



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 05
Matthew 5:17-20: Topic 5.0

Study By
Lorin L Cranford

Greek NT

5.17 Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι. 5.18 ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν· ἕως ἄν παρελθῆ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἰῶτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται. 5.19 ὅς ἐάν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν· ὅς δ' ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν. 5.20 λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐάν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

17 »Denkt nicht, ich sei gekommen, um das Gesetz und die Weisungen der Propheten außer Kraft zu setzen. Ich bin nicht gekommen, um sie außer Kraft zu setzen, sondern um sie zu erfüllen und ihnen volle Geltung zu verschaffen. 18 Ich versichere euch: Solange Himmel und Erde bestehen, wird kein i-Punkt und kein Komma im Gesetz gestrichen. Das ganze Gesetz muss erfüllt werden. 19 Wer also ein noch so unbedeutendes Gebot für ungültig erklärt und die Menschen in diesem Sinne lehrt, wird in der neuen Welt Gottes den letzten Platz einnehmen. Wer es aber befolgt und andere dazu anhält, wird in der neuen Welt Gottes hoch geachtet sein. 20 Ich sage euch: Ihr werdet niemals in Gottes neue Welt kommen, wenn ihr seinen Willen nicht besser erfüllt als die Gesetzeslehrer und Pharisäer.«

NRSV

17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

NLT

17 Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfill them. 18 I assure you, until heaven and earth disappear, even the smallest detail of God's law will remain until its purpose is achieved. 19 So if you break the smallest commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven. 20 "But I warn you – unless you obey God better than the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees do, you can't enter the Kingdom of Heaven at all!

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

These verses lay on the table for consideration the issues of Jesus and the Law of the Old Testament. Down through the centuries of interpretive history the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament has occasioned considerable discussion and debate. Particularly in Protestantism the discussion has been framed around the headings of Law and Gospel. Although this discussion normally extends well beyond the limits of ideas inside Mt. 5:17-20, these verses do provide one of the important scriptural 'windows' into this discussion. We will touch on this discussion as it is connected to this passage in the Sermon.

Literary Aspects of the Text:

The *literary forms*, or genre, that are present in vv. 17-20



¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

represent a mixture of patterns, some of which were developed orally during the period after Jesus' ascension to the writing of the Synoptic Gospels in the 60s and 70s of the first Christian century. Basically we see four sayings of Jesus brought together and shaped by Matthew into a cohesive unit of idea expression. The fourth saying in verse twenty falls into the 'Entrance Saying' category² and has particular significance, in light of the other instances of Entrance Sayings in the Sermon (cf. 7:21-23 in particular). They define radical commitment to Christ as the requirement.

The literary context of vv. 17-20 is profoundly important. These verses serve as an introduction to the discussion of the Law in vv. 21-48. In the six contrasts,³ Jesus adopts a radically new interpretation of the Law from the commonly held ones of his day. To a Jew at that time this would seem that Jesus was destroying the Law since He rejected how it was understood, especially by the religious authorities. Thus the Preamble to 5:21-48 in 5:17-20 takes pains to declare Jesus' loyalty to the Law of Moses.

