

How Jesus Christ fulfills the Old Testament

An Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20

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Why don't Christians sacrifice animals to atone for their sins?

Why aren't Christians required to keep a kosher diet (unless they want to do so out of free choice)?

Why aren't Christians required to build a central temple in which to perform carefully prescribed rituals in a land specially chosen for them?

The three-year ministry of Jesus Christ, culminating in his death and resurrection and his establishment of his church, makes all the difference in the transition from the Old Testament or Covenant to the New Testament or Covenant. In those three short years he ushered in a new era of salvation, although the old era contained the seeds of the new.

The most salient and sometimes difficult statement on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples and the Old Covenant is found in Matthew 5:17-20, in the context of the famous Sermon on the Mount. The four verses read as follows in the New International Version:

5:17 *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.*

This is a complex passage because, among other reasons, at first glance it seems that the Law and Prophets (a New Testament way of saying the entire Scriptures; cf. Matt. 22:40; Luke 16:16) is still in full force until heaven and earth pass away. But as we just noted, the Old Covenant prescribes animal sacrifices, whereas Christians no longer perform them in order to pay for their sins. What is happening?

The Old Covenant is to the New Covenant what promise is to fulfillment. How did, does, and shall Jesus Christ fulfill the promises of the Old Covenant?

That story is complex. Christians are commanded to read the Old Testament and are allowed to benefit from it, but they do not take everything in it as final. Christians honor

the Old Testament as the Word of God, just as Jesus did. But they read it, ultimately, through the vision of Jesus and the Spirit-inspired authors of the New Testament books and epistles.

Not everything as final? What parts still apply to them today, if any?

Many Christians misunderstand this important issue, so it is not surprising that Muslims do too. On some websites and in articles, Muslim polemicists refer to the Old Testament to justify, for example, executing homosexuals in Islam. The Bible did this, so why do Christians complain? The polemicists seem to imply that all of humanity should march backwards 1,400 years BC via the diluted and distorted old-new law of Muhammad and re-impose the old commands on everyone. But the polemicists fail to understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Maybe this article will help clarify this issue for Christians and Muslims alike.

The historical and literary contexts of Matthew 5:17-20

It is imperative to analyze a sacred text in its historical and literary contexts.

Historical context

The following two cultural facts are relevant to Matthew 5:17-20.

First, the sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem were still valid at the time of Jesus' ministry. The entire commands in the Torah (the law) and the rest of the Old Testament were still valid at that time. In fact, the sacrifices do not stop until AD 70, when the Romans under General Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian (ruled AD 69-79), destroyed the Temple—a relevant image since Jesus says that he did not come to destroy the Old Testament, as we shall see in the next major section. The sacrificial system means that Jesus will use words and ideas that contrast with it as a means of attaining righteousness before God. He will become the once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world. However, Jesus sometimes speaks to the people in terms of the entire law still being valid, but in the Gospel of Matthew he gradually reveals that he is in the process of reinterpreting the Old Testament and raising the people's vision to his own words and commands. Such are the last words he speaks before he goes up into heaven (Matt. 28:16-20). Jesus is causing a transition from the Old Covenant to the New, and he must do this in a way that people can receive and without destroying the Old.

Second, Matthew 5:20 says that the righteousness of Jesus' disciples must surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. These are two different groups, but many scribes were Pharisees. This latter group came from an extra-devout movement that began long before Jesus was born. They were non-priestly and committed to the oral law that explained the rules of conduct based on the law or Torah in the Bible. In some ways, oral law became as equally binding as the Torah—at least on the commoners, most of whom could not read or could barely read. They were certainly not experts in the law, so they depended on their leaders for guidance. As for the teachers of the law, they are often

called scribes. Their work was not so much copying out Old Testament manuscripts as it was teaching the Torah and the rulings that piled up on it. Since civil law and religious law were tied together, some were lawyers of sorts who could explain the law in a dispute, for example (Carson, pp. 33-34; 87).

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Pharisees and teachers of the law typify doing external actions in order to please God and appear righteous in the eyes of humans, while forgetting inner righteousness. For example, in Matt. 23:1-38 Jesus pronounces seven woes on them, which contrast their inner and outer righteousness. Verse 25 says: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence."

This second cultural fact is important because Jesus calls everyone to a more radical righteousness than that of these two groups of religious leaders. This call is based on God's righteousness imparted freely to all who ask for it through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the high point of Matthew's Gospel and of the other three Gospels as well.

Literary context

The literary context is divided into two parts: the entire Gospel of Matthew and the smaller section called the Sermon on the Mount.

