

Chapter 8

“The law is holy, just and good”

A study of Matthew 5

We are no longer under the supervision of the law, writes Paul (Galatians 3:25). But the same apostle also writes, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). He even writes that the old covenant came “with glory” (2 Corinthians 3:7). (However, he says in the next verse that the new covenant is “even more glorious.” We’ll examine 2 Corinthians 3 in chapter 17.)

The old covenant — including its sacrifices, rituals, and circumcision — was good. It was exactly what Israel needed. But once Christ came, the old covenant became obsolete. The sacrifices and circumcision are no longer a standard of righteousness. It would be wrong to pull out an obsolete law and command it for Christians today.

Which laws?

Romans 7:12 tells us that the law is good — but does this mean the law requiring physical circumcision is still in force? Of course not. This verse does not tell us *which laws* are good. It does not tell us which laws apply to us today. We can’t just quote the Old Testament for the laws we like, and ignore it for the laws we don’t like. That would be a misuse of the Bible. But Romans 7:12 does tell us to be cautious. Any law that God gave is a good law — but it is not necessarily good for us today. Paul says that we “uphold” the law by our faith in Christ. We are not a lawless people. But again, we must ask, *which laws?* The verse does not tell us.

Paul says that we cannot be declared righteous by keeping the law (Romans 3:20), but that does not mean that we reject the law, either. We want to obey God, to do

Paul could act like a Gentile; he did not obey laws that separated Jews from Gentiles.

what he wants us to do, even if we can’t do it perfectly. “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (Romans 6:15).

The law tells us what sin is (Romans 7:7) — but which law? Does the law of circumcision tell us what sin is? Not any more. The

laws of sacrifice do not tell us what sin is. Obsolete laws cannot tell us what sin is, so we need to be sure that we are not putting *our* idea of law into Paul’s meaning. We need to find out what law Paul himself meant, and which laws he himself kept.

He tells us this in 1 Corinthians 9, where he explains his missionary strategy: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those

under the law” (verses 19-20). When he was trying to win Jewish people to Christ, he acted like a Jew. (See Acts 21:26 for an example.) He could act like he was “under the law” even though he knew he was not.

“To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law” (verse 21). Paul even felt free to act like he was not under the law. He could act like a Gentile, even as Peter did (Galatians 2:14). The laws that separated Jews from Gentiles were no longer in force, and Paul did not have to obey them. He could obey them if he wanted to, when it was helpful for others, but he did not have to.

The law that Paul was under was “Christ’s law” — “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). This is the law that is holy, just, and good. This is the law that defines sin. Christ is the standard of righteousness; the old covenant is not.

Two ways to look at the law

Let’s go back to Romans 3:31. There is a moral law that was not nullified by Christ. This law is holy, just and good. And the obvious question is, what is this law? It is tempting at this point to put our words into Paul’s pen by saying precisely what “the law” is. Lutherans have their

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idea, Calvinists have theirs, Adventists have theirs, etc.

Is this “law” identical to the Ten Commandments? I see no evidence in the New Testament that anyone equated “the law” with only the Ten. Is “the law” larger? Does it include all of the Ten? Or are only some of the Ten in the eternal law? How can we tell? That brings us back to the central question, and unfortunately Romans 3:31 does not tell us exactly what we want to know. It simply tells us that there is a law that continues to be valid. Other parts of Romans tell us that there is also a God-given law that has expired. How do we fit this into Romans 3:31? Let’s take circumcision as an example. Do we nullify this law by faith? The answer could be developed in two ways. Both have some validity.

First, we could say no, we do not nullify the law of circumcision by faith. Rather, we uphold it and we keep it better, in the heart instead of in the flesh. Similarly, we keep all the rituals and ceremonies better, by faith in Christ, even though we do not keep them in the letter, even though the New Testament does not tell us how precisely we are keeping the grain offerings and the clothing rules by having faith in Christ. We figure that faith in Christ fulfills whatever purpose those laws had. But in this view, it is possible to “keep” a law without paying any attention to what it actually says. We might say that the physical requirements have been spiritualized away. This line of thought, however, does not tell us which laws can be spiritualized, and which must still be kept in the letter.

