

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

Thomas R. Schreiner

Introduction

Although I am not dispensational in my theology, I am honored to be invited by the dispensational study group to present a paper on the issue of the law. I was trained in a dispensational school and will always value the grounding I received in exegesis and theological construction. Virtually all scholars agree that the role of the Old Testament law for the believer in Christ is one of the most difficult and intricate questions in New Testament theology.¹ We can understand, even though we would dissent from, Heikki Räisänen's conclusion that Paul's understanding of the law is incoherent, inconsistent, and plagued with many contradictions.² Räisänen raises all the right questions but does not provide a satisfactory resolution to those questions. I have recently completed my own work on the Pauline understanding of the law, and I hope that I have presented a more satisfactory and accurate explanation of Paul's theology on this issue than that of the "new perspective," although I can hardly claim to have solved all the problems that arise in studying such a difficult subject.³

I was asked to present to the dispensational study group my understanding of Romans 10:4 and Matthew 5:17-48. Both of these texts are so controversial that all the relevant issues cannot be examined in this essay. My intention here is to sketch in briefly my understanding of both texts and some of the implications of these texts for one's understanding of the law.

¹The material in this essay is taken with modifications (and additions) from my article titled "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5," *WTJ* 55 (1993) 113-135, and my book *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

²Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

³Taken from the title of James D. G. Dunn's article, "The New Perspective on Paul," *BJRL* 65 (1983) 95-122.

ROMANS 10:4

We can get a quick idea of a scholar's understanding of the role of the law by investigating his or her understanding of Rom. 10:4. This verse has often been used to justify a global understanding of the relationship between gospel and law. For instance, those who posit an absolute discontinuity between law and gospel understand the verse to say that "Christ is the end (*telos*) of the law." They conclude from this verse that the law is no longer in force, and that no part of the law--even the moral commands--is normative for Christians. Others, however, claim that to read such discontinuity into the verse is unwarranted, and they argue that Paul is asserting that "Christ is the goal of the law." In this latter view, faith in Christ is the goal to which the law points, and there is a fundamental harmony between the gospel and the OT law.

Is Christ the Goal of the Law?

The idea that Christ is the goal of the law would actually fit quite nicely with my overall understanding of the role of the law in Pauline theology. It would serve as one of the banner verses for my thesis that the law is fulfilled in Christ, and that he is the goal of the law. So, I would be very happy to be convinced that the verse actually says that Christ is the goal of the law. I am hesitant, however, to embrace the teleological interpretation, for I doubt whether *telos* means "goal" here. Robert Badenas' claim that *telos* must be translated teleologically in Rom. 10:4 is debatable,⁴ for--whatever one makes of the term outside the NT--in the Pauline corpus and the rest of the NT the semantic range of the word is used more commonly with a temporal rather than a teleological

⁴See Robert Badenas, *Christ the End of the Law: Romans 10:4 in Pauline Perspective* (JSNTSup 10; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) 38-80. Against Badenas see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (WBC; Dallas Word, 1988) 2:589.

meaning. I have argued in some detail elsewhere against the translation "goal," but I will not delve into those arguments here since adopting this view would actually be compatible with my overall understanding of the role of the law for believers today.

Is Christ the Absolute End of the Law?

If *telos* means "end," then in what sense is Christ the end of the law? The sentence reads that "Christ is the end of the law with reference to righteousness for everyone who believes." This could be understood to say that the law has come to an end as a way of salvation.⁵ Righteousness in the OT era was via the law, but now that Christ has come right-standing with God is no longer based on the law. Ambiguity is present when one claims that salvation was by law in the Mosaic era, but now that Christ has come salvation is only through him. Some scholars, who see the law as coming to an end as a way of salvation, seem to suggest that there are two different ways of salvation, one based on keeping the law and one based on faith.⁶ In fact, older dispensationalists used verses like this to argue that the two Testaments taught two different ways of salvation, one by

⁵Paul Althaus, *Der Brief an die Römer* (NTD; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959) 108; H. W. Schmidt, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1963) 175; Roger Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 27; John Reumann, "Righteousness" in the *New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 88; Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964) 144-147; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 502-503; E. G. Gulin, "The Positive Meaning of the Law According to Paul," *LQ* 10 (1958) 116; G. Delling, "Telos," *TDNT*, 8:56; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949) 379-380; Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Rom. 9-11* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 84.

⁶A number of scholars in the first category listed above may be of this persuasion as well. The lack of precision in the way this view has been expressed makes it difficult in some cases to delineate specifically what some scholars have in mind when they say the law has come to an end as a way of salvation.

law and the other by grace. If this is what some scholars have in mind, then this is not a convincing solution. Paul appeals to Abraham (Rom. 4:1-8; Gal. 3:1-9) to teach that salvation has always been by faith, and that there is not a distinct way of salvation in the OT. Paul is scarcely suggesting that Abraham is a solitary exception to the way God justified people in the OT. The purpose is to demonstrate from the OT scriptures that justification by faith is the only way to salvation in both the old and new era.

On the other hand, some scholars are merely saying that although salvation in the OT was still by faith, such faith involved offering sacrifices and the performance of other commandments in the OT law. Now that Christ has come sacrifices and other prescriptions of the law are no longer necessary.⁷ The sacrifice of Christ has replaced the OT cultus. They detect, therefore, a salvation-historical significance in the statement that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness." Although salvation in the OT was still by faith, such faith manifested itself through the sacrificial system and keeping other commandments in the OT law. The era when these requirements were in force has passed away with the coming of Christ.

