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### **I Did Not Come To Abolish**

Key to a proper understanding of the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is the determination of how the NT Scriptures relate to the OT. Central to this is the understanding of what Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in Mt. 5:17-20:

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 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Covenant theologians have long used this passage to assert that what Jesus is saying is that he did not come to abolish the Law of Moses, except for those parts He did. New Covenant theologians have interpreted this passage as asserting a fulfillment in Christ, but not a fully-orbed one. The New Covenant Theology (NCT) theologians we will examine have confirmed a revised law and a higher ethic, but have stopped short of seeing both a complete fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in Christ and in Him being Law unto Himself, as One who is the “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:2), “the image of the

invisible God” (Col 1:15) and the One in whom “all authority on heaven and on earth has been given” (Matt 28:18).

In addition to Covenant Theology (CT) and NCT, other views have been proposed throughout the history of the church, many of which are reviewed by Fred Zaspel in his work with Tom Wells, New Covenant Theology (Wells and Zaspel, 77-90). The wide range of views on this passage suggests that even 2,000 years after the Sermon on the Mount was recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, that there is no consensus on this passage, yet it operates as the fulcrum for many theological systems as they relate to Law.

This study will propose that the correct understanding of this passage is that Jesus Christ completely fulfilled all prophetic aspects of the Law and the Prophets and in doing so is in His very person the Law of the New Covenant. In the course of that review, other views of Matthew 5:17-20 by NCT theologians Geoff Volcker In-Depth Studies, Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, and John Reisinger<sup>1</sup> as well as the CT view as expressed in various works will be included.

### **If Jesus Did Not Abolish Them, What About The Laws That No Longer Apply?**

This passage of Scripture apparently is one of the most difficult to interpret in the Bible because there are so many interpretations, and out of those, really very few that come close to what I believe Christ was communicating to us there on the mount.

On its face, it seems pretty straightforward: Jesus did not come to abolish – or destroy – the Law or the Prophets – that is to say the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament – but to fulfill what that Scripture says. Nevertheless, exactly how He accomplishes this is a source of great theological debate to this day.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is not meant to be comprehensive in its review of NCT interpretations of this passage, and recognizes that other works exist addressing Matthew 5:17-20, including Biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal, An Exegetical and Theological Study of Matthew 5:17-20 by Gary D. Long (1981).

When we read that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, that “one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law” as the King James Version says, until all is accomplished or all is fulfilled, what do we do with that?

Does that mean that the Old Testament Law stays in force as it was for Israel because the littlest dot on the page or stroke of the pen doesn't get erased? That can't be the meaning of that statement, as it contradicts other parts of Scripture. Included in the Law of Moses are 613 different commands, yet we know that most of those do not apply to us in the New Covenant – at least not as they did to Israel.

And there's ample proof of that in the Bible. We know that Jewish dietary laws do not apply to us. Jesus said in Matthew 15:10 and 11, “Hear and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”

Peter had a vision, as recorded in Acts 10 and 11, “And there came a voice to him: ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ 14 But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.’ 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’” (Acts 10:14-15)

The sacrifices, the priestly duties, the vestments and the rituals of the Temple, have all been fulfilled in Christ. As it says in Hebrews, Jesus is our sacrifice once for all time, Jesus is our great High Priest, and in Jesus Christ's life, death, burial and resurrection, what once had glory – the Old Covenant – has faded and passed away.

So we know the cultic requirements of Israel – page after page of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – do not remain in force.

Likewise, the civil laws of the Israelites contained in those books – laws about property, slavery, accidental injury, oaths, borrowing and lending – those are no longer in force. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah by the time of the Sermon had been gone for several centuries. And it's quite clear in Jesus' teaching – though perhaps not clear at that time to the disciples

who were still looking for a physical restoration of the kingdom – that Christianity was not about civil rule.

Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) He told the Pharisees, “[R]ender to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” (Matt 22:21)

And the Apostle Paul reminded the Romans, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” (Romans 13:1-2) And certainly in his imprisonments and as a Roman citizen, Paul lived out the words he wrote in chapter 13 of that epistle, staying subject to the authorities, even as he desperately wanted to evangelize.

Meanwhile, there are certainly aspects or principles of the Law of Moses that still apply. It's still sinful to murder; we're still to worship the one and only God; stealing, lying, adultery – they are still all sins.

How do we reconcile this?

Before we get to what this study proposes is the correct answer to this question, let's review the predominant Reformed view, one that has been the basis of about 400 years of predominant thought among Reformed theologians and one that has been codified in confessions and catechisms to the point that it is accepted without debate – or even any sort of critical thought – in churches and seminaries all across the globe. In fact, many men have been defrocked or disciplined by various Reformed denominations for even questioning some of those confessional presuppositions.

Not fearing that here, we'll press on in the spirit of *semper reformanda*, always reforming – even though, ironically enough, in some ways the Reformation itself has become calcified in its traditions ... and the confessions have served almost as if they had “papal” authority.

As early as the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas divided the Law of Moses into various parts to try to reconcile the disposition of the laws of God (Aquinas, Q. 91).

The Puritans and Reformers – the fathers of Covenant Theology – in similar fashion divided the Law into three constituent parts: moral, civil, and ceremonial. It was their contention that Jesus fulfilled and superseded the requirements of the civil and ceremonial laws, and thus they have passed away. But the moral law – which they define as the Ten Commandments given at Sinai in Ex. 20 – is the law that neither the jot nor tittle of shall pass away. And that view – that there are three distinct parts of the law – is one that exists to this day in the Westminster Confession of Faith and its catechisms (held tightly by non-liberal Presbyterians), the 1689 2nd London Baptist Confession that many Reformed Baptists hold to, the Heidelberg Catechism, and so on.

