

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Christ and the Law; the Higher Righteousness

Matthew 5:17–48

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Matthew 5:17–48 carries enormous doctrinal weight, and two issues deserve special care this week. The first is the relationship between Christ and the Law. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. He is their goal and their fullness. Help your students hold two truths together: the Old Testament is the inspired, authoritative word of God that points to Christ, and yet the Law of Moses as a covenant has been fulfilled and brought to its completion in Him. Christians today live under the New Covenant in Christ's blood (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10), not under the Law of Moses. Jesus is not lowering God's standard; He is deepening it, moving past the external act to the heart, where true righteousness has always lived.

The second sensitive issue is divorce and remarriage (vv. 31–32), and it must be handled with both clarity and tenderness. Teach plainly the permanence of marriage that God designed from the beginning. At the same time, recognize honestly that faithful Christians who love the Lord and revere His word have reached different conclusions on the harder questions surrounding the exception and remarriage. Your aim is not to settle every disputed point in one class, but to anchor your students in what is clear, to point them to the safe ground of 1 Corinthians 7, and to call each conscience to be fully convinced before God. Be especially gentle toward anyone in the room who carries the wound of a broken marriage.

Beyond the doctrine, this passage is aimed straight at the heart, so teach for formation. Jesus exposes the anger, lust, dishonesty, vengeance, and grudging love that hide beneath respectable behavior. The goal is not to crush your students with an impossible standard but to lead them to the Father who is making them like Himself. Send them home both clearer about the New Covenant and softer in heart, longing to be the kind of people in whom this righteousness is becoming real.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus says, "I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them" (v. 17). What does it mean that Jesus fulfills the Law, and how should that shape the way Christians relate to the Old Testament today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the word that anchors the whole passage: fulfill. The Greek word means to fill up, to complete, to bring to its intended goal. Jesus is not discarding the Law and the Prophets; He is the destination toward which they were always traveling. He fulfills the Law by perfectly obeying it, by embodying its true intent, by accomplishing what it pointed toward in the prophets and the sacrifices, and ultimately by satisfying its demands at the cross.

Help students see how this fits the rest of the New Testament. Paul says the record of debt with its legal demands was “set aside, nailing it to the cross,” and that the festivals and food laws were “a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:14–17). The Hebrew writer says that in speaking of a new covenant, God “makes the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). So the Law of Moses, as the covenant Israel lived under, has been fulfilled and completed in Christ. Christians today are not under that Law; we are under the New Covenant in His blood.

Guard against two errors here. The first is treating the Old Testament as if it no longer matters. It is still the inspired word of God, written for our learning (Romans 15:4), full of Christ on every page. The second is dragging believers back under the Law of Moses as a binding code, whether through Sabbath-keeping as a Christian obligation, dietary rules, or other shadows. We honor the Old Testament most by letting it lead us to Christ, whom it was always about.

Note that not one iota or dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (v. 18). Jesus has the highest possible view of Scripture. His point is not that the Law is unimportant but that it is so important it must be fulfilled, and He is the One who fulfills it. The student leaves with confidence in the whole Bible and clarity about living under the New Covenant.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the fulfillment and goal of the Law and the Prophets (v. 17; Luke 24:44)
- The Law of Moses fulfilled and completed in Christ, with Christians now under the New Covenant (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10)
- The continuing value of the Old Testament as inspired Scripture that points to Christ (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The error of binding the Law of Moses on Christians, including the Sabbath, as a New Covenant obligation
- Jesus' high view of the authority and permanence of God's word (v. 18)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between honoring the Old Testament and living under the Law of Moses?
- How does it help you to know that Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law you and I could never keep?
- Where might we be tempted to slip back into a rule-keeping religion rather than living under grace?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus traces murder back to anger and contempt in the heart (vv. 21–22). Where in your relationships are you harboring anger or contempt that you have quietly excused because you would never actually harm anyone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the heart-searching questions, so create room for honesty. Jesus takes the sixth commandment, which everyone in His audience felt safe from, and exposes its roots. Anger nursed in the heart, the contemptuous word “Raca” (a term of utter dismissal), and calling someone “You fool” all stand under judgment (vv. 21–22). The murderer and the man who despises his brother are watered by the same poisoned spring.

Help students name the respectable forms anger takes: the silent grudge, the cutting remark, the cold shoulder, the running commentary of contempt we keep about someone in our own minds. We would never lift a hand, and so we assume our hearts are clean. Jesus says otherwise.

Be pastoral. The goal is not to make people feel like murderers but to help them take seriously what God takes seriously, and to bring it honestly to Him. Anger itself is not always sin (Ephesians 4:26), but the contempt that writes another person off surely is.

