

the fulfillment of the law matthew 5 17 20 meaning

Understanding the Fulfillment of the Law: Matthew 5:17-20

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus provides profound insights into the law and its fulfillment, a concept that is pivotal to Christian theology. This passage reads:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

This passage not only clarifies Jesus's relationship with the Jewish law but also sets the foundation for the moral and ethical teachings that follow in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Context of Matthew 5:17-20

To fully grasp the meaning of this passage, it is essential to understand the context in which Jesus spoke these words. The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5 through 7, is where Jesus outlines the principles of the kingdom of heaven. It contrasts the traditional interpretations of the law with a deeper, more profound understanding of righteousness.

The Purpose of Jesus' Coming

In verse 17, Jesus explicitly states that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. This assertion is significant for several reasons:

1. **Affirmation of the Law:** By stating He fulfills the law, Jesus affirms its importance and validity. He respects the law given to Moses and acknowledges its divine origin.
2. **Understanding of Fulfillment:** Fulfilling the law goes beyond mere adherence to its commandments; it encompasses the entirety of the law's purpose. Jesus embodies the law's intentions and brings it to completion through His life, teachings, and sacrificial death.
3. **Connection to Prophecy:** Jesus's fulfillment of the law also ties back to the prophecies of the Old Testament, where He is seen as the Messiah who would bring a new covenant.

The Immutability of the Law

Jesus emphasizes the permanence of the law until “heaven and earth disappear.” This statement underscores the enduring nature of God’s word. The smallest letter or stroke of a pen signifies its precision and intentionality, suggesting that every aspect of the law has significance and purpose.

The Call to Righteousness

In verses 19 and 20, Jesus shifts the focus from mere legal compliance to a more profound righteousness. He warns against setting aside the commands of the law and teaches that true greatness in the kingdom of heaven is tied to both practicing and teaching these commands.

Righteousness That Surpasses the Pharisees

The Pharisees were known for their strict adherence to the law, yet Jesus challenges His followers to pursue a righteousness that exceeds theirs. This raises several key points:

1. **Heart of the Law:** Jesus emphasizes the importance of the heart behind the law. It’s not enough to follow the letter; one must embody the spirit of the law, which focuses on love, mercy, and justice.
2. **Holistic Obedience:** True righteousness involves a comprehensive obedience that goes beyond ritualistic practices. It encompasses the entire character and life of a believer, reflecting an inner transformation.
3. **Kingdom Ethics:** The righteousness Jesus speaks of is central to the ethics of the kingdom of heaven, which calls for a radical love that transcends societal norms and expectations.

The Implications for Believers

Understanding the fulfillment of the law has profound implications for Christians today. It invites believers to engage with the moral teachings of Jesus and the broader narrative of Scripture.

Living Out the Teachings of Jesus

Believers are called to embody the values of the kingdom, which may include:

- **Compassion and Mercy:** Reflecting God’s character through acts of kindness and forgiveness.
- **Integrity:** Upholding truth and righteousness in all aspects of life, not merely conforming to external standards.
- **Community Engagement:** Actively participating in the lives of others, promoting justice and equity.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The fulfillment of the law in Christ is also linked to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The Spirit empowers individuals to live out the commandments of God, transforming their hearts and minds. This transformation enables believers to fulfill the law not out of obligation but out of a relationship with God.

Teaching and Discipleship

In verse 19, Jesus emphasizes the importance of teaching the commands of God. This highlights the responsibility of Christian leaders and believers alike to:

- Educate Others: Share the teachings of Jesus and the significance of the law in a way that is relevant and transformative.
- Model Righteousness: Live as examples of the values of the kingdom, inviting others to see the implications of the gospel.

Conclusion

The passage from Matthew 5:17-20 serves as a cornerstone for understanding Jesus's mission and His relationship to the law. By fulfilling the law, He affirms its value and calls His followers to a deeper, more profound practice of righteousness that reflects God's heart.

Believers are invited not just to obey the commands but to embody the principles of love, mercy, and justice that underlie them. In doing so, they participate in the ongoing work of the kingdom, bringing the transformative message of Jesus to a world in need. The fulfillment of the law is not just a theological concept; it is a call to action, a challenge to live out the teachings of Christ in every aspect of life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does Matthew 5:17 mean by 'fulfillment of the law'?

Matthew 5:17 indicates that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them. This suggests that Jesus embodies the true meaning of the Law and brings it to completion through His teachings and actions.

How does the fulfillment of the law relate to Christian teachings?

The fulfillment of the law in Matthew 5:17 signifies that Christians are called to follow Jesus' example, which emphasizes love, mercy, and righteousness over mere legalistic adherence to the Law.

What implications does Matthew 5:20 have for righteousness?

Matthew 5:20 states that unless one's righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. This implies that true righteousness is not just about following the law externally but involves a deeper, heartfelt obedience.

How do scholars interpret the term 'law' in this context?

Scholars typically interpret 'law' in Matthew 5:17 as encompassing both the Mosaic Law and the teachings of the prophets, indicating that Jesus' fulfillment includes all aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In what way did Jesus fulfill the Old Testament prophecies?

Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, which align with the messianic expectations outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures, thus demonstrating that He is the awaited Messiah.

How can modern Christians apply the teachings from Matthew 5:17-20?

Modern Christians can apply these teachings by embracing the spirit of the law, prioritizing love and compassion in their actions, and striving for a transformative righteousness that reflects their relationship with Christ.

What role does grace play in the fulfillment of the law according to Matthew 5?

Grace plays a crucial role in the fulfillment of the law as it enables believers to live out the law's intent through the strength of the Holy Spirit, rather than relying solely on their own efforts to achieve righteousness.

Why is the phrase 'not an iota, not a dot' significant in Matthew 5:18?

The phrase 'not an iota, not a dot' underscores the importance of every part of the Law, indicating that all of it remains relevant and that Jesus came to fulfill its purpose, not to disregard its value.

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