There are several problems with this view.

First, there is no place in Scripture in which these divisions of the law are mentioned. The law that banned Israel from mixing fibers in its cloth and the law that banned the Jews from boiling a goat in its mother's milk were just as morally binding as the laws against murder or adultery. There is no provision in Old Testament or New Testament Scripture to enforce or suggest such a division.

As D.A. Carson writes, it's not really clear exactly what "moral" means. "If it has to do with what is fundamentally right or wrong, I would want to argue that what God approves is fundamentally right and what He forbids is fundamentally wrong; and in that case, when God approved certain ceremonial sacrifices in the Old Testament, people were morally bound to practice them. Again, if God forbade certain civil practices in the Old Testament, it would have been immoral to proceed with them, just because it was God who prohibited them" (Carson, 35).

Most significantly, that view serves to separate the actions of Christ from His person as a whole, essentially focusing solely on what theologians, and especially Covenant Theologians, call the active obedience of Christ. Graeme Goldsworthy writes, "It is common in systematic

theology to distinguish between the person of Christ and His work. But to distinguish is not to separate. The person and work of Christ may never be separated, since they are interdependent.” (Gospel-Centered, 297-8) Goldsworthy further contends that trying to separate the person and work of Christ led to the early church heresies about the nature of Christ’s divinity and humanity.

And when Jesus speaks of “not an iota, not a dot,” He doesn’t specify only a part of the law but of the law in its entirety. It really is importing something into the text by way of the Westminster Confession’s lens to superimpose that division.

Another difficulty with this view is that those who advocate it typically then describe what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount – especially in the antitheses that follow this passage, that is verses 21-48 – as expounding or amplifying the Ten Commandments. But that formulation falls apart when we look at verse 31 on divorce or verse 33 on oaths: neither of those applies to one of the Ten Commandments. In addition, it puts Jesus Christ in a role subservient to Moses; Christ in this view “merely gave a clear exposition” (Chantry, 81) of the Ten Commandments in a Talmudic manner.

Still another problem with this three-part separation of the law is this: some laws may fall under more than one category. For example, the fourth commandment – is the Sabbath moral, civil, or ceremonial? There are aspects of all three in its purpose and in its enforcement. The categories are not mutually exclusive.

Advocates of this view also speak of Christ’s fulfilling of the law – as in the moral law – as merely living up to it, that is, fulfilling its requirements, which does not address the prophetic and typological content of the books of Moses which are then fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, this view of the Law of Moses – that civil and ceremonial parts are set aside, or as the Covenant Theologian might instead say, abrogated, while others, the moral laws, remain in perpetual force – doesn’t align with what Scripture says. It also does not reflect how God’s

eternal truths are revealed in the replacement of types and shadows with the reality of the New Covenant.

Another Reformed view, albeit one less prevalent, is the view of theonomists – or Christian Reconstructionists – men such as Greg Bahnsen, R.J. Rushdoony, or Gary North.

Bahnsen, in his chapter “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel” from the 1993 book Five Views on Law and Gospel advocated for the continuation of Old Testament law as binding perpetually on Jew and Gentile alike. He would see the Law of Moses as being in force unless it was explicitly overturned – in ceremonial aspects only – since it represents the unchanging moral character of God (Bahnsen, 93-143).

However, despite Bahnsen’s assertions, it is clear that while God’s moral character is unchanging, His prerogatives in His dealing with His creation are not. Considerable discussion has taken place on the topic of polygamy and divorce in respect to God’s prerogatives versus God’s eternal standard of holiness. John Reisinger addresses this topic in his rebuttal to Richard Barcellos’ In Defense of the Decalogue, the 2008 In Defense of Jesus the New Lawgiver. Reisinger demonstrates that polygamy and easy divorce were permitted in the Old Covenant. While it could be argued whether these constituted sin in the Old Covenant or not, it is clear that the Laws given to Moses and the commands of Jesus do show a change in what God commands or permits between the two covenants.

And while there is the commendable aspect of a somewhat more consistent approach in the theonomic view than the classical Covenant Theology view, there is pretty clear teaching in the New Testament (as we have already discussed) that the kingdom of God is not a civil government of this present world. Additionally, as Paul tells us in Romans, the Gentiles were without the law, though Bahnsen would see the Law of Moses as perpetually binding on them anyway.

While the Covenant Theology view of three parts of the law is unsatisfactory, the theonomic or Christian Reconstructionist view is even more so ... there is a reading of this passage that satisfies Scripture very consistently.

Having discarded these two interpretations and their flawed hermeneutics, let's now unpack this passage in some detail and see what it is that Jesus is telling us about the Old Testament Scriptures ... and more importantly about Himself.

### **I Have Not Come To Destroy**

At the time of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had already begun His ministry, and it's likely that word was getting around about the radical things He had to say. He spoke as one who had equality with God. His teaching was at odds with the legalism of the Pharisees. But despite the radical nature of His teaching, Jesus makes it clear that He was not doing away with the Scriptures.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish (or destroy) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Let's take a look at some of the words used here and how they are used throughout this Gospel – and secondarily elsewhere – to get a sense of what Matthew was writing.

First, let's be clear about what is meant by “the Law or the Prophets.” The Law (or the Torah) includes the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Prophets include what are called the former prophets, books written before the Jewish exile: Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel and 1st and 2nd Kings; and the latter Prophets from the exilic and post-exilic era: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets.



(There's also third part of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings, which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel and the other remaining books. Sometimes those are lumped in as part of the general statement of "the Law or the Prophets.")

