

# Sermon on the Mount – Part 5

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*Matthew 5:17-20 ~ October 15, 2017*

- Don't cook a young goat in its mother's milk.
  - Don't wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.
  - Don't eat pork or shellfish.
  - Don't plant your field with two kinds of seed.
  - Don't cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.
  - Don't put tattoo marks on your body.
  - If you lend money to a member of God's family, don't charge interest.
  - Don't hold the wages of a hired person overnight.
  - Don't work on the Sabbath
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- Don't commit murder.
  - Don't commit adultery.
  - Don't steal.
  - Don't lie.
  - Don't covet.

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.

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Everything I just read can be found in the Old Testament.

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It's amazing how many Old Testament laws we ignore on a regular basis. It's equally amazing how many we hold up as the foundation for Christian character and behavior and use as a checklist to judge Christian faithfulness.

How are we supposed to know which ones apply today and which ones we can safely ignore? Has anyone ever wondered that before? That's an important internal question for those of us who are committed to following Christ.

It's also a question that takes on added meaning when asked by someone not committed to Christ—especially someone looking to denigrate or undermine Christianity. It's often phrased this way, "How is it that you can pick and choose which rules from the Bible you want to obey? It's obvious that by doing so you are showing yourself to be disingenuous, dishonest, and hypocritical."

Is that charge true? When we observe some Old Testament laws and ignore others, are we being dishonest, disingenuous and hypocritical?

The short answer is no...but the long answer helps us understand why.

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We'll begin exploring the long answer with the next section of the Sermon on the Mount. Please turn to Matthew 5:17-20, page 683-84 in the pew Bibles.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' longest recorded message in the gospels. It describes what human life and community look like when they are done God's way. British pastor and theologian John Stott uses one word to sum up how things look when they are done God's way—and that word is **different**.

**Matthew 5:17–20 (NIV)**

*<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.*

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Because Jesus starts this section by saying, “*Don’t think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets...*” it’s likely some people were thinking exactly that.

We need to understand that Jesus’ followers were steeped in the Jewish culture of the day. They attended synagogue and heard the Scripture read and explained. (For them, Scripture was what we know as the Old Testament.) They watched the Pharisees who were devoted to strictly keeping God’s laws. Then, Jesus showed up and his teaching, actions, and interactions began to raise questions about what they’d always known.

Was this something new? What about all the stuff they’d learned all their lives? It was a legitimate concern and Jesus addressed it.

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He said, “*I did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, I came to fulfill them.*” Well, that’s certainly an answer to the question but what does it mean?” What does it mean to fulfill something?

Jesus wasn’t contradicting the Old Testament; in fulfilling it, He was bringing it to its intended goal.<sup>1</sup> The law was always intended to show people their need to be righteous before God but it was never intended to make them righteous.

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<sup>1</sup> Blomberg, C. (1992). [Matthew](#) (Vol. 22, p. 103). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

The law was a visible and practical illustration of God's holiness and separateness and of people's total inability to bridge that separateness and achieve that holiness...not matter how hard they tried.

Folks in the Old Testament and in Jesus' day viewed the Law differently than we view it today. They lived by the Law in anticipation that Messiah would one day come. We are on the other side of that. We don't live in anticipation of Messiah coming, we live in the light of his coming. That's why Paul wrote to the Galatian church that *"if righteousness could be gained through the law, then Christ died for nothing"* (Galatians 5:21, NIV). He also wrote that *"if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law"* (Galatians 3:21, NIV).

Keeping Old Testament law does not make someone right with God and it never has. But that's kind of what the folks in Jesus' day had been taught. I say "kind of" because they were taught this side by side with the importance of following tradition which added layers and nuances to the Law. So, when Jesus came along and didn't keep the law the way they had been taught to keep it, they had questions. Why was he doing things differently? What did it mean for them? Did it mean the Law was being abolished?

Jesus came to fulfill the law but in fulfilling it he did not make it unimportant. In fact, his teaching, actions, and interactions did not contradict Scripture; they contradicted many of the traditions (the layers and nuances) that had been attached to Scripture over the course of generations.

It is so easy for us to attack the Pharisees and other religious leaders of Jesus' day. But if we have any kind history in a church, we may already understand what's was going on there.

I've learned that despite a person's denominational background, there are many stories of traditions and expectations that exceeded the requirements of Scripture. And these traditions and expectations have often been used to separate or identify "good Christians" from those who **more nominal** or **less committed** Christians.

I asked for feedback about these kinds of things on Facebook and got a load of responses.

- Good Christians don't dance.
- Good Christians don't listen to secular music, contemporary Christian music, or Christian rock music.
- Good Christians don't watch R-rated movies.

- Better Christians don't go to the movies at all.
- Good Christian women don't wear pants—only skirts or dresses.
- Good Christian women don't color their hair or wear makeup.
- Good Christians don't participate in mixed bathing.
  - Oddly, “mixed bathing” was a euphemism for “swimming together.”
  - A euphemism is a word or phrase used in place of a word or phrase considered to be offensive, harsh or blunt.
  - I don't know about you but to me “mixed bathing” sounds much worse than “swimming together.”
- Good Christians don't play cards.
- Good Christians don't observe Halloween.
- Good Christians don't get tattoos.
- Good Christians don't do any work on Sundays.
  - I guess pastors, Sunday school teachers, and nursery workers were never considered good Christians.
- Good Christians are in church every time the door is open.

