FULFILLMENT

Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy them, but to bring them to their intended goal. Truly I say to you: As long as heaven and earth last, not the slightest aspect of the law will fail until everything has been accomplished. Whoever, therefore, breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others so shall he be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever shall do and teach them, this person shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no way enter the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 5:17-20

This is where the teaching of Jesus really begins to pierce through the sophistry and mystification of Judaism. *(Sophistry is the use of fallacious arguments with intention of deceiving).*

Matthew places this passage here for a very important reason. The ethical teaching of Jesus that follows in the remainder of this sermon and in the remainder of Matthew's Gospel narrative, is so radical in character and flies against what the commonly accepted understanding of the commands of Torah were.

Thus, it is necessary for Matthew at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to underscore *the unwavering loyalty of Jesus to the law*. Only when the listeners or readers clearly grasp this will they be in a position to correctly understand the teachings of Jesus about the righteousness of the Kingdom.

The contrast for this teaching by Jesus against the interpretation of Torah by Judaism is emphasized in the repeated phrase throughout the remainder of chapter five, *"You have heard it said,"*

As he corrects the mistaken understanding of Torah, *Jesus presents the true meaning of it without advocating for its cancellation.*

Without question, the perspective within this pericope is especially useful to Matthew in his presentation of the gospel to his Jewish readers who have turned to follow Christ.

Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy them, but to bring them to their intended goal.
Matthew 5:17

Jesus begins by stating his intention with the words *"Do not think I have come."* This intention suggests that there already exists a contrary opinion regarding his intention.

Matthew is clear in his intention to let the *salvation by grace* Jewish followers of Christ understand that this faith in Christ is by no means *"antinomian"* or *against the law.*

It is fair to assume that *sovereign interpretation of the law <u>by</u> Jesus* was so out of step with the contemporary interpretation, which is championed by the Pharisees, that it would clearly seem that Jesus was speaking against the law.

On the contrary, Jesus emphatically denies that he has come to destroy the law or the prophets.

The word *"destroy"* can mean to *abolish, annul,* or *repeal.*
In reference to the temple:

> *But he answered them, "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 <u>thrown down</u>.*
> *Matthew 24:2*

Or in reference to the law:

> *God forbid that we should <u>forsake the law</u> and the ordinances. We will not harken to the kings' words, to go aside from our religion, either on the right hand or the left.*
> *2 Maccabees 2:22*

I have come – denotes the authority of Jesus. Jesus may not have come to abolish the law, but he is also not the servant of the law but rather its Lord.

Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets – the word *prophets*, given that this teaching regards the Mosaic law, could be an addition by Matthew in order to broaden the scope of the Messiah's fulfillment reach.

It could also suggest that the significance of Jesus for the Mosaic law can only be understood as part of a larger picture, that being the entire fulfillment of Torah. In this sense the wider scope of Torah would include the prophets. *"Law and prophets"* can refer to the whole Old Testament.

Thie elevation of the prophets to the worth of the law, would be a stark departure from the view held by the Jews of Jesus' day.

The meaning by Matthew is clear: the Messianic age had dawned in history, and with it came the fulfillment of the prophetic expectations. In this way the manner in which the law is *"fulfilled"* cannot be separated from the total mission of Jesus.

The word *"fulfill"* or *"to bring them to their intended goal"* needs to be considered as to meaning. The idea is to *"fill to the full"* rather than to *"establish." "Complete"* or *"bring to its end"* would be more accurate synonymous descriptions.

The idea of the law being *fulfilled* or *brought to its intended goal* by the act of Jesus *"doing"* activity is most likely not the intention. Though the conduct of Jesus is faithful to the true meaning of Torah, the completion of the law seems to come *in and through him*, that is, *in and through* his very presence. We have several options here.

1) Jesus fulfills the law by fully obeying the commandments of the Old Testament.

2) Jesus fulfills the law by his saving work of death and resurrection which was prophesied in the Old Testament.
3) Jesus fulfills the law by teaching it is such a way as to "complete" or "uphold" it.

The first option is doubtful since Matthew never uses the word *"to fulfill"* to describe obedience to the law.

The second option is unlikely because the works of Jesus are not in view in this context, especially when we read that,

> *"As long as heaven and earth last, not the slightest aspect of the law will fail until everything has been accomplished.*

This suggests something that transcends the saving work of Jesus while including it.

The third option seems most likely in mind, not in the sense of establishing the law nor in supplementing it, but by bringing it to its *intended meaning* in connection with the messianic fulfillment of not only *law* but also the *prophets.*

This option also allows for the affirmation of an *"unveiled"* definition of the law that naturally comes through this fulfillment. In accordance with Matthew, *the teaching of Jesus by definition amounts to the true meaning of Torah.*

This then, despite affirming a *unveiling* definition of the law also reveals Jesus' loyalty to the Old Testament conception of it.