So: "the Law or the Prophets" means we're speaking of the Hebrew Scriptures as a *unit*.

Now, the word "abolish" or "destroy." The root word in Greek that used there is καταλύω, for "destroy," "tear down," or "put an end to." It's the same word used in Matthew 24:2, when Jesus speaks of the Temple and says, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." "Thrown down" is based on that same root.

Similarly, when Jesus was before the council in Matthew 26:61, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" And in 27:40, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!" "Destroy": same word in each case.

So Jesus is saying that He has not come to destroy the Old Testament Scriptures. Indeed, we're told elsewhere in the New Testament that they are useful.

2 Timothy 3:16-17: "16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." Paul is talking about the Old Testament, seeing as how the New Testament was just being written. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets; they are still in the canon.

But Jesus did come to fulfill them.

The word rendered "fulfill" is from the Greek root πληρόω, meaning "to fulfill," "fill up," "make complete," "finish," "bring to completion," etc.

Matthew uses this word 17 times in His Gospel, mostly in the sense of fulfilling what had been prophesied. We won't consider all of them here, but let's look at a few to get a sense of how Matthew used the word in other places.

In chapter 1, verse 22, after the account of the birth of Jesus: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet ...”

In Matthew 2:15 after the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt and their return: “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”

In chapter 8, Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law. Verse 17 reads, “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.’”

And in Matthew 26, when Jesus is seized in the garden: “‘Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.’ Then all the disciples left him and fled.”

In all but two places in Matthew’s Gospel where this word for “fulfill” is used, it is used in the sense of fulfilling prophecy. Given that, I think we can go along with the assessments of D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo that the sense of the word “fulfill” here is not limited to the sense of “fulfilling requirements” – though that would make semantic sense in relation to a narrow definition of Law. However, it would not in the sense of fulfilling the “requirements” of prophecy.

After all, everything in the Law and the Prophets, every author from Moses to Malachi, everything written from 1400 B.C. or earlier to 450 years or so before Jesus’ birth ... everything was brought to fruition by Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, in Matthew 11:13, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.”

Geoff Volcker brings a narrower view to this passage. In advocating for the view that Jesus is fulfilling only the Old Covenant and not the entire Law and Prophets, he writes, “While it is true that Jesus is in many ways the fulfillment of the Old Testament this understanding does not seem to do justice to verse 18 and the context of this passage in the Sermon on the Mount.” (IDS, 48). This lends some light on that group’s interpretation of the passage, as we’ll see later.

As noted above, not just the Old Covenant is fulfilled in Christ but all of the Law and the Prophets. They are brought to fruition not just in the words; they are brought to fruition not just in

the teaching; they are brought to fruition not just in the signs and wonders; they are brought to fruition not just in the healing ... or the virgin birth ... or the return from Egypt.

The Law and the Prophets are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God.

No other – and I would dare say so no lesser – interpretation of this passage comprehends the greatness, the glory, the sacrifice, the sufficiency, the love, the deity, the perfection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Beginning With Moses**

The Law and the Prophets – the creation account, the protevangelium, the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, all of the prophecies of the major and minor prophets – all point to Christ. Every step of redemptive history is about the Son.

Matthew's Gospel makes it clear in many ways that in Christ is the fulfillment. But so does the rest of Scripture.

Having made the assertion in verse 17 that the entire Old Testament is about Christ, points to Christ and is fulfilled completely in Christ, let's see if the rest of Scripture supports this view, mainly in the NT.

First, let's look at Luke 24, the risen Christ walking on the road to Emmaus with two disciples. "And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:25-27)

In John's Gospel, Jesus also asserts that the Scriptures are about Him. In chapter 5 verses 39-47, Jesus says:

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you

may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

And in John 8:56-58, Jesus makes the audacious claim that He is Yahweh, the God of Abraham – echoing the words God spoke to Moses: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.’ So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’”

And that refers back to Exodus 3:18, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.””

Similarly, in Acts 1:6-8, the disciples needed a reminder that the Scriptures are speaking of a heavenly Kingdom, a Messiah who is not there to restore the earthly kingdom to Israel, but a Messiah who has come to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. That Messiah is the Lord Jesus Christ, who sits now at the right hand of the Father.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Jesus tells them they “will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon” them. And what happens when they receive the Holy Spirit? They become bold preachers of the Gospel.

Peter in Acts 2 quotes the prophet Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ... And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Peter references Psalm 16 and Psalm 110. Peter proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the Old Testament Scriptures because they point to Him and they are fulfilled in nobody other than Jesus Christ!

Paul, in Acts 13 at Antioch of Pisidia, does likewise. He cites Psalm 2, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you,” Psalm 16 again, and Habbakuk. Paul preaches the Gospel from the Law and the Prophets because they are about Christ!

Hebrews 1 is an exposition of the Old Testament and how it points to, tells the narrative of, and sets the stage for redemptive history culminating in Jesus Christ. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. ...”

In all of these passages, Jesus Christ HIMSELF is shown to be the fulfillment of Scripture. The writers of Scripture, the Apostles in their preaching, Jesus Christ in His words – and the Holy Spirit as the author of Scripture all testify that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the lens through which we view all of Scripture.

“The Jesus who mediates the word of God to us,” writes Goldsworthy, “is the Jesus who is defined in terms of his historic saving act. The meaning of the Bible, in that case, is tied to the saving work of Jesus” (Preaching the Whole Bible, 86).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is our lens. Jesus Christ is our hermeneutic.

**Jot and Tittle**

Now that we've established that Jesus Christ and His Gospel is the lens through which we view Scripture, and that the Law and the Prophets testify to Him because they are about Him, and that Jesus' inseparable person and work is the fulfillment of them, let's move on to verse 18.

