

Q. If Jesus' fulfilling of the law was His completing and ending the Law of the Old Testament (see "In what way did Jesus fulfill the law?) (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/jesusfulfilllawqa1.htm>), why did He say, "Whoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:19)?

A. Let's look at what Jesus said in context:

Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill. For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished. Whoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 5:17-20

On one side of the statement, Jesus says He has come to fulfill the law. He also gave two "untils." He said that *until* heaven and earth pass away, nothing would pass from the law *until* all things are accomplished. Since He said He had come to fulfill the law, His coming to fulfill the law was one of the "all things" that had to be accomplished. Heaven and earth have not passed away, but on the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). He accomplished all that He came to do. Thus, He has fulfilled the law.

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On the other side of the statement, Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. He then gave the "but I tell you" new commands (see "If we are no longer under the law, why did Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, raise the standard of the law?" for more information) (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/jesuslawsqa.htm>).

So, if Jesus came to fulfill the law, why would He warn against breaking the least commandment and teaching others to do so? Something in His statement should immediately warn us that Jesus is not talking about the Old Testament commandments. The Old Testament commandments all had their own punishments for transgression. But none of them have anything to do with being least in the kingdom. In fact, what is really striking about what Jesus says here is that those who break the commandments and even teach others to do so are still in the kingdom! They are least, but they are still there. There is no provision for such grace under the Old Covenant.

Jesus cannot be referring to Old Testament commands. He must be referring to the commandments He is about to give. These are the commandments of the New Covenant—commandments that, by the way, we find through the rest of the New Covenant and can be summed in one word, love.

But it is impossible for even born again Christians to always show perfect love. It is impossible for us to never ever hate our brother without a cause, to never ever lust after someone, to never ever want to return evil for evil, to never ever hate our enemies, and so forth. The only way our righteousness can exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees is to trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior and have His perfect righteousness imputed to us.

So we see from these Scriptures that Jesus fulfilled the law for us, and that God's standards of righteousness are not just an outward obedience to the Old Testament commands but an inner obedience that is far beyond what we can fulfill ourselves. Jesus was obedient even to the point of death (Philippians 2:8), and His obedience is imputed to us: "For as through the one man's disobedience many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one, many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). We can be saved only by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and God's imputing His righteousness to us. That's why Christians who trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior but who misunderstand Scripture and break, and even teach against, some of Jesus' commandments are still in the kingdom, and will still be saved.

Paul writes of this in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

For no one can lay any other foundation than that which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or stubble; each man's work will be revealed. For the Day will declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself will test what sort of work each man's work is. If any man's work remains which he built on it, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire.

As long as someone has Jesus Christ as his foundation, God will save him. If that person proclaims Jesus Christ as Savior but teaches wrong doctrine—such as teaching against Jesus' commandments—on top of that foundation, his teaching will be proved wrong and he will suffer loss, but he will still be saved.

It is, for example, quite common for professing Christians to not only personally break but even to teach against Jesus' commandments concerning divorce or swearing or turning the other cheek. Some of these people may never have been saved Christians in the first place. Others, however, may very well be saved, and these others, although they are not rightly dividing the pertinent Scriptures, are still saved because their salvation—like that of all of God's saints—does not depend on their works but on Jesus' finished work on the Cross.

As we have seen, the "least commandments" Jesus speaks of in Matthew 5:19 cannot be the Old Testament commands. Jesus fulfilled and ended the Old Testament law. By His death on the Cross, Jesus has saved all who trust in Him as their Savior. He's paid the penalty for their sins. They have His righteousness imputed to them, and God has put them under the New Covenant.

The New Covenant has commands, the commands Jesus speaks of in Matthew 5:19 and which are given throughout the New Testament; commands that can be summed in one word—love. But, unlike the Old Testament laws, these commands have no condemnation associated with them. God does not condemn us when we fail to live perfectly by the New Covenant commands: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). Even

if we break these New Covenant commands or ignorantly teach against them, we are still in the kingdom of heaven because God saves us by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

So, when Jesus said, "Whoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven," He was not talking about the Old Testament law, of which it is said, "A man who disregards Moses' law dies without compassion on the word of two or three witnesses" (Hebrews 10:28). Since He said that those who break and even teach against these commands will still be in the kingdom of heaven, He must have been speaking of the commands of the New Covenant, which is a covenant of grace under which there is no condemnation.

Not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.

Titus 3:5

Peter Ditzel