

## Prayer

For all that we have received from You, Lord Jesus, we give You thanks. We are grateful for our lives and for those we love, for our homes and friends, and for our work and leisure. May we be sensitive to the leading of Your Holy Spirit, so that we might live according to Your will for our lives. We give You the glory, Lord; AMEN.

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Pray for your work in the place where you work, and if you do not do formal work, then pray about the things you do each day*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for wildlife issues** *Pray about whaling and the difficult political and cultural pressures to sustain the waling industry*
- *Pray about local news items as found on the internet*
- *Give thanks to God for the gifts of laughter and joy*

## Meditation

You have always trusted people, Lord Jesus;  
As a baby, You were protected by Your mother and father;  
And because of their love, your trust was not abused.

You had a deep personal relationship with Your mother, Mary;  
You knew the reality of family life with brothers and sisters;  
You valued the work of Your cousin John the Baptist;  
You accepted little children into the Kingdom of God;  
You rejoiced in the friendship of those who walked with you;  
You gave your all for the liberation and salvation of others;  
You honoured your friends by revealing yourself to them;  
You commissioned the disciples to teach the one true Gospel;

May we learn from Your example how to be trustworthy;  
And by Your example, foster that compassion and respect  
Which make us disciples who are worthy of Your Name.

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## Bible passage - Matthew 5:17-20

<sup>17</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfil them. <sup>18</sup> Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter or stroke of the pen will pass from the law until everything has come to its completion. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever lives by them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness is far more than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.'

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## Bible Study

### Review

This passage of scripture is essential to our understanding of the entire Gospel. Here, Jesus explains how His preaching of the Kingdom of God and His work as the Messiah fit together with the scriptures of the Jewish people, summarised by the expression 'the Law and the Prophets' (5:17). We must study this passage carefully because the connection between Jesus' work described in the 'New Testament' is often thought of as quite different from the scriptures of the 'Old Testament', but this is not what Jesus says here.

Most Christians will be familiar with the fact that Jesus spent much of his ministry at odds with the Pharisees who insisted that Jesus did not properly practice the 'Laws of Moses'. Paul, in his letters, tells us that the legalism of the Pharisees failed to bring salvation to anyone, but Jesus had saved those who believe in Him through His grace and love (e.g. Romans 3:21-31, 7:1f. Gal. 3:10f.) With this in mind, many a Christian thinks of the Old Testament as a failed religion of the Law, and the New Testament as the bearer of the Good News of salvation. As a consequence, the Old Testament is used with caution, perhaps as a mere teaching aid to the New. This is profoundly wrong; the nature of God and His redeeming work for all humanity is in fact consistent from the Old to the New Testament, as Jesus explains here, but in order to explain why this is so, there are some facts we must understand.

Jesus said 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfil them' (5:17). This bold statement reveals a radically new interpretation of Old Testament scripture. The obvious meaning of this is that Jesus fulfils both the Law and the Prophets through His own life and ministry, and we can therefore find that the requirements of the Law, for example, are met in Jesus. Certainly, the letter to the Hebrews explains how Jesus' death fulfils the requirements of the sacrificial system of the Law. In addition, as Matthew has already begun to show us, the events in Jesus' life fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament, particularly those of Isaiah (see 1:22,23, 2:6,18, 3:3, 4:4 etc.). But there is more to this which we do not immediately spot today because few people know how Jewish people in Jesus' day perceived and used their scriptures.

Today, despite uncertainties about the Old Testament, it is common for a Christian to say that all scriptures are 'God's Word' (though some qualify this with words such as 'literal' or 'revealed'). However in Jesus' day, as in our own day, Jewish people believed something very different. They held the first five books of the Bible ('the Law') as the most important scriptures. In interpreting God's will they were more important than the prophets, by which they meant Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 'minor' prophets, and also the historical books including 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings (because they are as much about the prophets Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha as kings!). The other writings of the Old Testament such as Psalms and Job etc. were regarded as of even lesser importance!

Against this background, Jesus was saying something radically new, and also something profoundly unpalatable to the Pharisees. He talked about Prophets as well as the Law with equal emphasis, and as if they were equally God's Word! In other words, he upheld the Old Testament as God's Word without qualification and refused to allow the Law to be regarded as determining God's Word! Because the Pharisees had built up a complex system of life based on Moses' laws, believing them to be fundamental, what Jesus said was scandalous!

As we continue our studies in Matthew we will discover that frequently, Jesus' words and deeds are explained by the prophecies of Isaiah, and if we know the Old Testament, we will know that Isaiah himself re-interpreted the ancient traditions of God's people and the 'Law'. The pathway of God's Word presented by this text is this: the Law, then the Prophets, and then Jesus. Not one part of this pathway can ever be ignored, said Jesus (5:19), and if someone's understanding of God was based on the law alone then it was insufficient; all three were required. This is what Jesus means when he says; 'unless your righteousness is far more than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.' (5:20). A righteousness based on the law alone could never achieve salvation; Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus brings the righteousness of salvation by fulfilling the prophets, and fulfilling the Law!