Move toward hope. The same passage that exposes the anger also commands reconciliation (vv. 23–24), which is the subject of the next question. Jesus never diagnoses without offering a way forward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as a matter of the heart, not merely outward action (Matthew 15:18–19)
- Contempt and unrighteous anger as serious before God
- The difference between righteous anger and the contempt that dismisses a person
- The call to deal honestly with the heart rather than hiding behind clean behavior

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between anger that is sin and anger that is not?
- Where do you tend to let contempt live quietly in your heart?
- What would it look like to bring that anger honestly to God this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says our righteousness must “exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees” (v. 20). What kind of righteousness is He describing, and how is it different from careful external rule-keeping?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scribes and Pharisees were the gold standard of religious performance in their day. So when Jesus says our righteousness must exceed theirs (v. 20), the crowd would have been stunned. How could anyone be more careful than they were? The answer is that Jesus is not asking for more of the same. He is asking for a different kind of righteousness altogether.

Pharisaic righteousness was largely external: keeping rules, tithing herbs, washing hands, being seen. The righteousness Jesus describes goes to the heart, the motives, the desires. It is not less than obedience, but it is far more than mere compliance. It is the obedience of a transformed heart that loves what God loves.

Connect this to the New Covenant promise that God would write His law on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33). The higher righteousness is not achieved by trying harder under our own steam. It is the fruit of a heart changed by grace and shaped by the Spirit working through God’s word.

Be careful to keep grace and obedience together. This righteousness is real and it is required, yet it is not a ladder we climb to earn God’s favor. It is the life God produces in those who have come to Him through the gospel and are walking with Him in faithful, obedient faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The higher righteousness of the heart that exceeds external rule-keeping (v. 20)
- The New Covenant promise of God’s law written on the heart (Hebrews 8:10)
- Obedience flowing from a transformed heart rather than performance for show
- Grace and obedient faith held together, not set against each other

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to settle for looking righteous rather than being righteous?
- How does the gospel produce a righteousness that mere willpower cannot?
- What is one heart attitude God is inviting you to let Him change?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus tells us to leave the gift at the altar and first be reconciled to a brother who has something against us (vv. 23–24). Is there a relationship you need to make right, and what has been keeping you from taking the first step?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus gives reconciliation a startling priority. Even in the middle of worship, with your gift already at the altar, if you remember that your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled first (vv. 23–24). Right relationship with people is so tied to right relationship with God that Jesus interrupts the act of worship to address it.

Notice the direction. It is not only when you have something against your brother, but when he has something against you. Jesus puts the initiative on you regardless of who is at fault. The kingdom way is to move toward peace, not to wait for the other person to come crawling.

Press gently for specifics. Most of us can think of a relationship we have allowed to stay broken because reconciliation feels awkward, costly, or humbling. Ask what the first step would be: a phone call, a conversation, an honest apology, the release of a grudge.

Acknowledge that reconciliation is not always fully possible; it takes two, and some situations require wisdom and boundaries (Romans 12:18, “if possible, so far as it depends on you”). But the heart that follows Jesus is a heart that genuinely seeks peace and takes the first step it can.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The priority of reconciliation, even over the act of worship (vv. 23–24)
- Taking the initiative toward peace regardless of fault
- The link between our relationships with people and our relationship with God (1 John 4:20)
- Pursuing peace as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18)

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a relationship God brought to mind as you read this?
- What first step toward reconciliation could you take this week?
- What usually stops you from making the first move, and how can the gospel help?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus deepens the command against adultery to include the lustful look, and calls for radical, decisive action against sin (vv. 27–30). What is He teaching about how seriously God takes the sin that begins in the heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus moves from adultery the act to lust the appetite (vv. 27–28). The lustful look that feeds desire is already a betrayal of the heart. In a culture saturated with sexual images, this word is more relevant than ever, and it applies to men and women alike.

Then comes some of the most vivid language Jesus ever used: if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out; if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off (vv. 29–30). He is using deliberate

hyperbole to shock us awake. He is not commanding self-mutilation; He is commanding radical, decisive action against whatever feeds sin in us.

Help students translate this into concrete steps: the apps that come off the phone, the relationships that need boundaries, the habits that have to be cut, the accountability that needs to be invited. Sin that is merely managed will master us. Sin that is ruthlessly cut off loses its grip.

Hold this together with grace. The seriousness of sin is not meant to drive us to despair but to drive us to Christ and to take our holiness seriously. The One who calls us to radical action also offers cleansing, forgiveness, and the power of His Spirit to those who fight.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Lust as adultery of the heart (vv. 27–28)
- The seriousness of sin that begins in the inner life
- Radical, decisive action against sin (mortification) rather than managing it (vv. 29–30; Romans 8:13)
- The hope of cleansing and power over sin through Christ and His Spirit

Discussion Prompts

- What does taking radical action against sin look like in your life right now?
- Why is merely managing a sin not enough?
- Who could help you fight, and would you be willing to ask them?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus says, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (v. 37). Where are you most tempted to shade the truth, exaggerate, or make promises you do not keep, and what would plain honesty cost you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus addresses the practice of oaths (vv. 33–37). His listeners had developed an elaborate system of swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one’s own head, often to make a promise sound binding while leaving a loophole. Jesus cuts through all of it: let your yes be yes and your no be no. Anything more comes from evil.

