

## ***Garnishing with the "Greater Righteousness": The Disciple's Relationship to the Law (Matthew 5:17-20)***

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*As seen from the perspective of Matthew's Gospel, the nature of Christian discipleship requires self-attestation through good works and a conspicuous lifestyle. Hence it is necessary to underscore the importance of Christian ethics and the character of bona fide righteousness. The ethical tenor of much of the material in Matthew can be understood against the background of the Jewish-Christian community's becoming increasingly Gentile-Christian as well as the early church's relationship to first-century Judaism. What is striking is the degree to which the halakah advanced by Jesus himself appears to stand in continuity with the OT. The "greater righteousness" called for by Jesus does not stand in juxtaposition to the ethical standard enunciated in the law and the prophets. Rather, it is to be understood against the ethical deficiencies of contemporary establishment religion.*

*Key Words: Matthew, Torah, prophets, ethics, righteousness, Sermon on the Mount, fulfillment, abrogation, halakah*

### INTRODUCTION: MATTHEW 5:17-20 WITHIN THE MATTHEAN GOSPEL

It is of utmost importance in the Matthean Gospel that the disciple be characterized as a *doer* of the will of God. Correlatively, it is in Matthew that the ethical contours of *righteousness* and the necessity of *validating the disciple's lifestyle* are accentuated. This emphasis on ethics is evident from the outset of Messianic ministry, as seen in John the Baptist's call for deeds befitting true repentance (3:8) as well as Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29); it comes to full expression at the apex of Jesus' ministry in his stinging denunciation of contemporary religion for its failure in "doing" and practice (23:1-36); and it constitutes the final exhortation recorded in

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the Messianic commissioning of the disciples (28:16-20).<sup>1</sup> In Matthew, orthopraxy is a prominent motif.<sup>2</sup>

The ethical tenor of much material contained in Matthew can be defined against the backdrop of several factors—among these are a transition from a Jewish-Christian to an increasingly Gentile-Christian community; the early church's relationship to first-century Judaism, and the halakah advanced by Jesus himself. What is striking in Matthew is the degree to which Jesus stands in continuity with the OT. Early Christianity, as Hans-Dieter Betz<sup>3</sup> has noted, was united on the fact that Jesus taught and affirmed the Torah. In terms of Jewish theology and Jewish ethics, his teaching is orthodox.<sup>4</sup> As seen from the Matthean perspective, the nature of Christian identity and Christian truth-claims requires some version of confirmation or self-attestation. Central to the Matthean perspective, then, is the following question: How does the Christian community validate itself as the authentic covenant community?<sup>5</sup>

1. Matt 3:8 ("*Bring forth* fruit that is indicative of repentance"); 5:19 ("whoever *does* them [the least of the commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven"); 6:1 ("Take heed that you do not *practice* your piety before others in order to be seen by them"); 7:12 ("In everything *do* to others as you would have them *do* to you"); 7:18 ("A good tree cannot *bear* bad fruit, nor can a bad tree *bear* good fruit"); 7:21 ("Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of my Father in heaven"); 7:24 ("Everyone then who hears these words of mine and *acts* on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock"); 12:12 ("So it is lawful to *do good* on the Sabbath"); 12:33 ("for the tree is known by its fruit"); 12:50 ("For whoever *does* the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"); 16:27 ("For the Son of Man . . . will repay everyone for what he has *done*"); 21:6 ("The disciples went and *did* as Jesus had commanded them"); 21:28-31 ("A man had two sons. . . . Which of the two did the will of his father?"); 21:43 ("Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that *produces* the fruits of the kingdom"); 23:3 ("therefore, *do* whatever they teach you and follow it; but *do not do* as they *do*, for they do not *practice* what they teach"); 23:23 ("It is these things [the weightier matters of the law] that you should have *done* without neglecting the others"); 24:46 (Blessed is that servant whose master finds him *doing* when he arrives"); 25:40 ("And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you *did* it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you *did* it to me"); 26:13 ("Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her"); 28:19-20 ("Go therefore and make disciples . . . , baptizing them . . . , and teaching them to *obey* everything that I have commanded you").

2. On which see B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* (SNTSMS 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

3. "The Hermeneutical Principle of the Sermon on the Mount," *JStSA* 42 (1983) 17.

