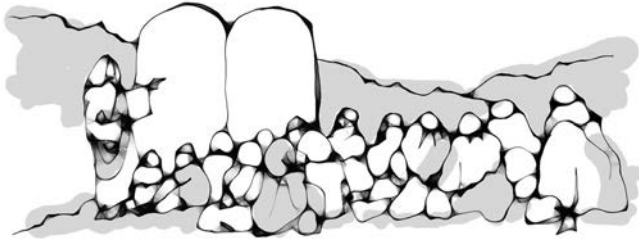


Christ and the Law in the Sermon on the Mount



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:17–20, Luke 16:16, Matt. 5:21–32, Rom. 7:24, Matt. 5:33–37, 38–48.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot, or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled’ ” (*Matthew 5:17, 18, NKJV*).

When most people think about the Sermon on the Mount, they automatically think of “the Beatitudes” (*Matt. 5:1–12*). However, the Sermon on the Mount actually covers three chapters that have been divided into four sections. The Beatitudes comprise only the first section. In the second, Jesus compares Christians to light and salt (*Matt. 5:13–16*). The third, *Matthew 5:17–48*, is where Jesus gives us a new and deeper perspective on the law. And then there is the final and longest section, *Matthew 6:1–7:23*, in which Jesus provides clear teaching on Christian behavior. The whole talk ends with the parable of the wise and foolish builders (*Matt. 7:24–27*), which stresses the importance of obedience to what God calls us to do.

This week we will investigate the third section, *Matthew 5:17–48* (which theologians call the *antitheses*, cases in which sharp contrasts are presented), to see what it teaches us about the law.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 26.

“One Jot or Tittle”

Read again Matthew 5:17–20. How interesting that Jesus would greatly emphasize the law here, while at the same time making the statement that He did about the scribes and Pharisees, who so greatly emphasized the law, as well. What important lesson does this passage teach about true obedience to the law?

Jesus begins this section with the assurance that He has not come to abolish “the Law or the Prophets” (*Matt. 5:17, NKJV*). Although there is no reference to it, many see this as a formulaic expression for the entire Old Testament (*see also Matt. 7:12, 11:13, 22:40, Luke 16:16, Acts 13:15, 24:14, Rom. 3:21*). In spite of what His opponents claimed, Jesus did not attack the very book that revealed the will of His Father. Instead, His purpose was to “fulfill” the law and the prophets, not to do away with them.

The word used for “fulfill” (*plero*) literally means to “fill up” or “complete.” It carries the sense of “filling to the brim.” There are two ways to understand *fulfill*. One is to place the emphasis on Jesus as being the fulfillment of Scripture (*for example, Luke 24:25–27, John 5:39*). However, key to understanding this text is the immediate context, which shows that Jesus did not come to destroy Scripture but to reveal its inner essence.

Having established His overall intent, Jesus switched emphasis from the Old Testament in general to the law in particular. Almost as if He knew that people would one day accuse Him of abolishing the law, He cautions that as long as heaven and earth remain, the law will exist until everything “is accomplished” (*Matt. 5:18, NIV*). With this statement, Jesus confirms the perpetuity of the law.

In fact, the law is so important that all those who violate its precepts will be called “the least in the kingdom.” This is just a way of saying that they are wrong in what they are doing. Jesus is quick to point out that He is not promoting the empty righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees but instead a righteousness springing from a heart that loves God and seeks to do His will.

Murder (Matt. 5:21–26)

After He clarified His intention to uphold the law, Jesus started to explain a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. He begins by citing the sixth commandment (*Exod. 20:13*) and summarizing, from the law of Moses, the penalty for its violation (*Exod. 21:12, Lev. 24:17*).

The sixth commandment does not include all cases in which one person kills another. In cases of manslaughter, a person could flee to a city of refuge and gain temporary asylum (*Exod. 21:13, Num. 35:12*). However, one who intentionally took another's life would receive swift judgment. In His explanation, Jesus does not focus on the act itself but on the motive and intents of the one who commits the act. One might take a life accidentally, but the person who purposes to take a life has gone through a period of deliberation. The sin took place before the person even carried out the terrible deed. Many potential murderers are stopped only by a lack of opportunity.

Read Matthew 5:22. What does Jesus equate to murder? How does 1 John 3:15 help to emphasize the point? What is the real issue here that Jesus is pointing to, and what does this tell us about the real reach of God's law?

