

Matthew 5:17-19

“Yeshua’s Fulfillment of the Torah”

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:17-19 obviously bears some significant importance for those who not only believe in the continued validity of the Torah in the post-resurrection era, but specifically the continued validity of things like the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat* or kosher dietary laws. Matthew 5:17-19 has been addressed, in significant detail, in the exegesis paper “**Has the Law Been Fulfilled?**” in *The New Testament Validates Torah* by J.K. McKee. Yet, it is important to review a number of key points regarding what Yeshua says about the continuance of the Torah for His followers, and for us to consider what various examiners of Matthew 5:17-19 have said about the Sabbath or kosher.

5:17 In His Sermon the Mount, Yeshua the Messiah makes the strong assertion, “Do not think that I came to abolish the *Torah* or the Prophets! I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill” (TLV). The Greek verb *plēroō* (πληρόω), commonly rendered as “fulfilled,” in the most general sense means “**to make full, fill (full)**” (BDAG).¹ While this can relate “**to bring to completion that which was already begun, complete, finish**” (BDAG),² likely via the fulfillment of prophecy, *plēroō* can notably also mean “*to perfect, consummate,*” in the context of “*to make complete in every particular; to render perfect*” (Thayer).³ AMG describes how the verb *plēroō* can imply “Figuratively, to fill, supply abundantly with something, impart richly, imbue with.”⁴

“Fulfill” is no synonym for “abolish,” and the Messiah’s stated intention was by no means to render Moses’ Teaching inoperative. “Fulfill” can be legitimately understood in terms of the Messiah’s arrival onto the scene of history, accomplishing the different prophetic expectations of the Law, Prophets, and Writings—but there is more. At His immersion by John the Baptist, Yeshua notably told him, “Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill [*plēroō*] all righteousness” (3:15), which is seemingly all-encompassing—involving components of prophetic accomplishment, Yeshua’s teachings and ministry examples, and the provision of the Holy Spirit to His followers, leading them into all truth (John 14:17). Far from coming to “destroy” (KJV) the relevance of the Torah, Yeshua very much came to show people how to live it properly.

5:18 Further on in Matthew 5:18, Yeshua dismisses any idea that by fulfilling the Torah, its importance and validity will somehow end by His work. He says, “Amen, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or serif shall ever pass away from the *Torah* until all things come to pass” (TLV). Yeshua the Messiah says the Torah is not going to pass away until Heaven and Earth pass away. Not only does He say that the Torah will not pass away, but that “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law” (KJV), or “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (RSV). These are references to the minutest strokes of the Hebrew letters of the scroll of the Torah, which can sometimes change the meaning of a word, clause, or sentence—indicating that the finer details of what the Torah says are very important to our Heavenly Father. The Messiah similarly says in Luke 16:17, “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.”

“All” was certainly not “fulfilled” following the ministry, execution, resurrection, and ascension of Yeshua—as ***much more*** is still to come in future salvation history. In particular, there are still

¹ BDAG, 828.

² Ibid.

³ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp 517-518.

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1177.

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Messianic expectations in the Law and the Prophets that we are waiting to see manifest, as God's people urgently desire to see the Messiah return and establish His Millennial Kingdom on Earth.

Contrary to what some may not realize, Heaven and Earth are still with us today. We can walk outside and see the ground and see the sky *and* even look at the wider cosmos. If Heaven and Earth are still with us today, why do we have those who say that the Torah or the Law of Moses has been totally abolished? Are its principles regarding human conduct and behavior so irrelevant for our modern condition?

5:19 The Messiah issues a great warning to those who teach others to disobey God's commandments in the Torah, by saying, "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps and teaches them, this one shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (TLV). What we may assume from these words is that one's status in the Kingdom of God is determined by how one handles or approaches the Torah. If one teaches from the Torah, affording the Torah its due respect and honor, and encourages others to honor and keep its commandments, such a person will be considered great in the Kingdom. If one teaches against the Torah and its commandments, that person will be considered the least.

There is certainly some debate over what Yeshua specifically meant when referring to "these commandments." There are some theologians who recognize that Yeshua does not speak against the Torah, but believe that "these commandments" He speaks of only relate to those specific commandments mentioned in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chs. 5-7—not all, or at least a significant breadth, of the commandments in the Torah.