The entire Gospel of Matthew is laid out in narrative or story form. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, various parts of the Gospel interact with others. No part of the Gospel is an arbitrary collection of sayings and events, but they are deliberately designed to flow together, with a plot, from beginning to end. So the structure and development is important, not only the individual pieces—as often in the Quran, where the context is not always in the book, but in *asbabi nuzul* (occasion of revelation), which is found outside of the Quran. The Gospel story has a beginning (Christ's birth), a middle (his three-year ministry) and a climatic ending (his death and resurrection). Jesus gradually and subtly reveals his priority and authority over the Old Testament in this story, but without destroying the older text. Matt. 5:17-20, our target verses, must be read in this large context because Jesus fulfills the Hebrew Bible through this divine story—and he is still fulfilling it today. But Matt. 5:17-20 must also be interpreted in the immediate literary context in the Sermon on the Mount, early in Jesus' ministry.

The immediate context of Matt. 5:17-20 in the Sermon on the Mount is explored first.

Jesus delivers the Sermon to his disciples on a mountainside. He lays out the ethics and proper conduct for members of God's kingdom. One aspect of the Sermon contrasts the way of Jesus with the legalistic oral traditions and sometimes the Old Testament itself (Matt. 5:21-48). Jesus uses a formula or a variation of it: "You disciples have heard from long ago . . . but I say to you." This means that Jesus is reinterpreting the traditions of the elders or the Torah itself. Thus, Christians read the Old Testament through the vision of Jesus. Our target passage in Matt. 5:17-20 sets up this contrast in Matt. 5:21-48. Jesus did

not come to destroy the sacred text, but to fulfill it in a variety of ways, as seen in the next major section.

Matt. 5:17-20 must also be viewed in light of the entire Gospel, in three stages.

First, it should be recalled that near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:18 says that the Old Testament shall not pass away until heaven and earth do and until "everything is accomplished" (key words that will be explained in the next major section). At the end of the Sermon Jesus shifts attention away from the oral traditions and the Old Testament towards his own words—but without destroying the Old Testament. His last words in the Sermon show the shift (Matt. 7:24-26):

*7:24 Therefore everyone who hears these **words of mine** and puts them into practice . . .
26 But everyone who hears these **words of mine** and does not put them into practice*

Jesus reveals to his disciples that his own words early in his ministry are beginning to take priority over all the words that have been uttered in sacred traditions and texts.

Second, to repeat, Matt. 5:18 says that the Old Testament shall not pass away until heaven and earth do and "until everything is accomplished." Jesus said this at the beginning of his ministry. At the end of his ministry, he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem where God has ordained that Jesus would die. He predicts the terrible events that will happen just before the Last Day (Matt. 24:1-35). He nails down the certainty of his predictions with words that reflect those in Matt. 5:18. Matt. 24:35 has a universal aspect that rises above the long discourse on the Last Days that he just spoke:

24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The difference between Matt. 5:18 and 24:35 is subtle, but important. Matt. 5:18 places time restrictions on the Old Covenant. Its words shall not pass away until heaven and earth do and "until everything is accomplished." On the other hand, Matt. 24:35 says that Jesus' words will never pass away, even when heaven and earth do. This places no time restrictions on his words. His words subtly and quietly take authority over previous sacred texts.

The third and final stage in the larger literary context takes place after Jesus' death and resurrection (Matt. 28:16-20). It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of these two unified events in terms of his fulfillment of the Old Covenant. By them he fulfills most of the promises, but he is still fulfilling others. Some will not be fulfilled until his Second Coming. But he himself ushers in this fulfillment. Be that as it may, after his death and resurrection, his mission is complete and final. He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (which raises him much higher than a mere prophet). Before he ascends into heaven, he instructs his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Then he tells his disciples which words to teach the nations:

28:20 [*Teach*] them to obey everything I have commanded you.

The revelation to his disciples about Jesus' authority in words is now complete. He commands his disciples to teach all nations his words first and foremost. But he does not destroy the Old Testament—far from it. His followers are encouraged—commanded—to read it. But Jesus' words take priority in the Christian's life. The disciples read the Old Testament through Christ's words and the rest of the New Testament. A longstanding adage wisely says: The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.

These three stages should not be misinterpreted. It is not as if Jesus grows in his authority. He always had it. Rather, he *reveals* his authority gradually. That was his way. He did not boast to the world about his true nature as the Son of God, but he kept it a secret for the most part. He accepted the popular (but ultimately inadequate) titles of Prophet, Teacher, and Rabbi, but to his inner circle and sometimes to those on the outside he revealed his true status as the Son of God (Matt. 16:15-20 and 26:63-64).