4. Of Matt 5:17-19, Jewish scholar P. Lapide writes: "In all rabbinic literature I know of no more unequivocal, fiery acknowledgement of Israel's holy scripture than this opening to the Instruction on the Mount" (*The Sermon on the Mount* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986] 14).

5. J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 23-24, wrestles with this tension.

Most interpreters of Matthew acknowledge that Jesus is not a new law-giver but *the* legitimate interpreter of the divine will as contained in the Torah and reiterated by the prophets. Thus, Matthew 5-7 can be legitimately understood as "the fruit of Jewish piety."<sup>6</sup> Within the broader context, this block of teaching can be said to embody the ethical demands of the kingdom of God. The case-illustrations recorded in 5:21-48 amplify the imperatives and warnings of 5:17-20—material that follows directly on the heels of important qualifying ethical imperatives (5:13-16):

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything. . . . You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they might see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

At the very least, the Christian disciple is hereby being admonished regarding the *durability* and *visibility* of one's lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> *Good works* are the immediate context in which the following imperatives are to be understood. Hence, a distinctive ethic—indeed, an *enduring ethic*—is the burden of teaching recorded in 5:17ff.

The six case-illustrations contained in 5:21-48, the "antitheses," demonstrate how the law's ethical demands have been circumvented. But by whom have they been circumvented? In what sense are these illustrations "antithetical"? And wherein lies the antithesis?

A significant amount of commentary assumes—or attempts to show—that Jesus, the true interpreter of the law, is setting aside Mosaic prescriptions.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Frank Thielman, in his important

6. R. E. O. White, *Biblical Ethics* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 54.

7. On the placement of the material contained in 5:17-20 within the Sermon on the Mount, see W. J. Dumbrell, "The Logic of the Role of the Law in Matthew V.1-20," *NovT* 23 (1981) 1-21.

8. Cf. in this regard Num 18:19. See also "Salt," *EncJud* 14 (1971) 710-11.

9. A listing of those who understand Jesus (more or less) to be canceling OT precepts is lengthy. Representative are W. D. Davies, "Matthew 5,17-18," in *Mélanges bibliques: Rédignés en l'honneur de A. Robert* (Paris: Blond & Gay, 1957) 428-56; E. Schweizer, "Matth. 5,17-20: Anmerkungen zum Gesetzverständnis des Matthäus," *Neotestamentica* (Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1963) 399-406; R. Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1965) 64-65; R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS 28; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 203-26, 242; M. J. Suggs, "Wisdom and the Law in the Gospel of Matthew," *Wisdom, Christ and the Law in Matthew's Gospel* (AnBib 71; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1976) 64, 159; J. P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 222-64; A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) 76; R. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982) 134-74; and, more recently, E Thielman, *The Law and The New Testament: The*

work *The Law and the New Testament*, has argued that in Matt 5:21-48 the antithesis that exists is between Jesus' teaching and Mosaic law; in fact, in several of the antitheses, Jesus is *forbidding* what Mosaic law *permitted*.<sup>10</sup> Jewish adherence to the Mosaic law, notes Thielman, has Jesus' contemporaries "mired in conformity to a penultimate ethic."<sup>11</sup> In practice, even the Mosaic law's proscription of murder, in Thielman's view, becomes "unnecessary."<sup>12</sup> Thielman sees greater discontinuity in Matthew 5 than continuity<sup>13</sup> and summarizes the Christian disciple's relationship to the law thusly: "The way in which Matthew describes both Jesus' teaching and his role as teacher shows that Matthew considered Jesus to be Moses' greater replacement, and believed that his teaching replaced Mosaic law."<sup>14</sup>

Does this conclusion reflect the Matthean perspective? Is the law a "penultimate ethic" and thus in need of being replaced? And if so, what might be the consequences of this "replacement" for the disciple both as *teacher* and as *doer*? In the end, what is the relationship between *doing* in Matthew and one's place in the kingdom?