Certainly, the commandments that Yeshua specifies in His Sermon on the Mount **are those that we should not dispute are absolutely imperative to keep**. Anyone, *especially in a Messianic community that claims to be "Torah observant,"* who fails to keep them will most certainly be considered "least." Nevertheless, Yeshua as a First Century Jewish Rabbi and our example for living upheld the validity of all the commandments of the Torah as key instruction for His followers. J.A. Motyer, reflecting a traditional Reformed perspective of the Law of Moses—which has always held that its moral and ethical instruction remain valid for all places and times for God's people—does properly direct,

We need to ask...to what extent the laws of the [Old Testament] continue to apply to believers in the [New Testament]. Matt. 5:17-20 is the key passage, insisting that the Bible is not two testaments but one book, united around the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said that nothing of the written law would be 'demolished' (*katalyō* [καταλύω]), not even the smallest letter (*iota* [ἰώτα]) or the least stroke of a pen (*keraiā* [κεραία]); all would come to their full flowering (*plēroō* [πληρώω]), everything would 'happen' (*ginomai* [γίνομαι]). We are, therefore, not at liberty to dismiss anything as 'Old Testament' without asking what is fullness of meaning, significance, and application in Christ is...Our task is not to harmonize two disparate documents (the 'Old' and 'New' Testaments) but to trace out lines of cumulative revelation which reach their fullness in Christ. As a broad position, even things which the Bible makes temporary as prescriptions for living remain on as principles of godly life, but everything must be judged in the light of the whole Scriptures, i.e. in the light of Christ.⁵

Matthew 5:17-19 Sabbath application There is little doubting, as is seen in subsequent teaching not only in Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7), but throughout the Gospels, that our Lord placed an extremely high emphasis on internal heart cleanliness for His followers. There is an emphasis witnessed in the Gospel of Matthew, in particular, on the Torah's weightier matters—which no one who believes in the continued relevance of the Sabbath should ignore:

"But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE' [Hosea 6:6], for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

⁵ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 245 fn#9.

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"But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE' [Hosea 6:6], you would not have condemned the innocent" (Matthew 12:7).

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23).

It is to be recognized, that as a definite part of the Messiah's arrival onto the scene of human history, His sacrifice for sins, and His resurrection from the dead—that there have been some natural changes enacted to the system of the Torah consequent of the Messiah event. These concern the setting aside of animal sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood, until the Tribulation period and Millennium (Hebrews 7:18, 28), or how capital penalties of the Torah may be properly regarded as having been nailed to the cross, and absorbed by Yeshua's own death (Colossians 2:14).⁶ Yeshua was sacrificed for all categories of Torah violation, with permanent forgiveness and atonement available to all people who trust in Him. There are capital penalties specified in the Torah for willful Sabbath violation. Yeshua absorbed these sacrifices onto Himself, so we will not require the death of one dismissing *Shabbat*. At the same time, did Yeshua dismiss and abolish the Sabbath?

Given His assertion, "Do not suppose that I have come to do away with the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to do away with them but to enforce them" (5:17, Goodspeed New Testament), interpreters have had to weigh what this means. In the estimation of Howard Clark Kee, for example,

"For Matt., at least certain aspects of the ceremonial law are as binding as the moral sections (cf. 5:23; 6:17)."⁷

M. Eugene Boring goes further, in noting a variety of thoughts that contemporary Christian readers (perhaps keeping many of them to themselves?) might have about aspects of Holy Scripture that most of the modern Church does not observe:

"The prefatory declaration of 5:17 is a preemptive strike at what some Christian readers might think when they read 5:21-28, and as they reflect on the fact that their church simply no longer practices some of the clear commands of the Bible: circumcision, the food laws, animal sacrifice, (the Sabbath?). Jesus' clear 'I have not come to abolish the Law' is directed both to those who *fear* that the new freedom of Christian faith has rejected the Bible and to those who (in their misunderstanding) *celebrate* that this the case."⁸

R.T. France goes further in his commentary on Matthew (2007), mentioning things such as the kosher dietary laws—and while not specifically mentioned probably also the seventh-day Sabbath—as presumably being in force for the author of this Gospel. His conclusion is, however, that Matthew's conclusion sits contrary to other parts of the Apostolic Scriptures, as well as most of what has been witnessed in Christian history and the broad Christian tradition:

It is these verses more than anything else in the gospel that have fostered the impression that Matthew took a very conservative line on legal observance, believing that the Christian disciple was bound to continue to obey all the commandments of the Torah just as much as, or indeed more meticulously than, those Jews who had not followed Jesus...

If that is what Matthew intended, the interpreter must face the fact that this teaching is out of step with the overall thrust of NT Christianity and with the almost universal consensus of Christians ever since, at least with regard to the more ceremonial aspects of the OT law, particular its sacrificial provisions...

⁶ Consult the article "The Significance of the Messiah Event" by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁷ Howard Clark Kee, "Matthew," in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 615.