We have not had time in this introduction to deal with other details of this text, but all this is crucial for our understanding of Matthew's Gospel and the ministry of Jesus.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

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## Going Deeper

the Kingdom of Heaven relates to the historic work of God through the 'Law and the Prophets' (vv17,18) and goes on to make two observations as a consequence. The first is about the responsibilities of living and teaching the Kingdom (v19), and the second concerns the righteousness which lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. It is a tall order to study all this in one session, but they do closely relate, and as the only

variation of these verses in scripture is a brief passage in Luke (16:16,17), I believe these four verses are original to Jesus' teaching in this form, and belong together.

### **The abolition of the Law and the Prophets?**

Most Christians know that the Pharisees embodied a tradition of legalism, and they readily accept that Jesus came to replace that tradition with the 'law' of love. This is a reasonable summary of the teaching of Paul based upon the life of Christ, from Romans (ch.7) and Galatians (5:14 in particular); but it does ignore some important points which will help us understand what Matthew (and Jesus) said about the Kingdom of God. As I go through the next paragraph, do not worry if you cannot remember the technical words. I ask you to follow this through with me as you read, and you will see that what comes out at the end is important; more valuable, I suggest, because it is not clearly explained in most commentaries.

In order to understand Matthew 5:17,18, it is wise to recall the way that the scribes and Pharisees handled their scriptures and developed their religious practices. The Jewish traditions of learning (Talmud) were based on the written law (the 'Torah', or first five books of the Bible) and the oral 'law' (Halakah) that was believed to have been handed down even from the time of Moses. Scribes and Rabbis interpreted the law and applied it to their own times by a process of investigation, called 'Midrash', which led to a considerable range of additional written material about the law, called 'Mishna'. By Jesus' day, the Law had been translated into Aramaic 'Targums', and the process of translation together with the tradition of Midrash had produced a large body of Mishna, some held by the Pharisees, and others held by other groups such as the Sadducees (who did not believe in the resurrection).

What we should note from all this is that God's 'Law', the first five books of the Bible, which is best understood as God's 'ground rules for life' found within everything from descriptions of creation (Gen 1,2,3) to legal codes (Ex 20) and stories (Most of Genesis 12-50), was the most important scripture for the Jews. It was more important than the 'Prophets' (including, what we think of as the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which were called the 'former prophets') and the other 'Writings' in our Old Testament. This grading of God's Word is not something we are used to, but was well understood in Jesus' day.

Secondly, the Rabbis and Pharisees based their understanding of scripture as 'the Law' on their own developed oral and written material, added over the centuries. For them, the Prophets and the Writings were of secondary interest, valuable for reading and discussion, but not as what we would call 'God's Word' on a par with 'Law'. They did not use the Prophets to interpret the Law as Christians do today.

On reading many commentaries on this text for these studies, most of them discuss, without considering all I have written above, whether verse 17 and 18 mean one of two things. Firstly that Jesus came to do away with the Old Testament Law completely and replace it with his law of 'love'; in which case, some say, we can virtually abandon the Old Testament. Secondly that Jesus came to 'fulfil' the law, in order to bring out its meaning by being obedient to it and completing it; in this way the Old Testament remains in force, but we, then, fulfil it only 'through' Christ. Strictly speaking, though again not mentioned in most commentaries, the first option is mightily close to the beliefs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century church leader Marcion, who, as the mainstream Early Church regulated its belief that the New and Old Testaments spoke with 'one voice', was excommunicated for his beliefs and declared a heretic in 144 AD! We are therefore left with some form of the second option.

### **A new interpretation**

What is not made clear, and is the purpose of my writing, is that Matthew is making a new case in his Gospel for how to interpret the Old Testament. I believe he realised this directly from the teaching of Jesus, and it is evident in our passage today. Jesus said 'do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets ... but to fulfil them'. He placed equal emphasis on the 'Law' and the 'Prophets' here and in other teaching (Matt 7:12, 11:13, 22:40) and declared that he had come to fulfil them both, which means that he would, in his person, meet the legal demands of the Law and also fulfil the interpretation of the Prophets in the Old Testament; the Old Testament is to be interpreted by Jesus himself and the Prophets.

I firmly believe that this transition of Biblical interpretation is rooted in Jesus' teaching, and that Matthew spotted it. This is why in so many of the stories of Jesus, and in particular the early ones we have just studied, Matthew describes the way Jesus 'fulfils' prophecy (1:23, 2:6, 2:18, 3:3, 4:15,16). Further, when Jesus comes to John in the wilderness, he asks to be baptised to 'fulfil all righteousness'. The very phrase itself held together the Law, which described 'righteousness' through both the faith of Abraham and the law of Moses; with the prophets whose words were spoken in order to be 'fulfilled'.

