

# How the Bible Fits Together

Matthew 5:17-20

February 3, 2019



Today we are continuing our journey through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7.<sup>1</sup> We began 2 weeks ago by looking at the Beatitudes. Then, last week, Pastor Eric talked about our calling to be Salt & Light for the Glory of God.<sup>2</sup> The passage that we are looking at today, Matthew 5:17-20, will cause us to take a closer look at the relevance of the Old Testament. Recently, a well-known pastor, one of my favorite speakers actually, made a startling statement about the Old Testament. Most of you would recognize his name if I wrote it. He leads a church of over 30,000 people in Georgia. In a recent book he writes: "The Ten Commandments have no authority over you. None. To be clear: Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments."<sup>3</sup> He makes this controversial statement as part of a sincere effort to make the gospel more accessible, more palatable to non-Christians. His intentions are in line with the famous Council at Jerusalem in Acts 15. This was a time early in the church's history, when the church leaders were trying to figure out what to do with Jews and Gentiles who were coming together in the same Church. They were debating things like circumcision, various dietary laws, and so on. This all made sense to the Jews but the Gentiles were pretty confused by a lot of this. Finally, a key church leader named James, stepped up and made this compelling statement in Acts 15:19, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." In other words, James seemed to be saying that there were various Old Testament customs that weren't prerequisites for Gentiles to become Christians.

For us today, this opens up the broader question: Just how relevant is the Old Testament, to living out our faith as New Testament Christians? Just how do the Old Testament and New Testament relate to one another? In other words, how does the Bible fit together? The Bible is a loooooong book. Actually, it's one book composed of 66 shorter books. Those 66 books are divided into 2 distinct subsections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. But how do we connect these subsections, which are separated by hundreds of years and separated by 2 different languages (Hebrew/Greek)? They are even further separated by the most pivotal event in all of human history, i.e. the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This historical event was, in fact, so radically transformative, that it has caused some Bible teachers to almost entirely disregard the Old Testament. Caused them to say, in essence, "Out with the old and in with the new!"<sup>4</sup>

If you have a paper copy of the Bible, please get it and open it to Matthew 1:1. This is essentially where the Old Testament and the New Testament come together. I want you to hold the New Testament in your right hand and the Old Testament in your left hand. Now tip it so that you can look at the top edge of your Bible's binding. Roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of God's written revelation is found in the Old Testament. Should we toss out the back  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our Bibles? As New Testament Christians, are we essentially wasting our time reading and studying the Old Testament? Let's find the answer to that question.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew's Gospel lays out five key discourses or teaching sections. Matthew 5-7, The Sermon on the Mount, is the 1st and longest of these five. Luke 6:20-49 is a parallel passage referred to as the "Sermon on the Plain." These are very likely the same sermon but Matthew and Luke each record the particular details that were most beneficial to their particular Gospel account and its purpose and priorities. See discussion by D. A. Carson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pp. 154-155 and the top of 159.

<sup>2</sup> Today, we are going to consider Mt. 5:17-20, which will set the stage for the rest of the entire chapter. In fact, what we come to understand today will set up the context for the next 6 topics in Matthew 5. Therefore, this is a key section to grasp before we read any further.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 136. Learn more by reading reviews by Michael Kruger: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/irresistible-andy-stanley/> and Kevin DeYoung: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/ten-commandments-authority-new-testament-christians/> There is also a very interesting podcast called "The Holy Post." In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the January 30, 2019 episode (#336) there is an interesting conversation between Skye Jethani and Mike Erre. Check it out!

<sup>4</sup> Let's keep learning from church history. Learn about a man named Marcion at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/marcion-getting-unhitched-old-testament/>

Please turn your Bible to Matthew 5:17. In verse 17, Jesus refers to “the Law or the Prophets.” This is a way of referring to all of the written Scriptures that make up Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> Here’s what Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” When Jesus begins by saying, “Do not think,” He means DON’T misunderstand me here!<sup>6</sup> Let me be as clear as I can about what the kingdom of heaven is all about: “I did not come to abolish the Old Testament.” Rather, Jesus reminds us to...

**1) Honor the Old Testament.** Jesus honors the Old Testament in many ways, including by coming to fulfill it. This means that He came to complete its intended purpose.<sup>7</sup> Jesus will bring all of the promises and predictions of the Old Testament to their intended goal.<sup>8</sup> Jesus came into the world on a mission, not a mission to get rid of the Old Testament nor even to simply endorse it.<sup>9</sup> Jesus came to authoritatively give it, its full meaning!<sup>10</sup> This is what amazed the listening crowd, “because he taught as one who had authority.” (*Matthew 7:29*) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is declaring that His teaching on these matters is the correct way of understanding God’s commands. He is proclaiming that His understanding of God’s righteousness is THE one and only correct understanding.

