

Matthew 5:17-20: Exegeting Scripture

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Setting

The events described in the book of Matthew take place in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the surrounding lands in the occupied Greco-Roman Empire during the early first century, between six B.C. and thirty-three A.D. Understanding the historical context of the Hebrew nation during this time gives deeper meaning to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17-20. After God rescued the Israelites from slavery and oppression in Egypt (Ex. 1-14), He brought them to a mountain where they eagerly agreed to enter into a covenant relationship with Yahweh (Exodus 19). To distinguish God's chosen people as holy and set apart from other nations, God's chosen people were given a law that would guide them. The law was meant to be an application of divine wisdom that would allow the Israelite nation to discern the divine ideal of covenant faithfulness.¹

Israel immediately rebelled. Judge after judge, king after king, and prophet after prophet, Israel remained unfaithful to God. Israel's prophets accused and warned Israel of covenant unfaithfulness, corruption, idolatry, and social injustices, but they rejected the call to repent. Therefore, God exiled the Israelite nation from their land through enemy captivity. Eventually, God's mercy and unfailing love brought the Israelite nation back into their land despite Israel's rebellious heart. The prophets hoped a future anointed, Davidic king would rescue and redeem the Israelite nation and restore God's presence amongst them (Dan. 2, Ps. 2, Ez. 43, Isa. 11, 53). In the first century A.D. the Roman occupation was believed to be a result of more covenant unfaithfulness. This is the story that Jesus saw himself fulfilling in Matthew 5:17-20. Jesus knew Himself to be the anticipated Christ and believed the heart change that the prophets foretold (Jer. 31:31-34, Joel 2:28-29, Ez. 36-37) would only come through Him and His faithfulness to God,

¹ John H Walton, *Wisdom for Faithful Reading* (InterVarsity Press, 2023), 117.

not out of obligation to a written text, but rather, to a transcendent set of values of which the written law, and all of Scripture, are an expression of.

The discussion text introduces Jesus' six antitheses regarding the relationship of the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and the nature of His kingdom, saying, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (Matt. 5:17). The need for Jesus to address the fact that He was not omitting the Torah speaks volumes to the misunderstanding people had of His kingdom and consequently, the anticipated Messiah. To better understand Jesus' words, it is imperative to understand two important cultural features for first century Jews. First, given Isaiah Forty and Malachi Four, an Israelite's natural assumption was that it would be very obvious when God's chosen, messianic king would bring His people back from "exile". Already in Matthew collection of Jesus' short-lived ministry, Jesus' teaching and miracles demonstrated that His Kingdom was not actually as clear as most thought and those waiting for the Messiah were not all going to be convinced.

Secondly, Israel's (dis)obedience of the Mosaic law affected their understanding of Jesus' mission, rule, and kingdom. Israel's purity and impurity laws deemed that if one came in contact with someone impure, they would become impure too. And the reverse, when one came in contact with God's holiness, they become holy. This is why Jesus' fearless healing (Matt. 3:23-25) and teachings to the societal outcasts (Matt. 5:3-11) were so significant. He touched and healed diseases, sicknesses and demon possessed people. Any of those things would render a normal Israelite impure, but instead Jesus' contagious holiness transformed impurity to purity, making people fit for the presence of God.² With a people listening and watching Jesus teach on

² Mackie, Tim. *God's Wisdom in the Law*. Bible Project, 20 May 2019, <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/gods-wisdom-law/>. Accessed 09 Oct. 2023. Podcast.

the reign of His upside-down kingdom, He first had to dispel that He was not there to remove the law, as some might have thought His actions demonstrated, but to fulfill it.

Purpose

The book of Matthew is written to show Jesus as the continuation and fulfillment of the entire biblical story of God's rescue and partnership with humanity. Matthew's account emphasizes that Jesus is the Messiah from the line of David, Jesus as a new Moses and true Adam, and God with humanity through the incarnation of Jesus. Matthew opens with a genealogy of Jesus that highlights Him as the Messianic, Davidic son (Matt. 1:1-17). When the angel talked to Joseph regarding the birth of Jesus, Joseph is referred to as "Joseph, son of David", despite the genealogy outlined immediately prior to this incident that listed Joseph as the son of Jacob. This serves as another example of how Matthew revealed Jesus as the seed from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:1). Jesus' birth story - conceived by Holy Spirit (Isa. 11:1-3, Malachi 3:1), born in Bethlehem (Micah 5), called Immanuel, the God of Israel embodied as a human (Isa. 7) - unveils Him as the anointed, Messianic king for which the prophets hoped.