This latter option is on the whole theologically unobjectionable, but it does not strike me as the most plausible understanding of the verse in context. Paul's primary complaint against the Jews here is not that they fail to understand salvation history. If this were his aim, he would have probably said something like this: "Before Christ came your faith expressed itself through OT sacrifices and observing the rest of the OT law. All of this was right and proper in the era before

⁷This is how I understand David K. Lowery's position ("Christ, the End of the Law in Romans 10:4," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (ed. C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 231, 234-236.

Christ. However, now that Christ has come he is the end of that old system. The new era of salvation has dawned, and this way of manifesting your faith should cease." In this case Paul's intention would be to provide Jews with proper information. Their faith would be real and genuine; it was simply outdated in a salvation-historical sense. They needed to place their faith in Christ and his sacrifice instead of the OT cultus.

The above solution is unconvincing, though, because Paul's primary complaint with the Jews is not lack of information but lack of faith. In Rom. 9:31 he says that the Jews did not attain righteousness by the law. If the salvation-historical view were correct, he could have very well said, "The problem is that your faith is directed towards the wrong object." Instead he indicts the Jews in v. 32 because they do not have faith at all. They are pursuing the law "not from faith but as from works." The flaw of the Jews was not merely the wrong object of faith, but lack of faith. They were trying to gain salvation by their works.

Romans 10 confirms the same thesis. Paul does say that the Jews were ignorant of God's righteousness in v. 3. But this ignorance is explained by the second participial clause in the verse. "For being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to God's righteousness." The ignorance spotlighted is not salvation-historical. The Jews were ignorant in that they thought their own righteousness was sufficient for salvation. This fits with what we have already seen in Rom. 9:31-32. Apparently the Jews believed that their own righteousness and works could merit salvation. Thus, Paul has to remind them in Rom. 10:5-8 that there is a great discontinuity between works and faith. Works-righteousness requires perfect

obedience for salvation (which Paul has already shown to be impossible [Rom. 1:18-3:20]), while faith relies on what God has done for us in Christ.

In conclusion, when we see that the primary problem in Rom. 9:30-10:8 is Jewish legalism, it is unlikely that Rom. 10:4 is making a salvation-historical comment on the relationship between gospel and law. I am not denying that a salvation-historical element is implicit in this passage. The fact that faith is now directed towards Christ indicates a salvation-historical shift. But Paul's main purpose is not to instruct the Jews that their faith in God as expressed through the OT cultus now needs to be transferred to Christ. Rather, he indicts the Jews for not having faith at all and for being convinced that their own righteousness would be sufficient for salvation.

I would like to suggest, therefore, that Paul is not making any global theological statement about the relationship between the testaments in Rom. 10:4. The context suggests that he speaks experientially in this text, so that his point is that Christ is the end of using the law to establish one's own righteousness.⁸ Those who believe in Christ cease using the law as a means of establishing their own righteousness, for believers see that righteousness comes through believing in Christ, and it cannot be attained by obeying the law. The logical relationship between vv. 3-4 is the primary support for this view. The assertion that "Christ is the end of the law" is not merely an abstract

⁸Longenecker, *Apostle of Liberty*, 152-153; Sam K. Williams, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *JBL* 99 (1980) 284; Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984) 138; Rudolf Bultmann, "Christ the End of the Law," *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM, 1955) 36-66, esp. p. 54; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 380-381; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-1965) 2:49-50; Ulrich Luz, *Das Geschichtsverständnis des Paulus* (BEvT 49; Munich: Kaiser, 1968) 139-145, 156-158; Nygren, *Romans*, 389; W. Gutbrod, "□□□□□," *TDNT*, 4:1075.

theological proposition which Paul suddenly inserts into the discussion. Instead, a *gar* joins 10:3-4, indicating that v. 4 is intimately wedded to v. 3. One of the crucial issues, then, is how the relationship between vv. 3-4 should be explained.

Before the connection between the two verses can be adequately explained, I should reiterate and expand upon the meaning of v. 3. "The Jews did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God, being ignorant about the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own." I have argued elsewhere that the fault of the Jews in v. 3 cannot be limited to nationalistic righteousness, as if Paul were saying that the sole problem of the Jews is that they excluded the Gentiles from participation in covenantal blessing. The main proposition in v. 3 is that the Jews "have not subjected themselves to the righteousness of God." I understand this to mean that the Jews have not submitted themselves to the divine activity of God by which he declares those who trust in him to be righteous. The two participles (*agnoountes* and *zētountes*) in v. 3 are causal, in that they explain *why* the Jews did not submit themselves to the saving righteousness of God. The reasons given are *because* they were ignorant of God's righteousness and *because* they were trying to establish their own righteousness. Now these two reasons should not be sharply distinguished since those who are ignorant of God's saving righteousness, the gift of his grace, and his glory will inevitably try to establish their own righteousness and godliness as a way to merit his approval.⁹

This short excursus on the meaning of v. 3 brings us back to the important question of the relationship between the two verses. Paul's charge against the Jews in v. 3 is that they did not

⁹Cf. Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:515.