#### "RIGHTEOUSNESS" IN MATTHEW: THE PRIMACY OF ETHICS

In order for the reader to grasp correctly what righteousness for the disciple entails, much of the Gospel narrative is devoted to what it is not. A sizable amount of material in 5:1-7:29 presents a contrast between distorted and bona fide "righteousness." The disciple learns by observing in concrete terms what does not constitute *dikaïosynē*.<sup>15</sup>

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*Question of Continuity* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 51-58. Cf. also A. Sand, "Die Polemik gegen 'Gesetzlosigkeit' im Evangelium nach Mathäus und bei Paulus," *BZ* 14 (1970) 112-25. By contrast, R. Mohrlang's study, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), argues for an understanding of Matthew as a legal "conservative" and one who stands closer to traditional Judaism than Paul. In this regard, K. Snodgrass ("Matthew and the Law," *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers* [SBLSP 27; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989] 536-37) raises a relevant question: Is Matthew in many cases being read from the perspective of a misunderstood Paul? While "the law" in Paul remains outside the scope of this paper, more precision in definition can be found in D. Moo, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law,' and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 73-100, esp. pp. 75-90.

10. Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament*, 51-58.

11. *Ibid.*, 58.

12. *Ibid.*, 52.

13. Both continuity and discontinuity in Matthew are acknowledged by Thielman, although the latter is emphasized.

14. *Ibid.*, 49.

15. Although there is wide disagreement as to the precise meaning of *dikaïosynē* in Matthew, a consensus exists in the literature that the concept of righteousness is a central Matthean theme. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew* (see n. 2), believes that Matt 5:20 "may provide the best evidence for the meaning of which Matthew attached to this term" (p. 79).

A climax in the Gospel narrative is reached in Matthew 23, wherein a series of woes or curses against scribal and Pharisaical religion is pronounced—and this due to its deficiency in righteousness. This prophetic denunciation stands in marked rhetorical contrast to the blessings pronounced in 5:1ff. From the Matthean perspective, Pharisaical religion already stands judged.<sup>16</sup> Similar to 5:21-58, 23:1ff. is significant inasmuch as it demonstrates a distorted view of righteousness and thus clarifies Matthew's redactive interests. In the mind of Matthew, it is the disciples who will replace the scribes and the Pharisees as the real transmitters of the faith (28:16-20).<sup>17</sup>

The clause "for I tell you" in 5:20 reflects the context in which a (polemical?) discussion between Judaism and Jesus' teaching is occurring. Jesus' exhortation, aimed at his disciples (5:1) is that a "greater righteousness" must be exhibited—greater, that is, than scribal and Pharisaical religion. In 5:21-48 specific examples of this greater righteousness are enumerated.

In Matthew, righteousness is profoundly a matter of *doing*. It is *social* in character, serving as active leaven in society. The verb *poiein*, which occurs 83 times in the entire gospel, is used 22 times in chaps. 5-7 alone.<sup>18</sup> Seen positively, the disciple is called above all else to *do* what is ethical. The failure of Pharisaical religion in Matthew's eyes was not that it skirted alms-giving, prayer, or fasting (things that religious "ought to have done"); rather, it was that it neglected the "weightier matters" of the law, such as justice and mercy (23:23). Orthodox interpretation entails *orthopraxy*.

Seen negatively, the disciples' righteousness is not to appear as that which is popularly expounded (23:1ff.). Pharisaical religion, as critiqued in Matthew 23, is not deficient based on theological grounds, but on ethical grounds. Viewed positively, the disciples' righteousness was to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). True righteousness consists of "letting your light shine" (5:14, 16), doing good deeds that are visible (5:16), doing "the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21), doing concrete deeds to "the least of these" (25:45), and doing "all that I have commanded you" (28:20).

Certainly, the gnawing question for many would have been whether Jesus' teaching was *a new teaching*. Matthew may well have

16. It would be unfair to judge all of Pharisaical Judaism as "hypocritical," however. Mark 12:28-34, for example, implies what was good in rabbinic Judaism. J. Neuser maintains that the portrait of the Pharisees we receive in the Gospels is essentially accurate of pre-70 AD Judaism (*Politics to Piety* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973] xxi).

17. So D. E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (NovTSup 52; Leiden: Brill, 1979) 34-63.

18. Five of the seven occurrences of *dikaiosynē* in Matthew are found in chaps. 5-7.

been waging a war on two fronts. While an increasingly Gentile church may have been inclined toward *anomia*, that is, a discarding of law (Matt 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12),<sup>19</sup> Pharisaical religion (at least as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels) tended toward distorted interpretations of the law. In Matthew, both the antinomian and the hypocritical Pharisaism sustain a stinging rebuke from Jesus; both incur divine judgment (7:23; 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). Thus, in Matthew righteousness has proper regard for the law, and this regard expresses itself foremost in *doing*.