Matthew's literary design of Jesus coming up out of Egypt (Matt. 2), passing through the waters of the Jordan in baptism (Matt. 3), testing in the wilderness for forty days (Matt. 4), and going up to a mountain to give new teachings of covenant love and faithfulness (Matt. 5-7), demonstrated Jesus to be the promised greater-than-Moses figure (Deut. 18:15-19). Matthew also demonstrates Jesus to be the true Adam. The sequential scenes of Jesus' conception as Holy Spirit empowered (Matt. 1), His baptism that inaugurated His ministry (Matt. 3), and His temptation by the devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4) parallels Genesis One and Two where Adam was created by God's animating Spirit, called to rule and tend the garden, and was tempted by the slanderer. However, opposite of Adam and Eve who fell prey to sin, Jesus proved power over

the snake. In the closing section of his book, Matthew contrasts Jesus Barabbas, a well-known prisoner, with Jesus the Messiah, in a trial scene before Pontius Pilot to prove Jesus as the Adam we were created to be but failed to live into (Matt. 27).

Although there are three other accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that also reveal Him to be the fulfillment of the entire Scriptures, Matthew's book has more Old Testament language, imagery, and prophesy than any of the other books. This additional context in Matthew's use of the Old Testament gives readers a brighter and fuller understanding of Jesus- the anointed, Messianic King from the line of David who became the suffering servant (Isa. 53), walked in perfect and wholly innocence as the Son of Man (Matt. 27:11-19, Psalms 110, and Dan. 7), and lived as God's presence with humanity (Matt. 28:20).

Theme

A major theme in the book of Matthew is God's kingdom that Jesus saw himself bringing to earth. Matthew writes, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here'" (Matt. 4:17). Over fifty times Matthew highlights the reality that God's kingdom had arrived and proved Jesus to be the fulfillment of the entire biblical narrative. It began with God creating a unified and beautiful place where heaven and earth were as one and human beings bore the image of God. Eden was broken by man (humanity) when he chose to seize abundance and life on his own terms and his own wisdom instead of the blessing and abundance of life that God offered. Consequently, man brought hell (evil) to earth. But God Himself intervened by becoming a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived the hell free life humanity was meant to live. Evil exhausted its power on Jesus when He was crucified, but when He rose from the dead, He defeated death and freed those who choose to put their allegiance in Him.

The main idea Matthew 5:17-20 conveys is that whatever people thought Jesus was doing, teaching, and proclaiming was in fact the absolute embodiment of what it meant to be a true human. Jesus knew salvation for the nations would come only through Him and His faithfulness to God, not out of obligation to a written text, but by obeying a transcendent set of values, love God and love others, of which the written law and all of Scripture are an expression of (Matt. 22:34-40). This is why Jesus proclaimed He was fulfilling God's restorative program not by doing away with the law or Torah, but by perfectly embodying it. His blameless life was the only eternal substitute that was able to be offered up on man's behalf to reunify oneness and right relationship with creation again. The apostle Paul connects the theme of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus bringing the kingdom of heaven and all the implications, and Jesus fulfilling of the law and Prophets, saying "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; The old has gone, the new is here...for God made [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:17,21).

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus boldly proclaimed He was the one to fulfill all of Scripture by being the true Adam who would listen to the voice of God and do what every command required. Matthew contextually develops this in the sequential scenes of Jesus' conception as Holy Spirit empowered (Matt. 1), His baptism that inaugurated His ministry (Matt. 3), and His temptation by the devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4). These scenes parallel Genesis One and Two where Adam was created by God's animating Spirit, called to rule and tend the garden, and was tempted by the slanderer. However, opposite of Adam and Eve who fell prey to sin, Jesus proved power over the snake. In the first five chapters alone, Jesus uses the word "fulfills" seven times. Matthew wants his audience to see the relation between Jesus as the true Adam and the fulfillment of all of Scripture.