submit themselves to God's saving righteousness *because they were seeking to establish their own righteousness*. What is the connection when Paul then says, "For Christ is the end of the law with reference to righteousness for everyone who believes"? Sam Williams rightly observes that there is an implied proposition linking vv. 3-4.¹⁰ The implied proposition, says Williams, is that the Jews were wrong in not subjecting themselves to God's righteousness. Or perhaps Paul is implying that those who have believed in Christ have submitted to God's righteousness. Which of these two is correct is not that crucial since in either case it is clear in the context that the Jews should have submitted to God's righteousness, and this submission would be expressed by believing in Christ. Verse 4 then provides the reason why the Jews should have subjected themselves to God's righteousness, viz., that Christ brings to an end the attempt to establish one's own righteousness. The close connection between vv. 3-4 demonstrates that Paul is not making some global theological statement on the relationship between gospel and law in v. 4. He is responding to the specific problem raised in v. 3 of people wrongly using the law to establish their own righteousness. In v. 4 Paul points out that those who believe in Christ cease using the law as a means of establishing their own righteousness. The whole focus of the context relates to Jews who wrongly use the law to establish their own righteousness. Verse 4 makes an experiential statement regarding this state of affairs which we paraphrase as follows, "Christ is the end of using the law to establish one's own righteousness for those who believe."

In support of the idea that Paul is not making a global statement on the relationship between gospel and law in v. 4 are the words *eis dikaiosynēn panti tō pisteuonti*. Christ is not the end of

¹⁰Williams, "The Righteousness of God," 283-284.

using the law for righteousness for all people. Verse 3 demonstrates that some Jews wrongly try to use the law for their own righteousness. Thus, v. 4 claims that only those who believe, who trust in Christ for their righteousness, cease trying to use the law to establish their own righteousness.

Romans 10:4: Conclusion and Implications

In summary, it seems to me that the main problem with most interpretations of Rom. 10:4 is that scholars try to support their whole understanding of the relationship between the law and the gospel on the basis of this text. Accordingly, great battles are fought over whether Christ is the goal or end of the law. The issues in this theological dispute are utterly crucial, and they need further discussion. But my thesis is that Paul has something more modest in view in Rom. 10:4. The particular problem he is countering is the human tendency to misuse the law to establish one's own righteousness. The purpose of the text is not to provide a programmatic statement on the relationship between gospel and law. Paul responds to a specific problem, the use of the law to establish one's own righteousness. It is not surprising, then, that Rom. 10:4 would contain an experiential statement, for Paul is reacting to an experiential problem. Such an attempt to establish one's own righteousness is of great consequence since those who do so have failed to submit themselves to God's saving righteousness. They should have submitted to God's righteousness since belief in Christ is the end of using the law to establish one's own righteousness. Paul does not, therefore, provide a weighty theological pronouncement here on the relationship between the testaments. He merely says that those who believe in Christ will no longer use the law to establish their own righteousness. They have submitted themselves to the righteousness of God by trusting Christ for their salvation (cf. Rom. 10:6-8).

Of course, there are other texts in Paul which emphasize the salvation-historical discontinuity between the new and old covenant, especially Galatians 3 and 2 Corinthians 3. I would suggest that these texts need to be balanced with the texts where Paul calls on believers to keep the law (Rom. 2:26-27; 8:4; 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 1 Cor. 7:19). I would argue that the overarching theme in Paul's theology of law is "fulfillment." Such fulfillment involves both discontinuity and continuity. It involves discontinuity in that the Mosaic covenant is no longer in force since it has been fulfilled in Christ. But the moral norms of that covenant are still obligatory since the fulfillment of moral norms does not involve the change of those norms but putting them in practice. Believers are now enabled (to a significant extent) to keep the moral norms of the law by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In order to advance discussion I will conclude my discussion of Romans 10:4 by interacting at two points with the fine essay by David Lowery.¹¹ I include this since he has written an article on Rom. 10:4 in the book edited by Blasing and Bock. Moreover, it should provoke some (friendly!) discussion since David is one of the respondents to my essay. There are a number of areas of agreement between David and myself, but for the sake of time I will concentrate on two places where we seem to differ. He rightly sees that there is discontinuity between the testaments, but in my opinion fails to balance this appropriately with the elements of continuity. David (pp. 237-242) rightly says that Rom. 9:30-10:8 and Phil. 3:2-11 show that the difference between the law and gospel is that the former involves "doing," whereas the latter requires "believing." But what he says here should be qualified, since this is not the only way of describing the relationship between the

¹¹Lowery, "Romans 10:4," 230-247.

law and gospel. Both Rom. 9:30-10:8 and Phil. 3:2-11 relate specifically to justification and teach that one cannot merit right-standing before God by keeping the law. But it does not follow from this that all law-keeping would constitute "doing" in a negative sense for Paul. What he indicts is the attempt to keep the law in order to obtain righteousness. Yet Paul also speaks positively of believers keeping or fulfilling the law (Rom. 2:26-27; 8:4; 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 1 Cor. 7:19). In these latter texts the doing of the law is not opposed to the gospel because such obedience is produced by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by human self-effort.¹²

An important and difficult text in this whole debate is Romans 2 where Paul speaks of Gentiles keeping the law. Whatever one makes of vv. 14-15 (for my part I think it describes the occasional keeping of the law by non-believing Gentiles), I understand verses 26-27 to refer to the observance of the law by Christian Gentiles. Lowery (pp. 239-240) thinks the Gentiles here are unbelievers, whose obedience to the law is remarkable but not saving. The problem with this view is the □□□ which connects vv. 28-29 to 26-27, showing that Gentiles keep the law (vv. 26-27) because they have been circumcised in heart by the Holy Spirit (vv. 28-29). The background to the words in v. 29 is found in the OT. Moses teaches that the circumcision of the heart is a work of God (Deut. 30:6). In Jeremiah's theology the circumcision of the heart (Jer. 4:4) is connected with the new covenant promise of the law being written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-34), and Ezekiel teaches that people will keep the law when the Spirit gives them a heart of flesh (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26-27).

