

Thoughts on Matthew 5:17-48

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"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. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17)¹

Introduction

At issue is what it means to "abolish" and what it means to "fulfill." If it is true that to explain is to set in context, explaining the present passage will involve setting the passage and the discourse as a whole in context, and explaining the two terms in question will involve setting them in context. Our approach will be to look at parallel passages.

Two Matching Discourses

Is there really any parallel for the sermon on the mount? There is, and it will be highly important for us to understand it. The parallel is from another sermon, on another mountain, but by the same Speaker. I'm referring to mount Sinai. We begin by considering the structure of the discourse in Exod 20 when the Father, in union with the Son, gave the ten commandment law to Moses. This in turn will help us to understand the structure of Christ's discourse in Matt 5. And these structural facts will go a long way toward helping us understand what it means to "fulfill."

But first

On Mount Sinai, who did the speaking? God was present on the mountain (see Exod 19:16-19), but there are three persons to the godhead. Were they separated from each other on Sinai? How could they be? Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). And so it is entirely reasonable for Ellen White to comment that, "The Father and the Son, attended by a multitude of angels, were present upon the mount."² But this in itself does not answer the question posed above. Who did the speaking?

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² *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 339.

Since the sin of our first parents, there has been no direct communication between God and man. The Father has given the world into the hands of Christ, that through His mediatorial work He may redeem man and vindicate the authority and holiness of the law of God. All the communion between heaven and the fallen race has been through Christ. It was the Son of God that gave to our first parents the promise of redemption. It was He who revealed Himself to the patriarchs. . . . It was He who gave the law to Israel. Amid the awful glory of Sinai, Christ declared in the hearing of all the people the ten precepts of His Father's law. It was He who gave to Moses the law engraved upon the tables of stone. . . .³

Is this biblical? It is resoundingly biblical. Consider a parallel. John says, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3). The word "through" speaks volumes. If the word "him" in this verse is the Father, how could anyone be over and above the Father, creating the world "through" Him? But if "him" refers to the Son, how can we avoid saying that the further words, "Let there be light," were also His? If the Father created the world "through" His Son, why should He not also pronounce His law in the same way. There is a pattern here. It is not that the Old Testament tells us about the Father and the New Testament tells us about the Son.⁴ In all the Bible, we never see the Father except as He reveals Himself to us through the Son. Nor do we hear Him except through the voice of the Son.

Thus, the voice we would have heard speaking from Sinai, if we could be there to hear it, was the same voice that called our world into existence initially. In both cases we would be hearing the will of the Father expressed, with perfect fidelity, through the voice of His Son. The only time in all the Bible that we see the two being separated from each other is at the cross. On that one occasion the One became Two, and it tore the heart of Christ apart. This separation, besides the weight of all the sins of the world, is what crushed out the life of the Son of God. Human sin did not do this. Human sin caused the separation which did it.

Structure of Exod 20:2-17

The ten commandments are, precisely, commandments. Right? Well yes, but about 45% of the total code by word count falls within clauses that are not commands. Almost half of the ten commandment law code consists of explanations. God does not merely want to get our attention by speaking as He does. He wants to meet our minds.

There are two ways to isolate the explanation clauses. On the one hand, we take vs. 10 along with 8-9 as a single command clause, standing in contrast with vs. 11, which is clearly an explanation. In the second case, we take the first part of vs. 10 as an explanation clause and the second part as a command. Thus, the question is whether we take the Sabbath commandment in two parts (table 1, below), or in four (table 3).

³ Ellen White, *God's Amazing Grace*, p. 43.

⁴ That is modalism. See <http://www.carm.org/modalism>.

Table 1
Fourth Commandment in Two Clauses

Verses	Text	
2-3	² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.	³ "You shall have no other gods before me.
4-6	⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them;	⁶ for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand <i>generations</i> of those who love me and keep my commandments.
7	^{7a} "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God,	^{7b} for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
8-11	⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.	¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
12	^{12a} "Honor your father and your mother,	^{12b} so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
13	"You shall not murder.	
14	"You shall not commit adultery.	
15	"You shall not steal.	
16	"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.	
17	"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."	

Note: Shaded cells contain explanation clauses.

Table 2
English Word Count

Vss.	Word Count	
2-3	18	8
4-6	35	46
7	11	12
8-11	59	38
12	6	16
13	4	
14	5	
15	4	
16	9	
17	30	

Table 3
Fourth Commandment in Four Clauses

Verses	Text	
2-3	² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.	³ "You shall have no other gods before me.
4-6	⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them;	⁶ for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.
7	^{7a} "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God,	^{7b} for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
8-11	⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work,	^{10a} but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.
	^{10b} "On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.	¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
12	^{12a} "Honor your father and your mother,	^{12b} so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
13	"You shall not murder.	
14	"You shall not commit adultery.	
15	"You shall not steal.	
16	"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.	
17	"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."	