#### "LAW," "ABROGATION," "FULFILLMENT," AND LEGAL DETAIL

What was the ethical guideline of the early church? It was nothing less than the ethical requirements spelled out in the law and repeatedly enunciated by the prophets. While Mark does not use the term *nomos* at all and in Luke it does not function as an important concept, in Matthew both lawlessness (*anomia*) and the law's distortion need to be combatted. It is significant, then, that mention of the law—in 5:17 and 7:12—encircles the central section of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's use of the combination phrases "the law or the prophets" (5:17) and "the law and the prophets" (7:12 and 22:40),<sup>20</sup> as well as the reverse form, "all the prophets and the law" (11:13), is meant to underscore a particular *prophetic* dimension of the law. Frequently in the OT the prophets "freed," as it were, the Torah from cultic manipulation by upholding a correct interpretation of it. Such seems to be implied in 7:12 and stated explicitly in 22:40. Hence, *ho nomos* in Matthew would appear to signify the Pentateuch, which contains the revelation of God's will, the deposit of God's revelatory utterances to his people<sup>21</sup>—utterances made binding by specific commandments<sup>22</sup> and ordinances. The law, as Israel's standard for good works, was accepted by the Christian community as binding, even when it needed recontextualization in Jesus' day.

19. In Matthew, it is lawlessness that characterizes the end of the age (24:12). Significantly, the term *anomia* does not appear in the other three Gospels.

20. J. D. Kingsbury (*Matthew as Story* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 67) is correct to point out that "the law and the prophets" serves both as an ethical norm and as a prophecy of a time of fulfillment. However, the designation *ho nomos ē hoi prophētai* ("the law or the prophets") is not intended to carry a predictive sense; rather, it indicates an ethical unity, as W Zimmerli (*The Law and the Prophets* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965] 13) has argued. Customarily, on the Sabbath, portions of the Torah and the prophets were read in the synagogue.

21. Thus H. J. B. Combrink et al., *Guide to the New Testament, Vol. IV The Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (trans. D. R. Briggs; Pretoria: NGKB, 1988) 95.

22. See the reference in 5:19 to "one of the least of these commandments" (*entolē*).

Matthew's generic use of "the law" is illuminated not merely by its frequency (5:17, 18; 7:12; 11:13; 12:5; 22:36, 40; and 23:23) but also by the struggle with Pharisaical Judaism being mirrored in the Gospel narrative. The central charge leveled against the Christian community was that it was not in continuity with Judaism precisely at its core—namely, the Torah<sup>23</sup> and the prophets.<sup>24</sup> How were the disciples to rebut this charge? A strategic response would be that, while Jesus the Messiah is the eschatological fulfillment of OT prophecy, Christianity is in full continuity with the ethical foundation of Judaism; the Christian disciple indeed shares this nonnegotiable core. The rather apologetic tone of the Gospel of Matthew, as Lamar Cope has observed, is thus to be expected; charges against the Christian community must be addressed.<sup>25</sup>

Matthew records two strong "do not suppose" declarations in Jesus' ministry. One is meant to shatter the mistaken notion that Jesus brings peace in the context of relationships (10:34). The other concerns the ethical requirements of the law (5:17). The prohibition formula *mē nomisēte* is to be understood as a rhetorical device in a polemic against popular opinion.<sup>26</sup> And what was this opinion? Seen through Matthew's eyes, it was that Jesus' coming was to abrogate (*katalysai*) "the law or the prophets." To a Jew, the setting aside or abrogation of the law constituted the mark of a heretic. It is, therefore, significant, that Matthew omits the reference to *didachē kainē*, "a new teaching," accorded to Jesus in Mark 1:27. The force of Jesus' statement recorded in 5:17 is this: "Do not begin thinking, do not even