¹²My position is similar to that articulated by Kenneth L. Barker ("The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* [ed. C. A. Blaising & D. L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 295-302), although I would give a different interpretation of the texts which relate to discontinuity.

Elsewhere when Paul contrasts the letter and the Spirit (Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6), he clearly describes the new covenant work of the Holy Spirit. So too, here in Rom. 2:28-29 the circumcision of the heart is based on the work of the Holy Spirit, whose heart transforming work is a fulfillment of new covenant promises and a sign that the new age has arrived. Paul argues in Rom. 2:26-29 that Gentiles who have received the Spirit actually keep the law, while Jews--who have the letter of the law but not the Spirit--do not and cannot keep it. This last observation shows that Paul has not left his main point of indicting the Jews by speaking of Gentile obedience. The reception of the Spirit by the Gentiles is designed to provoke the Jews to jealousy (Rom. 10:19; 11:11, 14) and salvation.

Thus, I would not say that the "leading of the Spirit renders the law obsolete" (Lowery p. 246). Instead, the Spirit (Rom. 8:4) provides believers with the ability to obey the law. Paul's use of parenthesis shows that he did not believe ethical admonitions dampened the life of the Spirit.¹³ Instead, commandments and exhortations are one means God uses to stimulate believers to live by the Spirit. What Paul objects to in Galatians is those who believe that justification can be obtained by obeying the law and who think that the law alone is sufficient for godly living.

To sum up: the Mosaic covenant has passed away because it has been fulfilled in Christ. This means that circumcision, food laws, and animal sacrifices should not be observed any longer. But the moral norms of the law are fulfilled by keeping them, and we keep them not in our own strength but by depending upon the Holy Spirit.

¹³I think that Paul uses the phrase "under law" (Gal. 5:18; Rom. 6:14, 15, etc.) as equivalent to being under the power of sin and under the dominion of the old age. We should not conclude, though, that the OT law is always counterproductive. Those who have the Spirit can put the law into practice.

MATTHEW 5:17-48

The Priority of Love

What I have just said here is a convenient bridge to Matthew 5:17-48 where Jesus proclaims that he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it. The Matthean teaching on the law has been a matter of debate for some time and is the subject of numerous monographs and articles.¹⁴ Before I focus on Matt. 5:17-48 it might be helpful to note a theme which Matthew shares with Mark and Luke, so that my reflections on vv. 17-48 will not be misunderstood. Matthew (22:34-40), Mark (12:28-34), and Luke (10:25-28) include accounts in which Jesus sums up the great commandment of the law in terms of the requirement to love God with all one's strength (Deut. 6:4-9) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18). It is remarkable that when Paul sums up the law he includes the command for neighbor love (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; cf. Jas. 2:8), although for our purposes we will not explore the lines of tradition between the historical Jesus and the statements by Paul. The centrality of love in Matthew, Mark, and Luke show that the particular commands of the OT law are

¹⁴Cf. e.g. R. S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1969); Klyne N. Snodgrass, "Matthew and the Law," *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers* (ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 536-554; John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel: A Redactional Study of Matthew 5:17-48* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976); Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) *passim*; Hans Hübner, *Das Gesetz in der synoptischen Tradition* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1973) *passim*; G. Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 58-164; M. J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) 99-127; I. Broer, "Anmerkungen zum Gesetzesverständnis des Matthäus," *Das Gesetz im Neuen Testament* (ed. K. Kertelge; Freiburg: Herder, 1986) 128-145.

misunderstood if they are separated from love.¹⁵ The commandments are to be fulfilled out of a response of love to God and neighbor; this is the motivation which informs particular obedience. Mechanical or external obedience to the law is not what the Synoptics have in mind when they speak of fulfilling the law. Loving God is the first and great commandment because it is the fulfillment of the first commandment to worship no other god. The fulfillment of the law finally cannot be calculated in terms of the keeping of external requirements, for one can keep external requirements to a significant extent and not love God (Mark 10:17-27 par.). The call to love God with all one's strength uncovers the depth of God's demand on one's life.¹⁶

Love and Commandments

Does love cancel out particular commandments? That is, is the summary of the law in terms of love for God and neighbor a sufficient description of what the law demands? The Synoptic writers do not think so, for there are numerous other commands in the gospels which flesh out the nature of love. The priority of love is the key for rightly understanding the place of all the commandments.¹⁷ Indeed, the supreme test of whether one loves God with one's whole heart is the willingness to be a disciple of Jesus. The account of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30) is instructive in this regard. Jesus does not ask the ruler if he has loved God with all his heart, but whether he has kept some of the commandments from the decalogue, all

¹⁵Cf. Douglas J. Moo, "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT* 20 (1984) 11.

¹⁶For some insightful comments on why love goes beyond written commandments see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. projected (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 1:508-509.

¹⁷So Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul*, 21.

from the second table. Only Matthew includes the command "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:19) as a summary of what the second table demands. When the ruler says that he has kept all these commands, Jesus' response that he should go and sell all that he has should not be interpreted as an extra command above and beyond the intention of the law.¹⁸ Nor should this command be taken as a two-tier ethic with the implication that true disciples give up their possessions.¹⁹ Rather, Jesus by asking the man to follow him in radical discipleship probes to see if this man really loves God with his whole heart and his neighbor as himself. If one is not willing to follow Jesus in radical discipleship, then one does not love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength. The willingness to follow Jesus is an indication of where one's heart is, a test of one's true treasure (cf. Matt. 19:21 par). Thus, in an external sense the rich ruler may have kept much of the law, that is, he never murdered or committed adultery. But what Jesus reveals to him is that such obedience was not really rooted in love for God or love for the neighbor, for a genuine love for God necessarily involves a willingness to follow Jesus.