The other approach is to say yes, the law of circumcision is nullified by faith, and we do not have to keep it. Although there may be theological continuity, there is no continuity in what we do in the flesh. But that still leaves us without a precise definition of “the law” that is *not* nullified. Does it include most of the Ten Commandments? Certainly. Paul quotes most of the Ten Commandments in Romans. But the still-valid law also includes Leviticus 19:18b, Deuteronomy 6:5, Micah 6:8 and various other laws from other parts of the Old Testament.

So what is “the law” Paul is discussing in Romans 3:31 and 7:12? The context does not give us any reason to equate it with the Ten Commandments. Rather, it just gives us the general principle that the concept of law is still valid, and that God still has behavioral standards for

God wants his children to do more than follow rules.

his people. But precisely what those standards are, we cannot tell from these verses alone. Romans 3:31 does not tell us whether the Sabbath, for example, is

part of the non-nullified law, or part of the law that is no longer required. We will have to look at other verses.

Superior righteousness

What did Jesus Christ mean when he said that he did not come to destroy the law? (Matthew 5:17) This verse from the Sermon on the Mount is sometimes used in support of old covenant laws. We need to see what Jesus said, and again, the *context* of the chapter will help us see what he meant.

Jesus begins this section of the Sermon with a caution: When you hear what I say, you might wonder if I am trying to eliminate the Scriptures. I’m not. I am doing and teaching exactly what the Scriptures say I should. What I say will be surprising, but don’t get me wrong.

“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” (verse 17). Many people focus here on the word Law, and assume that the question is whether Jesus will do away with Old Testament laws (plural). This makes the verse very difficult to understand, since everyone agrees that Jesus Christ caused *some* laws to become obsolete, and that this was part of his purpose. Just how many laws are involved may be disputed, but everyone agrees that Jesus came to abolish at least some laws.

In this view, it is possible to “keep” a law without paying attention to what it says.

But Jesus is not talking about laws. He is talking about the Law (singular) — the Torah, the first five books of the Scriptures. He is also talking about the Prophets, another major section of the Bible. This verse is not about individual laws, but about the Scriptures as a whole. Here is a valid paraphrase: Jesus did not come to do away with the Scriptures, but to fulfill them. This involved obedience, of course, but it went further. God wants his children to do more than follow rules. When Jesus fulfilled the Torah, it was not just a matter of obedience — he completed all that the Torah had ever pointed to. He did what Israel as a nation was not able to do.

Nothing will disappear until...

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, 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” (verse 18).

But Christians don’t have to circumcise their children, build booths out of tree branches, and wear blue threads in tassels. Everyone agrees that we don’t have to

keep these laws. So what did Jesus mean when he said that none of the Law would disappear? For practical purposes, haven't those laws disappeared?

There are three basic approaches to this. First, we can recognize that these laws have not disappeared. They are still in the Torah — but being in Torah doesn't mean that we have to do them. This is true, but it does not seem to be what Jesus intended here.

A second approach is to say that Christians do keep these laws, but that we do so by having faith in Christ. We keep the law of circumcision in our hearts (Romans 1:29) and we keep all ritual laws through faith. This is true, but it also does not seem to be what Jesus was saying right here. His original audience could not have understood this.

A third approach is to observe that 1) none of the Law could become obsolete until everything was accomplished, and 2) everyone agrees that at least some of the Law has become obsolete. So we conclude 3) that everything was accomplished through Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus fulfilled his mission, and the old covenant law is now obsolete, since it was originally planned to be in force only until he came.

There are many Old Testament laws that Christians do *not* have to keep, and verses 17-20 do not tell us which laws are which. If we quote these verses only for the laws we happen to like, we are misusing these verses. They do not teach the permanent validity of all laws, because not all laws are permanent. We cannot take these verses out of context as if they taught the permanence of the Old Testament laws that *we* happen to support. They don't, because not all the laws *are* permanent. We come back again to the question of *which* laws are still in force, and again, this verse does not tell us.

These commandments

Jesus then says, "Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (verse 19).

