will of God for the Christian community, and all of life is viewed from this perspective.” (p. 19) On pp. 42–47 Mohrlang compares Matthew with Paul, and concludes that “Matthew’s viewpoint is closer to that of traditional Judaism, while Paul’s represents a more radical break with it” (p. 47).

⁸ It is sometimes suggested that Matt 5:17–20 is concerned only with the moral law, not with the ceremonial and civil laws of the OT. But this convenient distinction of the law into three categories has

further place after the one perfect sacrifice has been offered by Christ. Paul, while his attitude to the law provides scope for a rich variety of interpretations and doctoral dissertations, uses language about freedom from the law (Gal 5:1–6) or being dead to the law (Rom 7:1–6; Gal 2:19) and about Christ as the end of the law (Rom 10:4; cf. Gal 3:24–25) which sits very uncomfortably with a view that Torah-observance is unchanged since the coming of the Messiah. Under his and Peter’s guidance the NT church found it necessary to abandon the OT food-laws as binding on all Christians (Acts 11:2–10; Rom 14:14).

But the view that Matthew regarded all OT laws (presumably including the sacrificial and food laws) as still binding regulations for the conduct of Yeshua’ disciples not only runs counter to the rest of the NT and of subsequent Christian thinking, but also conflicts with clear pointers within his own gospel. In 15:11 Yeshua will make a pronouncement which in effect undercuts the whole complex of the Levitical laws of purity (see comments there). And in the verses which will immediately follow this section we shall see Yeshua taking issue in various ways with a literal observance of the law as regulation, sometimes by simply going beyond its literal sense to a more nuanced understanding, but sometimes in the process leaving the regulations themselves as at best irrelevant and apparently even obsolete (see comments below on vv. 32, 34, 39).

Nor is the problem confined to a tension between vv. 17–20 and vv. 21–47. Even within this small section another note is heard. While v. 19 sounds like an endorsement of the scribal concern to ensure that every detail of the law should be observed to the letter, v. 20 speaks of the “righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” (which consisted of a scrupulous observance not only of the OT laws but also of their burgeoning elaboration of those laws) as something other than the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven, and warns that that sort of legal observance leaves one outside the kingdom of heaven altogether.

Undeniably there is tension and development within the attitude to the law which is reflected in Matthew’s gospel. But it is the responsibility of the exegete to try to make coherent sense of the text as it stands, before charging the author with blatant contradiction or clumsy editing. The following verse-by-verse comments will make that attempt.

In the light of the comment just made about the tension between vv. 19 and 20, there is a *prima facie* case to be made that Matthew is conscious of two opposite tendencies with which he is concerned, on the one hand a tendency to claim, in line with Paul’s “freedom from the law” teaching, that the OT laws no longer matter and can be abandoned,⁹ and on the other hand a tendency to emulate the scribes and the Pharisees in careful literal observance of the

no biblical basis, and cannot be traced back earlier than the Middle Ages. Moreover, such a selective approach is difficult to square with Yeshua’ insistence on the importance of the smallest details of the law (v. 18) and the “smallest commandments” (v. 19).

⁹ G. Barth, *Tradition* 159–164, summarizes his view that Matthew was confronted by the “antinomian” tendency of a group of Hellenistic libertines. J. Zumstein, *Condition* 199–200, further defines the “heresy” Matthew confronted as a charismatic strand of Christianity which focused on the risen Lord even to the virtual exclusion of Yeshua’ own earthly teaching, while the OT law had no further interest for them. Most recent interpreters are more reluctant to trace such specific “opponents.” W. D. Davies, *Setting* 334–336, discusses and dismisses the view that these verses are “anti-Pauline.”