What does “fulfill the law” mean (Matt 5:17)?

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When Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17), He was declaring that He would bring the Old Testament Scriptures to their intended goal and completion. He was not saying that every command of the Mosaic covenant would remain legally binding forever in exactly the same way. Rather, He was affirming that everything God had revealed in the Law and the Prophets would find its fulfillment in Him.

This is an important distinction. Jesus did not abolish the Old Testament by discarding it or declaring it unimportant. He fulfilled it by accomplishing everything it anticipated—its prophecies, promises, patterns, sacrifices, priesthood, and covenant purposes. The New Testament consistently presents Christ as the climax of the Old Testament story (Luke 24:27, 44; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 10:1–18).

What does “fulfill” mean?

The Greek verb translated “fulfill” is plēroō, which generally means “to fill, complete, or bring to its intended goal,” or “to accomplish.” Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the same verb is repeatedly used when Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus (e.g., Matt. 1:22; 2:15; 2:17; 4:14).

This context matters. Jesus did not contrast “abolish” with “keep unchanged.” He contrasted “abolish” with “fulfill.” His mission was not to invalidate God's revelation but to complete what it pointed toward.

Notice also that Jesus speaks of “the Law and the Prophets.” This was a common Jewish expression referring to the entire Hebrew Scriptures, not merely the legal commands given through Moses. His point is that every part of God's redemptive plan would be accomplished exactly as God intended.

What about Matthew 5:18?

Jesus continues:

> Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Some Christians understand this to mean every Mosaic command remains legally binding until the end of the present creation. Others understand Jesus to be saying that the Scriptures would remain fully authoritative until everything they anticipated was accomplished in His redemptive work.

The second view better fits the broader teaching of the New Testament. The Law of Moses did not merely command Sabbath observance and dietary regulations. It also required Levitical priests, temple sacrifices, ritual purification, and many other covenant institutions. Yet Hebrews explicitly teaches that Christ's once-for-all sacrifice has fulfilled and brought those sacrificial requirements to their intended end (Heb. 9:26; 10:12, 18). If every Mosaic command remained legally unchanged today, Christians would still be required to offer animal sacrifices for sin—something the New Testament unequivocally rejects.

The cross itself demonstrates that something within the Mosaic covenant has changed. Therefore, Matthew 5 cannot mean that every legal obligation of the Sinai covenant continues unchanged until the end of history.

Fulfillment is not cancellation

The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes both continuity and fulfillment. There is profound continuity because the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. His character does not change, His moral will remains holy, and the Old Testament continues to instruct God's people (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

At the same time, there is genuine fulfillment. The shadows give way to the reality (Col. 2:16–17). The Levitical priesthood gives way to Christ's eternal priesthood (Heb. 7). Animal sacrifices give way to Christ's perfect sacrifice (Heb. 10). Circumcision gives way to the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28–29). The old covenant gives way to the new covenant promised by Jeremiah (Heb. 8:6–13).

In other words, fulfillment does not diminish the Old Testament—it reveals its ultimate meaning.

How did Jesus fulfill the Law?

Jesus fulfilled the Law in several complementary ways:

- He perfectly obeyed it as the only sinless man (Matt. 3:15; Heb. 4:15).
- He fulfilled its messianic prophecies (Luke 24:44).
- He fulfilled its sacrificial system through His death (Heb. 10:1–18).
- He fulfilled its priesthood through His heavenly ministry (Heb. 7).
- He fulfilled its covenant promises by establishing the New Covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20).
- He fulfilled its purpose by bringing the righteousness the Law pointed toward but could never produce on its own (Rom. 8:3–4).

Does this mean the Old Testament no longer matters?

Not at all! Christians continue to read, study, preach, and treasure the Old Testament because it reveals God's character and points us to Christ. Jesus Himself repeatedly appealed to it, and the apostles built their teaching upon it.

What has changed is not the authority of Scripture but the believer's covenant relationship to the Mosaic Law. Christians live under the New Covenant established through Jesus Christ rather than under the Sinai covenant given to Israel (Rom. 7:4–6; Gal. 5:18; Heb. 8:13).

This is why the New Testament reaffirms many moral commands found in the Old Testament while also teaching that ceremonial institutions such as the temple sacrifices, Levitical priesthood, and food laws have reached their fulfillment in Christ.

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Matthew 5:17–20** — Jesus came to fulfill, not abolish, the Law and the Prophets.
- **Luke 24:27, 44–47** — Jesus explains how the entire Old Testament points to Him.
- **Romans 10:4** — Christ is the goal (*telos*) of the Law.
- **Hebrews 7:11–19** — Christ's priesthood brings a change in the covenant order.
- **Hebrews 8:6–13** — God establishes the promised New Covenant.
- **Hebrews 10:1–18** — Christ's sacrifice fulfills and ends the old sacrificial system.
- **Colossians 2:16–17** — The old covenant observances were shadows pointing to Christ.
- **Galatians 3:23–29** — The Law served a temporary, preparatory purpose until Christ came.
- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** — All Scripture remains inspired and profitable for believers.

Objections & Misconceptions

If Jesus fulfilled the Law, doesn't that mean He abolished it?
No. Abolishing something means treating it as invalid or throwing it away. Fulfilling it means bringing it to its intended completion. A prophecy is not abolished when it comes true; it is fulfilled.

Here's a helpful analogy: If you have an acorn, there are two ways it can come to an end: You could smash it with a hammer and **abolish** the purpose for which it was created. Or you could plant it in the ground and let it **fulfill** it's purpose. In either case, the acorn ceases to exist.

Doesn't Matthew 5:18 teach that every Mosaic command remains in force until heaven and earth pass away?
Jesus also says the Law remains until "all is accomplished." The New Testament repeatedly teaches that Christ accomplished what the Law anticipated through His life, death, resurrection, and priestly ministry. Hebrews explicitly states that animal sacrifices are no longer offered because Christ's sacrifice is complete (Heb. 10:18). Matthew 5 must therefore be read alongside the rest of the New Testament.

If Christians are not under the Mosaic Law, does that mean anything goes?
No! Christians are not lawless. They are under the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21). The New Testament calls believers to holiness, obedience, and love, but these flow from the New Covenant established by Christ rather than from the covenant made with Israel at Sinai.

Why This Matters

Understanding what Jesus meant by “fulfill” helps us read the entire Bible as one unified story centered on Christ. It keeps us from treating the Old Testament as either obsolete or permanently frozen in its Sinai-covenant form.

Most importantly, this doctrine protects the sufficiency of Christ. The Law pointed forward to Him. Its sacrifices, priesthood, temple, festivals, and promises all anticipated His saving work. To understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law is to recognize that God's redemptive plan has reached its glorious climax in the crucified and risen Messiah.

Recommended Resources

- R. T. France — *The Gospel of Matthew*
- D. A. Carson — *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*

- Craig L. Blomberg — *Matthew (New American Commentary)*
- Thomas R. Schreiner — *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*
- R. L. Solberg — *What God Has Made Clean*