But these three stages reveal a subtle shift from the Old Covenant (without destroying it) to the New Covenant and Jesus' new leadership. He is in the process of unfolding God's plan of salvation to the world, and he does this gradually.

But now we must return to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he first discusses the Old Testament in terms that his disciples can understand. The Old Covenant is in full force during the Sermon on the Mount, and he moves gradually to shift their attention to the New Covenant.

An Exegesis of Matthew 5:17-20

Matt. 5:17-20 is best analyzed verse by verse, sometimes clause by clause, and even word by word.

17 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.

Jesus was not against the law. As a devout Jew he honored it. But he must make the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from the law of Moses to the law of Christ. That is his mission.

The following three clauses and words in verse 17 are important for understanding this verse.

I have come: These words make the entire four verses Christ-centered. Indeed, this fits into the four Gospels. He is the one who fulfills the Old Testament by his sinless life. He is the one to fulfill its prophecies about his first coming. He fulfills it by his death and resurrection. He is the one to fulfill it by the establishment of his worldwide church. And he will fulfill it at his Second Coming.

Abolish: this translation is appropriate for a literary context, but it does not express the full meaning. The Greek word is *kataluô*, whose primary meaning is "destroy," "demolish," "dismantle" as in a house or temple, or "detach a stone from a building." It is found in the context of destroying the temple in Jerusalem (Matt. 24:2; 26:61). But outside of the New Testament in a literary context, it can mean to rescind not a law here or a law there, but the whole law at once, thus destroying the People of God (2 Maccabees 2:22; 4:11; 4 Maccabees 5:33) (Meier p. 70). This is revealing of Matt. 5:17. Jesus does not destroy the law as a whole, but he does fulfill passages, such as animal sacrifices.

Maybe an analogy or illustration will help. Let's suppose that an Old House represents the Old Covenant Scriptures, and a New House represents the New Covenant and Christ's ministry and the New Testament. Christ does not demolish the Old House, but he keeps it intact. Instead, he builds his New House next to it or even connected to it, sharing the same divine foundation. Christians live in the New House, which is grander and taller and has newer furnishings. They are allowed to visit the Old House. That is, they may read Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, histories, the Torah, and so on. They may be edified by the stories and principles found there, just as a visitor to the grand Old House can learn a lot from and enjoy the old furnishings and old-style architecture. But the Old House does not hold them in. They live in the New House.

All analogies are flawed, and in this case the New House may not accurately represent the organic connection to the Old House (as a tree would, cf. Romans 11:11-24). Also, the analogy should not be misinterpreted. The Old House does not represent the house built on sand, nor does the New House represent the house built on the rock (Matt. 7:24-27). Both the Old Testament and the New Testament share the same bedrock foundation of divine inspiration. But in favor of the analogy, it shows how to preserve the Old House and not destroy it, while the New House can exist next to it or even connected to it. Jesus was a carpenter in his earthly life, and now he is a spiritual carpenter, so to speak.

Fulfill: This word means to complete a promise or a prophecy or a prediction. The Old Covenant is to the New Covenant what promise is to fulfillment. The Old Testament contained types and shadows, which find their full meaning and substance in Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment in his very being and in his coming to earth.

What are some of the areas or themes in the Old Testament that Christ fulfills? The following five major ones represent others.

(1) In the Torah, the three main traditional divisions are fulfilled: the moral, judicial, and ceremonial.

First, Jesus fulfills the moral law. This is the foundation of the Old Testament. It demanded that the people of God keep of the commands, but could they? Even the most devout may have been good, but they were not good enough. However, Christ in his sinless life fulfills all of the demands because he walked in perfect love. One day, an

expert in the law sought to trap Jesus, asking him what the greatest commandment was. Jesus replied:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt. 22:37-40).

Jesus fulfilled both of them perfectly. Now we ask for His Spirit so we can do the same, always depending on his love and mercy when we fail.

Some Christian scholars and pastors believe that the Ten Commandments are still binding on them because they contain the essence of the moral law. That is a plausible interpretation. However, it may be better if all Christians focused on loving their neighbors. That is the best way to fulfill all of the moral law in obedience to Christ. In Romans 13:8-10 the inspired Apostle Paul repeats some of the Ten Commandments (e.g. do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, and do not covet), but he concludes that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (v. 10).

Second, Jesus fulfills the ceremonial or ritual aspect of the Torah.

