

# The Gospel of Matthew

## Lesson 6: Christ and the Law; the Higher Righteousness -- Matthew 5:17-48

Imagine sitting on that hillside as Jesus begins to speak about the Law. Every person around you had grown up with the Law of Moses woven into the fabric of life. It was their identity, their pride, their security. And now this young teacher from Nazareth is talking about it as though He has the right to say what it really means. You can feel the crowd lean in. Is He going to tear it all down? Is He going to throw out everything they have held sacred?

Then He says it: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (v. 17). Not destroy. Fulfill. Jesus is not a wrecking ball swung at the Old Testament. He is its goal, the One toward whom every law and every prophet had been pointing all along. He does not lower the bar. He raises it, and then He raises our eyes from the rule on the page to the heart underneath it.

What follows is a series of stunning reversals. You have heard it said, but I say to you. Murder is not just the act, it is the contempt that smolders in the heart. Adultery is not just the deed, it is the look that feeds the appetite. Love is not just for the neighbor who loves you back, it is for the enemy who wounds you. Again and again Jesus reaches past our behavior and lays His hand on our hearts. He is after more than people who stay inside the lines. He is after sons and daughters who look like their Father.

This is some of the most searching teaching in all of Scripture, and some of the most tender. It will press on your anger, your honesty, your marriage, your enemies. It ends with a word that sounds impossible: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). But hear it as a promise of who grace is making you, not a whip to drive you. The same Jesus who fulfilled the Law for us is at work to form His character in us. So come with an open heart, and let Him do it.

**Group Discussion:** Jesus repeatedly says, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you." Why do you think He keeps moving from the external action to the inner heart, and what does that reveal about the kind of righteousness God is looking for in His people?

**Personal Reflection:** Of all the areas Jesus touches in this passage (anger, lust, honesty, retaliation, love for enemies, marriage), which one landed most uncomfortably close to home for you, and why do you think God put His finger there today?

*Read Matthew 5:17-48*

### Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?

8. 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?
  
9. 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?
  
10. 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.

### Now or Later

**Reflect on these passages:** Colossians 2:13–17, the record of debt nailed to the cross and the shadows fulfilled in Christ; Hebrews 8:6–13, the new and better covenant that makes the first one obsolete; Romans 13:8–10, love as the fulfilling of the law; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, Paul’s instructions to the church on marriage and separation; Romans 12:17–21, overcoming evil with good rather than repaying it.