One could appeal to this account and say that it is possible for one to keep the whole law perfectly, and yet still fall short of the kingdom. It seems more probable that Jesus' demand that the man sell all his possessions (v 21) was designed to show him that he had not kept all the

¹⁸Contra Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 163; Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 28; Max B. Turner, "The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts," *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 111; Moo, "Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 13.

¹⁹Rightly Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," 96-97.

commandments perfectly.²⁰ He had violated the first commandment because he had another god whom he worshipped more than the one true God. Charles Cranfield rightly says, "Jesus is not, as Lohmeyer has suggested, inviting him to take a step beyond the Commandments to something higher than their requirements: the one thing lacking is the all-important thing, a single-hearted devotion to God, obedience to the first of the Ten Commandments."²¹ He had also violated the tenth commandment because he desired money more than he desired God. The account, on this interpretation, does not support the idea that one can obey the entire law. Instead, Jesus punctures the illusion that he had kept the law perfectly.

What this account also implies is that no one can claim to love God and the neighbor and commit adultery, murder, steal, bear false witness, or fail to honor one's father and mother. Love cannot be separated from specific commandments which help define what love looks like in practice. Nevertheless, one may keep these commandments in an external sense without having love. It is a serious mistake to define love simply in terms of obedience to moral norms. Love has its root in the heart, and thus the true test of love for God and neighbor is found in one's response to Jesus' radical call to discipleship.²² Love, then, goes beyond what is specified in commandments, but people cannot claim to be loving and actually transgress the commandments. This latter observation is utterly crucial in our day, for people so often define love in terms of subjective

²⁰Rightly Charles E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 328-330.

²¹Ibid., 330.

²²Cf. J. D. Charles, "The Greatest or the Least in the Kingdom? The Disciple's Relationship to the Law (Matt 5:17-20)," *TrinJ* 13 (1992) 145.

feelings even if the objective outward behavior is lacking. Today people even claim to commit adultery out of love! Commandments cannot exhaust how love should be expressed, but genuine love involves fulfilling commandments. And the commandments guard us from self-deception by reminding us of the specificity of God's demand.

A Survey of Matthew 5:17-48

The more difficult question in Matthew is to what extent the OT law is still in force.²³ Jesus says, "Do not think that I came to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota or hook will ever pass away from the law, until all things come to pass. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commands and teaches people to do thus, he will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does and teaches them, this one shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-20). The meaning of this passage continues to be debated.²⁴ There is especially sharp discussion over the meaning of the word "fulfill" (*plēroō*).²⁵

²³Räisänen (*Paul and the Law*, 86-90) thinks Matthew is not very clear, although he inclines to the view that there is no criticism of the law in Matthew, only of misinterpretation of the law.

²⁴For a helpful survey and critique of interpretive options regarding the law in the Sermon on the Mount see John A. Martin, "Christ, the Fulfillment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (ed. C. A. Blaising & D. L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 248-263. Martin also sees the moral norms of the law as obligatory for believers.

²⁵Meier (*Law in Matthew's Gospel*, 80) sees an emphasis on the predictive function of the law. Banks (*Jesus and the Law*, 210) thinks the text refers to the fulfillment and transcendence of the law in the teachings of Jesus. Barth ("The Abiding Validity of the Law" 68-69) opts for "establish," while Mohrlang (*Matthew and Paul*, 8) contends that Jesus is explaining the deeper meaning of the law. Moo ("Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 24-25) and D. A. Carson (*Matthew* [EBC; Grand Rapids:

Methodologically, it seems best to use the existing context of Matt. 5:17-48 to determine the meaning of the word. The contrasting term *kataluō* means "abolish" or "annul," and thus Jesus is certainly emphasizing that his purpose was not to abolish the law or the prophets. Verse 18 underlines the thesis of verse 17 in hyperbolic language. Even the tiniest part of the law remains valid "until heaven and earth pass away," or "until all things come to pass." Some have interpreted this latter line as suggesting that the law is in force until all things are accomplished in Jesus' ministry.²⁶ It is unlikely, however, that this is Matthew's intention, for this would contradict the previous statement that the whole law will remain in force "until heaven and earth pass away."²⁷ The saying about heaven and earth passing away refers to the passing of this age as the parallel text in Matt. 24:35 shows. The phrase "until all things come to pass" is parallel to "until heaven and earth pass away," but the reason for its insertion is because Matthew wanted to stress that all which the prophets predicted would be fulfilled.²⁸ The law and prophets would continue to be in force

Zondervan, 1984] 142-144) follow Banks in seeing an eschatological fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus. Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 485-487) conclude that the law is eschatological in that it points to Jesus, and that Jesus introduces a new law. Not all of these answers are mutually exclusive, although Snodgrass ("Matthew and the Law" 547) and Charles ("Matt 5:17-20," 149-150) are probably correct in seeing the "accomplishment" of the law as intended (although I also see a prophetic fulfillment here; see below), for Jesus is not referring here to the fulfillment of prophecy only, but also to concrete obedience in the lives of disciples. See the detailed discussion in McConnell (*Law and Prophecy*, 14-29).

