

# How Do the Commands of the Old Testament Apply to Us?

## A Study of Matthew 5:17-20

Characteristic of Completeness: Jesus Christ

Big Idea: This life is His story in progress.

Related Scriptures: Acts 13:38-39, 24:14; Romans 6:14; 7:4-7; 10:4; 15:4;

1 Corinthians 9:20; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:19-25; 5:18;

Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 1:16-17; Philippians 3:9; 2 Timothy 3:16

### Introduction

1. It's January 27. If you've resolved to read through the Bible in a year, you've probably already encountered some weird stuff in the Old Testament. And I'm afraid it's going to get worse.

You see, the first five books of the Old Testament, collectively called the Pentateuch, contain, among other things, a catalog of laws or rules given by God to the Jewish people through a man named Moses. Because Moses was the person through whom the laws were given, it is sometimes called the Law of Moses, or the Mosaic Law, or just the Law.

From within the Pentateuch—which comprises Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—ancient Jews tallied 613 total laws or commands. Of the 613, there are 248 things to do and 365 things not to do.

Some of the commands are familiar, and we embrace them today. But other commands are unfamiliar and just weird, and we ignore them. We pick and choose. For example, the last of the Ten Commandments appears in ► Exodus 20:17:

<sup>NAU</sup> Exodus 20:17 “You shall not covet . . .”

We know that one. It's good. We accept it. After all, it's one of the Ten Commandments.

But, here's another command in ► Verse 24 of the very same Chapter:

<sup>NAU</sup> Exodus 20:24 “You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen . . .”

Now that's one of those weird ones. We don't do that one. We're not buying the whole burnt-offering deal today. Not in churches or synagogues. And just a few verses after that, in ► Exodus 21:7, there's another weird command. It says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Exodus 21:7 “If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do.”

We’re not into this either. The seemingly sexist slavery is unsavory. So you see, we seem to pick and choose.

Even ► within the Ten Commandments, those of us who take the Bible seriously seem to pick and choose. We don’t treat them all the same. We all revere ► the commandment:

<sup>NAU</sup> Exodus 20:13 “You shall not murder.”

Got it. Not optional. But what about the ► commandment:

<sup>NAU</sup> Exodus 20:8 “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

For many of us, that seems to be optional. How many of us set aside a full day every week for the Lord, doing absolutely no work at all on that day? I don’t.

Was the Sabbath-day command less important to God than the no-murder command? Apparently not. In fact, God commanded the death penalty for those who failed to observe the Sabbath. He says in ► Exodus 35:2,

<sup>NAU</sup> Exodus 35:2 “For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy *day*, a sabbath of complete rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”

The fact that I haven’t been put to death for breaking the Sabbath goes to show: We pick and choose.

2. Maybe ► this picking and choosing bothers you little, but you figure some smart Bible people must have some good basis for picking and choosing. But then one night you’re watching a rerun of *West Wing* on TV. And somebody must’ve noticed our picking and choosing, because on the show, the president has an exchange with a radio talk show host who takes the Bible seriously. He exposes the apparent inconsistency of her picking and choosing. Let me show you.

(Show ► clip, *OT\_2*, here.)

3. So now this picking and choosing is bothering you a little more. Why do we pick and choose?

For many Christians, maybe it’s because God seems different in the Old Testament than in the New. In the Old Testament, sometimes God can seem like an angry, vengeful guy with some bizarre rules. In the New Testament, He seems to have

reformed, or at least changed His tactics. There's the sneaking suspicion that God is more gracious now. Like He tried to play hard ball with people in the Old Testament and it didn't work, so He simmered down. He's softer on sin, not so concerned about obedience, and more flexible and forgiving on matters of personal righteousness. In fact, it can even seem like God sent His Son, Jesus, as a last ditch effort to save us because nothing else worked. Demanding things from us didn't fly, so He had to resort to grace. He had to lower the bar or else nobody would get to heaven.

Is that why we pick and choose? Because we tend to go with the God of the New Testament who seems like He's had a gracious makeover?

4. Jesus challenges our thinking. Jesus says some things that call into serious question the whole picking and choosing business. We might expect Jesus to say something like, "Just forget about all that Old Testament stuff. I'm here now. Just pay attention to Me and you'll be fine." But He doesn't.

We've been studying our way through the Gospel of Matthew. It's in the New Testament. We come today to some verses that one Bible scholar describes as "among the most difficult verses in all the Bible."<sup>1</sup> ► It's Matthew 5:17-20. That's the text we're going to study today: Matthew 5:17-20. There, Jesus comments on the Old Testament. He ► says:

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets [that's the Old Testament]; 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. ► 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."

