

Appendix A: MORALITY IS MORE THAN CONDUCT

Morality is more than conduct—it is also a matter of character and goals. Jesus clarified the Law by stipulating its fulfillment was more than “correct conduct.” To use His introductory phrase, “You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...,” the Christ called us to a higher understanding of the Law.

1. The Law that changes not the heart (character) is mere legalism—refraining from murder and but hating your brother is contemptible by the Law.
2. The Law that changes not the goal of behavior is sheer hypocrisy—telling the truth, because you will not have to remember what you told people, is contemptible by the Law.
3. The Law that changes not the conduct, is virtual sloth—feeling compassion toward the poor and ignoring them is contemptible by the Law.

Therefore, regarding Jesus’ teaching regarding murder/anger, adultery/lust, and divorce/flippancy, you must balance your focus between:

- 1) The nature of His teaching, thereby clarifying just “what the heart” of the matter is, and potentially losing applicability for your students, **or**
- 2) The applicability of handling murderous anger, adulterous lust, and flippant divorces, and potentially losing the clarifying nature of His teaching—i.e., morality is more than conduct.

Understanding the Heart of the Law, Its Conduct, and Its Purpose within the Context of the Gospel

Understanding the purpose of the Law, especially as it relates to the Gospel is a key issue taught by Jesus the Christ in Matthew 5:17-20. Thus, it must be a critical part of your teaching regarding His teaching, especially in matters of the heart (character) and matters of purpose (goals), Matthew 5:21-32.

First things first. Whether the Law is right and true is not because God commanded them. To reduce the Law, and God, to His power being limited by His ability to espouse legislation questions His infallibility and inerrancy. Furthermore, if we hold that the Law is true and right just because God commanded it, then God could have said/commanded, without the cross, “I forgive you.”

Whether the Law is right and true is not because God only commanded that which is true and right. To reduce the Law’s goodness, and thus God’s goodness, to His wisdom limits the scope and perhaps even His praise-worthiness. Furthermore, if the Law becomes a god in that it transcends God who Himself conforms to the Law, we have put an illogical and unbiblical constraint on God. Finally, such a proposition makes atonement impossible—God would be unable to change a law above Him to which He Himself must conform.

How do we reconcile this issue? Well, that is part of what Jesus was addressing in Matthew 5:17-20 and illustrating in 5:21-32. To wit, the authority of the Law—whether it is true and right—is because the authority **is** Law; the authority of the Law is neither under nor over the Law. The Law is, of course, communicated by God; it is also wise, again because it was communicated by God. But the Law is true and righteous because it reflects its Author and who He is. The authority is neither under nor over the Law; the authority is Law. The Law is right and true because it reflects God Himself.

Therefore, Jesus the Christ can say, and we can believe with all assured trust (faith), that He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. A “fulfilled” law satisfies the Law-Giver. It satisfies the Law-Executor.

It satisfies the Seeker of Justice. It satisfies the Law-breaker. This may be the greatest statement of the Gospel—the Law is fulfilled. God is satisfied.

THE LAW IS HOLY
BECAUSE GOD IS
HOLY.

So, what was Jesus saying when Matthew used the word “fulfill” in 5:17? The Greek is πληρωω (play-roh-oh) which is used in Scripture with a wide range of meanings: to complete, to accomplish, to obey, to clarify, to bring to maturity, to ratify, to culminate, and/or to perfect. Thus, there are a variety of conclusions which one might draw from Christ’s statement. How you view the “difference” between the “old” and the “new” testaments will largely affect the verb you choose.

If you believe Christ came to “complete” the Law, then its constraints on human behavior are lifted—they no longer bind us (discontinuity). If you believe that Christ came to “ratify” the Law, then its constraints continue to this day (hyper-continuity). If you believe that Christ came to “bring to maturity” the Law, then its constraints need to be understood fully (e.g., “... you have heard it said, but I say ...; continuity).

Implications: What About the Believer?

Jesus answers this question by answering how we are to live our lives—our righteousness must surpass those who know the Law backwards and forwards (the scribes), and even those who follow the Law to the letter, the Pharisees.

How do we live a life in the Kingdom where we know the Law has 600+ rules? And, each one must be followed perfectly (“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” James 2:10). After all, not one jot nor tittle will be changed, but all will be fulfilled (play-roh-oh πληρωω). Just how do we do it? Jesus teaches that righteousness, following the Law, is an integrated, systemic matter of our character and our goals, **and** our conduct.

Jesus has called us to a higher, more complex plane of ethical conduct as believers—we are not only to do righteousness (conduct), and we are to seek righteousness (purpose), we are also to be righteous (character). Perhaps Peter said the latter best in 1 Peter 1:15-16:

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (quoting in part Leviticus 11:44)

Let Holy Spirit work—follow the Law, He will show you—Don’t quench Him, let Holy Spirit do what He does—To be a viable container of Holy Spirit, you become holy.

THE LAW IS HOLY BE-
CAUSE GOD IS HOLY.

This paradigm explains how Christians ultimately sin against God when they break His Law. In Genesis 39:9 – Joseph says, how then can I do this against God? In Psalm 51:4 – David says, against You and You alone have I sinned. When you have sinned, you have sinned against God, not the rule/law. Hence, the seductive “usefulness” of eliminating God, in our mind, as the source of the Law, as a reflection of God’s character. It is all too easy to violate the Law when we simply view it as a violation of the law—not as what it is, a sin against God and God alone.