Aaron was the foremost high priest of the Old Covenant, but he could not compare with the great High Priest [Jesus Christ] of the New Covenant. Aaron entered the earthly tabernacle, but Christ entered the heavenly. Aaron entered once a year, but Christ for all time . . . Aaron offered many sacrifices, Christ only one [himself]. Aaron sacrificed for his own sin, Christ only for the sins of others . . . (MacArthur, p. 258)

Besides the atonement or blood sacrifices, Christians are permitted to eat whatever foods their conscience allows them (Mark 7:14-19). If they voluntarily keep away from traditionally unclean animals like swine, then they are free to do this. But this is not a requirement from Christ or the New Testament authors. In Christ, all foods are ritually clean. After he ascended into heaven, he sent a vision to Peter about animals becoming clean. A voice from heaven said to the lead Apostle: "Do not call anything impure what God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

Third, Jesus fulfills the judicial aspect of the Torah. His death on the cross takes away the severe penalty of death for sins like homosexuality and cursing parents. His death takes their place because divine wrath for human sins was poured on him on the cross. Criminals like thieves and murderers should be punished, because of the principles of justice behind the particular rules. But they can have their sins forgiven while they suffer the just consequences of their crimes. Jesus and the New Testament authors never rescinded justice.

(2) Christ fulfills a geographical promise. God gave the land of Canaan to Abraham, the father of the ancient Hebrews (Genesis 17:8). That promise was repeated to Moses (Exodus 6:4). Joshua, the successor of Moses, spent most of his later life purging the land

of debased and degraded Canaanites. However, Jesus said in Matt. 28:18-20 that he sends his disciples to all nations. He raises his vision higher than a small geographical region, up to the entire world. Now Christians are called to wage spiritual warfare (not military warfare) by preaching the gospel to everyone. The calling of the first Joshua after Moses is spiritually fulfilled by the later Joshua—Jesus' name in Hebrew is Joshua.

(3) In the Old Covenant, God gave commands on how to build a mobile tabernacle (Exodus 25-27). Then he gave special permission to Solomon to build a permanent temple (1 Kings 5:1-6:38 and 7:13-8:66). However, Jesus fulfills this earthly temple in his own person and in his church. Jesus says to the Pharisees, referring to himself: "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6). Jesus said this in the context of keeping the law and sacrificing in the temple. He now fulfills the temple sacrifices and becomes a living temple through his new people of God: his church (1 Corinthians 3:16 and 1 Peter 2:4-8). His church is found around the world now, so his living temple is worldwide.

(4) Christ fulfills prophecies that predicted his first coming. This theme relates to a major part of the Old Testament in Matt. 5:17—the "Prophets." They promised a new era of salvation, and Jesus fulfills that promise. The primary example among many, many others is found in Isaiah 53, which describes the suffering Servant-Messiah. Verse 5 says: "But he was pierced for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." This is a perfect description of Jesus' death on the cross, since he was wounded and pierced. His death brings us peace from God because it atones or pays for our sins. He fulfills every prophecy that predicted his first coming.

(5) Besides Christ's first coming, some prophecies have been partially fulfilled and are still in the process of being fulfilled. They will be completely fulfilled in the future at his Second Coming. Joel 2:28-32 is a good example. God promises his people restoration after divine judgment. He promises them that he will pour out his Spirit on them to restore and bless them:

2:28 I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

In the New Testament the Apostle Peter applies this prophecy to the church that Jesus established. It is the Day of Pentecost, a celebratory feast (see Exodus 23:16). God sends his Holy Spirit like a mighty wind and fills everyone who was praying in an upper room. Acts 2:1-4 describes the blessed scene:

2:1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

This is a holy moment. Joel promised that God would send his Spirit to his people, and Jesus promised that he would also do this (John 16:5-16). That promise was fulfilled in Acts 2:1-4. Peter understands this, so he applies the prophecy in Joel to this holy moment (Acts 2:16-21). And it is still being fulfilled. God continues to send his Spirit into people who ask him.

But there is another part of the prophecy in Joel that awaits fulfillment. God through Joel describes what will happen in the Last Days. God will show wonders in the heavens and on earth—blood and fire and billows of smoke. Then the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood (Joel 2:30-31). But the good news follows: "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 32). Jesus repeats this prophecy as valid and still waiting fulfillment (Matt. 24:29; cf. Isaiah 27:13; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7). It will happen just before he returns in his Second Coming.