²⁶E.g. Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 216. Rightly Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul*, 9; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 494-495.

²⁷Cf. David Wenham, "Jesus and the Law: An Exegesis on Matthew 5:17-20," *Themelios* 4 (1979) 93; Moo, "Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 26-27.

²⁸So Carson, *Matthew*, 145-146; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 495.

until everything which they predicted came to pass and was fulfilled. Verse 19 draws an inference from verses 17 and 18. If Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill every part of it, then those who intimate that any part of the law is not to be practiced and taught will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.²⁹ There is no contextual support for the idea that the commandments in verse 19 refer to those given by Jesus.³⁰ This is surely special pleading.³¹ The inferential "therefore" (*oun*) which links verse 19 to the previous verses, and the similar subject matter in the verses show that the commandments of the OT law are in view.

Matthew's understanding of fulfillment in 5:17 needs to be compared with the use of the word "fulfill" (*plēroō*) in the rest of the Gospel. Matthew employs a "fulfillment formula" on a number of occasions to emphasize that Jesus brings to fruition what the OT pointed to (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9; cf. also 3:15; 26:54, 56). Indeed, the fulfillment specified in some of these texts (e.g. Matt. 2:15) is only understood to be such retrospectively in light of Jesus' coming. The implication is that the "fulfillment" of the OT in Matthew is

²⁹"Being least in the kingdom of heaven" is another way of referring to those who will not enter the kingdom; cf. Charles, "Matt 5:17-20," 156-157. For another possibility see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 497.

³⁰So Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 222. Rightly Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 496. Snodgrass ("Matthew and the Law," 545) notes the numerous ways in which scholars have tried to evade the text by lessening the validity of the OT law. He is correct in saying that these attempts have been singularly unsuccessful. Cf. also Wenham, "Jesus and the Law," 93.

³¹Stephen Westerholm (*Jesus and Scribal Authority* [ConB 10; Lund: Gleerup, 1978]) repeatedly argues (pp. 79-80, 91, 108, 113, 123, 125, 129-130) that Jesus did not conceive of God's will in terms of statutes. He is correct in insisting that the will of God goes beyond statutes for Jesus, and that one's heart attitude is of central importance. But it is telling that he can sustain this thesis only by assigning Matt. 5:19 to the Matthean community (p. 157, n. 7).

christologically focused. The fulfillment brought about by Jesus, then, does not necessarily mean that the Mosaic covenant will apply in precisely the same way it did before. The Mosaic covenant needs to be interpreted in light of the fulfillment brought by Jesus Christ.

An initial reading of Matt. 5:17-20, however, might suggest the OT law should be obeyed in every detail. Indeed, there is no suggestion that any commandment of the law is passé, including circumcision. For this reason some scholars have seen the Matthean view of the law standing in contradiction to Paul's. He represents a conservative Jewish Christian movement which insists on full adherence to the OT law.³² Such an understanding of Matthew, however, fails to account for the evidence of the entire gospel. The antitheses which follow in 5:21-48 do not yield such a clean solution to the matter (more on this below). Moreover, Matthew includes the tradition in which Jesus says that which enters the mouth does not defile a person (Matt. 15:1-20). He does not add the Markan statement (Mark 7:19) that he thereby declared all foods clean. But since Matthew was written by a person who was familiar with the Jewish law, he was well aware that the dissolution of the food laws was the implication of Jesus' statement.³³ It would seem fair to conclude that Matthew's understanding of fulfillment of the law does not require the observance of all that is found in the OT.³⁴ But then how can Matthew speak of every jot and tittle of the OT law being fulfilled by Jesus?

³²So Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul*, 42-43.

³³So Carson, *Matthew*, 350.

³⁴Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 490) comment that Matthew never mentions circumcision because he views it as unnecessary.

What we have said about "fulfillment" above provides part of the answer to this question.

What the OT law pointed to is now fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. Every part of the OT finds its fulfillment in him, and it must be interpreted in light of the coming of Jesus Christ.

The antitheses in Matt. 5:21-48 also help us to understand the strong statement on the ongoing validity of the law in verses 17-20. For instance, Matt. 5:21-26 relates anger to the prohibition against murder. There is no abrogation of the prohibition against murder. Jesus provides an authoritative interpretation ("But I say to you," 5:22) of what the commandment against murder involves. The intention was not merely to prevent murder but to prohibit all selfish anger. Genuine fulfillment of the law goes beyond what the Pharisees demanded (5:20).

In a similar way, the prohibition against adultery is still in force (Matt. 5:27-30). Matthew wants his readers to realize, however, that the kind of obedience which pleases God comes from the heart, indicating that one now delights in God more than anything else (cf. Matt. 5:8). Thus, even lustful thoughts and fantasies are worthy of judgment. They are the root of which adultery is the fruit.