It’s interesting to note how the grammar in the Sermon on the Mount has progressed up to this point: Verses 1-10 began with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person referring to “those,” “Blessed are THOSE who mourn.” Verses 11-16 move to the 2<sup>nd</sup> person “you,” “YOU are the salt of the earth; YOU are the light of the world.” But now, in verses 17-48, Jesus moves to the authoritative 1<sup>st</sup> person “I,” “I tell you.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, we will find 9 different occurrences of “I tell you” in the rest of Matthew 5. Nobody else talked this way. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law didn’t claim any authority in and of themselves, they just quoted other authorities.” But Jesus... Jesus spoke with His own authority.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in the weeks to come, as we continue our journey through the Sermon on the Mount, we will see Jesus correct some of the misunderstandings about God’s commands. We’ll see Him clarify some parts of it and intensify the reach of other parts. But, Jesus makes Himself clear in Matthew 5:18, “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” “Not the smallest letter” will disappear. The Greek New Testament uses the word “ἰῶτα,”<sup>13</sup> which is a really small letter. It’s where we get our English expression: “Not one iota.” Jesus goes even smaller though, by referring to the “least stroke of a pen.” Today’s equivalent might be dotting our “i” or crossing our “t.” Some of us older folks are more familiar with the KJV phrasing “one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”<sup>14</sup>

Ok, that’s all well and good, thanks for the grammar lesson Pastor Jerry! But what’s the point? The point is that Jesus is upholding the authority of the Old Testament at its highest level.<sup>15</sup> He is not diminishing it in any way nor is He dismissing even the very least part of it. In other words, Jesus taught that the Old Testament continues to have value and authority in the life of each Christian. Jesus has a high view of the Old Testament and so should we as His followers. ***We need to honor the Old Testament!***

Matthew 5:19 goes on to warn us, “Therefore **anyone who sets aside** one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Now, at this point, some of you may be thinking: “well, ok Pastor Jerry, I hear you. Honor the Old Testament.

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<sup>5</sup> “Taken together, ‘the Law’ and ‘the Prophets’ designated the entire Old Testament, including the Writings, the third section of the Hebrew Bible.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1600.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed.: Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1938 (Craig L. Blomberg)

<sup>8</sup> Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 103). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>9</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, pp. 70-71.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful discussion on how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and a good explanation of “Fulfillment Theology,” See Frederic M. Martin, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, pp. 87-100 and 139-151.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> “In Matthew 5:18 it is evidently the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic *yod* which, in the original form of the saying, represented the smallest letter of the alphabet.” Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 487). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See the title for Psalm 119:73 in *NIV* 2011 for an example of the Hebrew *Yodh*.

<sup>14</sup> *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Mt 5:18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 178.

But... it's not like we're going to go to the temple and perform the sacrifices that are commanded in the Old Testament! I mean, does God really want New Testament Christ-followers to practice and teach all the Old Testament purity laws? Because that could be interesting! There are rules about skin diseases and examining molds and clean/unclean foods. Is Jesus really teaching that we shouldn't set aside ANY of these commands?" Well, kind of. This is right where many of us get pretty confused about how the Bible fits together. But let's dig into these verses a little deeper and see if we can find some clarity. Jesus makes His declaration about not setting aside the Old Testament commands, immediately following the phrase in verse 18, "**until everything is accomplished.**" And He is teaching this, at a time in history, BEFORE His own death/resurrection. Even today, not everything is accomplished yet, but certainly a lot was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' once and for all, perfect sacrifice for sin, moved us out from under the Old Covenant.<sup>16</sup> This is where we need to...

**2) Use discernment in applying Old Testament commands.** And it's why, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus made sure that the books of the New Testament canon were written down for us. Thus, we have books like Hebrews to explain in detail what has now been accomplished through Jesus' work on the cross. In other words, a significant portion of the Old Testament was directly fulfilled by Jesus, when He went to the cross. We need to be careful here though, because it begins to sound like we're trying to be sneaky. Hebrews clarifies that while there is an important bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is also a vital distinction between the old COVENANT and the new COVENANT. Hebrews 8:13 says it this way, "By calling this covenant "new," [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear." In other words, the new covenant in Jesus' blood greatly surpasses the old covenant. To be clear, this does NOT make the entire Old Testament obsolete, but it does cause some of its commands and practices, under the old covenant, to become obsolete and outdated.

Many people find it helpful to consider 3 subsections for the Old Testament commands.<sup>17</sup> These subsections are generalizations. But, they can help us to better understand which parts of the Old Testament are still applicable to New Testament Christians, and which parts are only helpful for study purposes. The 1<sup>st</sup> subsection is the...

**1 – Old Testament Ceremonial Laws.** All of the Old Testament Ceremonial Laws were fulfilled by Jesus' sacrifice. They have become obsolete, now that the once and for all, perfect sacrifice has been made. In other words, there is no longer any need for New Testament Christ-followers to sacrifice animals, for example. All of the foreshadowing's of the temple and the temple rituals are now outdated, because the realities that they foreshadowed, have now come to pass through Christ.<sup>18</sup> This is why Hebrews 10:1a, 18 tell us, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves... And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary." In a similar way, Colossians 2:16-17 says, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." The 2<sup>nd</sup> subsection is the...