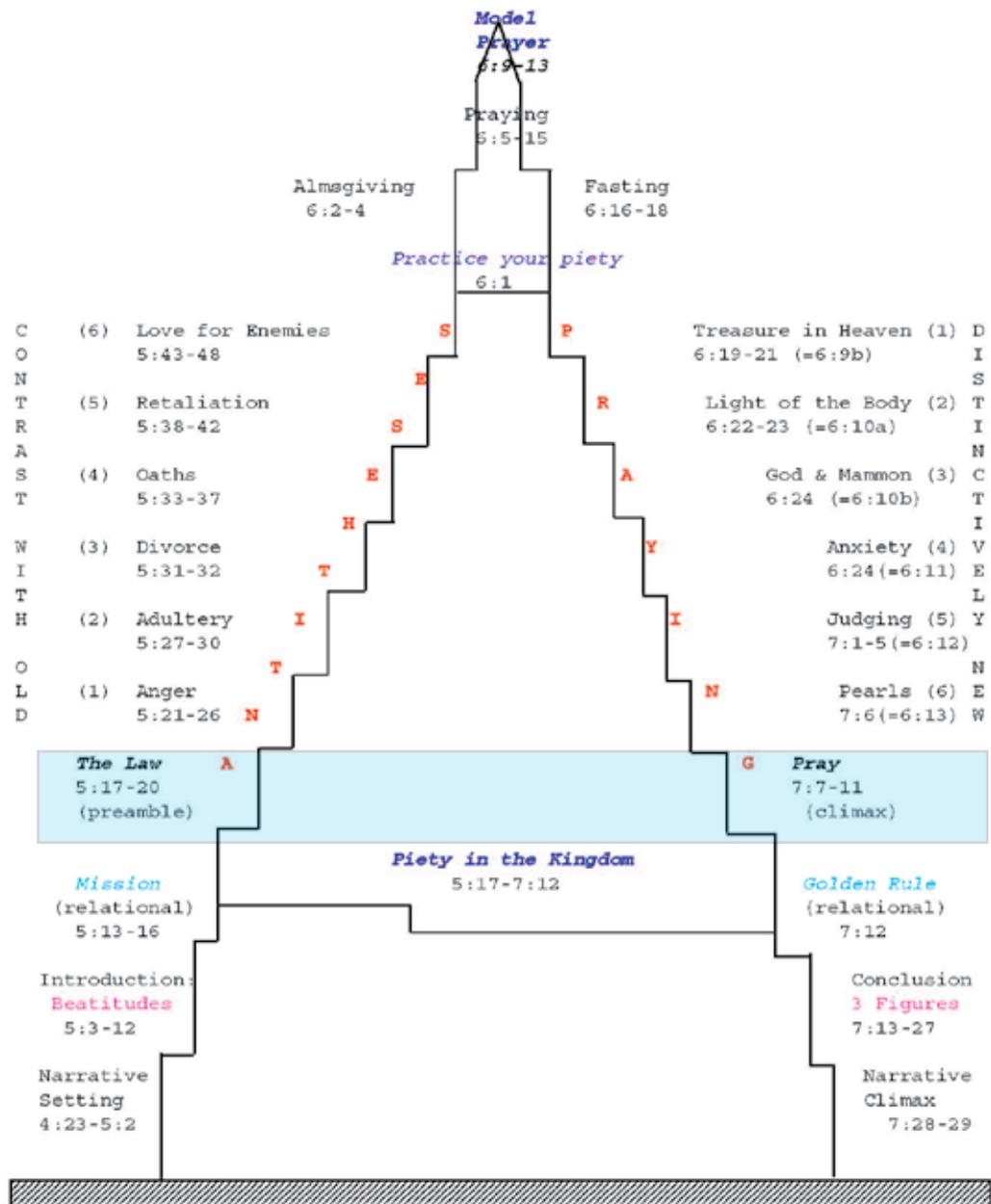
Also, by dramatic contrast in Jesus' approach to the Kingdom over against that of the religious leaders (cf. 5:20 and 7:15-23), the scribes and Pharisees, Matthew sets the stage for acquiring true righteousness in the Kingdom of God.

Thus, Jesus and Moses are connected, clearly and undeniably. But Jesus stands as the correct interpreter of Moses, and also possesses divine authority to extend and even modify the Law of Moses. This we will see in the so-called six Antitheses in 5:21-48.

The literary design, or structure, of the text is fairly easy to determine. The block diagram in English

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lorin L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

²By definition an Entrance Saying contains the verb phrase 'enter into the Kingdom of Heaven,' or its equivalent. These sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels set forth requirements for entering the Kingdom both now and for eternity.

³"You have heard it said...but I say to you..."

translation of the original Greek text helps to clarify the thought flow visually.

Block Diagram

23 ^{5:17} **Do not suppose**
that I have come
to destroy the Law or the Prophets;

24 **I have not come**
to destroy
but

25 **- - - - -**
to fulfill.

^{5:18} For

26 **I solemnly tell you,**
until Heaven
and
earth pass away,
one letter
or
one stroke of a letter will not pass
from the Law
until all be accomplished.

^{5:19} Therefore
whoever may break one
of the least of these commandments
and
----- may so teach men

27 **will be called least**
in the Kingdom of Heaven;

but
whoever may do them
and
----- may teach them

28 **this one will be called great**
in the Kingdom of Heaven.