Matthew's words on divorce (Matt. 5:31-32; cf. Matt. 19:3-12) are more difficult. His comments in Matthew 19 suggest either that he is correcting a misinterpretation of Deut. 24:1-4, or that he no longer sees the exception in the latter text as an option. Formally, Matthew seems to be abrogating an OT law.³⁵ We need to be very careful, though, in explaining what is happening here. What Jesus says regarding divorce is better described as fulfilling the purpose of the OT law. The words of Genesis 1-2 are introduced so that the words about divorce in Deut. 24:1-4 will be

³⁵So Westerholm, *Scribal Authority*, 114-125.

interpreted correctly, for the words from creation signify God's intention, namely, that one man be married to one woman. Indeed, Deut. 24:1-4 does not command divorce at all;³⁶ it only permits it and regulates it when it occurs.³⁷ Nevertheless, here is a clear example of an OT law which allows divorce. Jesus is now presenting a proper interpretation of a law which was given to Israel in the course of its history.³⁸ This law should not have been used to justify divorce; rather, it was a concession to the hardness of human hearts. Jesus explains that adultery is always wrong, even if there are concessions and regulations to mitigate an already existing evil. Jesus uses the creation words of Genesis 1-2 to show the true intention in the OT regarding marriage. Matthew is probably suggesting that the Pharisees should have understood the evil of divorce from the OT itself.³⁹

The prohibition of all oaths also seems to be an abolishment of the OT law which permitted such (Matt. 5:33-37). As with the divorce saying it is important to discern Matthew's intention in making this statement. OT laws were given regarding oaths in order to enshrine the importance of truthfulness. It seems apparent from both Matt. 5:33-37 and 23:16-22 that some oaths were not

³⁶Cf. Snodgrass, "Matthew and the Law," 552; Moo, "Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 19-21.

³⁷Mohrlang (*Matthew and Paul*, 12) says the Mosaic word should be viewed "as concession and not as legislation." Contra McConnell, *Law and Prophecy*, 51, 62.

³⁸The Lukan account (Luke 16:17-18) should also not be read as a dissolution of the Mosaic law; contra Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 43-51. Rightly Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 180. K. Salo (*Luke's Treatment of the Law: A Redaction-Critical Investigation* [Helsinki: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 1991] 144-149) thinks Luke undermines the law here but wants to conceal that fact.

³⁹Even if Deut. 24:1-4 is abrogated here, it does not follow from this that the whole OT law is no longer in force. Some laws in the OT (e.g. slavery, polygamy) were probably given to regulate existing evils in Israel. A careful interpretation of the whole of scripture helps us see what laws contain universal moral norms, and what laws were temporary.

considered binding by the Pharisees. For example, if one swore by the temple or altar, then the oath was apparently considered to be nonbinding (Matt. 23:16-22). Such casuistry skirted past the very reason laws with respect to oaths were given in the first place.⁴⁰ Thus, Matthew's purpose here is probably not to forbid all oath taking or to rescind the commands regarding oaths. The language of Jesus here is hyperbolic, and should not be pressed.⁴¹ The intention is to remind people of the original intention of the law.⁴² This does not constitute an abolishment of the OT law, but a strong reminder of the central purpose of the law.⁴³

Many have seen an abrogation of the OT law in Matt. 5:38-42 since Jesus seems to reject the OT law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," and instead calls on his hearers to not take revenge for evil which is done.⁴⁴ This very popular interpretation is probably mistaken.⁴⁵ What Jesus counters is a misinterpretation of the command to exact an eye for an eye and a tooth for a

⁴⁰Cf. Westerholm, *Scribal Authority*, 105-106.

⁴¹For the presence of hyperbole in Jesus' teaching see Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 11-12. Cf. Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 535-536) who conclude that hyperbole is present here and Jesus is not forbidding all oath taking.

⁴²Rightly Snodgrass, "Matthew and the Law," 551. Against Banks, *Jesus and the Law*, 194; McConnell, *Law and Prophecy*, 63-65.

⁴³Moo ("Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 21) seems to conclude here that Jesus does cancel the Mosaic law; so also Carson, *Matthew*, 154. Westerholm (*Scribal Authority*, 108) goes beyond the evidence in detecting an opposition to statutes per se in this episode.

⁴⁴Meier, *Law and History*, 157. Barth ("The Abiding Validity of the Law," 94) rightly sees that most of the antitheses counter the Pharisaic misinterpretation of the law, but he fails to see this in Matt. 5:38-42, concluding here that there is a "complete abolition of an Old Testament commandment."

⁴⁵Cf. Moo, "Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 22.

tooth. An examination of the OT shows that the *lex talionis* is found in civil contexts (Exod. 21:22-25; Lev. 24:17-22; Deut. 19:21). It has often been pointed out that this was a humane principle since it prevented people from punishing someone for a crime more than was warranted. The principle of proportional punishment was thereby enshrined, and it could not be excessively severe simply because the person injured was enraged or had greater social standing. The words "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," then, are simply a way of saying that the punishment should fit the crime. Jesus is not suggesting that governments cease using this principle of justice, for it is the only basis upon which punishment can be meted out righteously. Arbitrary punishments for crimes undercut any moral standard for a society.

What Jesus speaks against, then, is the arrogation of this command into the personal sphere. Apparently some were applying this teaching regarding an "eye for an eye" and translating it to their personal life, so that they felt justified in getting revenge upon anyone who personally wounded them. W. D. Davies and Dale Allison rightly remark that, "While in the Pentateuch the *lex talionis* belongs to the judiciary process, this is not the sphere of application in Matthew. Jesus, to repeat, does not overthrow the principle of equivalent compensation on an institutional level--that question is just not addressed--but declares it illegitimate for his followers to apply it to their private disputes."⁴⁶ To apply the *lex talionis* to personal affairs is a blatant misinterpretation of the OT law which was designed for a civil context, not as a rule for everyday interaction with people. The heart of the disciple is to be one of forgiveness and non-retaliation, not revenge or hatred. Indeed, one could externally obey the command to turn the other cheek and be burning with hatred towards the

⁴⁶*Matthew*, 542. They also note (542) that the examples given by Jesus are hyperbolic.

person who inflicted the injury. What Jesus demands is a righteousness which goes beyond mere external behavior.⁴⁷