At ► first blush, it looks like Jesus is saying that we ought not to pick and choose from the Old Testament, but obey all of it. Does that mean all the weird commands of the Old Testament apply to us? Are we supposed to fire up the "barbie" and make some sacrifices? Has God *not* had a gracious makeover after all? What gives?

This morning, I want to try to explain some of this and what it means for us, humbly acknowledging that this is difficult stuff. We'll be digesting Jesus' words from our text in ► three hunks, three parts, three segments. In each hunk, Jesus makes an important point that helps us reconcile stuff in the Old and New Testaments. Jesus helps us understand how the commands of the Old Testament apply to us as Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: And His Confrontation with the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978, 1987, 1999, 2005), 36.

I want you to see that all this revolves around the Person of Jesus Christ. In fact, ► He is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week: Jesus Christ. In particular, I want to show you an important thread woven through our text relating to Jesus. It's the big idea of my sermon. Here ► it is: This life is His story in progress.

I suspect this big idea may not mean much to you right now. But, we're going to flesh it out a little this morning.

- I. Here's ► the point from the first hunk of our text: Jesus does not contradict to the Old Testament; He's the culmination of it. That is to say, the coming of Jesus is not God's last ditch effort because everything else has failed; Jesus has been in God's game plan from the beginning. Jesus does not represent an about-face or change of strategy for God; Jesus is what God has been up to all along. This life is His story in progress.

I get this from ► Verses 17 and 18, where Jesus says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:17 "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."

- A. In what sense does Jesus ► "fulfill" the "Law or the Prophets"? First of all, when Jesus refers to ► "the Law or the Prophets," He's referring to the entire Old Testament. The "Law" refers to all the rules and regulations in the first few books of the Old Testament. The "Prophets" refers to all the rest.

How does Jesus fulfill the Old Testament? The word, "fulfill" means to bring into being that which was promised.<sup>2</sup>

How did Jesus bring into being that which was promised?

1. Well, Jesus fulfills "the Prophets" in the sense that He is the Messiah to whom the prophets all pointed. Jesus is the Savior—the One the prophets said would come.
2. Jesus also fulfills "the Law" in the sense that He is the answer to the problem the Law was intended to reveal. Scripture tells us that the Law was given to show all people their sinfulness and their need of a Savior. Therefore, the Law points to Christ. Christ fulfills the Law in that He is the culmination of it.

This is explained in ► Galatians 3, beginning in Verse 19. It says,

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<sup>2</sup> Breshears, "The Place of Law in the Life of the Believer in Christ," seminary paper, 3.

<sup>NLT</sup> Galatians 3:19 Well then, why was the law given? It was given to show people how guilty they are. But this system of law was to last only until the coming of the child to whom God's promise was made. . . . ► 23 Until faith in Christ was shown to us as the way of becoming right with God, we were guarded by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until we could put our faith in the coming Savior. ► 24 Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian and teacher to lead us until Christ came. So now, through faith in Christ, we are made right with God. 25 But now that faith in Christ has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian.

You see, all the rules and regulations in the Old Testament Law were not given to the Israelites as a ladder so they could obediently climb their way to heaven. The Law was given not as a ladder, but a mirror—a mirror to show people their fallen condition, to show them their desperate need of a Savior.

Did you hear about the agnostic editor of *Esquire* magazine who decided to spend an entire year trying to be completely obedient to every command in the Bible? He wrote a book about it, published just last year. He says, “One thing I learned was how much I sinned. That was a little disturbing, but once you start to pay attention to the amount that you lie and gossip and covet and even steal—I was taken aback and that was a real eye-opener.”<sup>3</sup>

Exactly. That's what the Law was designed to do.

B. Back ► in our text, Jesus not only gives a reason why He came—to fulfill the Old Testament—He also is careful to say what He did *not* come to do. He did ► *not* come to “abolish” the Old Testament. What does He mean?

1. A part of what Jesus is saying is that He's not setting aside or nullifying any of the predictions of the Old Testament. Everything that the Old Testament says will be accomplished *will* be accomplished. No predictions or fulfillments are abolished. That's His point when ► He says in Verse 18:

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:18 “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.”

2. In addition, when Jesus says He did not come to abolish, I think He means that He is not denying the inspiration of the Old Testament. It is inspired by God such that the original words written in the Bible are exactly what God

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<sup>3</sup> A.J. Jacobs, quoted in *Leadership Journal*, winter 2008, 17.

wants to communicate, without error. So, even the stuff that seems weird to us is not a mistake.

