

Q. In what way did Jesus fulfill the law?

A. Jesus' last words on the Cross were, "It is finished" (see John 19:30). He had done everything His Father had sent Him to do (see John 17:4). One of things He had come to do is found in Matthew: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matthew 5:17). So, one of the things Jesus had come to do was to fulfill—not destroy, but fulfill—the law. Obviously, then, by the time He said, "It is finished," He had done this. But the question is, in what way did He "fulfill" the law? What did He mean by "fulfill"?

People have differing opinions, and I won't take the time to list them all. I will mention, however, that one of the most common ideas is that "fulfill" in this verse means that Jesus came to fill the law to the full, fill the law to the brim, or magnify it. This opinion is held by a wide spectrum of people ranging from the followers of Worldwide Church of God founder Herbert W. Armstrong to Puritans to those who claim to be Particular Baptists.¹

But the question still remains, what does the Bible say Jesus meant by fulfill? Did He mean "fill to the full?"

Plēroō

In Matthew 5:17, the Greek word translated "fulfill" is *plēroō*. What does the Bible say this word means?

Can *plēroō* mean "fill to the full," that is, to fill something as one would fill a glass of water? Yes. In fact, it often means this in the Bible. But the meaning is always natural and obvious from the context. Thus, the Bible speaks of being filled with wisdom (Luke 2:40), valleys being filled (Luke 3:5), a house being filled with an odor (John 12:3), sorrow filling hearts (John 16:6), and so on. Similarly, we also read of a net being full (Matthew 13:48) and several times of joy being full (John 15:11; 16:24; 1 John 1:4; 2 John 1:12).

There are also some Scriptures where time is fulfilled, obedience is fulfilled, etc., where someone might argue that *plēroō* could be translated “filled to the full.”

On the other hand, I want to point out that in every case where *plēroō* is used in connection with the coming about of what was written or spoken in the law, or the prophets, or a prophet, or the Scriptures, or what Jesus had said earlier and so on, the meaning is always clearly “fulfill” as meaning to satisfy what was spoken or written so as to complete it.

Notice just a couple of examples. In the context of the angel telling Joseph how and why Mary was pregnant, we read. “Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matthew 1:22-23). The miracle of Mary’s virgin pregnancy and the resulting birth fulfilled—completed—this prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14. The prophecy demanded that this event occur, and when it occurred, the prophecy was fulfilled.

I will give one more example. In John 19:23-24, John wrote of the soldiers casting lots for Jesus’ seamless coat, “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did.” The soldiers were unwittingly used by God to do the things written in Psalm 22:18. Once they did these things, the prophecy was finished. They did not magnify it. They simply did the prophecy, and once they did it, it was done. No one else has to do it again.

Here is partial list of similar Scriptures: Matthew 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9, 35; Mark 14:49; 15:28; Luke 21:20-22, 24; 24:44; John 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 18:9, 32; 19:24, 36; Acts 1:16; 3:18; 13:27; and James 2:23.

Clearly these Scriptures show us that when *plēroō* is used of the coming about of what was written or spoken in the law, or the prophets, or a prophet, or the Scriptures, or what Jesus had said

earlier, the proper understanding is that of completion or bringing a message to the end for which it was purposed.

With this in mind, let's look at Matthew 5:17, along with verse 18: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." Amazingly, many who comment on these verses completely ignore the fact that the word "fulfilled" at the end of verse 18 is not translated from *plēroō*. It is, instead, translated from *genētai*, which is a form of *ginomai*. There can be no controversy about the meaning of this word. It means "accomplished" or "comes to pass."

So, in these two verses, Jesus is saying that 1) He did not come to destroy the law or the prophets, 2) He did come to fulfill them, 3) heaven and earth would have to pass before one jot or tittle—the smallest parts of the law, and, therefore, they stand for the entire law—can pass from the law UNTIL all is accomplished. I capitalized "until" because it is a word that so many expositors ignore here.

Jesus is giving us two either/or conditions. The law cannot pass until heaven and earth pass or the law cannot pass until all is accomplished. One or the other can do it. Heaven and earth have not yet passed, so we will leave that aside. But what did Jesus mean by all being accomplished? The natural meaning of the language is that He was referring to what He had just said in the previous sentence: the fulfilling or completing of the law and the prophets. Once He had completed the law and the prophets, the law could pass.