"For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

Really what is said here is pretty straightforward. "For truly, until heaven and earth pass away," for all time, essentially, "not an iota, not a dot," that is, not the smallest letter, not the smallest stroke of a pen, "will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

So, should we take this to mean that all of the Law remains in force, as some would suggest, or as others would say, a segmentation of the Law would remain in force?

We've established that neither of these is a satisfactory answer. In the former case, we don't live under the 613 various laws of Israel. In the latter case, the Covenant Theologians we discussed previously would use that verse to say that the "moral law" – what they define as the Ten Commandments – would not pass away. But we've shown that a three-part separation of the Law is not warranted, so there's nothing in this passage that suggests that "all of the Law" only means "some of the Law."

So neither of those explanations is the correct answer. And both of those treat "the Law" as just the statutes, ordinances and commandments and not all of the Torah, the five books of Moses.

Clearly, though, verse 18 tells us that the tiniest part, the most infinitesimal detail of the Law remains until all has been accomplished.

How can that be? The answer lies back in our analysis of verse 17. Jesus came to fulfill. As we noted, all of Scripture remains in our Bible and useful. And though we do not live under

the Law of Moses and we do live on this side of the cross, those Old Testament Scriptures still have meaning.

They have meaning and they remain because Christ has fulfilled them. But the reason they remain – and aren't torn out or ignored or superseded or even rejected like the Marcion heresy would suggest – is because they have had their fulfillment in the Messiah.

They remain until all has been accomplished.

Most eschatological views allow that many things have yet to come to pass. Even though NCT advocates may not all agree on how, or when, or what those things are – or if there's an already/not yet tension to it – but all has yet to be accomplished.

Jesus Christ did not come to destroy the Scriptures of the Old Testament; He came to fulfill what they prophesied. And not the slightest detail of those Scriptures – because they attest to Him and are fulfilled by Him – not the slightest detail will pass away until the end of the age.

### **The Least of These**

At this point, we've established the meaning of verses 17 and 18 of Matthew chapter 5. The Messiah, the Christ, did not come to tear up, destroy, abolish, overthrow, or negate the Scriptures of the Hebrews. Jesus Christ came to fulfill the entirety of them, every last jot and tittle.

All of it speaks of Him. He was there at creation; He was promised as the seed of the woman; He was the singular seed of Abraham; He is the One on David's throne; He is the redeemer of the fallen so that they might be the righteousness of God.

So that brings us to verse 19, another troublesome verse to figure out.

After saying that the Law and Prophets will not pass away, not even the tiniest detail, Jesus says, "Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Since it is the most prevalent view among generally Reformed or Calvinist theologians, let's once again view the Covenant Theology view on this, even though we've set it aside, to be clear what they advocate.

That view – which has already defined the Law as meaning just the Ten Commandments applying as unchanging moral law in perpetuity – that view interprets this verse as meaning this: “whoever relaxes one of the least of the Ten Commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. ...”

Now this brings up some problems. First, the phrase “one of the least” suggests that there are at least two least commandments. If you're going to have one of something, then you must have more than one, and the least number of more than one in whole numbers is ... two. This presents the sticky question: which two (or more) of the Ten Commandments are the least of them?

It's certainly not the first three, is it? Certainly having no other gods before God, not making graven images of Him, and not taking His name in vain can't be the least.

What about the fourth, the Sabbath? A. W. Pink, who held to this view of the three parts of the law, called the fourth commandment “one of the greatest of all God's commands” (Pink, 59).

It can't be murder, can it? Well, then, is stealing less egregious than adultery? Is it better to covet than to lie?

Well, as you can see, this argument – that there's a separate moral law meant by this passage – really falls apart again here.

But by way of dismantling this argument, we also see that the word “commands” or “commandments” does not necessarily mean the Ten Commandments. And we see that in Matthew 22, where one of the Sadducees, a lawyer, asks:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and



with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew, in verses 36, 38, and 40, is not speaking of the Ten Commandments when he uses the same word that is translated as “commandment” or “command” in 5:19. In its usage in this passage and in other parts of the New Testament, the Greek word is used generally to mean “commands” of Jesus or of God in general, and only as one of the Ten Commandments when it is called for in context.

So, then, what is being spoken of in this verse?

Let’s take a look at what others have to say about this.

D. A. Carson, in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, writes this about verse 19:

The expression “these commands” does not, I think, refer to the commands of the Old Testament law. It refers, rather, to the commands of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom mentioned three times in verses [19 and 20]. They are the commands already given, and the commands still to come, in the Sermon on the Mount (Carson, 38).

I believe Carson has this wrong on three accounts.

First, Carson refers to the commands already given. By “already given,” he must mean the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 5, verses 1-16, which includes the Beatitudes. What commands do we have there? For the most part, the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes are not commands, but are indicatives – they describe the blessed ones who inherit the kingdom of heaven.

In English, we have “Blessed are” but in the Greek, there’s no verb. It’s literally “Blessed the poor,” “Blessed the ones mourning,” “Blessed the gentle,” and so forth. The only two imperatives – the only commands – are in verse 12, “Rejoice and be glad,” when you are persecuted, and in verse 16, “Let your light shine ...”

Even as imperatives, they are imperatives about how one is to be – and those are akin to the descriptive, indicative sense of the Beatitudes.

Carson also suggests that it means those commands that follow, in the section known as the antitheses. Even this section, which expresses the great righteousness, the better righteousness reflected by the kingdom, has imperatives that again serve to describe. Certainly Jesus, when He says to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand if it causes you to sin, is not commanding us to do that, but is using hyperbole to point out the seriousness of sin.