What are "these" commandments? Is Jesus referring to commandments in the Law of Moses, or to his own commands, which he will soon give? We must take into account the fact that verse 19 begins with the word "therefore" (which the NIV does not translate).

There is a logical connection between verses 18 and 19. Is it, The Law will remain, so these commandments should be taught? That would imply that Jesus was talking about teaching all of the law. But there are commandments in the Torah that are obsolete and should *not* be taught as law today. So Jesus cannot be saying that

we should teach all the laws of the Old Testament. That would contradict the rest of the New Testament.

More likely, the logical connection between verses 18 and 19 is different, focusing more on "until all is accomplished," which is the closest phrase. The thought is like this: All the Law will remain until everything is accomplished, and therefore (since Jesus *did* accomplish everything), we are to teach these laws (the laws of Jesus that we will soon read) instead of the old laws that he criticizes. This makes better sense in the context of the sermon, and in the New Testament.

It is *Jesus'* commandments that should be taught (Matthew 7:24; 28:20). Jesus explains why: "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 7:20). The Pharisees were known for detailed obedience, tithing even on their herbs. But true righteousness is a matter of the heart, of a person's character, not just conforming to certain rules. Jesus is not saying that we need better obedience to the same laws, but rather obedience to *better laws*, and he will soon illustrate what he means.

But none of us are as righteous as we should be. We all need mercy, and we enter the kingdom not through our own righteousness, but through God's mercy, as Jesus explained in the beatitudes (verse 7). Paul explained it as the gift of righteousness, as justification by faith, as the perfect righteousness of Jesus being attributed to us as we become united to him through faith.

Here is a summary of this section: Do not think that Jesus came to abolish the Scriptures. He came to do what they said. Every law remained in force until Jesus accomplished all that he was sent to do. Now he gives a new standard of righteousness, and we must conform to his standard and teach it.

But I say...

Jesus then gives six contrasts between the old teachings and the new. Six times he quotes a traditional teaching, most often from the Torah itself, and six times he explains that *the old way is not enough*. He offers a more exacting standard of righteousness.

Do not despise

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be

Jesus is not saying that we need better obedience to the same laws, but we need to obey better laws.

subject to judgment” (verse 21). This is a quote from the Torah and a summary of its civil laws. People heard this when Scripture was read to them. (In the days before printing, people more often *heard* Scripture than they read it.)

Who said this “to the people long ago”? God himself, at Mt. Sinai. Jesus is not quoting a distorted tradition of the Jews — he is quoting God in the Torah. He then contrasts it with a more rigorous standard: “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (verse 22). Perhaps the Torah really meant this, but Jesus does not reason on that basis. He does not mention any authority for his teaching. It is true simply because he is the one who says it.

Jesus gives extreme statements to drive the point home.

We will be judged on our anger. Someone who wants to kill, or wishes that someone else were dead, is a murderer in the heart, even if he or

she is unable or unwilling to carry out the deed. However, not all anger is sin. Jesus himself was sometimes angry. Nevertheless, Jesus states it boldly: Anyone who is angry will be subject to divine judgment. The principle is stated in stark terms; the exceptions are not listed. Here and elsewhere in the sermon, we must realize that Jesus phrases his demands in an extreme form. We cannot lift sayings out of the sermon and act as if none of them have any exceptions.

Jesus then says, “Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca’ [a term of derision], is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (verse 22). Jesus is not referring new cases to the Jewish leaders. More likely, in the saying about “raca,” he is quoting something that the scribes were already teaching. But he says that the penalty for evil attitudes goes much further than a civil court — it goes all the way to the final judgment.

But Jesus himself called people “fool” (Matthew 23:17, same Greek word). We cannot take these sayings as legalistic rules that must be enforced to the letter. No, they are startling statements designed to make a point. Here, the point is that we should not despise other people. This principle is beyond the requirements of the Torah, but it is the true righteousness that characterizes the kingdom of God.

Two parables

Jesus then gives two parables to illustrate: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and

be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (verses 23-24).