I think it's easy for us to look back on our own histories and identify such things. I think it's harder for us to realize that with the passage of enough time, generations following us may look back and be able to do the same thing. And

that's instructive because most of these traditions and expectations had noble origins and seemed necessary at the time. The problem, however, is that with the passage of time, people often forget the reasons which justify the traditions and expectations and simply replicate them without explanation...even after they've served their purpose and should be laid to rest.

Jesus' primary beef with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his day was that their traditions and expectations had become so important to them that they couldn't (or wouldn't) acknowledge that those traditions and expectations might be overshadowing and obscuring the purpose and requirements of the law. (In much the same way the traditions and expectations I just mentioned did for those of us who spent time under such legalism.)

Jesus did not come to live in obedience to the traditions and expectations of men; he came to fulfill the Word of God which, in this instance, means that he came as the One to whom the OT law had always pointed and as the One who would make people righteous in God's sight. Paul understood this when he wrote to the Corinthian church that, "*Christ has become...our righteousness, holiness, and redemption...* (1 Corinthians 1:30, NIV).



So, instead of abolishing the Old Testament Law, Jesus affirmed its importance and centrality. But in doing so, he gave us a new paradigm for interpreting and applying the it.

All the Old Testament remains relevant for us today. Paul helps us understand with these words written to Timothy, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*” (2 Tim 3:16). Our Old Testament was the only Scripture Paul and the other New Testament writers had so that’s what he was writing about. His words about Scripture (our Old Testament) are still true today—“*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*”

Does that mean we must obey every Old Testament Law? No, it doesn’t.

How do we know which ones need to be obeyed and which ones don’t?

A teacher of the law asked Jesus, “*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*” (Mark 12:28). Jesus’ famous answer identified the two greatest commandments—love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31). Of the 613 commands scholars had identified in the Law, Jesus said love for God and love for people are more

important than all the rest. He was not saying the other 611 were unimportant, but that those two were the most important.

Let me remind you about the purpose of the Law. The law was always intended to show people their need to be righteous before God but it was never intended to make them righteous. It couldn't because people could never obey it perfectly enough to be right in God's sight. The law was a visible and practical illustration of God's holiness and separateness and of people's total inability to bridge that separateness and achieve that holiness... The Law pointed to something better; it pointed to Someone better, Jesus.

Remember Paul said all Scripture is useful, he didn't say it all must be obeyed. He said that Jesus has become our righteousness—Jesus makes us right with God.

So, how are we to approach the Old Testament today? We need to understand that the Old Testament cannot be properly interpreted until we understand how it has been fulfilled in Christ. Every Old Testament text must be viewed in light of Jesus and the new covenant he instituted.<sup>2</sup>

The Pharisees and many other religious leaders in Jesus' day did not understand that... They didn't want to understand it. They thought external

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<sup>2</sup> Blomberg, 103-104.

conformity to the law was righteousness enough<sup>3</sup> but Jesus said people needed to exceed that standard to enter God's kingdom.

That was a shocking a statement! No one was more righteous than the ultra-devout Pharisees. The Pharisees were almost universally praised in Jesus' day and were regarded as outstanding examples of people who lived by the law of God. But Jesus warned his hearers that the way of the Pharisees is the wrong way.<sup>4</sup>

Strictly obeying the law doesn't make people right with God. Fastidious adherence to traditions and expectations doesn't make people right with God. Only Jesus can make someone right with God when a person confesses their sin and commits their life to Christ.

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Pastor and author Myron Augsburger sums up this section well in his commentary on Matthew: “*Jesus cut through the traditions and legalistic interpretations and disclosed the broad principles of the Law from which he interpreted its basic intent. This intent was not to focus on the righteousness of the Law but on the need for righteousness with God.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stott, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Augsburger, Myron S. *The Communicator's Commentary: Matthew*, (Word Books: Waco, TX, 1982), p. 70.

One last time, how do we decide which laws we should keep and which ones we can safely ignore? Let me propose a different question: If, as Paul says, all scripture (the OT) is inspired by God and useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness, then how can we approach all the law in a consistent manner?

Let me share with you a 5-step process<sup>6</sup>. This is not mine, it from Daniel J. Hays, professor of biblical studies at Ouachita Baptist University:

1. What did it mean to the original audience?
2. What are the differences between the original audience and modern-day believers?
3. What is the universal principle in the text?
4. How does the New Testament modify or qualify the universal principle?
5. How does the modified or qualified principle apply to modern-day believers?

Sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? And it is. But why shouldn't it be when all Scripture is useful?

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<sup>6</sup> Hays, Daniel J. "Applying the Old Testament Law Today." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January-March 2001): 1-15.

When we observe some Old Testament laws and ignore others, are we being dishonest, disingenuous and hypocritical? No, we're not. We're doing our best to handle it responsibly because Jesus fulfilled it and did for us what we could never do on our own, with or without the law—make ourselves right before God.

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Over the course of the next six weeks, as we continue our journey through the Sermon on the Mount, we'll look at six areas where Jesus spoke directly about how traditions and expectations—based on Scripture—were overshadowing and obscuring the purpose and requirements of the law. If we aren't careful, we can do the same things.

Now, please don't walk away from this message thinking that I'm saying we have no need for traditions and expectations. We do need them...but we must constantly evaluate them to make sure they help us better understand and live out the truths of Scripture instead of overshadowing and obscuring them...because I have a feeling a lot more people got in trouble from “mixed bathing” than simply swimming together.

## **Prayer**