> *Blessed are those who <u>hunger and thirst for righteousness</u>, for they shall be satisfied.*
> *Matthew 5:6*

Jesus has spoken of *righteousness* and expounded the true meaning of the law as opposed to an incorrect or shallow understandings of it, and this is why the word *fulfill* should carry the idea of *"bringing the law to its intended goal."*

This presents a definitive interpretation of the law as something now possible because of the presence of the Messiah and his Kingdom.

Far from destroying the law, the teachings of Jesus – despite sounding contradictory to it – pierce to the divinely intended or theological meaning of the law.

> *Because the law and the prophets pointed to him and he is their goal, he is now able to reveal their true meaning and to bring them to "fulfillment."*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 106*

Truly I say to you: As long as heaven and earth last, not the slightest aspect of the law will fail until everything has been accomplished.
Matthew 5:18

As an introductory formula, *truly* can and is often rendered as the Hebrew transliteration *amen* meaning *verily* or *truly.* When spoken it emphasizes the weight of what will follow.

What is weighty in this statement is that *"not the slightest aspect of the law will fail."* This is a more forceful way for Jesus to say that he has not come to destroy the law. The above translation uses the word *"slightest,"* but this is often written as *"one jot or one tittle"* or other various renderings. *Jesus is making a claim that is absolute in his fulfilling of the law.*

The idea is that not even the most minute aspect of the law will pass.

Just as Jesus claims he is not here to destroy the law, he is also stating that the law is to be preserved. Not, however, in the rigorous or scrupulous manner as interpreted and observed by the Pharisees, but rather as definitively interpreted by Jesus the Messiah.

In other words, to follow the authoritative teaching of Jesus is to be faithful to the entire meaning of the law: this is how one upholds every jot or tittle.

Until heaven and earth pass away / until all is accomplished – note the use of the dual *"until"* phrasing in this verse which indicates the law's continuing validity *until* something occurs.

Does *heaven and earth passing away* mean:

1) the end of the present age,
2) or is it a hyperbolic way of saying *never,*
3) that difficulty is indicated before heaven and earth pass away.

What does, *until everything is accomplished* mean?

1) The life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in fulfillment of prophecy?
2) The complete fulfillment of the commandments?
3) A parallel to the first *until* statement when *heaven and earth pass away and Jesus returns* in accomplishment of all things.

Are these two *until* clauses referring to different things or are they synonymous or close to?

Combining option three in each case above is probably the more accurate meaning:
the law remains in place until the consummation of the age.

What must be remembered, however, is that the way in which the law retains its validity as far as Matthew is concerned, is through the teaching of Jesus.

<u>teaching them to observe</u> (watch / guard as in a fortress) <u>all that I have commanded you</u>. And I will be with you always, to the <u>end of the age</u>.
Matthew 28:20

The words *until heaven and earth pass away* are not simply a way of saying *"never."* They refer to the end of time as we know it and the beginning of the regeneration of the created order.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.
Luke 16:17

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
Matthew 24:35

Here, the words of Jesus are elevated even above those of the law. They endure eternally, beyond the existence of heaven and earth.

Until heaven and earth pass away / until all is accomplished – are to Matthew, equivalent in that they both point to the coming eschatological era. The law as interpreted by Jesus remains valid until events between the present era and the fulfillment of the eschatological era have occurred.

This interpretation is consistent with Jewish and rabbinic views of Torah.

This is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endureth for ever: all they that keep it shall come to life; but such as leave it shall die.
Baruch 4:1

However the Torah does not perish but remains in its force.
4 Ezra 9:37

But again, as we have said, this is the law as understood in the context of the fulfillment of God's purposes announced by Jesus (hence the law and the prophets). For Jesus is the goal of the law and prophets, the bringer of the kingdom, and hence, the final interpreter of the law's meaning. The law, as he teaches it, is valid for all time, and thus in effect the law is upheld.
Hagner – Matthew, page 108

Whoever, therefore, breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others so shall he be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever shall do and teach them, this person shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 5:19

The argument as to the meaning of what constitutes *"breaking the least of these commandments"* has continued probably since Jesus finished speaking the sentence. We could list many interpretations, but it would be more advantageous to direct out attention to the context.

With that in mind, let's look at vv.18-19 together for that would be where the context is found.

Truly I say to you: As long as heaven and earth last, not the slightest aspect of the law will fail until everything has been accomplished. Whoever, therefore, breaks

one of <u>the least of these commandments</u> and teaches others so shall he be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever shall do and teach them, this person shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The underscored above, I believe, frames the context. Thus, *the least of these commandments* is more naturally taken to refer to the Mosaic law and the *"jot and tittle"* of it.

Also, what Jesus has in view here is not *"the least"* as in importance but *"the least"* as in the easiest to fulfill. Breaking one law was akin to breaking all of them.

Therefore, Jesus is using hyperbole to emphasize a point. The statement here as in the other verses in this pericope (section), is not to be taken literally. After all, Scripture itself teaches us that no one can keep the whole of the Mosaic Law nor was that even God's intention in giving it.