23. Nearly twenty centuries removed, the reader is apt to miss the significance of *Torah* for the first-century Jewish mindset. Firmly rooted in divine covenant, it constituted the visible expression of relationship with God, a supreme gift of divine grace; thus T. W. Manson: "The idea that underlies the word 'Torah' is not primarily the formulation of a series of categorical commands and prohibitions with appropriate sanctions. . . . It is rather a body of instruction regarding man's place in God's world and his duties to God and his neighbor. The 'Torah' is divine guidance as to the right way in which man should behave as a subject of the heavenly king" (*Ethics and the Gospels* [New York: Scribner's, 1960] 29). In a similar vein, W. C. Kaiser, Jr., has described religious motivation in the OT as both "evangelical" and "legal" obedience; that is, Israel was commanded to love God with every fiber of being and, as a result, *keep His commandments* ("The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law: Moses, Jesus and Paul," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* [ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985] 182). The contemporary reader must be reminded that love and the law are not in opposition to one another.

24. From the standpoint of Matthew, the pathetic irony is that Jerusalem kills the prophets who are sent to it (Matt 23:31, 24, 37).

25. O. L. Cope, *Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1976) 127.

26. Thus Betz, "Hermeneutical Principle," 18-21.

consider the possibility, that I am annulling the teaching of the law and the prophets." Such a prohibition has the aim of dealing with a fundamental misunderstanding of his mission.<sup>27</sup>

While some in the Christian community might be inclined to believe that the commandments are no longer valid, "on the other side of the street," most likely in the synagogue (23:2, 6), there are debates raging between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Oral tradition, that is, the "fence around the law," has had the effect of obscuring the true meaning of the commandments (see Mark 7:8-13). In a day when halakhic interpretation was en route to being absolutized, it was the "abrogators" of the law who were to meet the force of Jesus' fury (hence, the material in Matt 23:1 ff.). Stringent Pharisaical interpretation of the law (not to mention "lawlessness") was to be rejected, and it is the distortions in these traditions that must be addressed—*Ēkou-sate hoti errethē . . . egō de legō hymin . . .*—and purged (5:21-48). The stress on continuity in 5:17-18 is important for interpreting the "antitheses" in 5:21-48; it is not the Torah itself that Jesus rejects, rather the halakah, the oral tradition and interpretation, that have come to surround the law.

While much exegetical ink has been spilled in attempts to render precisely the verbs *plērōsai* ("fulfill") and *katalysai* ("abrogate," "loose" or "annul"), understanding the context in which they appear as well as their proper relationship to each other—one of *contrast*—is critical to their proper sense in Matt 5:17. The nature of the actions is antithesis and mutual exclusion. Moreover, the immediate context in which 5:17 is found disallows us from applying a "prediction-verification"<sup>28</sup> or "transcending"<sup>29</sup> sense to the verb "fulfill"<sup>30</sup>—a sense that *plērōsai* otherwise carries in Matthew.<sup>31</sup> Good works (5:16) and doing the "better righteousness" (5:20) commend the disciple in the sight of God. (The intent of Matthew 1-4, for example, is to show clear pro-

27. Thus G. Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM, 1963) 67.

28. Contra Schweizer, "Matth. 5,177 399-401; Barth, Matthew's Understanding," 68; J. P. Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1980) 46-47; P. Stuhlmacher, "Jesus Volkommenes Gesetz der Freiheit," *ZTK* 79 (1982) 289-91; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 142; U. Luz, "Das Matthäusevangelium und die Perspektive einer biblischer Theologie," in *"Gesetz" als Thema Biblischer Theologie* (ed. O. Hofius and P. Stuhlmacher; Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie 4; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989) 236-37; and others.

29. Contra R. Banks, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17-20," *JBL* 93 (1974) 229-33; idem, *Jesus and the Law*, 210-13, and others.

30. On the fulfillment theme in Matthew, see H. Frankemeille, *Jahwe-Bund und Kirche Christi* (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 10; Münster: Aschendorff, 1973) 388ff.