Jesus is describing throughout the Sermon on the Mount two things: the exceeding righteousness needed to enter the kingdom of heaven and the exceeding righteousness characteristic of its citizens. We can't look at it as merely ethical commands. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote in his *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*:

What is of supreme importance is that we must always remember that the Sermon on the Mount is a description of character and not a code of ethics or morals. It is not to be regarded as law – a kind of new “Ten Commandments” or set of rules and regulations which are to be carried out by us – but rather as a description of what we Christians are meant to be, illustrated in certain particular respects. It is as if our Lord says, “Because you are what you are, this is how you will face the law and how you will live it” (Lloyd-Jones, 21).

In fact, the Christian walk is not meant to be one of following a list of rules, but rather applying the principles of one's faith to one's life. If we took the statements of the Sermon on the Mount and applied them literally, it would be a mess. As the Lloyd-Jones points out, when Jesus says, “And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well,” a universal application of this at all times would leave you standing in your underwear with an empty closet. That is, if you could find the closet with your eyes plucked out.

So, by characterizing verse 19 as pointing to commands in the Sermon, Carson contradicts even some of his own teaching, and in turn misses the point of the Sermon, so well described by Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Let's turn now to Moo and Zaspel. Both of these men come closest to getting this passage right, but neither sees the full implications of it.

Moo writes in his article "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses" from the aforementioned Five Views on Law and Gospel (353) this:

Probably, then, we should understand v. 18 to be an endorsement of the continuing "usefulness" or authority of the law. Jesus is no Marcionite and even if his followers are no longer bound by the commandments of the law, they are still to read and profit from it. 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 its original form.

Zaspel's explanation of verses 17-19 is similar: "It is all of the law that remains, but it is to be obeyed as interpreted by Jesus" (Wells and Zaspel, 127). Unfortunately, that stops short of really expressing the newness of the New Covenant. There's more than a new ethic, or a more stringent level of performance.

Zaspel, in referring to the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, writes:

"These commandments" from Christ do not reflect a substandard, more-easily-attainable righteousness. The law as it is now fulfilled in Christ epitomizes the very highest righteousness, one that surpasses even that of the "scribes and Pharisees" and one that Moses' law anticipated. These men, who in their day represented the very essence of holiness had at their best a righteousness that was inferior to that made known by Christ's authoritative interpretation of the law. Indeed this is the very righteousness of God (Wells and Zaspel, 128).

Zaspel is mostly right that “the law as it is now fulfilled in Christ epitomizes the very highest righteousness,” but Zaspel is wrong that Jesus’ exposition “is the very righteousness of God.”

Both Zaspel and Moo reflect the CT paradigm of Old Testament commands being replaced by New Testament commands, albeit more “spiritual” ones. They follow a pattern similar to that used by Covenant Theologians from the time of the Reformation. But they miss the mark by staying within that framework, that paradigm.

What is the correct interpretation of this? I believe the answer is given to us in the last verse of the passage we are studying.

### **Unless Your Righteousness Exceeds ...**

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).

We saw the argument that the higher righteousness of Jesus’ commands are higher than that of the scribes and the Pharisees and that those commands are the very righteousness of God.

The first part of that statement is correct. The Pharisees were scrupulous keepers of the letter of the law. And Jesus presented a higher standard.

The problem is that those antitheses of Matthew 5 are NOT the very righteousness of God. In fact, it’s really, well, blasphemous to say that. For example, “if your right hand causes you to sin. ...” Does that apply to God? Does that apply to Christ? He who knew no sin and who did not succumb to temptation in the desert?

Does Jesus need tighter rules on divorce? NEVER! The Son of God will remain perpetually faithful to His bride!

A merely higher righteousness is NOT what is necessary. What is required in front of that Holy God is perfect righteousness: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

How much does our righteousness need to exceed that of the Pharisees? They were already very good – excellent, unsurpassed – at obeying the Law. Do we need to be somewhat better than the righteousness of the Pharisees? How about twice as righteous as the Pharisees? Ten times as righteous? A thousand times as righteous? A million ... or a billion times as righteous as the Pharisees?

All of those numbers indeed signify a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. And all of those numbers mean nothing: literally or mathematically.

Paul reminds us in Romans that among men there is nobody at all who is righteous. “There is none righteous! No, not one” (Rom. 3:10).

So, if there are no men righteous, not one, then that means that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, even times a billion, still equals nothing. There is no righteousness in them at all. Even the very best Pharisee is tainted by sin. And we can see through the words of Jesus that their hearts are tainted because they are missing the weightier matters.

What is required to enter the kingdom of heaven is perfect righteousness. Only Christ has that righteousness and only clothed in His righteousness can one enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus Christ did come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. He did fulfill every iota and dot, every jot and tittle, the smallest letter and the tiniest stroke of the pen. Jesus is the One who teaches the law and the prophets perfectly. Jesus is the One who keeps the law that He has fulfilled. Jesus, and the ones clothed with His righteousness – the only righteousness – are the ones called great in Heaven.

## **Christ as Law**

The Law of Moses required complete obedience. Failure to obey just one part of the Law meant failure to keep all of it. (As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:10, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’”) The only one to achieve complete obedience to the Law of Moses is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (Heb. 1:3) The Law of Moses was only a representation, an expression of God’s righteousness, given on stone tablets at Sinai and in commands relayed through Moses. But it wasn’t THE righteousness of God. Only Jesus Christ is the “exact imprint of His nature.”

Christ represents – Christ is – the righteousness of God.

In addition to representing God’s righteousness, the Law of Moses represented God’s will for Israel and God’s authority over Israel. As it says in Deuteronomy 30:9-10:

9 The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, 10 when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Jesus Christ always and without exception does the Father’s will. “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” (John 5:30)

In Christ is God’s righteousness, and in Christ is God’s will.