Context

Immediately before Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus was teaching a crowd of marginalized outcasts from all over the country, proclaiming how His kingdom was going to come to and through them and people like them. This is illustrated by the connection between Matthew 4:23-35 and Matthew 5:1. Jesus had just healed people with diseases, demons, and illnesses. Based off of purity laws and a popular belief that ailments came as a result of sin (John 9:1-2), they would have been treated poorly, rejected by others, and deemed societal outcasts. These kinds of followers formed the crowds that Jesus taught to from the mountain top. They would have related most to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:3-16 of being poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, persecuted, and insulted.

After Jesus taught about the kind of people who would live with Him in His kingdom, He immediately taught about the radical nature of His kingdom, known as the six antitheses. Jesus explained to His followers what it looked like to discern the divine ideal of covenant faithfulness underneath the written law code. For example, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:27-28). Later on, Matthew parallels this with an interaction Jesus had with a rich man, telling him that he must obey the commandments to gain eternal life. "I have kept all of these" the man replied. Jesus then told him to sell his possessions, give to the poor and store up his treasures in heaven. It seems that Jesus expounds upon the spirit of the law, while the rich man lived by the letter of the law. Jesus' interactions and teachings preserved by the Biblical authors reveal the only way people were

going to be able to live in His kingdom is if God transformed their hearts by the indwelling of His Spirit that would cause them to walk in the wisdom of His statutes, just like the prophet Ezekiel envisioned (Ez. 36:26-27).

Matthew 5:17-20 is vital to the book as a whole because it reveals Jesus' kingdom to be a continuation from the old to new covenant but carried out in a discontinuous way. For example, Jesus no longer requires physical circumcision as a covenant of old, but He does require a circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29). Animal sacrifices are no longer required, but a substitute atonement still needs to be offered for the cleansing of sins and blameless covering to enter God's presence which Jesus' life, death, and resurrection accomplished. While Jesus said He did not come to abolish the law but fulfill it, He demands His followers to live by the wisdoms of the law guided by Holy Spirit. Without Matthew's text, followers of Jesus who read Matthew's book could easily turn to legalism (one must follow the rules in order to be saved) or antinomianism (because one is saved, they could live however they want) instead as transformed ambassadors of Jesus guided by the wisdoms of the law now written on their hearts.

Outline

Matthew 5:17-20 is the introduction to a larger literary section, known as the "six anthesis", ending in Matthew 5:48. This text reveals Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament and its relationship to His ethical teachings, upside down nature of His kingdom, explained in verses 21-48, as well as other places throughout Matthew's book. The text at hand is derived in four distinct yet successive sentences addressing the reign and rule in the Kingdom of heaven that Jesus talks on in the rest of Matthew's gospel.

- I. Jesus fulfills all the Hebrew Scriptures (Matt. 5:17)
 - a. Jesus rebuttals the accusations (Matt. 5:21-7:29)

- b. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us (Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:23, 28:20)
- c. Jesus is the prophesied Messianic King (2 Sam. 7:12-13, Isa. 11:1, Matt. 1:1)
- d. Jesus is the greater than Moses like Prophet (Hosea 11:1, Matt. 2:15, 3:13, 4:1-2, 5:1-48)

II. The Law remains (Matt. 5:18)

- a. Jesus has authority in His speech (John 12:49)
- b. The application of Divine wisdom (Matt. 5:21-48, Ez. 36:26-27)
- c. The Spirit of the law (Matt. 5:21-48, Jer. 31:31-34)

III. Jesus' reverence for the Law (Matt. 5:19)

- a. Love God, love others (Matt. 22:34-40)

IV. A true righteous one (Matt. 5:20)

- a. Only Jesus meets the righteous requirement of the law (Rom. 8:1-4)
- b. The law as a guardian until the time of Jesus (Gal. 3:24, Gal. 5:18)

Expository Summary

Jesus fulfills all the Hebrew Scriptures (Matt. 5:17)

The Jewish people saw Jesus' radical demeanor and teachings as scandalous. They raised accusations that He was forsaking the history of their ancestors preserved in the Scriptures and this charged Jesus' rebuttal that He did not come *to abolish the Law or the Prophets*.³ Rather, Jesus *fulfilled them* and by becoming the embodiment of all the Scripture, He provided the final revelation of God's redemptive plan for humanity. Jesus became Emmanuel, God with us, someone Isaiah foretold would come and dwell with His people forevermore (Isa. 7:14, Matt.