31. The eschatological and typological sense of "fulfillment" is mirrored in 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; and 27:9-10.

phetic parallels between OT events and their *eschatological* fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah. Matthew 5-7, by contrast, focuses on the teaching of Jesus and is intended to be *didactic* in function.) This didactic interest finds confirmation in what follows. Far from contravening the commandments in 5:21-48,<sup>32</sup> Jesus is calling for a "radical"—which is to say, *basic*<sup>33</sup>—obedience to the commandments that love requires. The directing principle of love for the disciple is objectively revealed in keeping statutory commandments (thus Rom 13:8; Jas 2:8-12). Matthew's primary concern is the background debate with Judaism over the role of the law, not Jesus as the arrival of eschatological promise; hence, the emphasis on *doing, obeying, and keeping*.<sup>34</sup>

The verb *katalysai* is set in opposition to the verb *plērōsai* and functions as a flat proscription. Was this Jesus setting up a new teaching? And most importantly, was he setting aside the Torah? Such would be questions circulating at the local synagogue down the street. Matthew's aim is transparent: the ethical demands of the law were not to "cease."<sup>35</sup> That *katalysai* here carries the sense of annulment, cessation, or abrogation finds support from pre-Christian Jewish texts dealing with the law in which the verb *katalysai* is also used (for example, 2 Macc 2:22 and 4 Macc 5:33).

In accordance with the salt metaphor that had preceded it, Jesus' declaration concerning the law is clear: the law is durative in nature. What is stated negatively in 5:17 is declared positively in 5:18 through the strengthened authoritative formula *amēn legō hymin*. Occurring 50 times in the Synoptics and 30 times in Matthew, Jesus'

32. That the antitheses of 5:21-48 are not between Jesus and Mosaic law but between Jesus and contemporary interpretation is supported by Matthew 23 and by the concluding statement in the Sermon on the Mount: "For he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes" (7:29). Both expressions "you have heard . . ." and "it was said . . ." are found in rabbinic literature. See M. Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (Journal of Biblical Literature Monographs 6; Philadelphia: SBL, 1951) 27-30; and D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956) 67-71. The expression "the men of old" (5:21 and 33), contra Meier (*Vision*, 243), need not refer to Moses and his generation; this may be a reference to later teachers of the law, and specifically, to "the scribes and Pharisees" mentioned in 5:20.

33. "Radical" is to be understood in the sense of its root, from *radix* ("source," "stem," or "root").

34. Cf. *b. Šabb.* 116b, a Talmudic passage that shows strong affinities to Jesus' statement: "I have not come to add or take away from the Torah of Moses." Earlier in the twentieth century, P. Fiebig argued that the term *plērōsai* confirmed Jesus' utilization of rabbinic oath terminology, conveying the notion that the law was fully valid and binding (*Jesu Bergpredigt* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1924] 27).

35. The commentary by John Calvin in this regard is instructive: "[W]e must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law; for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life, and must, therefore, be as unchangeable, as the justice of God, which it embraced, is constant and uniform" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelist, Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Vol. I* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963] 277).

introductory formula confirms without exception the certainty of what follows. In the OT, *amēn* declares praise to God, affirms a task, or confirms a promise or threat.<sup>36</sup> And as a reflection of its frequent use in the synagogue, it occurs often in the Matthean Gospel. Moreover, the emphatic form *egō de legō hymin* (5:22, 28, 32, 34, and 44) is employed by Jesus to set aside traditional rabbinical notions.

Verse 18 employs the language of hyperbole. Jesus' use of terms as framed by Matthew—*iōta*, *keraiā*, *entolē*, *elachistos*, *parerchomai*, *panta*—is aimed at suiting the meticulous expectations of rabbinic scholarship (see 23:4, 8). Jesus is speaking in rabbinic terms of *smallness*.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in stressing that not the "smallest" detail of the law would "pass away," he is emphasizing the permanence of the law. Rabbinic literature, before it affirms anything, assumes the permanence of the Torah.<sup>38</sup>

Why, in Matthew's eyes, is Jesus so adamant about the law's detail, and why does the law's depiction in Matthew conspicuously resemble contemporary legal notions? Hyperbolic speech utilizes exaggeration for the sake of effect, and the effect is to underscore durability. From Matthew's standpoint, to construe Jesus' "coming" as antithetical to the law is to misconstrue his coming altogether.