- a. Second ► Timothy 3:16 confirms this, saying,

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness

“All Scripture” includes the Old Testament. It’s inspired by God and is profitable for us.

- b. Romans ► 15:4 corroborates the usefulness of the things written in the Old Testament. It says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Romans 15:4 . . . whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction . . .

The Old Testament is the inspired Word of God. And anything that is inspired by God deserves our utmost respect and reverence.

3. But ► that is not to say that the commands of the Old Testament apply to us today in the same way that they applied to the Israelites to whom they were given. In fact, I want to show you that, while the Law continues to be instructive, it is no longer operative for us today. We are not bound by it, but we can learn from it. The Law in history demonstrates the sinfulness of humankind and we can see, in retrospect, how it pointed to Christ. That’s instructive, but not normative. We are not required to obey the 613 rules and regulations of the Law. We are no longer bound to obey the commands of the Mosaic Law today because the Bible says so.

It is remarkable that in all the New Testament epistles, not once is the believer commanded to obey the Mosaic Law.<sup>4</sup> And nowhere in Scripture is the Law ever said to have been given to the church.<sup>5</sup> But repeatedly it is said that Christ has brought an end to the Law. He didn’t abolish it; He fulfilled it. The Law has fulfilled its purpose in pointing to Christ. Let me give you a few examples.

- a. Romans ► 7, beginning in Verse 4 says,

<sup>NLT</sup> Romans 7:4 . . . The law no longer holds you in its power, because you died to its power when you

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Tracy, seminary class notes.

<sup>5</sup> Lightner, “Part III: A Dispensational Response to Theonomy,” *BibSac*, July 1986, 237.

died with Christ on the cross. . . . 6 But now we have been released from the law . . .

- b. Ephesians ► 2:15 says of Jesus,  

<sup>NLT</sup> Ephesians 2:15 By his death he ended the whole system of Jewish law . . .
- c. The Apostle Paul, himself a Jew, says in ► 1 Corinthians 9:20,  

<sup>NLT</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:20 . . . I am not subject to the law . . .
- d. Galatians ► 5:18 says,  

<sup>NLT</sup> Galatians 5:18 But when you are directed by the Holy Spirit, you are no longer subject to the law.
- e. Romans ► 6:14 says,  

<sup>NLT</sup> Romans 6:14 . . . you are no longer subject to the law, which enslaves you to sin. Instead, you are free by God's grace.
- f. Romans ► 10:4 says,  

<sup>NAU</sup> Romans 10:4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Jesus does not contradict the Old Testament; He's the culmination of it, the fulfiller of it. It's all part of His story in progress. That's the point from the first hunk of our text.

- II. Someone ► might say, "Well, Bob, you say that all the rules and regulations of the Law no longer apply to us directly. Does that mean that God is not really interested in obedience anymore?" Good question. And that leads us to the second big point Jesus makes in our text. Here ► it is: Jesus does not minimize obedience; He affirms it as King. Following God is still very much about obedience. God still demands submission from His followers and He will reward us accordingly.

I think that's the point Jesus is making in the second hunk of our text. It's in ► Verse 19, where Jesus says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:19 "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."

Jesus is saying, “Greatness in My kingdom is still based on obedience.” And He speaks with the authority of a king. And notice at this point, Jesus isn’t talking about *entering* the kingdom of heaven; He’s talking about degrees of greatness among those within it. He’s talking about rewards. Those who obey will be rewarded with greatness. Those who do not obey will receive less. Rewards in the kingdom of heaven are still based on obedience.

The New Testament is full of commands that Christians are obligated to follow. These commands are sometimes referred to collectively as the “law of Christ.” For believers today, this Law of Christ has superseded the Law of Moses.

A. Galatians ► 6:2 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Galatians 6:2 Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

B. Romans ► 8:2 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Romans 8:2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

C. It ► is interesting that in the New Testament, there are commands that parallel the Ten Commandments. In fact nine of the Ten Commandments are restated and in some cases expanded in the New Testament. Observance of the Sabbath day is the only one of the Ten Commandments not restated in some way in the New Testament.

So for example, we Christians are still not to commit adultery, but not because the Mosaic Law says not to. It’s because the New Testament says not to. In fact, Jesus raises the bar even higher than the Mosaic Law did with respect to adultery. He says in ► Matthew 5:27-28,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

So ► the main point of the second hunk of our text is this: Jesus does not minimize obedience; He affirms it as King. God in the Person of Jesus has not gone soft on obedience. This life is His story in progress, and it’s not just a story of redemption and forgiveness and salvation; it’s a story of obedience.

