

Text: Mt 5.17-19

We will start our Christmas series on November 24, so I want to take a break from Hebrews and address two questions I've received. The first one will set a foundation for the second one.

The question comes from Mt 5.19:

Mt 5.19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

I'll try to explain the question as it was given to me, and hope that I can express it properly.

1. What does "annulling a commandment" mean?
 - a. Does it mean saying "we can set aside or ignore X law because we are in the age of grace?"
 - b. Does it mean saying, "that law doesn't apply to me, but it does apply to you?" (*i.e.* "teaches others to do the same law I set aside")
2. Whatever "annulling" means, why does the passage seem to say that this guy will be "in the kingdom" at all? ("least in the kingdom of heaven")
3. Side question: "what's the deal with 'least commandments'? Aren't all commandments equally valid? Isn't sin still sin?"

When we look at these questions, especially focusing on the one verse, we can see where confusion could arise (and commentators often don't help). So, to start with, let's step back a bit and consider a wider context, which is our text for today:

Read Mt 5.17-19

We could say that an even wider context is the Sermon on the Mount, it is taught by Jesus to his disciples (with others listening), the whole crowd is made up of 1st century Jews (unless one or two Gentiles showed up), so we must consider this context also. The whole sermon, the audience, their "thought-environment," everything.

Proposition: The place of Jesus demands faithful application of all he says, giving full weight to every teaching of Scripture.

I. Implications of Jesus fulfilling the Law (17)

A. Jesus – much misunderstood (then and now)

1. Jesus was a phenomenal figure during his first coming

- a. His many miracles marked him as distinct from any other prophet who ever arrived in Israel
- b. His teaching contrasted with the rabbis and the Pharisees

See the last two verses of chapter 7, when the Sermon concluded (Mt 7.28-29)

Mt 7.28-29 ¶ When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching;²⁹ for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as their scribes.

2. The people of Judah and Galilee had much to say about him

- a. And much of it was wrong
- b. Questions, theories, tall tales, gossip

In 1709, Richard Steele, who published a literary and society journal called "The Tatler." He said of himself, "The Insignificancy of my Manners..makes the Laughers called me a Quid Nunc."¹

What is a quidnunc?

"A person who constantly asks: 'What now?'; an inquisitive or nosy person; a gossip."²

- c. There was a lot of busy talk about Jesus: no doubt some said, "He is trying to destroy the Law."

¹ Tatler 10, ¶2, in *The Tatler. By Isaac Bickerstaff Esq* • (ed. Richard Steele) · 1709-11 (271 issues collected into 2 vols.).

² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "quidnunc (n.)," December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7040063120>.

3. Today, Jesus is as misunderstood as ever

- a. Ask the average person to tell you what they know of Jesus, you will hear many stories
- b. Many who study the life of Jesus repeat and expand false stories about Jesus

In answer to them, Jesus says, “Do not think I am come as you think I’ve come.”

B. Jesus – on a mission

1. Not to destroy

- a. The word “abolish” (NAU) or “destroy” (KJV)

Literally, “to throw down” or “loosen down” – “destroy”

Mt 24.2 And He said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

- b. The Law and the Prophets

- 1) Shorthand for the whole Old Testament
- 2) Sometimes, “The Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets”
- 3) He means the whole of the Old Testament, the Word of God

Jesus did not dismiss the OT, neither should we

2. But to fulfill

- a. Misconceptions of fulfillment

- 1) “Jesus only meant the moral law”
 - a) Civil and ceremonial law indeed abolished
 - b) This division of the Law is not derived from the Bible
 - c) Jesus statement in verse 18 doesn’t teach this – not one jot or one tittle
- 2) “Jesus provides the fullest meaning of the law”
 - a) Introduces a novel meaning for “fulfill”
 - b) Ignores v. 18 “jot and tittle”
 - c) Misinterprets Mt 22.34-40 (Great Commandment)

- 3) "Jesus fills up the law by teaching a better or superior form of righteousness" [gives law its "real" meaning]
 - a) Weakens the voices of the prophets in the OT
 - b) Makes the OT meaning uncertain and less stable
 - c) And, "it is hard to see how all this can be derived from vv. 17-20"³

b. The best interpretation

- 1) The Law and the Prophets point to Christ
- 2) Christ completes, fulfills, answers every anticipation, type, prophecy, promise, analogy, implication, and prefiguring of the OT
 - a) The Exodus "foreshadows the calling out of Egypt of God's 'son.'"⁴

Mt 2.15 He remained there until the death of Herod. *This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."*

- b) The ceremonial aspects of the Law prefigured the work fulfilled in Christ on the cross (Heb 2-10)

Now obsolete, but not without meaning

- c) The teaching ministry of Christ fulfilled the Law by filling it out as we see in the following verses (Mt 5.21-48, "you have heard ... but I say unto you")

"In no case does this 'abolish' the OT as canon, any more than the obsolescence of the Levitical sacrificial system abolishes tabernacle ritual as canon. Instead, the OT's real and abiding authority must be understood through the person

³ D. A Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 143.