Though the Bible often talks about the power of words, Jesus here takes it to a deeper level. Often the sole purpose of harsh words or cursing is to evoke negative feelings in the victim. Jesus' point is crystal clear. It's not just those who carry through with the crime who are guilty of murder but also those who speak harsh words to others or who even harbor murderous thoughts. Jesus counsels those harboring these thoughts to reconcile with their victims before coming to the altar (*Matt. 5:23–26*).

Dwell on the implication of Jesus' words in the texts for today. How well have you done in this regard? What does such a high standard tell you about the need to be covered by Christ's righteousness at all times?

Adultery (Matt. 5:27–32)

Jesus' next example involves commandments concerning adultery. He first cites the seventh commandment, *You shall not commit adultery*. In the context of the law of Moses, adultery took place when a married person was sexually involved with someone other than a spouse. The law was very clear that both parties found guilty of adultery should be put to death. As with the sixth commandment, Jesus gave the deeper implications of this particular commandment.

Adultery often starts long before the acts are committed. In the same way that murder starts with the intention to inflict permanent harm on an individual, adultery begins at the very moment when an individual lustfully desires another person, married or single, to whom he or she is not married.

Read Matthew 5:29, 30. How much more forceful could Jesus be in describing the danger of sin? After looking at these texts, read Romans 7:24. What important truths are found here?

Here, too, Jesus provides an instant remedy for those sins that have been exposed. The solution is not to follow through with the sin but to have a conversion of the heart. With strong metaphors, Jesus counsels the one who has the problem to do what is necessary if he or she wishes to enter the kingdom. This may mean taking a different route to work or terminating a cherished friendship, but eternal gain far outweighs the passions of the moment.

As we saw before, Moses permitted divorce even though he knew it was not a part of God's original plan. After addressing married men with roaming eyes and admonishing them to control their impulses, Jesus encourages lifelong marriage fidelity.

“The surrender of the will is represented as plucking out the eye or cutting off the hand. Often it seems to us that to surrender the will to God is to consent to go through life maimed or crippled. But it is better, says Christ, for self to be maimed, wounded, crippled, if thus you may enter into life. That which you look upon as disaster is the door to highest benefit.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 61. What implication might these words have for you?

Promises, Promises . . . (Matt. 5:33–37)

The first two antitheses (murder and adultery) are based on the Decalogue. The antithesis regarding divorce and the ones that follow are taken from other sections of the Mosaic law, including the one about swearing falsely and performing oaths to the Lord.

Read Leviticus 19:11–13. What specific points do we find here? See also Exod. 20:7.

The Mosaic law, from which Jesus quotes, is listed in a section of Leviticus that condemns a number of deceptive practices. Here again it is evident that Jesus' concern is with the *intentions*. Anyone who makes a promise with no intention of fulfilling it has made a conscious decision to sin.

Though the command against swearing falsely relates to promises made to other people, the second command concerns promises made to God.

Read Deuteronomy 23:21–23. In what way do these verses relate to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33–37? See also Acts 5:1–11.

Unlike the person guilty of false swearing, the one who makes a financial pledge to God is not necessarily intending to defraud. However, Jesus knows human nature and cautions against making promises that one may later regret. Rather than making promises that may not even be in the power of the individual to fulfill, a Christian should be a person of integrity whose “yes” means “yes” and “no” means “no.”

Think about a time that you made a promise (either to a person or to God) that you intended to keep but ultimately didn't. How can you learn to be careful about this problem? What about promises to yourself that you have reneged on?

Lex Talionis (Matt. 5:38–48)

It appears that the common theme here (Matt. 5:38–48) is revenge. This theme concerns the many commandments in the Mosaic law that are built on the principle of repaying a crime with an equal punishment, an idea called *lex talionis*, a Latin term meaning “law of retaliation.”

As we see in a number of passages (Exod. 21:22–25, Lev. 24:17–21, Deut. 19:21), the law called for the offender to suffer the same experience as the victim. If the victim lost an eye, arm, foot, or life, the offender must also. This “law of retaliation” was common among a number of ancient civilizations. Why not, since it seems to reveal a simple principle of justice?

It’s important to realize that this principle is there to *limit* retaliation; that is, to keep people from extracting more from a wrong done to them than they are rightfully entitled to extract. Thus, in many ways, this law was to ensure that justice was not perverted.