A supporting point that expositors often ignore is the fact that Jesus applied *plēroō* to not just the law but also the prophets. Why is it that so many people who accept that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies have a hard time understanding that, in the same way, He fulfilled the Old Testament laws—all of them? In fact, the two together—the law and the prophets—stand for the entire Old Testament. Matthew 22:40 tells us, for example, that upon the two great laws hang "all the law and the prophets." Luke 16:16 says, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it." John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He forms the boundary between the Old and New Testaments, with their respective covenants. Acts 13:15 explains that "the law and the prophets," obviously meaning the Old Testament, is read in the synagogue.

So, Jesus fulfilled, or brought to completion, the entire Old Testament. This is supported by many other Scriptures that I have often referenced in other articles on this website. As one example, read Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." The word "end" here is *telos*. This word means the aim (see Galatians 3:24); the termination, the limit at which something ceases to be (read Romans 6:14; 2 Corinthians 3:11-13; Ephesians 2:15; and Colossians 2:14).

But How?

Jesus was a Jew born under the Old Covenant, under the law. If He was to fulfill the law, He had to keep it perfectly, which He did. But when He died, the law was fulfilled. The Old Covenant and its law then ended. We fulfill a contract by completing what we are obliged to do under the contract. Once we do this, we have fulfilled the contract, and it is ended.

Suppose I am an artist, and I am engaged to paint a mural in the city hall. A contract is drawn up detailing the obligations of all parties involved. Once I have completed the painting and fulfilled my obligations to the city, and they have fulfilled their obligations to me, the contract is fulfilled and ended. It no longer has a legal hold over me or the city. It is fulfilled. But suppose, before I fulfill my obligation in the contract, the state government steps in, reviews the contract, and says there is something about it that is contrary to state law. They then use their authority, or the authority of the court, to end the contract, to declare it void, to abolish or destroy the contract before it is fulfilled.

Jesus was saying in Matthew 5:17-18 that He had not come with the authority of God to destroy the law before it was fulfilled, but that He was going to fulfill the law right down to every jot and tittle. Once He did that, the law would end because all obligations in the contract would have been fulfilled. The law changed when the Old Covenant law was fulfilled by Christ and replaced by New Covenant law, the law of Christ. This is what William Gadsby called, "the gospel of His grace, which is the law from Zion, called the law of faith, the law of liberty, and the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus."²

With the Old Covenant law now fulfilled, for anyone to come along and say that we must still keep it is Judaizing or legalism. Whatever reason he may give for saying this does not matter because there is now no valid reason for teaching that we must keep the Old Testament law.

Judaizing is often condemned in the Bible, and in Galatians it is called "another gospel: which is not another" (Galatians 1:6-7; see also Galatians 2:16-21; 3:1-14; 5:1-4; and Acts 15:1-5, 24). It is not really another gospel because "gospel" is not a proper word to describe it. "Gospel" means "good news," but this other message that legalists promote is bad news. This other message says that we are still under the law, and, therefore, Jesus did not fulfill it as He said He would. It implies that when Jesus said, "It is finished," He lied. It says, therefore, that Jesus did not do in the flesh everything that He was supposed to do. Thus, those who promote it fall into the category of antichrists and deceivers according to 1 John 4:2-3 and 2 John 1:7. Paul said, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8).

Fulfilled in Two Ways

Make no mistake about it. Jesus did not come to destroy the law before He had fulfilled it. But He did fulfill and end it. He fulfilled the law in two ways. First, He lived under the law perfectly. He obeyed every bit of the law. And His perfect righteousness is imputed to us. Secondly, He paid our legal, penal obligations by dying in our stead. Because of our transgressions, because we have all sinned, our obligation was to die and spend eternity in hell. Jesus fulfilled that obligation for us by what He went through on the Cross. Jesus did not destroy the law, but by fulfilling the law, He removed us from being under legal obligations.

And what commandments did Jesus mean when He said, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven"? (Matthew 5:19). Most assume that he meant the Ten Commandments. But He never says this. To properly understand, we must look to the context. And the context shows us that Jesus must be referring to the commandments He is about to give, the commandments of the New Covenant—commandments that, by the way, are continued through the rest of the New Covenant and are summed in one word, love. And love is something that only God works in us.

It is often said that in Matthew 5, Jesus amplified many Old Covenant laws and thus magnified or "filled to the full" the Old Covenant law. But the Old Covenant had no provision for such change. Although

Jesus may have used what the people knew of the Old Covenant law as a springboard in His teaching, when He said, "But I say unto you," Jesus was giving His New Covenant law that entirely replaced the Old Covenant.