The heart of this is integrity. A follower of Jesus should be so honest that no oath is needed to guarantee the truth of his word. Our character should make our promises trustworthy.

Bring this into ordinary life, where the question lives. We round up our accomplishments and round down our failures. We exaggerate for effect. We make commitments we have no real

intention of keeping. We tell the small lies that smooth a conversation. Jesus calls His people to be the kind of folk whose word can simply be believed.

Ask about the cost. Plain honesty sometimes means admitting we were wrong, disappointing someone, or losing an advantage. That cost is exactly where integrity is forged.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integrity and truthfulness as marks of a disciple (v. 37)
- The danger of using technicalities to evade the truth
- Honesty in small things as the seedbed of trustworthiness (Luke 16:10)
- Truth-telling as reflecting the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2)

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to shade or exaggerate the truth?
- What would it cost you to be completely honest in that area?
- How does our honesty reflect the character of God?

Question 7

Student Question:

Instead of “an eye for an eye,” Jesus tells His disciples not to resist the one who is evil, to turn the other cheek and go the second mile (vv. 38–42). How does this kingdom way of non-retaliation reflect the character of God, and how does it differ from the world’s instinct?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The old principle of “an eye for an eye” (v. 38) was actually a limit on revenge, designed to keep punishment proportional. Jesus calls His disciples to something higher still: do not resist the one who is evil, turn the other cheek, give your cloak as well, go the second mile (vv. 39–42). These are vivid pictures of refusing to answer insult and injury with retaliation.

Be careful to explain what Jesus is and is not saying. He is addressing personal retaliation and the desire for revenge, not abolishing all justice or self-defense or the proper role of government (Romans 13). He is calling His people to break the cycle of vengeance with surprising, generous, cross-shaped love.

This reflects the very character of God, “who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” (v. 45). God does not treat us as our sins deserve; He pours out kindness on the undeserving. His people are to mirror that mercy. The world keeps score and pays back. The kingdom absorbs the blow and returns good.

Make it concrete. The second mile shows up in traffic, in the workplace, in the family, in the comment thread. The disciple is the one who does not need to get even, because he trusts a God who will set all things right in the end (Romans 12:19).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Non-retaliation and the renunciation of personal revenge (vv. 38–42)
- The character of God who blesses the undeserving (v. 45)
- The distinction between personal vengeance and the legitimate role of justice and government (Romans 13:1–4)
- Overcoming evil with good rather than being overcome by it (Romans 12:21)

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to refuse to get even with someone?
- What is the difference between turning the other cheek and ignoring genuine injustice?
- How does trusting God's justice free you from the need for revenge?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus commands, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (v. 44). Who is the one person it is hardest for you to love right now, and what would genuinely praying for them look like this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the summit of the passage: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (v. 44). It is easy to love those who love us; even the tax collectors and Gentiles do that (vv. 46–47). The distinctive mark of a child of God is love that reaches the one who has wounded us.

Notice that Jesus commands prayer specifically. It is hard to keep hating someone you are sincerely praying for. Prayer is where God begins to change our hearts toward our enemies, softening bitterness into something that can finally desire their good.

Press for the one hard name. Most of us have someone: the person who betrayed us, the family member who wounded us, the critic who will not relent. Ask what real prayer for that person would look like, beyond a grudging mention. Praying for their genuine good, their salvation, their flourishing.

Keep this from becoming sentimental. Loving an enemy does not mean pretending the wrong did not happen or exposing yourself to ongoing harm. It means refusing to let hatred have your heart and actively seeking their good, as God sought ours while we were still His enemies (Romans 5:8, 10).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for enemies as the distinctive mark of the children of God (vv. 44–45)
- Prayer as the pathway to a changed heart toward those who hurt us
- God’s love for us while we were His enemies as the model (Romans 5:8–10)
- The difference between loving an enemy and ignoring genuine harm

Discussion Prompts

- Who is the hardest person for you to love right now?
- What would it look like to genuinely pray for that person this week?
- How does remembering God’s love for you as an enemy change how you see them?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus addresses divorce, pointing back to God’s design for marriage and naming sexual immorality in connection with the exception (vv. 31–32). What does this teach about the permanence of the marriage God intended, and how should a believer think carefully, humbly, and with a clear conscience about the harder questions of divorce and remarriage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most pastorally sensitive question in the lesson, so move slowly, teach clearly, and lead with both conviction and tenderness. Jesus addresses divorce (vv. 31–32) against the backdrop of a culture that had made it casual. He immediately raises the standard by pointing back toward God’s original design, the design He will spell out fully in Matthew 19: one man and one woman joined for life, a union God Himself makes (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6).