And as it says in Matthew 28:18, to Jesus Christ has been given all authority on Heaven and on Earth.

So if in the incarnate Jesus Christ has been revealed the highest expression of God's righteousness; and if in Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all that God promised to Israel; and if in Jesus Christ is obedience of all that was required of Israel; and if in Jesus Christ is the complete expression of God's will; and if in Jesus Christ is all authority on heaven and on earth, then our conclusion is this: in this New Covenant, Jesus Christ is Law.

Indeed, all of the things the Law of Moses represented and required are a shadow of the Messiah: the ceremonies, the sacrifices, the righteousness, the need to obey, and the authority – all those things that were shown prophetically in the Law – are fulfilled completely in Jesus Christ.

Undoubtedly, the idea of Law as a person will (and has) drawn consternation.<sup>2</sup> But the concept of a sovereign king as law was not foreign to that time. Jesus Christ is the exact representation of God's righteousness and Jesus Christ is the One with all of the authority on Heaven and on Earth. "For in him," Paul writes in Colossians, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority."

So, if a king can be the law in a person, how much more can Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the very expression of God, His exact image, the exact imprint of His nature – how much more can the Word who became flesh be law? It is the very nature of Christ that we are to reflect, and it is the very person of Christ that we are to obey.

### **The Law of Christ Is Not a Set of Laws**

If Christ is the Law, what is "The Law of Christ?"

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<sup>2</sup> This has been a point of discussion on the Sound of Grace mailing list and in other places. A review of that mailing list's archive from the first six months of 2009 will show ample discourse: <http://www.associate.com/groups/soundofgrace/>

We turn to this because Moo, in his article, continues after his exposition on Matthew 5:19 to discuss the “Law of Christ.” The phrase is found twice in the NT. In Galatians 6:2, Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” and 1 Cor 9:21, “To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.”

Despite its brief mention and lack of context, there have been whole theologies and there have been whole NCT doctrines built around “the Law of Christ.”

Paul gives scant mention of it – just those two verses – and no elaboration. Covenant Theologians would typically refer to it as identical to the moral law or Ten Commandments, and would consider Matthew 5:17-18 as the imprimatur.

Moo defines it generally as the teachings of Christ as contained in the New Testament. But that brings up a couple of problems: First, nowhere in Scripture does it tell us that the “Law of Christ” is His teachings; second, nowhere does Christ or any Apostle say (as Moses wrote), “This shall be a statute for all your generations,” or anything like that. The teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostles, especially Paul, come mostly in the form of exhortations and indicatives, calling for us as new creatures to be that which we were recreated to be.

Thirdly, Paul writes quite consistently against a law of letters, for example, in 2 Cor 3:5-6, “[O]ur sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” or in Galatians 5:17-18, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

Replacing one law of letters with another law – even a better one – still runs counter to what Paul has written.

Similarly, Zaspel refers to the law of Christ as being the Law of Moses as interpreted by Christ and asserts that Paul “sees God’s commandments now as ‘the law of Christ’” in Zaspel’s



quotation of an earlier work (Wells and Zaspel, 137). Zaspel also rather vaguely states that Hebrews 7:12, “For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well,” supports the law of Christ replacing the Law of Moses, but admits that while, “the relation of the law of Christ to the law of Moses is not explained here, the contrast is nonetheless clearly stated for our help” (Wells and Zaspel, 138).

Steve Lehrer, writing for IDS, has a similar assessment: “The law of Christ is made up of all of the commands given in the teaching passages of the epistles and certain parts of the Gospels. This is God’s standard for all people from Pentecost to eternity. In the attempt to apply any part of the rest of Scripture to believers, it must be interpreted through the lens of these Scriptures” (IDS, 33).

The correct answer, however, doesn’t add to Pauline theology what isn’t in Paul’s epistles. When Paul was writing his letters, most of the NT canon had yet to be written. It is doubtful that in his first epistle that Paul was telling the Galatians to follow a law that consisted of the commands of all of the NT Scriptures prior to their composition – even allowing for inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Rather, Paul in speaking of the Law of Christ was elucidating a theology of the Law of the Spirit.

As G.M.H. Loubser writes:

Law of Christ is not a clandestine phrase by which Paul wished to introduce some form of law or compelling system of ethics through the backdoor. It is intended to describe the bearing of the burdens of others as intrinsic to the new paradigm inaugurated by Christ and his Spirit. It was intended to characterise [sic] Christian action and ethics as in line with the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ was the bearing from which Christians had to determine their position and the direction in which they were to move ethically. Their decisions had to be taken in terms of the cross of Christ, even though it might at times be in contradiction to what the world and law expected – scandalous, as it were!

Paul's use of the term "law" in this phrase is not indicative of moral law or externally compelling morality, but of how foundational the new dispensation is. It is absolutely fixed in Christ and cannot be undone. (Loubser, 350).

Similarly, Michael Winger, in his 2000 article "The Law of Christ" for Cambridge New Testament Studies Journal, writes:

We must therefore take Paul's use of 'law' in Gal. 6:2 in a somewhat looser sense; not as identifying any specific, legal instruction, but as referring to the way Christ exercises his lordship over those called by him. And what way is that? According to Gal. 4:16-25, it is necessary for those who are 'of Christ' to live in a way that is organized by the Spirit; according to 5:18 that is sufficient as well. A necessary and sufficient condition for life in the community of the called: what else could there be to the 'law of Christ'? ... Indeed, since the 'the law', Jewish law, is now distinguished from 'the law of Christ', it is plainly an inferior one. In effect, Paul says: We who belong to Christ live in and according to the Spirit; that is our law – the true law. (Winger, 544-5)

The Law of Christ cannot be extrapolated into describing a set of written commands that did not exist when Paul wrote Galatians and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Rather, the phrase "law of Christ" emphasizes the bearing of burdens that reflects Christ's admonitions to us to love God and love our neighbor. It is living in, living under and following the Spirit of Christ.

