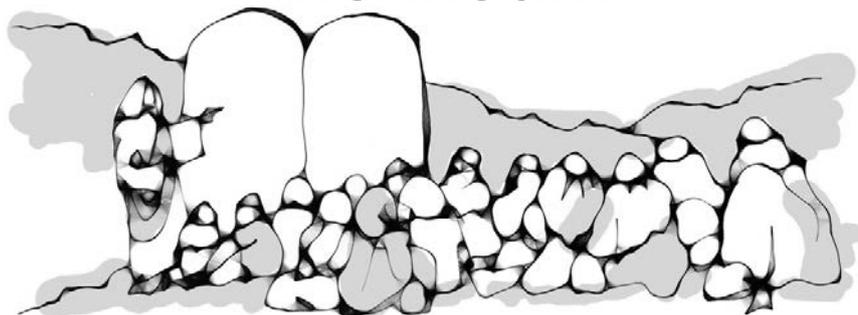


Christ and the Law in the Sermon on the Mount¹



SABBATH—APRIL 19

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 5:17–20; Luke 16:16; Matthew 5:21–32; Romans 7:24; Matthew 5:33–37; Matthew 5:38–48.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Do not think I have come to get rid of what is written in the Law or in the Prophets. I have not come to do that. Instead, I have come to give full meaning to what is written. What I’m [I am] about to tell you is true. Heaven and earth will disappear before the smallest letter disappears from the Law. Not even the smallest stroke of a pen will disappear from the Law until everything is completed’ ” (Matthew 5:17, 18, NlrV).

WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, they think of the “Beatitudes”² (Matthew 5:1–12). But the Sermon on the Mount really covers three chapters that have been divided into four parts. The Beatitudes cover only the first part. In the second part, Jesus compares³ Christians to light and salt (Matthew 5:13–16). In the third part, Matthew 5:17–48, Jesus gives us a new and deeper understanding of the law. And then there is the final and longest part, Matthew 6:1–7:23. Here, Jesus gives clear teaching on Christian behavior (action). The whole talk ends with the parable⁴ of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24–27). This parable shows the importance of obedience to what God asks us to do.

This week, we will study the third part, Matthew 5:17–48. This part includes what Bible thinkers call the *antitheses*. They are examples in which the sharp difference between two things is shown. We will learn what this part teaches us about the law.

DEFINITIONS

1. the Sermon on the Mount—the famous sermon that Christ gave on a mountain. The complete sermon is found in Matthew 5–7.
2. Beatitudes—the early part of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus listed ten blessings called the Beatitudes, found in Matthew 5:1–12.
3. compares—to show how two or more things are the same or different.
4. parable—a short story that teaches a spiritual lesson or truth.

“ONE JOT⁵ OR TITTLE⁶” (Matthew 5:17–20)

The word Jesus used for “fulfill” (*plero*), in Matthew 5:17, means “filling to the brim.”

DEFINITIONS

5. jot—the least bit; the smallest amount.
6. tittle—a very small part.
7. scribes—members of an educated group of men in ancient (from a very long time ago) Israel through New Testament times. They studied the Scriptures, copied the law, and were teachers.
8. Pharisees—members of an ancient (from a long time ago) Jewish group that followed Jewish religious laws and teachings very strictly.
9. prophecy—special messages from God about what will happen in the future.

Read again Matthew 5:17–20. Jesus gives a strong point about the law here. At the same time, He makes a statement about the scribes⁷ and Pharisees,⁸ who placed great importance on the law. What important lesson do these verses teach about true obedience to the law?

Jesus begins this part with the promise that He has not come to abolish (remove) “the Law or the [writings of] Prophets [special messengers from God]” (Matthew 5:17, NKJV). Many Bible students believe this expression is another way of saying or meaning the entire Old Testament (read also Matthew 7:12; Matthew 11:13; Matthew 22:40; Luke 16:16; Acts 13:15; Acts 24:14; Romans 3:21). In spite of what His enemies said, Jesus did not attack the very book that explained the will of His Father. Instead, Jesus’ purpose was to “fulfill” the law and the prophets, not to remove them.