Therefore, in Matthew 5:38–42 Jesus was not necessarily attacking the legitimacy of a law that demanded a person to be punished for a crime. Instead, Jesus focused on the Christians’ response to people who try to take advantage of them. Rather than seeking opportunities for revenge, Christians should “retaliate” with kindness, something that we can do only through the grace of God working within us. In this appeal, Jesus has taken us to a deeper level in our understanding of what it means to be a follower of the Lord.

The final antithesis addresses the attitude that promotes love for friends and hatred for enemies. The command to love your neighbor is found in Leviticus 19:18. There is no explicit text that calls for hatred of enemies, even despite Deuteronomy 23:3–6.

In the context of Jesus’ world, the Jews were under foreign occupation by the Roman oppressive power and were second-class citizens in their own land. Given their oppression, they probably felt justified in hating their enemy, who at times severely oppressed them. Jesus was showing them a better way to live, even under less-than-ideal circumstances.

Read Matthew 5:44, 45. What is Jesus saying to us here? More important, in what way can you apply this teaching in your own life with someone who has done you wrong?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Jesus takes up the commandments separately, and explains the depth and breadth of their requirement. Instead of removing one jot of their force, He shows how far reaching their principles are, and exposes the fatal mistake of the Jews in their outward show of obedience. He declares that by the evil thought or the lustful look the law of God is transgressed. One who becomes a party to the least injustice is breaking the law and degrading his own moral nature. Murder first exists in the mind. He who gives hatred a place in his heart is setting his feet in the path of the murderer, and his offerings are abhorrent to God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 310.

Love is the binding principle in God’s law. In each of the antitheses, Jesus elevates the principle of love: love keeps a person from harboring hatred toward her sister; love keeps a husband and wife together; love challenges the Christian to be always honest in his dealings with others and God; love allows a person to react in kindness when he has been wronged; and love empowers the individual to treat the enemy as he himself would like to be treated.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In this week’s section, Jesus said, “You have heard it has been said by them of old,” and then later said, “but I say unto you,” and then gave the antitheses. Notice that some of the sayings “of old” were direct quotes from the Bible or taken from Old Testament teachings. Thus, the problem was not with the references but with how they had been interpreted. What lesson can we take from this regarding, if not our doctrines, the way in which we interpret them? How might we be in danger of looking at things too superficially and missing the deeper meaning?
- 2 Many fall into the trap of interpreting texts in isolation from other texts. One such text is Matthew 5:48, where we are told to be as perfect as our Father in heaven. How does the interpretation of this text in its immediate context (*Matt. 5:43–48*) demonstrate the importance of careful Bible study? How would you respond to a person who claimed that this text was teaching sinlessness? What is the text really teaching, and why does this teaching reveal the true meaning of being a follower of Jesus?
- 3 How do the texts we studied, particularly about murder and adultery, help to show how wrong those are who claim the law was abolished after the Cross?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 22:37*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to reveal its inner essence.

Feel: Sense that the law addresses not just actions but motives.

Do: Demonstrate Spirit-led actions, thoughts, and motives rather than outward compliance.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Keeping the Law Is Heart Work.

- A** Why did Jesus' opponents claim that Jesus was out to destroy the law?
- B** What does "fulfill" mean in Matthew 5:18?
- C** How does Jesus' keeping of the law differ from the way the scribes and Pharisees kept the law?

II. Feel: Motive Is Everything.

- A** Some may have accused Jesus of being soft on sin. How does Jesus' forceful teaching in Matthew 5:29, 30 show Jesus' revulsion toward sin?
- B** How do the disciples feel about Jesus' teaching on the motivation of law-keeping (*Matt. 19:10*)?
- C** How does Jesus' expansion of the command against swearing falsely in Matthew 5:33–37 show us that our dealings with one another and God should be based on more than fluctuating feelings?

III. Do: Surrendering to the Work of the Holy Spirit

- A** Why do we seem to prefer having a list of things to tick off rather than having our motives changed?
- B** How can I live so that my "yes" will mean "yes" and my "no" will mean "no" without having to resort to some kind of oath to make others believe me?