Our understanding of Matt. 5:38-42 is confirmed by Rom. 12:17-13:7. In Rom. 12:17-21 Paul, probably in dependence upon the teaching of Jesus, exhorts the Romans not to pay back evil for evil, to be at peace with all people, and to leave vengeance to God rather than taking it in one's own hands. The similarity with Jesus' words is unmistakable. Paul goes on to say in Rom. 13:1-7 that God has ordained the state to punish evil doers, insisting that it does not bear the sword in vain. In other words, believers, are not to take vengeance into their own hands, but the state "is an avenger for wrath to the one practicing evil" (Rom. 13:4). It is right, then, for the state to take vengeance on those who do evil because it has a God-appointed ministry to do so, while believers are not to wreak vengeance on others. What Paul says in Romans is consistent with our understanding of Matt. 5:38-42. Believers' hearts are to be full of love and forgiveness towards those who have wronged them, but for the sake of justice God has set up the state to punish those who commit crimes.⁴⁸

The last pericope in Matthew 5 (5:43-48) should be interpreted similarly. No OT command says that one should love one's neighbor and hate one's enemy (at least in the sense that Jesus

⁴⁷Carson (*Matthew*, 155) wrongly understands the interpretation proposed here by contending that if this is what Jesus were teaching, then he would go on to explain that the state has the function of repaying evil. But the intention for giving this word was to prevent people from using the OT law as a pretext for revenge, not to explain how unrighteousness is resolved in society.

⁴⁸I should note that my comments do not indicate that I am in agreement with Christian Reconstructionists. For a helpful critique see W. S. Barker & W. R. Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

criticizes this teaching), and thus what Jesus responds to here is a distortion by some, probably the Pharisees, of what the OT says.⁴⁹ The true meaning of Lev. 19:18 is that believers should love all people, friends and enemies, because by so doing they reveal that they are children of God who loves all people by blessing them with many good gifts.

Conclusion on Matthean Teaching

The thrust of Matthew's teaching, then, is that the law should be practiced by disciples, and Jesus is the true interpreter of the meaning of the law.⁵⁰ The fulfillment of the law by Jesus means that the law does not have the same status as previously. A clear example of the abrogation of the law relates to Jesus' statement regarding foods in Matt. 15:1-20.⁵¹ This incident is of the most help

⁴⁹Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 506) insist that Jesus is not responding to a misinterpretation of the law in Matt. 5:21-48, but to what the law really says. But the OT does not clearly teach that one must hate one's enemies (so Carson, *Matthew*, 157). Thus, Jesus is probably responding to a misinterpretation of the OT in verses 43-48.

⁵⁰Snodgrass ("Matthew and the Law," 541-542) and Barth ("The Abiding Validity of the Law," 104) rightly argue that the fulfillment of the law in Matthew is to be understood from a perspective in which the love command is central.

⁵¹Note how Jesus also ignored cleanliness regulations in touching a leper (Matt. 8:1-4) and a dead girl (9:25), although it is not clear if this would be viewed as a violation of the law, since Jesus may have followed the law's prescriptions regarding uncleanness subsequently. Cf. Banks (*Jesus and the Law*, 105) on this latter point. Banks also (92) argues that it cannot be clearly established that Jesus' attitude with regard to the temple tax (Matt. 17:24-27) constituted a violation of the OT law. Snodgrass ("Matthew and the Law," 552-553), Barth ("The Abiding Validity of the Law," 89-91), and Mohrlang (*Matthew and Paul*, 11-12) are incorrect in failing to see an abrogation of the law in Matthew 15 (for a more satisfactory view see Carson, *Matthew*, 351-352). Matthew does seem to have a positive view toward Rabbinic traditions on occasion (23:2-3, 23), but in light of the criticisms in Matthew 15, 23:2-3a should probably be interpreted as ironical (for this view see Carson, *Matthew* [472-474]). Mohrlang, on the other hand, argues (12-14) that scribal tradition remains authoritative for Matthew. It is telling that Mohrlang (47) concludes that Paul's view of the law is "more fully thought-out and consistent" than Matthew's.

in understanding the Matthean perspective on the law. Jesus came to fulfill the law, and he sovereignly explains the role of the law in light of his ministry. In most Matthean texts this does not lead to an abolition of any law but to clarification regarding the true intention of the law.⁵² Nevertheless, the purity laws do seem to be abolished, even if Matthew lacks Mark's clarifying statement (Mark 7:19). In addition, the concession for divorce is ruled out or rightly interpreted. Thus, the fulfillment Jesus speaks of in Matt. 5:17 should not be interpreted to say that every single law of the OT should still be practiced by the church. For Matthew the point is probably that the ministry of Jesus fulfills the true intention for which the law was given, and that one cannot understand the OT rightly without seeing the one to whom it pointed. I think it is fair to conclude, then, that according to Matthew the moral norms of the law are still authoritative for the church.⁵³ The teaching of Jesus in Matthew helps us to discern what these norms are.

⁵²Contrary to Lowery ("Romans 10:4," 245), I do not understand Jesus' command to a would-be disciple (Matt. 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-60) to "let the dead bury their own dead" as proving that the command "honor your father and mother" (Exod. 20:12) is no longer authoritative. Instead, there are occasions when moral norms conflict, and Jesus is teaching that devotion to God must take priority. Nonetheless, believers are still obligated to honor their fathers and mothers (Eph. 6:2).

⁵³Cf. Charles, "Matt 5:17-20," 159-160.