^{5:20} For

29 **I tell you,**
unless your righteous far exceeds that
/-----|
of the scribes and Pharisees,
that you will never gain entrance
into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The thought flow revolves around the declarations in statements 23-25, which serve as foundational to the passage. The admonition to not misunderstand Jesus in statement 23 is re-enforced by the negative/positive assertions in statements 24-25. The foundation for this claim of a positive connection of Jesus to the Old Testament rests upon two bases, as the “for’ (γὰρ) conjunctions in statements 26 and 29 indicate. First is the assertion of the unchangeableness of the Law in statement 26. Out of this comes implications for those in the Kingdom, which are set forth negatively (#27) and positively (#28). Obedience to the Law and encouragement of others to obedience is mandated by Jesus. The second reason for Jesus’ stance to the Law grows out of a dramatic contrast between His understanding of Kingdom righteousness and the views of the scribes and Pharisees, as reflected in statement 29. Note that both reasons are introduced by solemn pronouncement of divine truth: #26 “I solemnly tell you” (ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν), and #29 “I tell you” (λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν). This solemn tone emphasizes the importance of these two reasons underlying Jesus’ positive stance to the Law and to the Old Testament in general. Thus, the passage asserts a positive connection of Jesus to the Law and to the Old Testament based upon two very

important reasons.

Exegesis of the Text:

5:17 Issues:

1) *The Law or the Prophets* (τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφήτας).

The phrase “the Law or the Prophets” shows up again in 7:12 in the Sermon. The twofold phrase serves as ‘brackets’ or ‘book ends’ pulling the material in 5:17 through 7:12 together into a cohesive unit. The structural outline of the Sermon above reflects the impact of this in the literary design of the entire Sermon. The phrase itself was a commonly used Jewish reference to the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible early on fell into three



sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings. Most often the first two of these divisions was used to refer to the entire text of the Old Testament.

2) *“Not to destroy but to fulfill”* (οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι).

By the late 60s and early 70s Christianity was increasingly accused of seeking to do away with the Law of Moses and of replacing it with a concept of divine grace that opened the doors to a Pandora’s Box of immoral behavior. The apostle Paul faced this accusation all through the 50s in his preaching of God’s grace.⁴ Matthew’s Jewish Christian readers in the early 70s needed affirmation that such was not true of Jesus, and that Christianity valued the Old Testament. The words of Jesus in Matthew’s narrative are easy to understand at first, but carry profound implications. The Greek verb καταλῦσαι basically means to dismantle so as to render something useless or powerless. In this usage, the opposite of destroying is fulfilling, i.e., πληρῶσαι. A wide range of interpretations of this has emerged over time.⁵ At the heart of the matter is that Jesus provides the completion of the Law and He becomes the realization of what it had anticipated in God’s dealings with not just Israel but with all humanity.

5:18 Issues:

1) *“Nothing will change in the Law until...”*

The absoluteness of ‘nothing’ is seen in the phrase “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter” (NRSV) which translates ἰῶτα ἐν ἢ μία κεραία. The ἰῶτα ἐν refers to the Greek alphabet letter iota ‘ι’, which is the smallest written letter in the Greek alphabet. This is translating the Hebrew reference of Jesus to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the yod (י). The μία κεραία, with κεραία meaning ‘tittle’ or ‘horn,’ is not as clear but from the context it seems to designate scribal ornaments or small serifs or strokes that differentiated some very similar Hebrew and Aramaic letters (h and ḥ, b and k, y and w, r and d).

⁴Cf. Rom 6:1-2, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” See also Rom. 3:31; Acts 18:13; 21:28.

⁵Compare the list in W.D. Davies and Dale Alison (ICC, T&T Clark): “This clause repeats and reemphasizes that Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets and adds another claim: he came to fulfil them. Compare Rom 8:4; 13:8; Gal 5:14; Acts 6:14. For οὐκ ἦλθον + infinitive + ἀλλά + infinitive see also 9:13 = Mk 2:17; 20:28 = Mk 10:45; and Mt 10:34. The crux of this clause—and of all of v. 17—is the meaning of πληρῶ (Mt: 16; Mk: 3; Lk: 9), which is usually translated, ‘fulfil’. Unfortunately, the gamut of possible interpretations is quite long. (1) The Greek could be a translation of, ὁσιπ (= ‘to add to’). Jesus originally said, as b. Šabb. 116a–b has it, ‘I did not come to destroy the law of Moses nor did I come to add to the law of Moses’.⁸ (2) πληρῶ is the equivalent of the Aramaic qūm, with the meaning ‘establish’, ‘make valid’, ‘bring into effect’ (see Jastrow, s.v.).⁹ According to Schlatter, pp. 153–4, qūm might also mean ‘to do’, ‘to execute’ (cf. SB 1, p. 341). (3) πληρῶ means ‘obey’, as in Rom 8:4.¹⁰ (4) Jesus ‘fulfils’ the law by observing it perfectly and completely in his own person and ministry.¹¹ (5) Jesus ‘fulfils’ or ‘completes’ the law by bringing a new law which transcends the old.¹² (6) The Torah is ‘fulfilled’ when Jesus, explaining God’s original intention, brings out its perfect or inner meaning or expands and extends its demands.¹³ (7) Jesus ‘fulfils’ the law because, through his coming, he enables others to meet the Torah’s demands.¹⁴ (8) When Jesus ‘fulfils’ the law or the prophets, he does it by bringing the new righteousness, which is the new spirit of love: love is the fulfilling of the law.¹⁵ (9) The ‘fulfilment’ is eschatological: the telos which the Torah anticipated, namely, the Messiah, has come and revealed the law’s definitive meaning. Prophecy has been realized (cf. As. Mos. 10:8; Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 3:6:46; Eusebius, Dem. ev. 8:2, p. 387).¹⁶”