► **Summary:** Jesus shows in His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that He had not come to do away with the law. Rather, He came to magnify the law and show the need for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in order to keep it.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 22:37*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God’s law cannot be viewed only as a set of rules. It is a call to a complete lifestyle commitment, empowered by the Holy Spirit in which our actions, as well as our innermost thoughts and motives, will be Spirit led.

Just for Teachers: In this week’s lesson, we grasp the far-reaching intentions of God’s law to impact all aspects of our lives and the approach we should take to it. We see that God’s law is not meant to be debated in a theoretical way but must penetrate the very fiber of our being.

The story is told of a rich man who had a mansion nestled on the side of a high mountain. The only way to reach the house was by means of a dangerous mountain road with a sheer cliff on one side. The rich man was in need of a new chauffeur and advertised the job. Three men responded to the advertisement. Tom, the first to be interviewed, felt quite confident; after all, he had been a racecar driver. Strangely, during the interview, the rich man only asked one question: “How close to the edge of the cliff can you drive?” Tom felt that this was the moment to tell the rich man about his excellent vehicle control and point out that he had never lost a race or lost control of his racecar even at high speeds. “But how close can you drive?” insisted the rich man. After some quick mental calculations, Tom replied, “I think I could safely handle a vehicle to within a meter [three feet] of the edge.” Sam, the next to be interviewed, felt even more confident. After all, he had done some stunt driving for a movie. He was fearless behind the wheel. When asked how close to the edge of the cliff he could drive, he quickly replied, “I could take any vehicle to within half a meter [one and a half feet] of the edge and even have a wheel slightly overlap the side without a problem!” Joe, the last to be interviewed, had no particular claim to driving fame. “So Joe, how close to the edge of the cliff can you drive?” the rich man asked. “I don’t know, sir. I’m afraid of heights, so I will just stay as far away from the edge as possible.” Joe got the job.

Opening Activity: After sharing the story presented above, ask class members if they agreed with the rich man’s choice for his chauffeur. What attitudes did Tom, Sam, and Joe display toward the law of gravity? After all, none of them were deliberately planning on breaking any safe-driving laws.

Discuss: How were Tom’s and Sam’s attitudes similar to Jewish thinking about the law in the time of Christ?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Kingdom of God Sermon (*Review Matthew 5:17–48 with your class.*)

Matthew 5:17–48 describes a key moment of Jesus’ ministry and is part and parcel of the larger Sermon on the Mount. Situated chronologically at the beginning of His ministry, the ideas and concepts contained in this section represent the proverbial line in the sand as Jesus distinguishes the kingdom of God from the kingdom of the ruler of this world. God’s kingdom is salt and light and composed of people who are willing to make a difference (*vss. 13–16*).

Right from the outset, Jesus deflates a question that may have arisen in the minds of the Pharisees and scribes as they undoubtedly listened very carefully to the young Rabbi from Nazareth: “ ‘Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill’ ” (*vs. 17, NKJV*). The Greek term that the NKJV translates as “destroy” can also be translated as “nullify,” “abolish,” “demolish,” or “dismantle.” Jesus did not come to demolish or nullify the Law and the Prophets (which is shorthand for the complete divine revelation of the Old Testament, in other words, Scripture); He came to *fulfill*.

Right at this juncture it would be good to pause for a moment and consider the etymology of “fulfill.” The Greek form of *fulfill* is closely related to *filling*, and the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX or Septuagint) uses exactly this verb to describe the Creator’s command to His creatures to fill the earth (*Gen. 1:22, 28*). The incarnate Word that created the world through His word (*John 1:1–3*) is about to fill in the blanks that a mere “you shall not kill” or a simple “you shall not commit adultery” left open. Human reason would find these commandments pretty self-explanatory, and yet, Jesus as the Lawgiver drills deeper.

Consider This: Why did Jesus emphasize that the kingdom of God has come?