And how can our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20)? There is only one way. Jesus Christ was perfect. He embodied perfect righteousness. This is the way that He "magnified the law" (Isaiah 42:21). Not by amplifying the outdated and completed Old Covenant law, but by being righteousness personified. And His perfect righteousness is imputed to us if we believe on Him alone as our Savior. That is the only way to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. We know that in this life we do not perfectly keep Jesus' commandments because our carnality does not allow us to perfectly and consistently love. But Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and, that being so, it is impossible for us to be condemned. As John says, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, as Romans 8:1 says. We always remain perfectly righteous when we are robed with the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ who fulfilled the law perfectly for us.

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

Romans 8:1-4

¹ Worldwide Church of God founder, Herbert W. Armstrong (along with those who continue to teach his doctrine), believed that Jesus meant that He had come to fill the law to the brim, to magnify it. Notice, for example, what Armstrong disciple Roderick C. Meredith, head of the Living Church of God, writes of Matthew 5:17-19: "'Fulfill' here means 'to fill to the full.' Jesus Christ came to *magnify* the Law. Isaiah 42:21 tells us that Christ was sent to 'magnify the Law and make it holy.' Did you ever put a magnifying glass on something? Magnifying does not destroy it, it simply makes it far bigger, and far more meaningful. You can see it all in its intricate parts. Jesus did that. He *magnified* God's Law. He showed the spiritual intent, the great

spiritual purpose and the attitude in which we ought to keep it—not doing away with it all, but making it all the more binding.... *Every human being* will have to learn to keep God's Law, or they won't be in God's Kingdom" ("The Gospel of Matthew – Program 32," <http://www.lcg.org/cgi-bin/lcg/biblestudy/lcg-bs.cgi?category=Matthew1&item=1119296790>).

The Puritan Matthew Henry says while commenting on this verse: "Let none suppose that Christ allows his people to trifle with any commands of God's holy law." I want to respond to this by saying that it does not really even address the verse. Jesus isn't saying anything about what He will allow His people to do or not do. He is saying what He will not do (destroy the law) and what He will do (fulfill). All Henry is doing in his comment is setting up a straw man and then knocking it down. It is completely unhelpful and misleading.

The Protestant Jameison-Faussett-Brown Commentary states: "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil—Not to subvert, abrogate, or annul, but to establish the law and the prophets—to unfold them, to embody them in living form, and to enshrine them in the reverence, affection, and character of men, am I come."

Notice this from Particular Baptist, Dr. C. Matthew McMahon: "Jesus came to fill up the Law and complete it in our stead. This does not mean He has done away with it, or made it void. That is not the meaning of the word used. In Matthew 5:18, one verse later, He states, 'For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled.' Not only does Jesus not nullify the Law for us, but rather He does just the opposite: that in view of His work to fulfill it, not one jot or tittle shall be removed. Jesus has given Christians the ability in salvation, because of His work as the sinless Savior, to make moral choices once again on behalf of the Law. He kept the Law so we could keep it as well. Jesus' work enables us to run the race in a way worthy to win the prize. He does not invalidate the Law, but places it before us knowing that He will be working through us to keep it. And though we stumble in keeping it, He is ever working in us to overcome the stumbling blocks" ("What is the Difference between Legalism and Obedience?" <http://www.apuritansmind.com/Tracts%20and%20Writings/LegalismAndObedience.htm> — emphasis his). What is stunning about this teaching, which comes from someone who professes to be a Particular Baptist, is that it is classic Armstrongism. I don't mean that the writer is consciously teaching Armstrongism, but that, for anyone such as myself who worked for Herbert W. Armstrong, the similarity between McMahon's teaching and even jargon here and that of Armstrongism is shocking. This is not the place to detail all of this, but when I read such phrases as "Jesus came to fill up the Law," "He kept the Law so we could keep it as well," "Jesus' work enables us to run the race in a way worthy to win the prize," and "He will be working through us to keep it," I can't help but picture Armstrong thumping his Bible. Notice also that McMahon has interpreted Jesus' statement that "one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled" to mean "that in view of His work to fulfill it, not one jot or tittle shall be removed." This is a complete reworking of what Jesus said and changes the meaning altogether.

² *Gadsby's Catechism*, Q. 73.