### **The Commands of Christ Are Not Given As Laws**

We've established that Christ Himself as a person is the Law for the New Covenant in that He is God's expression all authority and all righteousness. And we've also established that deriving the "law of Christ" from a loosely defined set of teaching is not in context with what Paul wrote to Galatia and Corinth.

But what are we to obey? After all, a person is not a set of external codes. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, but He is not a rulebook, or a legal document, or any sort of a list of laws, statutes or codes.

Now, most assuredly – and I want to make this abundantly clear – we are to heed all of the teachings of Jesus Christ and we are to obey all of the commands, the imperatives, that are given to us by Jesus Christ.

But there is a distinction. The commands of Jesus Christ are not laws in the way the Laws of Moses are laws. Most of the instruction given to us by Jesus and the Apostles – especially Paul – even those given as commands, are in the form of exhortation or encouragement. The commands of Jesus and of the Apostles are saying to us, “This is who you are in Christ; be who you now are.”

Much of what is in the New Testament Scriptures comes to us in the form of indicatives. For example, the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:2-12, describe the nature of those in the kingdom of heaven. They are not commands, but they are indicatives. Indicatives: meaning that they indicate something or they describe something. In the Beatitudes, they *describe* the blessed ones who inherit the kingdom of heaven. They describe the new nature of the believer.

The commands we have in the New Testament have mostly to do with the heart or the nature of the believer. They serve to instruct us in our walk or help us conform to what we are to be in Christ. Let's take a look at some examples:

(Matthew 22:36-40): “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” The command of Jesus is internal; it is of the heart. The command of Jesus is to love. You can't make someone love and punish them if they don't. You can command it, but you can't create love by commanding it. It is a command that tells you to be what you are or what you have been recreated to do.

(Eph. 5:25): “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. ...” Again, love. Be loving. Be one who loves.

(Titus 2:7-8): “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, a dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.” Show yourselves to be Christ’s, Paul says. Show what it is to be His.

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1 John 2:15) This is like Christ’s command in Matthew 22. Love God; love your neighbor. Not stuff. Again, this love, this is intrinsic to, part of who we are in Christ. It can’t be instituted by threat.

Each of these, while commands to us, while imperatives for us, are not given in the form of laws, but as imperatives that drive the indicative. In other words, they are commands that illustrate to us, implore us, exhort us, make plain to us, how we are to be as Christ’s elect.

Similarly, the words of Matthew 5:21-48 – the antitheses – speak about the heart and the inward nature of the believer rather than simply just providing outward commands to follow. These are imperatives that again both serve to describe the nature of who we are in Christ and tell us to be what we are to be in Christ.

Jesus certainly does use some hyperbole to get the point across. When He says to tear out your right eye or cut off your right hand if it causes you to sin, Jesus is not commanding us *literally* to do that, but Jesus is using that drastic idea, that picture, to graphically illustrate the seriousness of sin.

If what Jesus were giving us were meant to be a law, wouldn’t you think He would have given it to us in Levitical fashion? Jesus would have said something like, “If a man lusts after a woman, he shall have committed adultery. He shall tear out his right eye which has made him lust. This is the law for lust.”

Instead, Jesus has used overstatement to create a powerful internal understanding of the heinousness of that sin.

### **Completing the Picture**

To complete the picture of how Christ is Himself the Law of the New Covenant, we need to see how the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled in Him. We'll see that fulfillment by reading the words of the prophets in the light of Christ and in the light of the Gospel.

In Isaiah 42 and 49, we see Christ as the suffering servant, the Messiah who will sit on David's throne and deliver the people. We see that this servant, the Messiah, Christ, will himself be given as a covenant for the people. In Isaiah 42:1, it reads:

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

That's one of the prophecies that Matthew, in 12:6-8, lists as fulfilled by Christ. Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, the Messiah, will bring forth justice to the nations.

Isaiah in verse 4 also writes that this Messiah will be law, even to the remotest lands:

“He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.” The coastlands, meaning the shores of the Mediterranean – representing the outer reaches of civilization. The Messiah will spread His law to the distant nations.

Later, Isaiah in 42:6-7 writes:

“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

The servant, chosen by God, who Matthew proclaims is Jesus Christ, is given as a “covenant for the people” and a light for the nations. Christ, the Messiah, is that covenant. Isaiah 49:8 also calls the suffering servant a “covenant for the people.”

But for which nations is this suffering servant, Christ Jesus, the light for the nations? Is it just the nations of Israel and Judah?

That's answered in Isaiah 49:6: "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Paul quotes that verse in his discourse, his sermon, at Antioch of Pisidia in Acts 13, to show that Christ came not just for the Jews.

Jesus Christ is given as a covenant for the people, a law for the people, and a light for all nations.

What is the nature of this covenant?

Jeremiah 31:31-33 says:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Hebrews 10:12-15 points to this passage and links it to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. The inspired writer of Hebrews tells that this sacrifice and this writing of the law on the heart is for Jew and Gentile alike. Luke 22:20 uses the words found in Jeremiah: "This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood."

Christ's blood is poured out to ratify the New Covenant that is inaugurated in Him. As it says in Jeremiah about that new covenant: "I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts."