Whatever the precise designation it alludes to the most insignificant aspect of the Law. Not one part will cease to be in force: οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ, which is emphatic.

2) This will apply until two things happen:

- a) “until heaven and earth pass away” (ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ).
- b) “until all is accomplished” (ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται).

The question arises as to whether these temporal clauses refer to the same point in time, or to virtually the same point in time. Probably the answer is yes, although different scholars take differing viewpoints on this. The simplest understanding is that the Law will be in place until the close of the age, or the end of time. One must remember from the context of 5:17-48 that the Law will remain in place as Jesus’ interpreted and applied it to disciples and to the Kingdom of God. As such Jesus affirmed the revelatory nature of the Law of God and of the Old Testament. As such it remains applicable to believers over time until the coming again of Christ. But as the following contrasts in 5:21-48 will illustrate it applies as Jesus’ interprets its meaning. These six contrasts will provide clues for Christian use of the Old Testament.

5:19 Issues:

The contrastive pair of declarations given to disciples in the Kingdom grow naturally out of the claim of the permanency of the Law in verse 18, as ‘therefore’ (οὖν) asserts.

1) Practicing and teaching the Law.

In the contrastive pair of statements (#s 28 and 29 above), the disciples of Jesus are encouraged to both obey the Law and to teach others to do the same: ὅς ἐάν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους and ὅς δ’ ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ. Not obeying and teaching others to disobey are forbidden to disciples. The “one of the least of these commandments” most likely means the details of the Law particularly as taken up in interpretation by Jesus beginning in verse 21.

2) Greatness in the Kingdom

Disobedience and teaching to disobey bring negative assessment to the disciple: he “will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν). In contrast, the person doing the opposite “will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν). The ‘least’ and ‘great’ designations allude to the concept of rewards based on faithfulness to God, not to inclusion in or exclusion from the Kingdom. It relates back 5:12, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Inside the Kingdom disciples will be rewarded with differing blessings in the eschatological fulfillment of the Kingdom. Although using different terms Paul was concerned about the same point: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”⁶

5:20 Issues:

In solemn tones Jesus introduces a second reason for His positive connection to the Law. It is a dramatic contrast to that of the scribes and Pharisees in the understanding of righteousness in the Kingdom, particularly as an entrance requirement.

1) Righteousness in the Kingdom (ἡ δικαιοσύνη)

The idea of righteousness (ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη) in Matthew is different from that in Paul’s writings. In Paul righteousness is being made right with God through the redemptive death of Jesus. Out of this comes right behavior before God in commitment to God through Christ. In Matthew, Jesus’ teaching on righteousness is on living rightly before God. We can be persecuted because of it (5:10). We are to hunger and thirst for it (5:6). We are to strive most of all for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (6:33). John the Baptist showed us the way of righteousness (21:32).

2) “if your righteousness does not abound” (ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων)

The righteousness of the disciple must go way beyond that of the religious authorities of that day. The scribes and Pharisees were generally considered to be the most knowledgeable Jews regarding the Law of God, and also the most devoted to keeping all its commands. But their concept was self achieved goodness by minute observance of all the interpretive implications of the Law of God. That is, religious legalism raised to a very high level. Jesus’ understanding of righteousness focused on God and the emulation of His character in our daily living: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). As the six antitheses in 5:21-47 will make clear this righteousness begins inwardly with transformation of one’s self, and then produces genuinely appropriate behavior outwardly as an extension of that character down

⁶2 Cor. 5:12 NRSV. See also 1 Cor. 3:12-15.