

Matthew Chapters 5:17-19 – Fulfill Not Abolish

Introduction:

Jesus bridges the rabbinic exhortation and the hard teachings about the Law with a statement about His approach to the Law.

This simple statement has caused a great amount of confusion about the meaning of the statement itself and its application.

Commentators and theologians have various thoughts about “Abolish” and “Fulfill”:

- The scribes and Pharisees had developed the oral tradition to explicate the law more clearly for the people; they wanted to make its meaning evident on the practical level of living it rightly. Jesus is saying, in effect, that they have failed to do so. Only He can “fulfill” it, that is, bring it to its intended end or goal.
- The idea seems to be that the Law is regarded as previously incomplete, not fully developed into all the breadth and spiritual depth of its requirement; and Christ came to make it complete.
- The Jews counted 613 separate edicts in the Mosaic Law, and there was never a single moment when the Lord Jesus did not absolutely fulfill in every detail every commandment. As a baby and as a boy, as a teenager and in the prime of life, at home, at school, at work, at play, as a son and as a brother, as a neighbor and as a friend, as a village carpenter, as an itinerant preacher, in secret and in public, when surrounded by family and friends and when confronted by formidable foes—at all times, in all places, in all ways, He kept the Law of God. He kept it in letter and in spirit. He kept the Law in its injunctions and in its intentions. He kept it because it was His nature to keep it. He would never dream of not keeping it. It was His Father’s will and Jesus always did those things that please the Father.
- Matthew is saying that Jesus performed or upheld that which was required by the Law and met the expectations of the predictions about Him in the writings of the prophets. In Him, the Law and the Prophets reached their fullest expression
- Jesus was not presenting a rival system to the Law of Moses and the words of the Prophets, but a true fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets—in contrast with the Pharisees’ traditions.
- Jesus said He would fulfill the Law by obeying it perfectly and would fulfill the prophets’ predictions of the Messiah and His kingdom.
- Jesus means that He will bring all that the Old Testament has established to its fullest heights and intents.

Analysis:

Verse 17 –

A negative particle with an aorist subjunctive – You should not think.

That I came to abolish - καταλύω kataluō. This word’s meaning has a large semantic range that includes dismantle, annul, destroy, or ruin (Matthew 24:2; Acts 5:38-39; Romans 14:20; 2 Corinthians 5:1).

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But to fulfill - πληρόω plēroō. We studied this word back in lesson 3. It also has a large range of meaning (to complete, to fill up, to fulfill what was previously stated).

Most uses of the fulfillment passages in Matthew have specific prophetic concepts. “The NT utilizes these [fulfillment] passages as illustrations, prefigurings, or signs pointing to a future antecedent. Not all OT instances make a future antecedent evident; nonetheless, the later (NT) reference underscores the reality that many OT events were prefiguring things to come.” Christopher Cone

But the word does not always indicate the fulfillment of something predicted or alluded to (Matthew 13:48, 23:32).

Not to abolish but to fulfill is in reference to the Law and Prophets – When “Law and Prophets” is used, it refers to the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole (Old Testament, Tanakh).

Verse 18 –

The jot and the tittle (smallest letter or the smallest stroke) will not pass away.

Until heaven and earth will pass away – This is saying that this will never happen

The Word of our God stands forever (1 Peter 1:25; Matthew 24:35; Isaiah 40:8). Truth, God’s truth, never changes, and this truth will not change even when the age of ages comes in.

Hebrews 10:1 – The Law was indeed a shadow, but that does not diminish the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures (Romans 7:12).

Verse 19 –

Jesus gives a stinging admonishment: whoever annuls (luo) will be least, but whoever teaches and keeps the commandments will be great.

In the kingdom of heaven (Messianic reign on Earth). Every Jew desired to be great in the kingdom, but how is this to be accomplished (serve, be humble, be last, keep and teach the Law, etc...)?

Understanding:

The first thing we need to understand is what abolish and fulfill mean in this context.

In the body of this discourse and throughout His life, Jesus challenges the Pharisees, scribes, elders, and lawyers in their understanding and application of the Law.

The Jews had both traditions and oral laws that were (what they thought to be) a proper interpretation and application of the Scriptures (Tanakh). This was known as the Mishnah, Talmud, and Gemara. Various ideas and teachings have been added since the time of Jesus, but the religious leaders had a great number of regulations and ordinances that were based upon the Tanakh.

Matthew 5:31 – Divorce was permitted for almost any reason as long as you give her credentials.

Matthew 5:33-37 – Oaths were allowed to be broken based upon the level of the oath.

Matthew 5:43 – Where is “you shall hate your enemy” ever written?

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Matthew 15:1-9 – Traditions have taken precedence over the Word of God

In challenging the religious leaders and their oral laws and traditions of men, Jesus was accused of breaking the Law, altering the Law, and abolishing the Law (Acts 6:13-14). Before Jesus begins His teaching, He emphatically states that what He is teaching is not destroying the Law.

Jesus is preempting the accusation.

Since it is Jesus' teaching that is being accused of abolishment, the idea of fulfillment is also about the teaching of Jesus. This is important in this context since phrases need to be understood in context.

Jesus is saying that He brings the Law and the Prophets (Tanakh) to its intended purpose.

Does Jesus fulfill the Law with His life, death, resurrection, and promise of return? Yes, is that what Jesus is doing here?

Possibility 1 – Jesus is alluding to every fulfillment that He would do (John 17:4; John 19:30).

Possibility 2 – Jesus is providing a complete, full, and correct understanding of the Law and the Prophets (Luke 24:25-27).

I lean toward possibility 2 in this context. Jesus is not abolishing or altering anything in the Law, rather, in His teaching, He is giving the proper understanding and application. Jesus is directly challenging the religious leaders in their abuse of the Law.

When we read verses 17-19 with that understanding in this immediate context, we can view Matthew 5-7 (and the rest of Matthew) in light of Jesus correcting the nation of Israel in regard to the Law. Yes, Jesus has fulfilled and will continue to fulfill the prophecies concerning the Messianic picture, but I do not think that is what is being expressed here.

The Hebrew Scriptures is not abolished, it is not unnecessary, and it is not to be ignored. But it must be properly understood and applied.

- The Law is a constitution for Israel.
- The Law is constant and cannot be altered.
- The Law was never meant for righteousness before God (Acts 13:38-39; Romans 10:1-4).
- The Law is used to bring sinners to the need for a Savior (Galatians 3:21-25).
- Under the Law – This speaks to the economy in which God brings blessings and curses to Israel (and other nations/peoples).
- Under Grace – This speaks to the economy in which God brings blessings to all believers and the curse of sin is taken by Christ.
- Teaching the Law without understanding it is condemned by God (1 Timothy 1:3-7).