Similarly in Ezekiel 36:27, "And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

The Holy Spirit is put within, poured out upon, given ... to all believers. The giving of the Holy Spirit means that Christians are indwelt with the exact imprint of God.

That giving of the Holy Spirit fulfills Jeremiah by putting the law within the believer and writing the law on the heart. The Holy Spirit as the righteousness of God is Himself righteousness in us as believers. The Holy Spirit causes the believer to obey Christ, fulfilling Ezekiel. The Holy Spirit is the righteousness of God, in perfect alignment with the will of the Father and the Son. That righteousness is given to us.

### **Walking in the Spirit**

If living as a believer means to walk in the Spirit and to trust the Holy Spirit as your law, your ethic, what does that look like?

Paul gives us a beautiful picture of walking, living, in the Spirit in chapter 3 of his second letter to the Corinthians. Echoing language from Ezekiel 36:27 and Jeremiah 31:33, Paul opens this discussion by writing in verse 3, "And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." Paul can see the work of the Spirit, the changed ethic, the changed lives of the Corinthians. He sees this as evidence of the New Covenant taking hold in the lives of the people of Corinth. He sees the law of God, the very righteous nature of Christ, written on the hearts of the people. He makes reference to the "tablets of stone" of the Ten Commandments to contrast an inward nature as opposed to external codes.

Paul continues in verse 5:

5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but  
a our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us competent to be ministers of a  
new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit  
gives life.

Paul contrasts the law of letters, the Law of Moses, the law of the Old Covenant with the new covenant, a covenant of the Spirit. The Spirit of God, the very righteousness of God, is far superior. It gives life to those who have received it and not condemnation like the Law of Moses.

Paul continues in verse 7:

7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory.

The ministry of death, the Old Covenant, whose very law brought condemnation to all who could not keep it – which was all of Israel until Christ – that ministry of death still had glory, because in its law, it represented the righteousness of God. And in its words, it proclaimed the coming Christ.

The Law of Moses, and in particular the Ten Commandments, are prophetic as they show a picture of the righteousness that Christ would fulfill and the righteousness believers would attain in glory. We will have no other Gods; we will not murder; we will not lie. We will in glory be righteous and sinless.

Now to verse 17, where Paul shows what the Spirit of the Lord can do; what the Law of Moses could never do:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

As Paul also writes at the start of Romans chapter 8, you, believer, indeed have been made free.

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, I could not



do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit frees us from the chains of the law, freed us from sin and death, freeing us to be the new creatures in Christ He has made us to be: renewed in the image of Christ and one day to be transformed completely to that image.

The theme of life in the Spirit is also a major one for Paul in Galatians. While the judaizers are trying to shackle the Galatians under the law of Moses, Paul reminds them that they are new in Christ and led by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Galatians, starting in verse 16:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The active, personal involvement of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the lives of the believer takes the place of the law. The Holy Spirit guides the conduct and conscience of the believer, guiding the believer, transforming the believer, growing the believer in grace, and producing in the believer the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control," all indicatives, all descriptions of the believer's new nature. This is whom you've been born from above to be.

And as Paul writes, "against such things there is no law." No law of letters can put the fruit of the Spirit in you. No rules can make you a new creature in Christ.

It is the “mind of Christ” as Paul writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, a union with Christ through His Holy Spirit, that is our law. His nature, given to us, becomes our nature.

John records the words of Jesus in chapter 14 verse 20 of his Gospel. When Jesus has gone and the Holy Spirit has come, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

And in the Apostle John’s first letter, chapter 2 verse 24, “Let what you heard from the beginning,” John is referring to the Gospel, “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.”

This is not like the covenant God had with Israel. This is a new covenant. The very nature of God, the very righteousness of Christ is indwelling in the believer – Christ Himself is written on the Christian’s heart. The Christian does not have a set of rules written on his. The heart of the Living God has been given to the Christian by His Spirit.

How do we walk in the Spirit? We must constantly look to the Cross and look to the finished work of Jesus Christ; we focus, as Paul wrote in Philippians, on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise,” we think about these things.

We don’t beat ourselves up with the Law. Paul says in Romans that the Law brought his flesh to sin. No ... we focus on the Spirit. We look to the Cross. We turn to Christ!

### **Does This Mean We Don’t Need Scripture?**

Now, some might ask, “does what you are saying mean we don’t need the Bible to tell us what is right or wrong, or what is sin or not sin?”

By no means!

We've already reviewed several verses that serve to instruct or exhort us on how we are to live as Christ's. On this side of glory, in these corruptible bodies, we still absolutely need the discipling of the Holy Spirit via the word of God. We need all of what Scripture teaches us: what the Law and the Prophets tell us about Christ and what the New Testament tells us about living as Christ's.

We absolutely need the Word of God. But that word is not a law book or a rulebook. It is the living Word that gives us life and testifies to the Spirit of Christ in us.

And we do need the fellowship of our brothers and sisters. We need the church that God has given us. We need that church to support us, to encourage us, to reprove us, to correct us and train each other in righteousness. As Paul writes about to the church in Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the Law of Christ."

## **Fulfillment**

We have seen that Jesus Christ did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill all that they wrote about Him.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by becoming the suffering servant given as a covenant, as a law, and as a light for the nations.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by obeying all of the Law of Moses because of His own righteousness.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by becoming our Law through His righteousness and authority.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by bearing our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by defeating death in His resurrection.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by leaving with us His Spirit, the Helper, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by giving that Spirit to us, so that in His Spirit, Christ could indeed be Immanuel, God *with* us.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by sealing us with that Spirit, as a promise of our future glory.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by becoming sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.

And it is in Jesus Christ, and only in Jesus Christ, that we are fulfilled.

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