#### ON ABROGATING "THE LEAST" AND BEING "THE LEAST"

The ramifications of "loosing," "annulling," or "relaxing" one of "the least of these commandments" and teaching others the same are sobering: they are said to entail a loss of rank in the "kingdom of heaven" (5:19). Among teachers of the law, "light" commandments stood in contrast to "great" or "weighty" / "heavy" commandments. An example of a "light" commandment was the Pharisaical custom of tithing on herbs and spices (Matt 23:23 = Luke 11:42). "Heavy" commandments included breach of the Sabbath (for example, Matt 12:1-13 and 28:1), profaning God's name (for example, 26:63-65; Mark 14:61-64; John 8:58-59; and 10:33), and profaning the temple (for example, Matt 12:6; 21:12-13; and 26:61). Scrupulous with respect to details (an ardor not wrong in itself, but a monstrosity when contrasted with abrogating the "weightier" principles of social mo-

36. V. Hasler, *Amēn* (Stuttgart: Gotthelf, 1969) 168-74.

37. H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (6 vols.; Munich: Beck, 1989-97) 4.244-47. Both *yod*, the tenth and smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and *waw*, the sixth letter, were proverbial for smallness. See G. Schwarz, "*iōta hen ē mia keraiā*," *Matthaeus 5,18*," *ZNW* 66 (1975) 268-69.

38. Grammatically, the double negative *ou mē* in 5:18 constitutes a definitive negation. The law's permanence is observed in Bar 4:1; Wis 18:4; and 4 Ezra 9:37, as well as in Philo (*Life of Moses* 2.136).

rality such as justice and mercy, 23:23-24), Pharisees tithed, as the law required, on "all the increase of your seed which comes year by year from the field" (Lev 27:30 and Deut 14:22). They did this, however, to the extent of trifling absurdity—mint, dill, and cummin, for example, were used for medicinal purposes as well as flavoring. Such inversion of priorities is further illustrated in a Near Eastern hyperbole: in seeking to strain out an insect while drinking and thus avoid swallowing what was considered "unclean" (Lev 11:2-23), they inadvertently swallowed the proverbial camel—another "unclean" beast. Righteousness, as it turns out, is not to be found in gnat-straining!

Deut 22:6-7, which contains instructions concerning one's obligation if chancing upon a bird nest, demonstrates that "smallness" has its proper place in the divine economy. Indeed, Jesus himself teaches on the value of the small, undomesticated bird, a proverbial symbol of low value (Matt 10:29 = Luke 12:6-7). Implicit in this teaching is the value to God of these "least" in creation. The OT, it should be observed, does not teach an either/or ethic; both "small" and "weighty" requirements of the law are to be regarded. In fact, in some respects rabbinic literature stands in essential agreement with the OT in this regard:

Run to the light as well as to the weighty commandments. (*m. 'Abot* 4:2)

Be heedful of a light commandment as of a weighty one, for you do not know the recompense of reward of each commandment. (*m. 'Abot* 2:1)

Twice in 5:19 the verb *didaskhein*, "to teach," is used, and this in association with "loosing." From Matthew's perspective, "teaching" and "doing" go hand in hand and are indivisible; for the disciples, this unity cannot be overstated. What is transmitted to others matters, and matters enormously. That the law is not being abrogated but remains the core of "new covenant" ethics for the true disciple is not only a legitimate exegesis of 5:21-48<sup>39</sup> but also the implication of

39. Jesus' hermeneutical guidelines, suggested in 5:19, are on display in 5:21-48. In speaking in contemporary rabbinical terms, Jesus is placing emphasis where it is needed. He is tearing down the "hedge" of oral tradition while erecting a new one in its stead. Jesus' interpretive "hedge" in the case-illustrations could be described as follows: do not become angry (vv. 21-26); do not lust in the heart (vv. 27-30); do not divorce your wife and cause someone else to marry her, thus leading her to commit adultery (vv. 31-32); do not take oaths at all (vv. 33-37); do not take retaliation into your own hands; rather, tend toward forbearance, which can diffuse situations (vv. 38-42); and since you never know who will be your neighbor, treat everyone the same, in love (vv. 43-47).

Jesus' command in 23:3—the context of which is Jesus' denunciation of Pharisaical religion and rabbinical instruction: "Therefore, *do whatever they teach* you and *keep* it; but *do not do as they do*, for *they do not practice what they teach*." The flaw in scribal teaching is foremost ethical.<sup>40</sup> Again, the link between *teaching and doing* is critical in Matthew's eyes.