Jesus lived in an old covenant age, and his mention here of old covenant laws about sacrifice does not mean that they are still in force today. His parable points out that interpersonal relationships have priority over sacrifices. If someone has something against you (whether justified or not), that person should have taken the first step, but if that person does not, do not wait. Take the initiative. However, it is not always possible. Jesus is not giving a new law, but stating a principle in bold terms: we should try to reconcile.

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny” (verses 25-26).

It is not always possible to settle matters out of court, and we do not have to let false accusers get away with extortion. Again we see that we cannot treat Jesus’ words as precise laws. Nor is he just giving us wise advice about how to stay out of debtors’ prison. Rather, he is telling us to seek peace because that is the way of true righteousness.

Do not lust

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’” (verse 27). God said it on Mt. Sinai. But Jesus tells us “that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The tenth commandment prohibited lust, but the seventh commandment did not. It prohibited “adultery” — a behavior that could be regulated by civil laws and penalties.

The mention here of old covenant laws does not mean that they are still in force today.

Jesus makes no attempt to have Scriptural support behind his teaching. He does not need it. He is the living Word, and has more authority than the written Word. His teaching falls into a pattern: The old law says one thing, but true righteousness requires much more. He then gives extreme statements to drive the point home. When it comes to adultery, he says, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (verses 29-30).

Yes, it is better to lose a body part than to lose eternal life. But that is not really our choice, because eyes and hands cannot cause us to sin, and if we remove them, we have committed another sin. Sin originates in the heart, and what we need is a changed heart. Jesus' point is that we need surgery on our thoughts. We need extreme measures to eliminate sin.

Do not divorce

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'" (verse 31). This refers to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which accepts the certificate of divorce as a custom among the Israelites. This law said that a woman could not be married to one man, then another, and then go back to the first man. Other than this rare situation, the law did not make any restrictions. The Law of Moses permitted divorce, but Jesus did not.

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (verse 32). This is a hard saying, both to understand and to apply. Suppose an evil man puts away his wife for no reason at all. Is she automatically a sinner? And is it a sin for anyone to marry this victim of divorce?

It would be a mistake for us to treat Jesus' statement as an unalterable law. For one thing, Paul was inspired to realize that there is another legitimate exception for divorce (1 Corinthians 7:15). Matthew 5 is not the last word in the Bible on the subject of divorce. What we learn here is only part of the picture.

Jesus' saying here is a shocking statement designed to make a point — in this case, the point that divorce always involves sin. God intended for marriages to be life-long, and we must strive to keep them the way he intended. Jesus did not attempt to discuss what we should do when things go wrong.

Do not swear

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord'" (verse 33). These principles are taught in Scripture (Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:31). But what the Torah clearly allowed, Jesus did not: "But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King" (Matthew 5:34-35). Apparently the Jewish leaders allowed people to take oaths in these names, perhaps to avoid pronouncing the holy name of God.

"And do not swear by your head, for you cannot

make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (verses 36-37). The principle is simple: honesty — but it is made in a startling way.

Exceptions are allowed. Jesus himself said more than Yes and No. He often said Amen, Amen. He said that heaven and earth would pass away, but his words would not. He called God as witness that what he was saying was true. Paul also wrote some strong affirmations that were more than simply saying Yes (Romans 7:1; 2 Corinthians 1:23).

So we see again that we should not take the bold statements of the Sermon on the Mount as prohibitions that must be enforced exactly as written. We should have simple honesty, but we can on occasion emphasize the truth of what we are saying. In a court of law, to use a modern example, we are allowed to "swear" to tell the truth, and ask God to help us tell the truth. It is nitpicking to say that "affirm" is acceptable but "swear" is not. In a court of law, these words mean the same thing — and both are more than a simple Yes.

We obey according to the commands of Christ, not the laws of Moses.

Do not seek revenge

Jesus again quotes the Torah: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'" (verse 38). It is sometimes said that this was merely a maximum limit for vengeance in the Old Testament. It was indeed a maximum, but it was sometimes a minimum, too (Leviticus 24:19; Deuteronomy 19:21).

But what the Torah required, Jesus prohibited: "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person" (verse 39). But Jesus himself resisted evil persons. He drove moneychangers out of the temple. The apostles resisted false teachers. Paul objected when soldiers started to flog him. Jesus' statement is again an exaggeration: It is permissible to resist evil persons. Jesus would allow us, for example, to resist evil persons by reporting crime to the police.