The word used for “fulfill” (*plero*) means to “fill up” or “complete.” It suggests the meaning of “filling to the brim” in the way that a glass is filled with water all the way to the top. There are two ways to understand the word *fulfill*. One is Jesus being the fulfillment of prophecy⁹ in the Bible (for example, Luke 24:25–27; John 5:39). But the key is to understand this verse to mean that Jesus did not come to destroy the Bible but to support it fully.

First, Jesus makes His point that He supports the authority of Scripture fully. Then He begins to talk about the law itself. It seems almost as if He knew that people would one day blame Him for removing the law. He warns that as long as heaven and earth remain, the law will continue until everything “is accomplished [successfully done]” (Matthew 5:18, NIV). With this speech, Jesus supports the idea that the law is to continue forever.

In fact, the law is so important that all people who break it will be called “the least in the kingdom” (Matthew 5:19, NIV). This is just another way of saying that they are wrong in what they are doing. Jesus is quick to point out that He is not encouraging the empty righteousness (holiness) of the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, He is expecting a righteousness that comes from a heart that loves God and longs to do His will.

MURDER (Matthew 5:21–26)

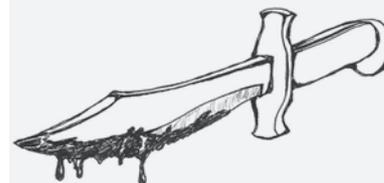
In Sunday's study, we learned that Jesus was clear in fully supporting the law. Then Jesus explains a righteousness that goes beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus begins by pointing to the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13). From the law of Moses, Jesus summarizes the penalty for breaking this law (Exodus 21:12; Leviticus 24:17).

The sixth commandment does not include all cases in which one person kills another. In cases of killing a person by accident, a person could flee to a city of refuge (safety) and get short-time protection (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:12). But a person who kills another person on purpose would receive swift judgment (punishment). In His explanation, Jesus does not focus on the act itself but on the reason why the murderer chose to kill someone. When a person decides to kill on purpose, he or she has gone through a period of careful thought and planning. The sin took place before the person even carried out the terrible action. Many murderers are stopped only by a lack of opportunity.

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

The Bible often talks about the power of words. But Jesus here takes it to a deeper level. Often, the only purpose of harsh (rough) words or cursing is to stir up negative feelings in the victim. Jesus' point is very clear. Those who carry through with the crime are guilty of murder. But those who speak harsh words to others or who even hold murderous thoughts are guilty too. Jesus advises those holding these thoughts to make peace with their victims before coming to the altar (Matthew 5:23–26).

Think deeply about what Jesus' words in the verses mean to you today. How true have you been to His words? What does such a high principle (important rule) tell you about the need to be covered by Christ's righteousness at all times?



Those who speak harsh words to others are guilty of murder.

ADULTERY (Matthew 5:27–32)

Jesus' next example involves commandments about adultery. He first points to the seventh commandment: *you shall not commit (do) adultery*. In 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 who were guilty of adultery should be put to death. As with the sixth commandment, Jesus gave deeper meaning to this commandment.

Adultery often starts long before the sexual act takes place. Murder starts with the decision to do permanent harm to another person. In the same way, adultery starts when a person 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 verses, read Romans 7:24. What important truths are found here?

Here, too, Jesus gives an immediate cure to those sins that have been exposed. The answer is not to follow through with the sin. Instead, the guilty person is to have a conversion (change) of the heart. With strong metaphors (word-pictures), Jesus advises the one who has the problem to do what is necessary if she or he wishes to enter the kingdom. This may mean taking a different way to work or ending a dear friendship. But eternal gain is much more important than the passions of the moment.

As we saw before, Moses permitted divorce even though he knew it was not a part of God's first plan. Jesus advises married men with roaming eyes and warns them to control their desires. He also encourages lifelong purity and faithfulness in marriage.

“Jesus shows that the surrender of the will is the same thing as taking out the eye or cutting off the hand. Often it seems to us that to surrender the will to God is the same as going through life crippled. But Christ says it is better for a person to be wounded or crippled and gain eternal life than to be whole and lose it. What seems to be a terrible misfortune is the door to eternal life.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, page 61. What spiritual meaning do these words suggest to you?



Adultery starts when a person desires someone, married or single, to whom he or she is not married.

