

Deeper Discoveries

Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 4: Matthew 5:17–20, 48



Literary Design

The references to “the Law and the Prophets” in vv. 5:17 and 7:12 (a verse we get to in Lesson 9) serve as brackets around the main body of the Sermon on the Mount. [1] This is called an *inclusio*, a literary device in which similar words or ideas appear at the beginning and end of a section of text as a signal to the reader. We have already seen one in the Beatitudes in Lesson 2: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” begins and ends Jesus’ list, presenting them as a unity. Matthew uses this same structure here for several important reasons:

First, the *inclusio* shows that the central section of the sermon, from 5:17 to 7:12, is a unified teaching in which Jesus explains how his teaching relates to the Old Testament Scriptures. [2]

Second, Matthew’s use of the *inclusio* shows that Jesus’ teaching continues the story of the Old Testament as its fulfillment, rather than “unhitching” from it and starting something brand new. [3] The New Covenant comes through Christ, who fulfills the Old Testament promises and prophecies, just as the Old Testament itself testified it would. See Romans 3:21.

Third, the *inclusio* helps us understand the theological purpose of this teaching section. Matthew 5:17–20 explains that the entire Old Testament points to the kingdom of heaven that Christ has brought, and to Christ himself. He prepared the listeners for the specific examples which will be explored by us in the weeks to come. Christ’s disciples’ lives cannot be separated from the Hebrew Scriptures. [3]

[1] Charles L. Quarles, Matthew, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (B&H Academic, 2017), 49. Edited.

[2] D. A. Carson, God with Us: Themes from Matthew (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 38–39. Edited.

[3] D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 127–128, 142. Edited.

Old Testament Connections and Themes

Christ Fulfilled the Law and the Prophets: What Do We Do as Gentile Believers?

We need to understand *how* Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets to understand his teaching properly. Are we required to keep the Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws to be faithful followers of Christ?

Ceremonial and sacrificial laws—diet, festival observances, temple sacrifices for sin—were regulations delivered specifically to the Jews and no one else through Moses. [1] These practices function differently than universal moral laws, which applies to all people. God’s purpose was not merely about food but to create a nation distinctly set apart from the nations/Gentiles to worship the Lord before them, even in the small details. [1] (see Lev 20:24–26; Deut 4:5–8; 7:6–11; Exod 19:5–6; 20:11–12)

The early church faced a critical question about whether Gentile converts needed to adopt these distinctly Jewish practices. Paul himself wrote one of his earliest and sharpest letters, Galatians, to address the controversy. Certain Jews sought to impose all dietary regulations and ritual law upon Gentile converts [1], but the Jerusalem Council addressed this conflict (Acts 15), concluding that Gentile believers are members of the kingdom of heaven, called by God in Christ to salvation, and they did so on the basis of the Hebrew Scripture

testimony (Acts 15:14–20). They were explicitly not required to follow Jewish food laws or convert to Judaism. [1] Gentiles are saved through faith, united with Israel’s Messiah, Jesus, and they rejoiced when they received the letter from James and the council explaining and approving their inclusion as the people of God apart from distinctive Jewish practices (Acts 15:30–31).

Jewish and Gentile Christians had been saved through faith in Christ, and Jewish law could not justify anyone before God, making Jews and Gentiles equally dependent on grace. [2] Christians are set apart as Jesus defined them: as those who were ‘blessed,’ as Salt and Light, as those who rejoice in affliction for Christ’s sake and look forward to their eternal reward.

[1] R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: Ephesians* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 64–65. Edited.

[2] Moisés Silva, “Galatians,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1212–1213. Edited.

Saving Righteousness

We should spend a little time pondering Matt 5:20. This verse is maybe even a bit scarier than you think, because it could be translated faithfully as “unless your righteousness *greatly exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you *most certainly won’t* enter the kingdom of heaven!” Praise God for his mercy, for we know that we find our entry into the kingdom of heaven through Christ and his righteousness, and not our own. But we might think that Jesus has come up with a new plan, and that would be a mistake. We do not understand Jesus well if we disconnect his teaching and person from the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the great messianic prophecies, fulfilled in Jesus, is this:

Jeremiah 23:5–6 (ESV)

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

Those disciples listening that day did not yet know the whole story, and it’s helpful to imagine just what was going through their minds so that we too can be shocked and amazed at God’s grace. Unlike these disciples, we *have* the whole story, and in Christ the days Jeremiah prophesied of came to be.

Commentary (Michael Green)

The main thing here is the attitude to God’s law. The category of law is not abolished for the followers of Jesus. He came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Of course, some elements in Old Testament law were abolished *by* being fulfilled. They had pointed forward to what had now eclipsed them in the fuller light brought by Jesus. *But the moral law had not been abolished.* Indeed, Jesus goes on to intensify its demands. He is concerned to show his disciples in the kingdom that their righteousness must transcend the formal obedience which, at its worst, Pharisaism was capable of, the attitude that said, ‘Right, I have fulfilled precisely what is required of me, but I didn’t want to do it, and I shall not throw in one iota of extra commitment.’ Jesus looks for the inner disposition as well as the outer action.

The law is not the limit of obedience; it is to be seen rather as the springboard for a life of devotion to Jesus and his Father. It is the curbstone along the road of love. And Jesus proceeds, in the verses that follow, to give a number of examples of the outworking of that wholeheartedness. Greatness in God’s kingdom is measured by wholehearted obedience. [1]

[1] Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 92. Edited. Italics mine.