**2 – Old Testament Civil Laws.** All of the Old Testament Civil Laws were designed to help the nation of Israel function as a society of God's people. This is far from the multi-cultural reality in the church today, where Gentiles are being grafted in at a high percentage.<sup>19</sup> Jesus' death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, launched the beginning of the Church, which then quickly grew into an assembly of both Jews AND Gentiles from many nations. Now, I want to be careful here because it would take a much longer sermon to navigate how Old Testament Israel and the New

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<sup>16</sup> "They will endure for all time but with the important qualification 'until everything is accomplished.' With the coming of Christ, many aspects of the law are brought to complete fruition (e.g., the need for sacrifices, on which see Hebrews)." Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 104). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>17</sup> While these 3 subdivisions can be helpful in distinguishing some broad observations; let's understand that they are simply generalizations. These 3 subdivisions are not clearly articulated in the Bible itself. Therefore, they lack the exactitude one might need at various points of application.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin says, "It was only the use of [the Old Testament ceremonies] that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed." Referenced by John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Consider Romans 11 and Ephesians 2:11-22.

Testament Church relate to one another. My only point right now is that God's people are no longer limited to one nation. The Old Testament Civil Laws were mostly designed for life within that nation.<sup>20</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> subsection is the...

**3 – Old Testament Moral Laws.** The Old Testament Moral Laws are not timebound in the way that the other laws tend to be. They are timeless because they are based on the unchanging character of God and His immutable attributes. In other words, the moral laws that we find in the Old Testament are not made obsolete by Jesus' death and resurrection, nor do they become outdated. Therefore, this runs exactly contrary to the opening statement I quoted about the Ten Commandments having "no authority over you....Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments." I disagree. And, I would argue, so does Jesus. **We need to use discernment in applying Old Testament commands!** We need to be careful not to categorically dismiss the entire Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, there are certain things that have become obsolete. On the other hand, we need to remember that, MUCH of what the Old Testament says, still directly applies to God's people today. It is STILL binding and it still offers helpful, practical advice for godly living. That's why, in the verses that follow, we will find Jesus reaffirming some of these laws and even amplifying their application for New Testament Christians.

That actually segues nicely into our final verse. In Matthew 5:20 Jesus says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus "mentions the Pharisees and [teachers of the law] precisely because they were a [poster child] of the greatest righteousness imaginable within Judaism."<sup>22</sup> However, if we were to jump ahead to Matthew 23, we'd see that Jesus lays out a list of 7 different woes against the Pharisees. They are nothing less than a stinging, public rebuke of their hypocrisy and their empty spirituality. Jesus often criticized the teaching of the Pharisees, and here's why: although some of their rules and regulations were good, they fell far short of "the radical demand for absolute holiness demanded by the [Old Testament]."<sup>23</sup> Their teaching was actually shutting people OUT of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>24</sup> By the time Jesus gets to the end of chapter 5, He crescendos with this definition of righteousness: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (*Matthew 5:48*)<sup>25</sup>

In other words, Jesus didn't come to lower the bar or to make God's commands less difficult. Just the opposite, He wanted to restore our understanding of God's incredible holiness and our understanding of what makes the Kingdom of Heaven so truly distinctive. We will find specific examples of what Jesus means in the following verses. Jesus picks out some particular teachings that He wants to clarify, to reaffirm, and to amplify. As we look at the rest of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, what we will come to realize is that...

**3) Together the Testaments call for greater righteousness.** Through a powerful style of teaching, by comparing and contrasting various ideas, Jesus will cast a vision for a greater righteousness; a righteousness worthy of His Kingdom. He will cycle through a series of statements, "You have heard that it was said...But I tell you..." This greater righteousness is vital, because without it, verse 20 says that you and I will certainly NOT enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The Old Testament and the New Testament share this in common: God's righteousness surpasses all others and **He calls us, as His people, to greater righteous!**<sup>26 27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For example, see Deuteronomy 24:10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Consider the 1 Peter 1:19 reference to the "prophetic message" of the Old Testament as well as John 5:39.

<sup>22</sup> Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 105). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>23</sup> D. A. Carson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> See Matthew 23:13.

<sup>25</sup> This echoes back to Leviticus 19:2, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:20 doesn't lay out any kind of plan for how we can reach such a high standard of righteousness, or how we can develop this kind of deep, spiritual maturity, or even where we can find the power to live such a radically holy life; it just clearly states that the demand is there. D. A. Carson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Rev. Ed.*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 179.

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 61:3 prophesies what people in the Kingdom of Heaven will be like: "...They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor." Oak Hills Christian College relates part of its mission and purpose to this verse.