PROMISES, PROMISES . . . (Matthew 5:33–37)

The first two *antitheses* (murder and adultery) are based on the Ten Commandments. The *antithesis* about divorce and the ones that follow are taken from other parts of the law of Moses. This includes the one about swearing falsely (lying) and making false promises to the Lord.

Read Leviticus 19:11–13. What special points do we find here? Read also Exodus 20:7.

Jesus quotes from the law of Moses. It is listed in a part of Leviticus that disapproves of many dishonest practices. Here again it is clear that Jesus' concern is with the desire to do evil.

Anyone who makes a promise without planning to keep it has made a mental decision to sin.

The command against swearing falsely has to do with promises made to other people. But the second command deals with promises made to God.

Read Deuteronomy 23:21–23. What do these verses have in common with Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33–37? Read also Acts 5:1–11.

A person may be guilty of false swearing. But the one who makes a financial pledge to God is not always trying to cheat Him on purpose. But Jesus knows human nature and warns against making promises that one may later regret.

It may not even be in the power of the person to keep his or her promise. But a Christian should be a person of honesty 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 planned to keep but did not. How can you learn to be careful about this problem? What about promises to yourself that you have failed to keep?

LEX TALIONIS (Matthew 5:38–48)

Christians should “retaliate” against evil with kindness.

DEFINITIONS

10. revenge—the plan to hurt someone who has hurt or harmed you.

11. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

It seems that the common theme here in Matthew 5:38–48 is revenge.¹⁰ This first theme deals with the many commandments in the law of Moses that are built on the principle of repaying a crime with an equal punishment. This is an idea called *lex talionis*. These are Latin or Italian words meaning “law of retaliation [revenge].”

As we find in many verses (Exodus 21:22–25; Leviticus 24:17–21; Deuteronomy 19:21), the law requires the law breaker to suffer the same experience as the victim. If the victim lost an eye, arm, foot, or life, the law breaker must also. This “law of retaliation [revenge]” was common among many nations of the past. Why not, since it seems to show a simple principle of justice?

It is important to realize that this principle is there to *limit* revenge. That is, to keep people from going too far when they try to hurt someone who has done them wrong. So, in many ways, this law was to make sure that justice was not twisted.

In Matthew 5:38–42, Jesus was not attacking the law that required a person to be punished for a crime. Instead, Jesus focused on the Christians’ answer to people who try to take advantage of them. Rather than trying to get revenge, Christians should “get even” with kindness. This is something that we can do only through the grace¹¹ of God working within us. In this idea, 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* is the attitude (thought or feeling) that encourages love for friends and hatred for enemies. The command to love your neighbor is found in Leviticus 19:18. There is no clear verse that calls for hatred of enemies. Not even Deuteronomy 23:3–6.

In Jesus’ world, the Jews were under the control of Roman power. They were second-class citizens in their own land. Because of their situation, the Jews probably felt they were right in hating their enemy rulers, who were cruel to them. Jesus was showing them a better way to live, even in terrible situations.

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

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pages 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Jesus takes up the commandments separately. He explains the depth of their requirements. Instead of removing one jot of their force, He explains how far-reaching their principles are. He exposes [explains] the fatal mistake of the Jews in their outward acts of obedience. He declares that by the evil thought or the lustful look the law of God is broken. One who becomes a part of the least wrongdoing is breaking the law and lowering his own moral nature. Murder first starts 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 disgusting to God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 310.

Love keeps all things working together in God’s law. In each of the *antitheses*, Jesus upholds the principle of love. Love keeps a person from hating her sister. Love keeps a husband and wife together. Love challenges the Christian to be always honest in dealings with others and God. Love lets a person answer in kindness when he or she has been wronged. And love empowers an individual to treat an enemy as he or she would like to be treated.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① As we learned in this week’s study, Jesus said, “You have heard it has been said by them of old.” But He 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 were taken from Old Testament teachings. So, the problem was not with the verses themselves but with how they had been interpreted. What lesson can we take from this about how we interpret our beliefs? How might we be in danger of missing the deeper meaning?
- ② Many fall into the trap of interpreting verses without studying other verses. An example is Matthew 5:48, where we are told to be as perfect as our Father in heaven. How does the interpretation of these verses (Matthew 5:43–48) explain why it is important to study the Bible carefully?
- ③ How do the verses we studied about murder and adultery help to explain how wrong people are who claim the law was removed after Christ died on the cross?