³ R T France, *The Gospel according to Matthew :An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans ; Leicester, England, 2002), 1:119.

28:20). He was the promised Messianic King, the stump of Jesse, from the line of David that would deliver God's people from an enemy greater than Egypt, Babylon (2 Sam. 7:12-13, Isa. 11:1, Matt. 1:1). Jesus was a greater than Moses prophet. Jesus' life patterned that of Moses as He came out of Egypt (Matt. 2:15, Hosea 11:1), passed into the Jordan river (Matt. 3:13), remained in the wilderness for forty days (Matt. 4:1-2) and taught a new command from the mountain (Matt. 5). Jesus will ultimately lead His people into the Eden city (Acts 7:38, Rev. 21-22).

The Law remains (Matt. 5:18)

Similar to the prophets' phrase, "Thus says the Lord," Jesus' signature line: *Truly I say to you* highlights His authority of speech given from the Father (John 12:49). Matthew and John record Jesus saying this phrase over fifty times in their gospels. Jesus' references, *until heaven and earth disappear* and *until everything is accomplished*, are common apocalyptic language to designate God's complete renewal of creation.⁴ He sandwiches *not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear* with these references in order to emphasize the authority of the law over His followers' lives⁵ Jesus reclaims the divine ideal of covenant faithfulness (Spirit of the law) underneath the written law that Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesied (Ez. 36:26-27, Jer. 31:31-34). To Jesus and his followers, the law will remain until it reaches its intended culmination because the source of obligation is not to a written text but to a transcendent set of values of which the written law code is an expression (Matt. 5:21-7:29).

Jesus' reverence for the Law (Matt. 5:19)

⁴ Ibid., 1:120.

⁵ Scot McKnight and Tremper Longman, III, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016).

Jesus' sacred regard for the Hebrew Scriptures is unequivocal. He juxtaposes those who do not take the law seriously (using *least*) with those who take the law very seriously (using *great*) in order to highlight the devotion and effectiveness of a disciple of Jesus.⁶ Jesus makes it clear to His followers that anyone who is a disciple of Him is called to have the same devotion for the law as Him. Later in Matthew it becomes clearer that Jesus' reverence for the law is derived from the fact that He sees its summation as total and complete love for God and others (Matt. 22:34-40).

A true righteous one (Matt. 5:20)

Jesus dispels any sense of legalism from past, present, and future generations. There is only One who can bring about a *righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law*.⁷ Jesus' method of contrasting the outward and formal righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes with that of the inward, spiritual righteousness is done to emphasize the righteousness one received by putting their faith in Jesus the Messiah (Rom. 8:1-4). Indeed, some of the scribes and Pharisees might have had the very righteousness demanded by the law, but Jesus is not speaking of the letter of the law, but of the system the law represented.⁸ The law was a guardian until Jesus came. His followers are no longer under the care of a guardian, but are justified by faith through the indwelling of His Spirit (Gal. 3:24, 5:18).

Theological Contribution

Matthew 5:17-20 provides pivotal revelation of God's new covenant with His people. Up to this point in the Biblical narrative, it has only been prophesied that God would establish a new covenant with His people. Jeremiah recorded God's new covenant promise that He would "put

⁶ R.T. France, 1:121.

⁷ Robert Jamieson, Andrew Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Logos Research Systems, 2017), 2:21.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

[His] law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:32-33), whom Joel attributed as the pouring out of God’s Spirit (Joel 2:28-29). God also told Ezekiel that He would transform His covenant people through a new covenant by giving them a new heart that will cause them to obey His statutes and observe His laws (Ez. 36:26-27). Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus this Spirit-filled, new creation humanity could now walk in union with the Cosmic Creator. In other words, Jesus claimed, and proved, to be the new covenant God promised.

