

"Law and Letters"

Matthew 5:17-20

Overview



Most of us have a divided relationship with the law of our land. On the one hand we are so grateful for the order that it brings (and for the brave men and women in blue who ensure that chaos does not run rampant in the streets).

On the other hand, who of us has not griped at a law we feel is unjust (or stretched a law or two for our benefit – such as adding a few kilometers on to the speed limit when we are running behind)? In a word – it's complicated.

Jesus too seemingly defied the law at times. But His life was not one of disobedience. Rather it was one of greater definition and fulfillment. And now He calls us to just such an understanding (and life) as well.

Getting Started *The Letter of the Law*



1. Christ says nothing from the Law will be lost. What is one thing you have a habit of losing?
2. Do you have someone in your family involved in some aspect of the legal system (enforcement, law firm, etc.). Who are they and what do they do?
3. If there was one law you could change, which one would it be and how would you change it?

The Text



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. 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.

Matthew 5:17-20 (NIV)

The Video (optional) "Law and Letters" – Matthew 5:17-20 - by Mikey Pierson, Feb. 21/21
(view at www.immanuelonline.ca)



NOTES: _____

Understanding



1. In this passage, what is it that Jesus says He has come to do (vs. 17)? Why do you think Jesus needed to push back on the idea that He was trying to abolish the Law (for example, consider how people would have reacted to the way Jesus introduced His teaching in vs. 21-22)?
2. What does it mean to “fulfill the law” (vs. 17)? For one aspect of meaning, take a look again at vs. 21-22. For other aspects of meaning, review Matt. 1:22-23; Romans 3:21-22, 10:8-14.
3. How permanent is the Law according to verse 18? What is its purpose (see Romans 10:4, Gal. 3:23-25, 2 Tim. 3:16-17)? When will “everything be accomplished”? What about after that? Does Jesus mean the law will be lost (or null and void) after that time? Or does He mean something else?
4. How does our treatment of the Law impact our status in Jesus’ Kingdom (verse 19)?
5. What does it mean to be “least in the kingdom of heaven”? What does it mean to be called “great” in that same kingdom?
6. How would you describe the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (vs. 20)? Why was their righteousness not sufficient for gaining entrance into heaven? In what way is our righteousness to be different (see Jer. 31:33)? Give an example of such righteousness.

Applying



1. Jesus connected with sinners despite the rabbis’ teaching that said “Keep thee far from an evil neighbour and consort not with the wicked”. Given what you see in this passage, what would you say was wrong with the Pharisees’ teaching and why was Jesus right in His conduct?
2. The “smallest letter” or “stroke of a pen” can sometimes be omitted without any change in the meaning (in ancient Hebrew). Why is it so important that not even the tiniest part of the law will be lost (vs. 18) (i.e. what does it teach us about the Law (and about God and the way He works))?

3. The Pharisaical view of the law has been described as legalistic. According to Daniel Doriani, there are three types of legalism:
- a) Attempting to attain salvation by works.
 - b) Fabricating new laws based on tradition or misinterpretation of Scripture.
 - c) Concentrating on law and obedience to the exclusion of other facets of the life of faith.

For each of the above, try to think of a current example of such legalism in the church today (and suggest how Jesus would rather have us believe / live).

4. Would you describe what Jesus lays out in the Sermon on the Mount as a legal code? Why or why not? How is what Jesus talks about different? (NB: Consider why it is that Jesus was able to describe the law of His Kingdom without numerous volumes of commentary and legal code such as the Pharisees had.)
5. In verse 19, Jesus comments on both improper and proper teaching of the commands. But in the latter part of the verse, He calls for something in addition to teaching. What does He include and why do you think Jesus felt it important to mention it?
6. A man chooses not to steal something. Is he exhibiting the righteousness sufficient for the kingdom of heaven? How will you decide?
7. Jesus' approach to the law (and His commitment to it (vs. 19)) seems to contradict Paul's approach to the law, especially as Paul talks about freedom from it (see Gal. 2:19, 3:24-25, 5:1-6). How could one account for this apparent contradiction?

Memory Verse(s)



²⁰ 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.

Matthew 5:20 (NIV)

Extra Resources



- ❖ “*Law and Letters*” – *Matthew 5:17-20* - by Mikey Pierson, Feb. 21/21 (view at www.immanuelonline.ca). Mikey helps us understand how Jesus is the fulfillment of all that we see in the Old Testament.
- ❖ “*How Christ Fulfilled and Ended the Old Testament Regime*” – by John Piper (article on www.desiringgod.org, Feb. 23, 2005). This article deals with how we should treat specific aspects of OT law in the modern age.
- ❖ “*Christian – Do You Love God’s Law?*” – by Sinclair Ferguson (article on www.ligonier.org, Jan. 13, 2021). Ferguson explains what our relationship with God’s law should look like.