To sum up, Jesus has fulfilled, is fulfilling, and shall completely fulfill the entire Old Testament. The Old Covenant is to the New what promise is to fulfillment. He has ushered in the new era of salvation in the flow of God's plan of salvation begun in the Old Testament. All the promises of God are absorbed in Christ's life and being. He becomes the fulfillment of the Old Testament without destroying it.

The Old Testament remains until heaven and earth pass away and "until everything is accomplished."

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.

This verse demonstrates that the Old Testament has an expiration date that has not yet arrived. The two "until" clauses offer us hints on when that date will come.

The first "until" clause says: "until heaven and earth disappear." There is nothing complicated here. God's Word remains until the physical universe is wrapped up. Peter the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Spirit, agrees (2 Peter 3:10):

3:10 But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night [unpredicted]. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. (See also Hebrews 12:27)

However, it should be recalled that the very words of Jesus Christ will remain even after the universe disappears: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matt. 24:35). This means that Jesus Christ supercedes the Old Testament, fulfilling it back then, now, and in the future.

The next "until" clause says: "until everything is accomplished." Matthew is writing the life of Christ in narrative or story form. Matthew quotes many Old Testament references to Christ throughout his narrative. We should therefore understand the word "everything"

in that light. Jesus Christ fulfills the Hebrew Bible at his birth. He fulfills it during his life and ministry. He fulfills it especially in his death on the cross and his resurrection because these two events ratify and confirm all else that precedes them. Next, he fulfills the promises in the Hebrew Bible in the new age of salvation, through his church and through historical events (though this last category is harder to detect). He will fulfill everything in the Hebrew Bible at his Second Coming. Finally, the Old Testament will become completely null and void only when God himself will wrap up the universe like a mantle of clothing, tossing it aside.

This is what "until heaven and earth disappear" and "until everything is accomplished" mean. God's Old Covenant Word—every smallest letter and stroke of the pen—will last as long as the universe does.

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.

This verse is divided into two main clauses: (1) those who break the commandments and teach others to do so; and (2) those who practice the commandments and teach others to do the same.

The first clause is easier to understand. The analogy of the Two Houses may clarify matters. When Christians go back to the Old House (the Old Testament), they are not allowed to break items in the Old House. They must not pick up an old dish (a command) and smash it on the floor. Instead, they should leave things as they found them when they return to the New House (New Testament). Leaving things alone is not the same as breaking them. Above all, if Christians become teachers, they should not teach others to break items in the Old House. Rather, they teach their fellow Christians to respect and honor the Old House as a whole, and the items found in it.

The second clause in verse 19 is a little more difficult to understand, but reading this verse in the context of the two preceding verses and of the entire Gospel of Matthew will make things clear.

In verses 17 and 18 (analyzed in the two previous sections), we learned that Jesus has fulfilled, is fulfilling, and shall completely fulfill the promises in the Old Testament. Therefore, he must be our interpretive guide as we read, practice, and teach the commandments. To use the Old and New Houses again, when we enter the Old House, we look at it through the vision of Jesus and through his fulfillment. He is our authoritative tour guide, so to speak. We obey the commands as they have been conditioned by his new era of salvation.

This conditioning is the theme of the entire sweep of Matthew's Gospel. As noted in the section "historical and literary contexts," in verse 19, Jesus is speaking the Sermon on the Mount to disciples still living under the Old Covenant. After the Sermon is over, he gradually reveals a new direction. He is making a transition from the Old to the New,

building the New House without destroying the Old One. When the Gospel culminates in the last chapter, Jesus instructs his disciples to teach all nations everything he commands (Matt. 28:20). As the fulfiller of the promises of God, he must take priority.

However, does this mean that the entire Old Testament has been canceled, abrogated, annulled, demolished, dismantled, or destroyed (words that translate the Greek word *kataluô* in v. 17)? Not "until heaven and earth disappear" and not "until everything is accomplished." The Old House is still standing without one piece missing or taken from it. All the items and furnishings are still in it. Rather, Jesus lifts our vision to the New House and calls us into it. Every commandment that is contained in the Old Testament can still be read, taught, and practiced for edification and blessing. But they must now be read through the fulfillment process and through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

For example, when Christians read about animal sacrifices in Leviticus, they focus on Christ's sacrifice, realizing that the old sacrificial system pointed to him. They "practice" it by offering a sacrifice of praise to God: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise" (Hebrews 13:15). This Spirit-inspired verse was written in the context of Christ's sacrifice of his blood on the cross outside the city of Jerusalem. Also, Paul says we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices: "holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). Jesus Christ inspires all believers to lift their vision beyond the literal sacrifice of animals and look to him, the literal and once-and-for-all and unique sacrifice for all times. Then they "practice" their own *spiritual* sacrifice. Therefore, the Old Testament has been fulfilled in this area.