III. I imagine some in Jesus’ original audience were saying to themselves: “Yeah, obedience. Well I’m feeling pretty good about myself. Because I’m righteous. I obey God’s commands. I’m not like those bad heathen people. I’m much better. I’m certainly righteous enough to get to heaven.”

Which brings us to the third and final point of our text. Here ► it is: Jesus does not deny our need for righteousness; He's our only hope for it. Jesus says we do indeed need righteousness to enter the kingdom of heaven, but our own righteousness is not going to cut it. That's what Jesus is saying in the third hunk of our text. It's in ► Verse 20, where Jesus says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now, this statement is a shocker. During Jesus' ministry on earth, the people considered most holy, most righteous, most devout, most moral, most virtuous were called the scribes and Pharisees. They were clergy, the professional do-gooders.

So this is like saying, "Unless you are a greater philanthropist than Mother Theresa and a greater evangelist than Billy Graham and a greater social reformer than Martin Luther King and a greater prophet than Muhammad and more peaceable than Gandhi and wiser than Confucius and more holy than the Pope, you're not getting into heaven, period."

I don't think Jesus intends this to be an encouragement to try harder to develop our own righteous. Rather, it's an encouragement to abandon our own righteousness altogether as a means of trying to get to heaven. Because it won't work.

Apart from Christ, we all lack the goodness required to be right with God. We lack true righteousness, true goodness. That was the whole point of the Mosaic Law: to show us we are sinners in need of a Savior. We must trust not in our own righteousness for eternal salvation, but in Christ alone. And having trusted in Christ, we receive the righteousness of God as a gift. This does not make believers good people; it merely gives them good standing before God. They are justified or counted as righteous.

The exchange is described in ► 2 Corinthians 5:21. It's an exchange in which Jesus takes on our sin and bears the punishment for it, while we, in turn, receive His righteousness. It ► says,

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

This exchange is activated by our faith, not our goodness. We do nothing to earn it. It has nothing to do with our righteousness, only His. We simply believe in Jesus to make things right, and His righteousness is credited to our account. In ► Philippians 3:9, Paul says that he wants to . . .

<sup>NAU</sup> Philippians 3:9 . . . be found in Him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith

Having received this God-righteousness by faith, we are forever forgiven, forever saved from the penalty of our sin, forever free from spiritual bankruptcy, forever adopted into God's family. It's because of Him. Not us.

Friday, I got a call from a member of our church. Her neighbor, whom I had never met, was in the hospital, losing her fight against cancer. She was terribly afraid of what was going to happen to her when she dies. So the church member called me and asked me to come.

When I arrived, I saw her laying there, no hair, her body ravaged by the cancer, surrounded by her mother and daughter and sister. I said, "I'm so sorry you're having to go through this. I understand that you have some concerns that you might like me to address. Is that right?"

She explained that she was afraid that God was punishing her with the cancer and that she was going to be alone in hell after she died.

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

She cried and began recounting one thing after another—things she's done wrong. Family members understandably tried to console her, saying that she's a good person.

I said, "May I have your permission to tell you what I think?" She nodded yes.

I said, "Well, I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that you aren't good enough to get to heaven on your own. Neither am I. Neither is anyone in this room, or the rest of the world. The Bible tells us that we all fall short; we've all sinned. If God operated purely on the merit system, we'd all be headed for hell, because we're all a bunch of screw-ups."

"But the good news is that God doesn't operate on the merit system. He operates on the grace system. By His death and resurrection for our sins, Jesus Christ alone offers the free gift of eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. He paid for your wrongdoing and mine, that we might have forgiveness and eternal life by simply believing in Him."

"You can be assured of heaven, and you needn't fear, if you'll simply believe in Jesus for eternal life. Do you believe?"

She said, "I hope to God. Yes, I believe."

It's not her story of being good enough. It's not my story of saying the right things. It's His story of grace in progress.

This ► life is His story in progress. Not ours. To whom does all of Scripture point? Jesus. Who are we obligated to obey? Jesus. In whom must we trust to receive eternal life? Jesus.

It's not about you. Or me. All things have not been created for us. We are not before all things. All things do not revolve around us.

Rather, Colossians ► 1:16-17 tells us:

<sup>NAU</sup> Colossians 1:16 . . . all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Jesus is not to be a footnote or a chapter or even the dedication in my life story. Jesus *is* life's story. This life is *His* story in progress. I merely have a part. And so do you. Ours is to find it.

Are you looking?