⁴ Carson, 144.

and teaching of him to whom it points and who so richly fulfills it.”⁵

“all of the Old Testament remains normative and relevant for Jesus’ followers (2 Tim 3:16), but none of it can rightly be interpreted until one understands how it has been fulfilled in Christ.”⁶

II. Emphatic teaching of the permanence of Law (18)

A. The Emphasis: “AMEN”

1. Lit. “For *amen* I say to you”
2. Amen = “surely” in NAU, “verily” KJV
3. It was Jesus’ way of putting the next words in bold

B. The Law retains its authority to the smallest letter of mark

1. KJV, “jot and tittle”
2. The Greek has the smallest Gk letter (“iota”) stand in for the smallest Hebrew letter (“yodh”)
3. The tittle is the small distinguishing mark between similar letters: כ/כ; ד/ד; ד/ד

Every detail of the Law remains in force, as fulfilled in Christ.

C. Special emphasis of this statement: the durability of the Law

1. Nature of authority is as it relates to Christ, fulfilled in Christ (17)
2. Extent of authority: to the very jot and tittle
3. Duration of authority
 - a. Until the end of the age (not quite forever)
 - b. Until all is accomplished (“everything in the law considered under the law’s prophetic function”⁷)

⁵ Carson, 144.

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 103–4.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 145.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ in these two verses confirms the whole of the Old Testament. He puts His seal of authority, his *imprimatur*, upon the whole of the Old Testament canon, the whole of the law and the prophets. Read these four Gospels, and watch His quotations from the Old Testament. You can come to one conclusion only, namely, that He believed it all and not only certain parts of it! He quoted almost every part of it. To the Lord Jesus Christ, the Old Testament was the Word of God; it was Scripture; it was something absolutely unique and apart; it had authority which nothing else has possessed or can possess.”⁸

III. Comparative uses and results of the Law (19)

All this, finally, brings us to the verse in question.

A. Least and Greatest commandments

1. The Jews had a hierarchical way of looking at the commandments
2. Jesus went along with this when he was asked, “Which is the greatest commandment”

This doesn’t mean any commandment is less inspired, but the ethical value of each one may vary.

B. The position of the “whoever’s” in the verse

1. Least in the kingdom
2. Great in the kingdom

“But here Jesus is concerned most with his disciples as teachers, as he contrasts greatness and obscurity *within* the kingdom.”⁹

⁸ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, One-Volume Edition, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 187.

⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 105.

C. The big question: what does it mean to “annul” even the least of the commandments?

1. Various words by translators

- a. NAU: “annuls”
- b. KJV: “breaks”
- c. YLT: “looses”
- d. ESV: “relaxes”

2. There is a bit of wordplay with v. 17

- a. “Abolish” has the same root, with a preposition added: “to loose down” or “to throw down”
- b. The word here is the Gk 101 verb, λύω (the verb we use to learn the Gk verb system)
 - 1) Basic meaning “to loose” (like “loosen the thongs of his sandals”)
 - 2) Can mean “destroy” in some contexts
- c. Here, compared to “throw down” in v. 17, I think the ESV “relax” is best

3. Consider the attitude Christians have had towards the OT

- a. Some dismiss it as irrelevant
- b. Some preachers rarely teach from it or read it

“You will find so many people today who seem to think they can believe on the Lord Jesus Christ fully and yet more or less reject the Old Testament. It must be said, however, that the question of our attitude towards the Old Testament inevitably raises the question of our attitude towards the Lord Jesus Christ. If we say that we do not believe in the account of the creation, or in Abraham as a person; if we do not believe that the law was given by God to Moses ... if we say that, we are in fact flatly contradicting everything our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ said about Himself, the law, and the prophets.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:187.

4. Even more than that, now we have the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments: what about Christians who want to *relax* any of it?

“The law pointed forward to Jesus and his teaching; so it is properly obeyed by conforming to his word. As it points to him, so he, in fulfilling it, establishes what continuity it has, the true direction to which it points and the way it is to be obeyed. Thus ranking in the kingdom turns on the degree of conformity to Jesus’ teaching as that teaching fulfills OT revelation. His teaching, toward which the OT pointed, must be obeyed.”¹¹

Conclusion:

Proposition: The place of Jesus demands faithful application of all he says, giving full weight to every teaching of Scripture.

We can’t play fast and loose with any of it.

“Annulling” or “breaking” the least commandment is the attitude that says, “well, that was cultural...” or, “that doesn’t apply to me...”

Do we dare relax or disregard *any* of the Scripture?

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 146.