Thus, it is always wise to let surrounding verses interpret a target verse. In this case, verses 17 and 18 interpret the target verse 19. And it is always wise to interpret a target verse in light of the entire text where it is found: the Gospel of Matthew.

A prominent New Testament scholar correctly says of verse 19 and Christ's fulfillment process being our interpretive guide:

The law pointed forward to Jesus and his teaching; so it is properly obeyed by conforming to his word. As it points to him, so he, in fulfilling it, establishes what continuity it has . . . (Carson, p. 146)

Another reputable theologian agrees:

In v. 19, then, the continuing practice of the commandments of the law must be viewed in light of their fulfillment by Jesus. It is the law as fulfilled by Jesus that must be done, not the law in the original form. (Moo, p. 353, emphasis original)

Jesus conditions and interprets the old commandments that we teach and practice. We look at them through his vision.

5:20 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.

In this verse Jesus raises the standards for citizens (and future citizens) of the kingdom of God. Their righteousness must surpass or excel that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This verse can best be explained by the next section in the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-48).

Jesus reinterprets (not cancels or abrogates) the Torah and the traditions of the elders. He uses this formula or a variation of it: "You disciples have heard from long ago . . . but I say to you." In Greek this last clause "but I say to you" is emphatic. It is contrasted with the teaching of Jesus' predecessors. He restricts their meaning even further, using six examples.

(1) Jesus cites the sixth commandment of the Ten, which prohibits murder (Exodus 20:13), but then he tightens it up by going straight to the heart. If anyone has anger in his heart towards a brother, then he will be subject to judgment. He then counsels reconciliation (Matt. 5:21-26).

(2) Jesus refers to the seventh commandment, which prohibits adultery (Exodus 20:14), but then he tightens it up with the problem of the heart. If anyone entertains lust, he has already committed adultery (Matt. 5:27-30).

(3) Divorces were easy to get in first-century Israel, and this put the woman at risk if she did not have her father's household to which she could return. It certainly put a strain on her paternal family. Jesus tightens up this easy divorce procedure, which favored the man (Matt. 5:31-32).

(4) Jesus references verses in the Torah about swearing oaths (Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21), but he says that his followers should not swear at all because they have integrity in their hearts (Matt. 5:33-37).

(5) Jesus refers to the *lex talionis* or law of retaliation (Exodus 21:24), but he says it is better not to seek revenge. The citizen of the kingdom must be ready to forgive and go the extra mile.

(6) Finally, he cites a command and a tradition that says a kingdom citizen should love his neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), but hate his enemy (a tradition or popular belief). However, Jesus says a kingdom citizen should also love his enemy and pray for his persecutor.

In each of these six examples Jesus deepens the outward act—where the stereotypical Pharisee and teacher of the law lived—into the heart and mind. That is the theme that unifies each example.

That is how the righteousness of the citizens of the kingdom must surpass or excel that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This is how we Christians examine the Torah and the whole Old Testament. We use the wisdom and vision of Christ, as he fulfills the entire Hebrew Bible. The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.

Conclusion

If Christians want to practice the commandments in the Old Testament, they should learn from Christ's wisdom revealed in Matt. 22:24-40. As noted in the analysis of Matt. 5:17, the Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus with words, so one of them, an expert in the law, asked him which commandment was the greatest.

22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Jesus boils down all the commandments in the Old Testament to these two. They are the best way to obey all of them. Jesus' followers should live a life of divine love through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name.

Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is in perfect agreement with his Lord and Savior, using the key words "fulfilled" and "fulfillment" (Romans 13:8-10):

13:8 [F]or he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself. 10 Love does no harm to the neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Only the life and love of Jesus Christ that he sends into our hearts through the Holy Spirit can enable us to walk in divine love. Our love for God cannot be self-initiated. God draws us to love him by his Spirit. This is the first great commandment. Only as we love him, we love others. That is the second greatest commandment. As for righteousness coming from keeping the two greatest commandments, only his righteousness that he offers us freely after his death on the cross and resurrection can save us. Our own righteousness cannot.

We must trust in Jesus Christ and receive the Holy Spirit and his righteousness in his name.

We Christians honor and revere the Old Testament, but we interpret it through Jesus Christ and the new era of salvation and fulfillment that he ushered in on the day he was born.