

# One of the Most Difficult Texts in the New Testament: Capital “L” and “P” (Matt. 5:17-20)

Sermon Series: *The Law of Christ and Continuity and Discontinuity Between the Old and New Covenant.*

Sermon #1: There are various genres of law, including the Mosaic law, positive law, and natural law. The law of principle will be revisited in the future. In Scripture, there is law, the law, and the Law.

Two nuanced interpretations emerge from this text (with the input of others):

- A. Jesus has fulfilled the law by ending, replacing, supplementing, adding to, actively obeying, enforcing, confirming, or restoring the intention of the Law. There is limited continuity between the Law and the Prophets (Old Covenant) and the New Covenant.
- B. As a Jew, under the law (Gal. 4:4-6), Jesus taught, lived, and fulfilled the law. As a result, the Mosaic Law is still binding since “not all has been accomplished” (v.18-20).

## 1. Jesus did not come to *abolish* the Law or the Prophets (v.17a)

To *abolish* in Greek can have a wide variety of meanings:

- A. To throw, cast down, or demolish (Matt. 24:2; Mk. 13:2; Lk. 21:6).
- B. To cause the ruin of something, as in to destroy or dismantle (Matt. 26:61; 2 Cor. 5:1).
- C. To end the validity of something and cause it to be no longer in force; to annul, to make invalid; to bring something to its end and ruin (Acts 5:38).
- D. To cease, lodge, or halt (Lk. 9:12).

English Translations:

- “Do not think (presume) I have come to *abolish* the Law or the Prophets.” (ESV, NASB, LSB, NKJV, CSB, NIV, BLB).
- “I did not come to *abolish* the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets” (NLT)
- “Do not think I am come to *destroy* the law or the prophets” (KJV)
- “Do not think that I have come to *destroy* the Law or the Prophets” (HCSB)

English translations interpret Jesus’ statement by capitalizing the “L” and “P.” There is no capital “L” or “P” in Greek for v.17, into the “category” of Law (capital “L”).

Law (nomos) can mean (A) a particular or specific command that promises rewards for obedience or punishment for disobedience (Gal. 3:10); (B) a rule, principle, system, or norm (Rom. 3:27; 7:21); (C) a collection of writings, such as the Pentateuch (1 Cor. 9:8, 9; 14:21, 34; Gal. 3:10); or (D) a summary of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17-21; Jn. 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; Rom. 3:21).

Why is this important?

- If Jesus intends to interpret the “law” as “Law” broadly, it will refer to either the Pentateuch or the whole Old Testament.
- If Jesus intends for the “law” to be interpreted as “law” narrowly, he is referring to strictly the Mosaic Law.
  - The Mosaic law is a subset of “Law.” The “Law” is not a subset of the Mosaic law.

\* In pairing the Law with the Prophets, Jesus intends to speak of the Law as the entire Old Testament, not merely the Mosaic law.

## 2. Jesus came to *fulfill* the Law and the Prophets (v. 17b)

To *fulfill* in Greek can have a variety of meanings:

- A. To make full, fill (full) as in the filling of nets (Matt. 13:48), being full of something, as in wisdom (Lk. 2:40), being well-supplied (Phil. 4:20).
- B. To complete a period of time (fill, complete) as in forty years (Acts 7:30).
- C. To bring to completion that which has begun, to complete, finish (Rom. 15:19; Phil. 2:2).
- D. To bring to a designed end, such as prophecy, obligation, promise, law, request, purpose, desire, hope, duty, or destiny (Matt. 1:33; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17).
- E. To complete, as in a number made (Rev. 6:11).

How has Jesus fulfilled the Law? (1) His sinless life (active obedience), (2) His sacrifice (passive obedience), (3) dozens of Messianic and Suffering Servant prophecies, and more to come (4) various types and shadows in the Old Testament (5) the intention and meaning of the Old Testament that was obscured by sin, compounded by the traditions of men; the principle of love (Matt. 22:37-40).

Is the Law in v.18 the same Law of v.17?

- The ESV, NASB, LSB, NIV, and BLB all capitalize the “L,” connecting it to v.17.
- The HCSB, NLT, KJV, and NKJV do not capitalize law, perhaps distinguishing it from v.17.

The Law and the Prophets were a common designation in Scripture (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Lk. 24:27-32; Acts 13:15; Rom. 3:21-26).

## 3. Those in His Kingdom will obey Him, as the Law and the Prophets point to Him (v.18-19)

- The conjunctions “for” (v.18), “therefore” (v.19), and “for” (v.20) indicate that Jesus is continuing His train of thought.
  - The Greek for “pass” (v.18) can mean “to lose force/become invalid.” It is not the omission of a stroke (Hebrew consonants and vowels) but the loss of authority.
  - The Law will only become invalid once everything is accomplished, i.e., future prophecies concerning His Second Coming (Matt. 24:35; Rev. 20:11).

What are “these” commandments?

- They are primarily Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (v.1, 10), not *merely* the Mosaic law and tithing and purity regulations (23:23-26). They are the principled commandments of the Law, “swallowed up” by Jesus’ teaching: love (Lev. 19:9-18; Matt. 22:36-40). In essence, Jesus’ teaching and the Mosaic Law are the same.
  - The Pharisees were rebuked for neglecting the “weightier matters” of the law, which are justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23-26). Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their divisions of the law, as His followers in His kingdom must have a righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees. This is an external impossibility.

Summary of Jesus’ statement concerning the Law and the Prophets:

“I have come under the law as a Jew (Gal. 4:4-5), though apart from the righteousness of the law, righteousness will be acquired through Me, by faith (Rom. 3:21). I did not come to *destroy* the Law (included in it is the Mosaic Law) but to bring it to *completion* through My teaching, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Everything is to be interpreted through Me since the Law and the Prophets point to Me (Lk. 24:27; Jn. 5:39; Rom. 3:21). The One Whom Moses (Law) and Elijah (Prophets) pointed to has arrived (Deut. 18:15-18; Matt. 17:5-8). I have come to expound My Law and bring its intended meaning to fulfillment in Myself.”