⁸ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 196.

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[T]he view that Matthew regarded all OT laws (presuming including the sacrificial and food laws) as still binding regulations for the conduct of Jesus' disciples...runs counter to the rest of the NT and of subsequent Christian thinking...⁹

Yeshua's sacrificial work on behalf of humanity has inaugurated the era of the New Covenant, where not only is permanent atonement and forgiveness available—but **where God's commandments are to be supernaturally transcribed onto the hearts and minds of His redeemed people** (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27; cf. Hebrews 8:8-12).¹⁰ It is also prophesied that God's word or Torah will go forth from Zion, with the nations at large seeking to be instructed by it (Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 2:2-4).¹¹ Both of these realities would serve to support the continuance of not only the Torah, but also a great deal of its instruction *unrelated* to the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices, for the post-resurrection era.

A great deal of what Yeshua's fulfillment of the Torah was to involve, is seen in His direction, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Yeshua Himself, in His Sermon on the Mount, specified many areas where His level of expectation for righteous behavior exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees of Second Temple Judaism, placing a definite emphasis on the internal thoughts and intentions of a person, which if not kept in proper check, would be the place from which physical, sinful activities would originate.

While he has a broad array of issues, ranging from Yeshua's Sabbath observance to His adherence to ritual purity, in view, S. Westerholm—who is generally negative toward the Torah, and who thinks that the Law of Moses has been abolished for the post-resurrection era—still concludes that Yeshua's basic adherence to, and presumed criticism of, the Torah's instruction on outward matters, is little different than that of the Tanach Prophets. Westerholm details,

"While the words at times suggest that the cultic and ritual aspects of religion have no place whatever in a world of ideal piety, the point is rather the condemnation of wrongs than the advocacy of a religion with cult (cf. Amos 5:21-26; Is 1:10-17; Jer 7:21-24; etc.). Still, no more than Jesus does Amos or Hosea, Isaiah or Jeremiah see a contemporary need for new interpretation or expanded observance of ritual requirements. Such matters will care for themselves when justice and mercy find adequate expression."¹²

As we have widely witnessed within our examination Tanach passages from Israel's Prophets, the institution of the Sabbath—which is to facilitate human wholeness—is something which was often violated right alongside of care for the destitute. Yeshua the Messiah is often seen admonishing the religious persons of His era of their dismissal of caring for the disenfranchised, as well as how it was legitimate to do good on the Sabbath day. Far from the weekly Sabbath being a time when many people could rest and be refreshed, it was often a time when people were too worried about its violation.

Yeshua the Messiah directs, "Do not suppose that, if I have appeared, that was with the intention of abolishing the teaching of the law and the prophets. I have made my appearance not to abolish it, but to give full expression to it" (5:17, God's New Covenant-Cassirer). A mature man or woman of faith, who looks to the example of Yeshua as one to properly emulate, should be able to properly balance sound inward thoughts and motives *with* proper outward actions. Wanting to be whole in all aspects of obedience to God, Biblical directions involving adherence to the Sabbath or kosher eating should not be entirely dismissed (at least without first considering or reevaluating

⁹ R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp 179-180.

¹⁰ Consult the article "What is the New Covenant?", appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah* by J.K. McKee.

¹¹ Consult the exegesis paper on Micah 4:1-3 and Isaiah 2:2-4, "The Torah Will Go Forth From Zion" by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

¹² S. Westerholm, "Clean and Unclean," in Joel B Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 131.

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passages in the Apostolic Scriptures where they are in view), with only love for God and neighbor¹³ (as important as such instructions are) believed to be the only relevant commandments.

It is important, when entering into discussions about the Apostolic Scriptures and the Sabbath, to weigh the place of Matthew 5:17-19. Even if a bit contrary to many centuries of Christian thought, these verses should temper us to take a more conservative perspective on the role of the seventh-day Sabbath for the post-resurrection era. Even if the work of Yeshua the Messiah on the tree at Golgotha (Calvary), may be thought to render inoperative the capital penalties of Sabbath violation, the fact that within much of Protestant Christianity for certain, that there has been a widespread observance of a "Sunday Sabbath," demonstrates how the Sabbath principle is something of significance for the people of God.

Today's Bible readers seeking Scriptural continuity, owe it to themselves to take a closer look at New Testament passages about the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Do some passages which are commonly thought to abolish the Sabbath, truly do so? Has the Sabbath been changed from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week? Or, might there be some worthwhile, alternative interpretations of some passages—with some different translations of specific terms or clauses, and/or a particular background setting to be considered?

¹³ Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.