Jesus' next statements must be seen as exaggerations, too. That does not mean we can dismiss them as irrelevant. Rather, we must receive the principle, and we must allow it to challenge our behavior, without turning these rules into a new law-code as if exceptions were never allowed.

"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." In some circumstances, of course, it would be better to walk away, as Peter did (Acts 12:9). Nor is it wrong to voice an objection, as Paul did (Acts

23:3). Jesus is teaching a principle, not a rule that must be kept in a rigid way.

“And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (verses 40-42). If people sue you for ten thousand dollars, you do not have to give them twenty thousand. If someone steals your car, you do not have to give your truck as well. If a drunk asks for ten dollars, you do not have to give anything.

The point in Jesus’ extreme sayings is not that we have to let people take advantage of us, nor that we should reward them for doing so. Rather, it is that we should not take revenge. Try to make peace; do not try to hurt others.

Do not hate

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (verse 43). The Torah commands love, but it also commanded Israel to kill the Canaanites and to punish all evil-doers. But Jesus says, “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (verse 44).

Jesus teaches a different way, a way not like the world. Why? What is the model for all this radical righteousness? “That you may be children of your Father in heaven” (verse 45). We are to be like God is, and he loved his enemies so much that he sent his Son to die for

them. We cannot send our children to die for our enemies, but we are to love our enemies and pray for them to be blessed. We fall short of the standard that Jesus says is right. But our frequent failures do not mean that we should quit trying.

Jesus reminds us that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (verse 45). He is merciful to all. “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” (verses 46-47). We are called to do more than what is natural, more than unconverted people do. Our inability to be perfect does not change our calling to seek to improve.

Our love for others is to be complete, to extend to all peoples, and that is what Jesus means when he says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (verse 48).

Do not think that Jesus came to do away with law entirely — but do not think that he came to make the old covenant permanent, either. Christians should obey God, but we obey according to the commands of Christ, not the laws of Moses. That is part of the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything *I* have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). We are under the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses.

Review

- God’s law is still valid, but not all of his laws are.
- Peter and Paul could live like a Gentile. In Jewish culture, what would that mean?
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes several bold commands that we later find out have exceptions. Is his statement in verse 19 also an exaggeration?
- Does verse 19 mean that Christianity should teach all the laws of the Old Testament?

What does Jesus emphasize — rules about worship, or laws about how we get along with other people?

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Old teaching	Source	New teaching	Exaggeration
Do not murder, anyone who murders will be subject to judgment	Quote from Ex. 20:13, summary of Old Testament civil laws about murder	Anyone who is angry with a brother will be subject to judgment Anyone who says, “fool!” will be in danger of hell First be reconciled to your brother Settle matters out of court You will not get out until you have paid the last penny	Jesus was sometimes angry; not all anger is sin Jesus called people “fool” Reconciliation is not always possible It is not always possible Sometimes debts are forgiven
Do not commit adultery	Quote from Ex. 20:14	Anyone who lusts has already committed adultery If your eye or hand causes you to sin, remove it	Eyes and hands cannot cause sin; and removing them <u>is</u> a sin
Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce	Reference to Deut. 24:1-4	Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery	Paul allowed another exception The man commits adultery, too. If she does not remarry, she is not an adulteress.
Keep the oaths you have made to the Lord	Paraphrase of Num. 30:2 and Deut. 23:31	Do not swear at all Let your “Yes” be “Yes”	No need to say “affirm” instead of “swear” Jesus and Paul said more than “Yes” to affirm their words
Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth	Quote from Lev. 24:19; Deut. 19:21	Do not resist an evil person Turn the other cheek Give double what they ask	Nonviolent resistance is permissible; Jesus even used force sometimes We can object or walk away Not always required - do not reward evildoers
Love your neighbor hate your enemy	Quote from Lev. 19:18 Torah	Love your enemies and pray for them Be perfect	humanly impossible
Summary	Usually a quote of the Torah	Even more is required — who can obey these startling demands?	Exceptions often exist