Begin with what is clearest, because here there is no serious disagreement among those who take Scripture seriously. God designed marriage to be permanent. He hates the devastation that divorce brings (Malachi 2:16). Marriage is not a contract to be dissolved at convenience but a covenant that reflects God’s own faithfulness. Teach this plainly and let it stand.

The harder questions begin when we ask what Scripture teaches about divorce that has already happened and the possibility of remarriage. Jesus names an exception involving sexual immorality (the Greek word *porneia*), spoken here to people still living under the Law. Faithful, godly Christians who love the Lord and honor His word have reached different conclusions about how broadly or narrowly to apply that exception and about remarriage. Some hold that divorce and remarriage are permitted only for sexual immorality; some add desertion by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15); some, weighing the audience and setting of these words, conclude that believers have somewhat broader liberty under grace. This is not a debate a single class can settle, and you should not pretend otherwise or bind your own judgment on every conscience.

Point your students to the safe ground of 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul lays out a path on which a believer cannot go wrong. For someone whose marriage is broken, three options carry zero chance of being mistaken: remain unmarried, be reconciled to the spouse (1 Corinthians 7:11), or, after the death of a spouse, be free to marry only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39). Any other path may turn out to be permissible in God's sight, but it at least carries the possibility of being wrong, and that alone deserves careful, prayerful weight. Then call each believer to study the passages honestly and to be fully convinced in his own mind before God (Romans 14:5, 23), acting on the conclusion he can hold with a clear conscience, not merely on what a preacher or a tradition has assumed.

Finally, be tender. Almost every class has someone carrying the weight of a broken marriage. God hates divorce because of what it does to His people, but He does not hate the divorced. He loves them. The God who calls us to take His word seriously is the same God who is faithful and just to forgive (1 John 1:9). Repentance is always the door back to fellowship with the Father, and in Christ the old has passed and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Teach the truth without flinching, and hold out grace without reserve.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's design of marriage as a permanent, one-flesh covenant (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6)
- God's hatred of divorce because of the devastation it brings (Malachi 2:16)
- The exception for sexual immorality named by Jesus, spoken to those under the Law (vv. 31-32; Matthew 19:9)
- The range of faithful views on remarriage held by serious students of Scripture, none of which a single class should bind on every conscience
- The safe ground of 1 Corinthians 7: remain unmarried, be reconciled, or remarry only after a spouse's death and only in the Lord
- The call for each conscience to be fully convinced before God (Romans 14:5, 23)
- God's grace, forgiveness, and tenderness toward the divorced who come to Him in repentance (1 John 1:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17)

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's design from the beginning teach us about how seriously to take the marriage covenant?
- Why is 1 Corinthians 7 described as safe ground, and how does it guide someone facing these questions?
- How can our class hold firmly to the truth about marriage while showing real tenderness to those who have been through divorce?

Question 10

Student Question:

Jesus closes, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). Looking back over the whole passage, name one specific area where Jesus is calling you past mere rule-keeping into a heart that looks like your Father's.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole sweep of the passage. Jesus has moved through anger, lust, honesty, retaliation, love for enemies, and marriage, and He ends with what sounds impossible: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). The word translated perfect means complete, mature, whole, brought to the intended goal. In context it especially means complete in love, loving as the Father loves, even our enemies.

Help students hear this not as a crushing demand but as the trajectory of grace. God is not asking us to manufacture His character by willpower. He is telling us where He is taking us. The whole sermon describes the kind of person the gospel is making, and the Father who calls us to it is the Father who is at work in us to accomplish it.

Press for one specific area. The temptation is to nod at all of it and change none of it. Ask each person to name a single place where Jesus has moved them this week from mere rule-keeping toward a heart like the Father's: a grudge to release, a habit to cut off, a truth to start telling, an enemy to start praying for.

Close with worship and dependence. The right response to this towering passage is not gritted teeth but bowed knees: Lord, I cannot do this on my own, but You can do it in me. Make me like my Father. Lead your class to ask God for exactly that.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christlike maturity and completeness, especially in love, as the goal of the Christian life (v. 48)
- Sanctification as God's work in us that we cooperate with, not self-improvement by willpower (Philippians 2:12–13)
- Concrete, specific obedience as the fruit of genuine encounter with Christ
- Dependence on God and worship as the right response to His high calling

Discussion Prompts

- What single area from this passage is God most clearly putting His finger on?
- What specific step will you take this week in response?
- How can you depend on God rather than willpower as you take that step?