Matthew 5:17 theologically contributes to the relationship between this new covenant and the covenant of old. Jesus said He did not come to eradicate the old covenant given to Moses and the Israelite nation on Mount Sinai, but rather, He brought the law and all the Scriptures into a state of completion. Jesus reclaimed the divine ideal of covenant faithfulness, through a life guide by Holy Spirit, underneath the written law just as Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesied. Jesus posed two strongly divergent options to His followers: either they continue with the traditional way of law observance, ignoring the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, or they accept His divine authority that has become the true intention of the law.⁹ For Jesus and His new covenant, the law still remained because the source of obligation was not to a written text but to a transcendent set of values of which the written law code is an expression (Matt. 5:21-7:29).

Matthew 5:20 also theologically contributes to the way one is to keep new covenant faithfulness. In the past, righteousness was attained through the physical acts of circumcision, sacrifices, and offerings. But by referring to a righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus claimed He was the only one who could bring about a perfect, right standing relationship with the Father that His new covenant demanded. Therefore, the new covenant righteousness can only be realized by placing one’s faith in Jesus the Messiah. The biblical

⁹ Francois P Viljoen, “The Foundational Statement in Matthew 5:17-20 on the Continuing Validity of the Law,” *In die skriflig* 45, no. 2/3 (June 22, 2011).

authors later reflect on Jesus' proclamation and conclude that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23) but to those who put their faith in His name, He indwells with His Spirit, transforming them into His righteousness and giving them the right to be called children of God (Rom. 3:23, Rom. 10:4, 2 Cor. 5:21, John 1:12-13).

Biblical Principles

When Jesus claimed, and proved through His life, death, and resurrection, that He fulfilled all of Scripture (Matt. 5:17), He made it possible for humanity to live in right relationship with God once again. This biblical principle of Jesus as the promised Messiah is foundational for the Christian life. Paul calls Jesus the cornerstone of our faith (Eph. 2:19-22). The fact that Jesus proved to be the faithful Adam, the greater than Moses prophet, and the eternal Davidic King, means that one can put full trust and allegiance in Him. No longer do people have to rely on themselves for guidance, strength, answers, or wisdom. Rather, they can have confidence that King Jesus, the proven One, rules with compassion and grace and is slow to anger, abundant of loyal love and faithfulness (Ex. 34:6). All who walk as children of the Light must take refuge in Jesus just like the Psalter, who proclaimed, "My soul finds rest in God; my hope comes from Him. Truly He is my rock and my salvation; He is my fortress; I will not be shaken" (Ps. 62:5-6). Jesus is the Messiah, the king, whom all must and can confidently trust with their lives because he fulfilled all of Scripture by living the only life free of sin and in perfect relationship with the Father at all times.

Jesus' method of contrasting the outward and formal righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes with that of the inward, spiritual righteousness in Matthew 5:20 is meant to emphasize the righteousness one receives by putting their faith in Jesus the Messiah, the only true righteous

One (Rom. 8:1-4). The Biblical principle found in this verse is that followers of Jesus can forever live in relationship with God and experience His presence, through the indwelling of His Spirit, because of Jesus' righteousness that has become our own. In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he writes "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Paul continues his line of thought by affirming that all followers of Jesus have become the holy temple of God, the indwelling of His Spirit, that is not made of human hands but by the sacrifice of the Lamb (Eph. 2:19-22, Acts 17:24).

This principle is incredibly relevant today because believers are able to intimately experience the presence of God at any moment and place in time. No longer is there a veil that separates His people from the Holy of Holies because Jesus is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). No longer is there a human intercessor that goes to God on behalf of the people. Instead, all Jesus followers have become a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) who can enter His throne room because of the life-giving blood of Jesus (Heb. 4:16). The author of Hebrews provides rich imagery of the assurance followers of Jesus have when entering God's presence, saying "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22). Because of Jesus, it is possible to walk in step with God, through His indwelling Spirit, as His ambassadors who partake in eradicating the hell on earth by being and bringing His presence and kingdom to earth.

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