II. “You Have Heard . . . but I Tell You” (*Study the six antitheses Jesus proposes in Matthew 5 with your class.*)

Jesus uses six antitheses that help us to understand that action is only one element of human compliance with the law. Jesus not only reminds us that God considers motivation and thoughts as much as action but, by using this antithetical structure, He also indirectly claims to be on the same level as the Divine Lawgiver. The antitheses cover murder (*Matt. 5:21–26*), adultery (*vss. 27–30*), divorce (*vss. 31, 32*), oaths (*vss. 33–37*), retaliation (*vss. 38–42*), and love toward enemies (*vss. 43–47*). It is highly significant to note that

not all of these examples represent the Ten Commandments. Divorce and oaths could be classified as civil laws, while retaliation and love for enemies should be considered underlying theological (or philosophical) foundations. Jesus very purposefully selects different levels of the divinely ordained law to impress on His listeners the fact that law-keeping without the Lawgiver is impossible and not germane to the human domain. Put differently, by including thoughts, attitudes, and underlying motivations within the bandwidth of the law, Jesus clearly highlights the impossibility of human beings—you and I—ever being able to keep the law (with all its different levels and motivations) by ourselves. Even with our best intentions we find ourselves at the feet of the Lawgiver who stepped from Sinai to Golgotha to provide both a perfect example and a perfect salvation that is available to all who accept His gift.

Consider This: In what ways does Jesus challenge us to keep the law more strictly than even the Pharisees did?

III. “Be Perfect, Just as Your Father in Heaven Is Perfect” (*Study Matthew 5:48 with your class.*)

This crucial section concludes with another statement that shakes our foundations and, unfortunately, has often been taken out of context: “ ‘Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect’ ” (*Matt. 5:48, NKJV*).

Jesus highlights two spheres of perfection: “ ‘You shall be perfect’ ” refers to His listeners. This is linked to another sphere of perfection: “ ‘as your Father in heaven is perfect.’ ” Ellen G. White’s statement, “as God is perfect in His sphere, so we are to be perfect in ours” clearly alludes to these two different levels of perfection (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 574). Deuteronomy 32:4 describes God’s perfection: “ ‘He is the Rock, His work is perfect’ ” (*NKJV*), while Isaiah 64:6 underlines the fact that “our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (*NKJV*). Jesus—the Lawgiver, Creator, and Savior—however, bridges this abyss that separates our lack of perfection and God’s complete perfection. “ ‘I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one’ ” (*John 17:23, NKJV*). Biblical perfection, then, has two levels, God’s perfect Oneness within the Godhead and humanity’s perfect oneness with Christ.

Here is an illustration for humanity’s perfect oneness with Christ, taken from Robert J. Ross: “Scientists have recently discovered a way to make the first 100 percent completely flat and smooth surface on machined and highly polished glass. It is so flat and smooth that when two of these thick sheets of glass are slid one over the other, displacing all the air, the bond between the molecules becomes so great that it is near impossible to separate the two sheets of glass. They are truly one. Jesus’ perfect oneness with the Father through His obedience here on earth becomes our robe of (His) righteousness imputed to us for all of eternity. The righteousness that He wants to impart to us is the perfect

oneness we can have through His Spirit’s leading. Obedience motivated by genuine love allows Him daily to grind and polish us until we are absolutely bonded as one in Him that we will be nearly impossible to separate.” —“Perfection,” *Adventist World*, December 2009, p. 21.

Consider This: How does the overall drive of the Sermon on the Mount help us to understand Jesus’ call for perfection?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 In Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5, He emphasizes the motivation and thoughts behind the law. How are we judged—by our motivation or by our deeds? Give biblical support for your answer. (*Hint: See Ezekiel 24:14.*)
- 2 If sin is not just the act itself but begins in the mind, when does a temptation become a sin?
- 3 What is the difference between “turning the other cheek” or going the “extra mile” and being the passive victim (*Matt. 5:38–42*)? (See Thursday’s discussion of Christian “retaliation.”)

Application Questions:

- 1 After reading Matthew 5:23–26, consider how far you should go in trying to make up with someone who holds a grudge against you. How does the need for reconciliation affect your relationship with God?
- 2 Jesus takes the commandment of not committing adultery further by saying that anyone who looks with lust is breaking this commandment. Is this teaching still valid in our world, in which we are bombarded by advertising designed to play on our sexual desires?
- 3 According to the popular bumper sticker wisdom “Don’t get mad—get even,” how can we handle situations that make us angry? Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is not telling us to calmly accept abuse but to “retaliate” with unexpected kindness. How is this possible?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: John has a terrible neighbor. The man lets his dog dirty John’s lawn without cleaning it up, plays loud music on Friday nights until late, and has even been seen tossing trash over the fence into John’s yard. As a class, suggest some practical ways in which John can “heap burning coals on his head” (*Prov. 25:21, 22, NIV*).