This is easy for us to say now, because we are used to it as traditional Christian doctrine, but consider this against the background of traditional Jewish teaching in his day. It is extraordinary! It is quite new! Those who look for some new item of Jesus' teaching not taught before miss the point. What is new is that he places the Prophets on a par with the Law, and declares that he fulfils them! He has taught across the face,

as it were, of the Jewish traditions of his day, but not the Old Testament. God's Messiah could not be extracted from mire of traditional teaching, and a new approach was required.

We are now used to interpreting the 'Law' as well as the historical stories of the Old Testament according to the Prophets. We abide by what they say and not the Jewish Mishna; for example, we do not consider legalistic offerings to be 'what God wants' (Isaiah 1:11), and even have services to renew our 'Covenant' with God using the words of the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-33). The Prophets, generally, spoke unrepentantly about the failings of Israel, but they pointed to a solution of her problems in the Messiah; and it makes sense, therefore, for us to say that Jesus, our Messiah, fulfils the 'Law and the Prophets'. For this reason Christians believe the Prophets (and also the Writings, but that is another story!) to be an equal part of scripture to the 'Law' – contrary to Jewish belief.

So, when Jesus said 'until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter or stroke of the pen will pass from the law ...' (v18) he was able to say this because he had reinterpreted the whole Jewish system; not the scriptures themselves. He replaced the Jewish Talmud, the old interpretation of Halakah, Midrash and Mishna, and threw it away. By so doing he opened up the scriptures of the Old Testament to all, and invites us to discover how He himself, the Messiah, fulfilled of the 'Prophets'.

### **Living and teaching the Kingdom of Heaven, and 'righteousness'**

For this reason, Jesus taught next about the importance of the 'Law'. If someone were to break the law, whoever they are, they set an example to others; no-one, in any part of the world, lives so isolated an existence that what they do does not affect those around them. Also, if a teacher were to break the 'Law' that they are supposed to teach, then that would be equally dire. Both were dismissed by Jesus; they would be 'called least in the Kingdom of Heaven'; however, those who lived God's Law and taught the same would be 'called great ...' (v19).

This verse could only come after the previous affirmation of the Law by Jesus, and it sets the scene for the teaching that is to come in the rest of the 'Sermon on the Mount'. Over and over again during the next couple of chapters, comparisons are made with the Old Testament Law; but if we thought Jesus was giving us an easy option by re-interpreting the 'Law' and the 'Word of God', then we have misunderstood Him.

The great objective of the 'Law' was to secure 'righteousness' as a bridge between God and His sinful people. The fact that the Law failed to do this by itself is the reason why the Messiah had to come, not because Paul says so in his letters (see above), but because the Old Testament Prophets declared it to be God's way and God's will. Jesus, in fulfilling the Prophets, called therefore for a higher standard of righteousness than that on offer by the 'Scribes and Pharisees', with their Talmud, Mishna and Midrash. His work, as Messiah, was to succeed where the Law, albeit good of itself, had failed. Verse 20 makes all this quite clear, and again, sets the scene for what is to come in Matthew's Gospel; though it will be some time before we discover how we are to attain that higher standard.

I hope you can see the importance of this passage of scripture. It is a crucial text about the work of the Messiah in Matthew. Our understanding that Jesus replaced not the Old Testament itself, but the interpretative system of the Scribes and the Pharisees and their religious practices, is one that the Church has wholly taken on board today; though most Christians largely develop their understanding of this through the letters of Paul, rather than the Gospels.

The interpretation I have given of this passage is confirmed by the famous story of the transfiguration in Matthew 17. Here, Jesus meets Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets) on a mountain top. When Jesus appears together with these two great figures before the disciples, a voice from heaven speaks for a second time in the life of Christ 'This is my Son, the Beloved ...'

Matthew, for one, firmly believed he had got it right about Jesus, the Law, and the Prophets!

## Application

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Has any part of this study told you something you did not know before? What difference does this make to your understanding of it?
2. What does this text tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven?

3. Do people really believe that all scripture is equally 'the Word of God', or do they believe it is in some way graded in value and content, for example between Old and New Testaments?

### **Personal comments by author**

*This study is at the heart of my own interpretation of Matthew's Gospel, and the importance of the prophets cannot be underestimated. It is they who make the connection between Jesus and the ancient law, and if we read them, we will discover how and why they felt they had to abandon the old religious systems of the law and look forward to the coming of the Messiah. If we read about why they walked this path, we will come to know a great deal about the nature of humanity and God's Word.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Look up some of the passages of scripture suggested by this study or referred to in it so that you understand what is being said here.*
- *Look at the list of books of the Bible in the index at the front of your edition. Which books are you familiar with, and which do you not know? Why do you think this is? Work out a scheme to try and read more of the scripture you do not know.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Gracious Lord God, speak gently in my ear. For I am conscious that without the saving work of Christ, I am not worthy of Your attention. Tell me the truth, tell me Your Word, tell me where to go and what to do. I will do all to obey Your Holy Name. AMEN

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