Note: Shaded cells contain explanation clauses.

Table 4
English Word Count

Vss.	Word Count	
2-3	18	8
4-6	35	46
7	11	12
8-11	18	12
	29	38
12	6	16
13	4	
14	5	
15	4	
16	9	
17	30	

The numbers in table 2 give us a proportion of $163/293 = 55.6\%$ command to $130/293 = 44.4\%$ explanation. The numbers in table 4 give $151/293 = 51.5\%$ command to $142/293 = 48.5\%$ explanation. Thus, counting the first way almost 45% of the total law code consists of words which occur in explanation clauses, while counting the second way it is almost half.

There's something we haven't pointed out yet. Notice where the explanation clauses are located. They all occur within commandments 1-5. Thus, they are confined to the first half of the law. For commandments 6-10 there are no explanations. "You shall not murder" (vs. 13). Just don't do it. No reason given. "You shall not commit adultery" (vs. 14). Again, no explanation. And so on through to the end. Why does God leave the job half done? Or does He?

Structure of Matt 5:21-48

Commandment #6. After some introductory remarks Jesus, in His sermon on the mount (His second sermon on a mount), begins in vs. 21 by saying,

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'^{1 22} But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." (Matt 5:21-22a)

Which commandment is this? It is the sixth commandment – the first one which lacks an explanation clause in Exod 20. And here is the explanation. It is as though the Speaker had paused after Exod 20:12 for a sip of water and resumes His current of thought in Matt 5:21. It is the same discourse. It is the same set of explanations, continued without interruption.

What is the thrust of His remarks here? Not only must we avoid killing our brother, or our sister; we must avoid wounding them with our words.

Commandment #7. The next section begins in vs. 27. There Jesus says, "'You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'" Here He clarifies that we must not be disloyal to our mate even by our thoughts. In our hearts we must true and loyal to our life companion.

Commandment #9. The section following the discussion of marital relationships concerns our use of words. The thrust of what He says is, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (vs. 37). Thus, the commandment not to give false testimony includes more than just not giving false testimony. It implies that we should use words with simplicity and restraint.

Discussion. This is the ninth commandment, rather than the eighth. They are introduced out of sequence. And what is the sequence? It's not just a matter of switching numbers. There is a natural progression in the commandments that we should notice. Murder (#6) is both physical and violent. Adultery (#7) is physical, but not necessarily violent. Stealing (#8) is physical in the sense that something is picked up and moved, but not in the sense of requiring any interpersonal contact. Lying (#9) involves only our words. Coveting (#10) involves only our thoughts. There is a clear hierarchy here, with a descending level of physicality.

Notice something more. Where does this sequence begin? It does not begin with the first commandment, but with the sixth. So only part of the law is included. But why the sixth

commandment? Why not the fifth? In the sermon on the mount the implied division of commandments into tables is not 1-4 and 5-10, as we normally think of them. It is 1-5 and 6-10.

What is there about the fifth commandment that would make it separable from the second table and appropriate as part of the first table, along with the four commandments that deal with love for God? Think about this for a moment. What is it about loving God? Why are these commandments included in the law? Why do we worship God? Because we owe our existence to Him. This is why idolatry is wrong. Idols do not make people; people make idols. When we worship things that did not make us, that is degrading and it brings the wrath of the One who did make us. Where do our parents fit in this part of the discussion? They are God's instruments to bring us into existence. We do not worship them, because their role is not one of creation, but of procreation. But the principles involved are similar enough that it makes a great deal of sense to include the fifth commandment along with the fourth in the first table.⁵

Commandment #8. There is another type of sequence in Christ's discussion of the law here in the sermon on the mount. His allusions to specific commandments are direct and explicit when He begins, and as He continues the connection has to be looked for. It is there, but is has to be looked for.

In the present case, we can know that commandment #8 (the one which deals with stealing) is in Jesus' mind in vss. 38-42, because of the way He ends the section. His comment on the commandment that says, "You shall not steal," is, "Give."

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (Matt 5:42)

Commandment #10. There is only one commandment left. Can we see it in the verses that remain? Actually we can, because it deals with our inner thoughts. This is the same subject matter as see in the commandment not to covet. Coveting takes place in our minds. It is the most spiritual of the commandments in the second table (see Rom 7:7) because it is the least physical. You could covet what a friend has without their ever knowing about it. And so here Jesus, in commenting on the tenth commandment, tells us how we should direct our thoughts.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt 5:43-48)

In the present context that last clause, about being "perfect," has to do living a consistent life – a mature life in Christ, a life characterized by His own way of thinking. The context for His words does not grow out of Plato, as so many comments of the passage do. It grows out of His own earlier words to Moses. In the ten commandments God tells us not to do certain things. Here He tells us to be consistent. Don't do evil, and furthermore, don't want to do evil. Let your

⁵ See <http://www.historicism.org/Documents/10CommDiv.pdf>.

thoughts be consistent with your actions. Be complete, entire, mature, not rendering merely outer obedience, but obedience from the heart.

