

The Purpose of the Law another look at Matthew 5,17-20

“¹⁷Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.

¹⁸For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5,17-20).

This small passage is often cited as proof that Jesus observed the Law in every detail, as it was interpreted and taught during the first century, and that he recommended his followers to do the same. However, this portrait of the Master is not consistent with those reports in other parts of the New Testament, which describe his clashes with the scribes and Pharisees over their interpretation and handling of the Law. Does this passage really present Jesus as a typically observant Jew of his time, or does it indicate something more profound and controversial about Jesus’ attitude to the Law?

“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Mt 5,17).

Clearly the Law is important to the mission of Jesus. This mission does not involve the annulment of the Law, but rather its fulfilment. The idea that the Law is something that needs to be fulfilled, rather than just observed, lies at the root of Jesus’ new approach. It implies that the Law has a purpose, and is not an end in itself. Here the Messiah is telling us that he came to fulfil that purpose.

“For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Mt 5,18).

The written Law is evidently so important to Jesus’ mission that it cannot be changed in the slightest way until heaven and earth pass away. The question is: why is the Law so important and what is its role during this period between the advent of Jesus and the fulfilment of the kingdom of heaven in the new heaven and new earth? The answers are not given explicitly in the text. However, in the next two verses, Jesus implies that **proper** observance of the Law is indeed a qualification for entry into ‘the kingdom of heaven’ – it is a guide to obtaining redemption and a key for understanding the mission of the Messiah. It should be noted that this reason for the persistence of the Law, as it is written, is not necessarily related to **literal** observance. There is no specific indication in this verse regarding the way the Law should be observed and it would be wrong to assume from this verse that Jesus is commanding us to observe the Law in every detail. It is not until the next verse that Jesus explains what he means by **proper** observance.

“Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5,19).

Clearly, Jesus is addressing the teachers of the Law. What does it mean to ‘relax’ a commandment? What does it mean to ‘do’ a commandment? From the discourse that follows (Mt 5,21-38), it is clear that Jesus considered that the Law had already been ‘relaxed’: the commandment on adultery had already been relaxed in order to permit divorce (if indeed Moses had permitted this, he falls into the category of those who “*shall*

be called least in the kingdom of heaven"); the command 'to love your neighbour' had been relaxed in the case of enemies. Since the Law has already been 'relaxed', **literal** observance is barely enough to 'enter the kingdom'. In Jesus' view, the **proper** 'doing' of the Law involves a thorough re-evaluation based on an understanding of its origin and purpose: since hate lies at the origin of murder, we should not hate; since lust lies at the origin of adultery, we should not be driven by lust. **Proper** observance of the Law must conform to the ultimate purpose for which it was given – the fulfilment of the kingdom of heaven in the new heaven and the new earth, understood as a renewed human society in which righteousness dwells forever (cf. 2Pet 3,13; Rev 21,1-8).

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5,20).

According to this verse, the scribes and the Pharisees were not even able to enter the kingdom of heaven, as they were lacking in righteousness. The subsequent passage does not reveal how this affected their interpretation of the Law. In other parts of the Scriptures, however, they are accused of manipulating the Law to their own advantage (e.g., Mt 15,1-9). Their selfish and uncharitable approach to the Law led to unjust distortions that were burdensome for people to observe, and prevented them from entering the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt ch. 23). The scribes and Pharisees were therefore compared to 'blind guides' (Mt 15,12-14). It appears, then, that Jesus' approach to the Law is in no way critical of the Law itself, but is severely critical of its past and present interpreters. The leniency or unrighteousness of these interpreters of the Law has prevented them from giving clear guidance on its **proper** observance. In this passage of the 'Sermon on the Mount', Jesus is clearly revealing himself as an authentic and authoritative interpreter of the Law, in a way that is fundamentally related to his mission as the Messiah.

In summary:

1. Jesus stresses an important element in the observance of the Law: the idea that it has an ultimate purpose – the realization of the new heaven and the new earth in which love and righteousness will dwell.
2. As the Messiah, Jesus himself is responsible for bringing this purpose to its ultimate fulfilment.
3. Literal or 'blind' observance of the written Law is barely sufficient to accomplish these aims. As the Messiah, Jesus initiates a re-interpretation of the Law and gives fresh guidance on its observance, all in accordance with its ultimate purpose.
4. Because of their unrighteousness, the scribes and the Pharisees had erred in their interpretation of the Law, and were therefore not to be trusted.