What Jesus is emphasizing here is not keeping the law to its most minute details. This is what the Pharisees and Judaism highlighted. Rather, Jesus is emphasizing a *full faithfulness* to the meaning of the law *as it is expounded by him.*

The least of these commandments then, refers to the final full meaning of the law, but as it is taken up and interpreted by the One who gave the Law in the first place: Jesus.

Jesus penetrates to the deepest heart of the law: the Law at its fullest meaning, not Judaism's rigorous and mystic interpretation of it.

"Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Wy do you seek to kill me?" The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?" Jesus answered them, "I did one work, and you all marveled at it. Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?"
John 7:19-23

The language Jesus is using regarding the law would have been familiar to the adherents of Judaism – *a proposition of holy law in which human action of obedience or disobedience to the law is followed by divine action.*

Jesus, however, has given their interpretations revised overtones contained within the broader context – that being, the fulfillment of the law brought about by Jesus himself.

As Matthew's Gospel progresses, these revised overtones and Jesus' fuller intention concerning the Mosaic law will emerge.

Whoever, therefore, breaks one of the least of these commandments and <u>teaches</u> others so shall he be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever shall do and <u>teach</u> them,

Note in various tenses, the twice-used use of the word *"teach."* This stresses the responsibility of the disciples to not only observe the law as interpreted by Jesus, but to teach it faithfully.

Teaching is given great emphasis in the Gospel of Matthew which tells us that he held it in the highest importance for his church.

"Great" and *"least"* in the Kingdom of heaven is in keeping with Jewish and rabbinic perspective. It is directly related to the idea of rewards as motivation for proper conduct.

> *Rejoice and be glad, <u>for your reward is great in heaven</u>, for so they persecuted the prophets before you.*
> *Matthew 5:12*

> *The "least" has presumably been essentially faithful to the law, though not having reached or taught the ideal championed by Jesus. Matthew could well have in mind more liberal Jewish Christians or especially gentile Christians who tolerated more laxity regarding the law than he wished to (or could) promote among his particular Jewish-Christian congregation. It is unlikely that "least" refers to those excluded from the kingdom. The assumption is that although they were guilty of the smallest commandments, they had kept the law for the most part. Their reward will be proportionately less.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 109*

> *For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*
> *1 Corinthians 15:9*

> *For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no way enter the kingdom of heaven.*
> *Matthew 5: 20*

Jesus again uses the formulaic *"I tell you"*, stressing the great importance of the coming words.

The righteousness mentioned here which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees must not be understood as referring to a quantitative value, as if being preoccupied with or keeping the most minute portion of the law is in view. One cannot *"out-Pharisee"* those who rigorously adhere and uphold each letter in each word of the Mosaic Law.

Jesus expects, as he continues to speak antithetically, a new and higher kind of righteousness, a righteousness that rests upon the presence of the eschatological kingdom he brings and that finds its definition and content in his definitive and authoritative exposition of the law.

Jesus is calling his followers – *his disciples* – to a way of righteousness. However, his way is centered on the *true meaning of Torah* delivered by the Messiah. Following this *true meaning* is taking the paththat leads to perfection.

"You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Matthew 5:48

The larger context of the verse (e.g., the grace of the beatitudes) forbids us to conclude that entrance into the kingdom depends, in a cause-effect relationship, upon personal moral attainments. The verse is addressed, it must be remembered, to those who are the recipients of the kingdom. Entrance into the kingdom is God's gift: but to belong to the kingdom means to follow Jesus' teaching. Hence, the kingdom and the righteousness of the kingdom go together; they cannot be separated.
Hagner- Matthew, page 109

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
Matthew 6:33

But Jesus answered John, "Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."
Matthew 3:15

Jesus is the living Torah, the Torah in the flesh, the Torah walking and talking and breathing and acting. Not a jot or tittle is lost, but we can keep the law – retain it and obey it – only if we follow the living Torah. Following Jesus is following Torah. Following the law means keeping company with the living Torah, Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father, the Instruction of the Father, the Word of the Father made flesh to be the light of the world. Walk in the light and you fulfill the righteous requirements of the law.
Leithart – Jesus as Israel, page 125

The ethical teaching of Jesus the Messiah, the one who in his person brings the fulfillment that indicates the kingdom's presence, is nothing other than the true meaning of Torah. As the Messiah, Jesus has come to bring both the law and the prophets to their intended fulfillment. Jesus' view of the law as valid until the end of time means that the fulfillment he brings is in true continuity with the past, a fulfillment toward which the law and the prophets pointed. God's purposes have a unity; yet a new stage in his purposes has been reached. Jesus alone and not the Pharisees can interpret the Torah finally and authoritatively. This is the explanation of the radical-sounding teaching of Jesus that cuts through the casuistry (use of clever reasoning) and mystification of the scribes and Pharisees.
Hagner – Matthew, page 110

Jesus is committed to Torah, but he alone is in a position to expound its intended meaning.

It is vitally important to know that the understanding of Torah, the attainment of the righteousness of the law are linked with the presence of the Kingdom.

Jesus as the infallible expounder of the truth of Torah has outdone the Pharisees.