God is not mocking us when He says, through Solomon, "My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways" (Prov 23:26). The heart is something we can give to God, when we allow His Holy Spirit to move upon it. It is not impossible for human beings to respond to God. We can learn to love what He loves and to hate what He hates. We cannot do this without the drawing influence of His Spirit. The initiative comes from Him. But given that initiative on His part, it is possible to respond to Him. That's one thing. The second is that a yielded, responsive, willing heart is capable of rendering obedience. It is possible to love a God like this, and to serve Him as He enables us.

Two Matching Terms

Are the words "abolish" and "fulfill" opposites? They are set off in opposition to each other in Matt 5:17, but are they opposites? The opposite of "abolish" (the word actually means "destroy") would seem to be "preserve." The opposite of "fulfill" would seem to be "make empty." Do these facts line up, or do they contradict each other?

What does it mean to "abolish"?

There is a translation in which each of the four following passages use the same word. Here are the four passages.

"They worship me **in vain**; their teachings are but rules taught by men." (Mark 7:7)

And he said to them: "You have a fine way of **setting aside** the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9)

"Thus you **nullify** the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." (Mark 7:13)

"You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give **false** testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" (Mark 10:19)

As mediated by context, the word used in each of these passages means something like "empty." Thus, the people Jesus has in mind worship in a way that is empty, or devoid of meaning (Mark 7:7), because God didn't tell them to worship that way, and they empty the commands of their meaning by putting human traditions in their place (7:9, 13). False testimony, in this context, is testimony emptied of truthful content.⁶

⁶ The translation is Cuzco Quechua (*Mosoq Rimanakuy* [Lima: Sociedad Bíblica Peruana, 1973]). The word is yanqay (Mark 7:7), yanqayay (7:9, 13), yanqa (10:19). In its various forms It means "empty" (yanqa), or "be empty" (yanqay), or "make empty" (yanqayay). This is not textual evidence that compels a given conclusion. It's just something I noticed in preparing for this sermon and that suggested a way of seeing the verses where it occurs. The last of the above forms is the one that occurs in Matt 5:17.

What does it mean to abolish? In this context it does not mean to make the law go away or somehow cease to exist. It simply means to make it of no effect. For what it's worth, notice that in vs. 17 Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets," but in vs. 18, "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law." In vs. 17 He does not just say "Law" and in vs. 18 He does not say "Law and Prophets." The law is that body of writing from which not one stroke will disappear. Which part of the law? The part that talks about murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting. Is that all? We've only mentioned five things. We would of course want to include the part about worshiping only God, not taking His name in vain, and honoring our parents. Is that all?

The part we haven't mentioned yet is the only part some wish to abolish. The fourth commandment has to do with the Sabbath. It is curious that the commandment which says "Remember" is the one people most want to forget. But that is the one in which we come closest to Jesus. On the Sabbath He invites us to spend an entire day with Him? Is that too long a time? Some think so. But it is not longer than eternity. If we can't bring ourselves to spend a day with Jesus, will be able to spend eternity with Him?

What does it mean to "fulfill"?

In structuring His discourse as He does, Jesus gives us an idea of what He means by the word "fulfill." The series of explanations He begins in Exod 20 are continued in Matt 5. In this way the series is fulfilled. It is completed. It's potential is realized. It is filled full.

A second way Jesus shows us what He means by "fulfill" has to do, not with the form of His remarks, but with their content. In each part of His discourse He shows us how we can see Him in His law. He does this by projecting His own attributes of character onto what the wording and substance of what the commandment says.

Thus, the command not to murder becomes a command not to hate, and by extension a mandate for giving life rather than taking it. The negative command not to commit adultery becomes a positive command to be loyal, even in one's innermost thoughts. The negative command not to lie becomes a positive command to use words with simplicity and restraint. We should only say what we mean and only mean what God puts in our hearts. The negative command not to steal becomes a positive command to give (see vs. 42). The negative command not to covet becomes a positive command to think as God thinks and to love both our friends and our enemies. Why should we think and act in these ways? Because Jesus does. That is the ultimate explanation in Matt 5, but He doesn't say it. He illustrates it.

Conclusion

In this way the entire second table of the law becomes a reflection of Jesus' own character. It becomes a transcript of what He is like, but in codified form. As we see Christ in the law, do we not perhaps lose some of our motivation for setting it aside? How many laws like this are there? Do such laws need to be abolished or set aside? Do they need passionate arguments showing why we wouldn't need to keep them anymore? Why? If we frame an argument and the result of believing it is that we see Christ less clearly, that we understand Him less well, it's the wrong argument. Away with such thinking! This is a law we need to remember and to live by.