Loss of rank in the kingdom of heaven was of enormous import to a Jew. One could not expect the bliss of paradise if one had set aside the Torah.<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere in Matthew Jesus employs the concept of "rank" in the kingdom of heaven, notably in his denunciation of scribal religion's preferential treatment of rabbis and teachers (Matthew 23):

- the humble are acclaimed "great" (18:4)
- the "last" are made "first" and the "first" "last" (20:16)
- the "great" ones are those who become servants (20:26)
- the "greatest" will be humbled and the humble exalted (23:11)

The greatest-least contrast in 5:19 is clarified—and magnified—in 23:1ff., where it takes the form of prophetic woe-cries being directed at the teachers of the law (23:27, 8, 10, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). Both the responsibilities and the consequences that attend *teaching and doing* are sobering.

Given the parallelism in 5:19 between greater and lesser, loss of "rank" in the kingdom of heaven is best understood as a literary-rhetorical device, or what R. H. Gundry has called "poetic justice."<sup>42</sup> But it is more, and based on the woe-cries outlined in Matthew 23, a *literal* loss—in the form of divine judgment ("Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation," 23:36)—is being forecast.

All told, the elements of 5:19—the "whole" law, "light" parts, "practice" and "teaching"—are Jewish to the core.<sup>43</sup> They underscore

40. Hence, the interpretation of 5:17-20 that treats the whole question of the law eschatologically—that is, in terms of prophecy and fulfillment-verification—fails to discern the contextual flow of Matthew's argument. See Meier, *Vision*, 224-39, for an exegesis of 5:17-20 that assumes discontinuity between the Old and the New based solely on an eschatological reading of the text.

41. *M. Sanh.* 10:1. Others who have no portion in the world to come include the generation of the Flood, the generation of the Diaspora, the men of Sodom, the generation of the wilderness, the spies who brought back an evil report, Korah and his band, and apostates.

42. R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 82. E. Arens, *The ἔλθῃ Sayings in the Synoptic Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1976) 96, and I. Broer, *Freiheit vom Gesetz und Radikalierung des Gesetzes* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980) 51, are in essential agreement.

43. A number of features in 5:17-20 and 21-48 mirror interpretive principles employed by the school of Hillel. In addition to the "light" versus "heavy" contrast, these

what for the disciple is nonnegotiable: all ethical demands are to be observed. All commandments have the same goal: loving God and loving others.<sup>44</sup> All are binding, even when they have different "weights" (see 23:23-24).<sup>45</sup> Through teaching *and* practicing the law, it is "affirmed,"<sup>46</sup> "confirmed,"<sup>47</sup> and "upheld."<sup>48</sup> The continuing validity of the law as an ethical guide is hereby emphasized.<sup>49</sup>

### "THE GREATER RIGHTEOUSNESS" AND THE DEMANDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Matt 5:20 functions both to summarize the preceding statements and to introduce the case-illustrations that follow. The formula "for I tell you" represents a *kelal*, an exegetical key, to Jesus' interpretive approach, not unlike the practice of rabbinic schools.<sup>50</sup> Here Jesus moves from principle to practice. The shift from the (indefinite) third-person singular (*hos ean*) to the second-person plural (*hymim*) denotes application being made to the disciples. Jesus is calling for a "better righteousness"—that is, one which qualitatively exceeds (*perisseuō*) that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The inside-outside analogies that form the crux of Jesus' vitriolic denunciation of religious leaders in Matthew 23 are instructive. Judaistic literature reflects an emphasis on avoiding—at any cost

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include: (1) a principle stated followed by a case-illustration (for example, 5:17 then 5:21-48); (2) a *kelal* or summarizing (for example, 5:19 and 5:44); (3) the insertion of interpretation (for example, 5:22, 28-30, 32, 34-37, 39-42, and 44-48); (4) the tendency to illustrate repetitively in threes (for example, 5:21-22); (5) basing the *halakha* on a precept from the Torah; and (6) starting with a text, then working back to the text (for example, 5:43-48). For a discussion of Hillelite techniques, see M. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) 24-27.

44. Thus it is logical for Matthew that human love grows cold where lawlessness—not the law!—increases (24:12).

45. The frequently advanced hypothesis that Matthew is only attempting to mirror more conservative Jewish-Christian tradition without being convinced of the tradition himself is simply unconvincing.

46. Thus G. Maier, *Matthäus-Evangelium —I* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Haennsler, 1979) 142-44; and Lapide, *Sermon*, 14.

47. Thus C. F. D. Moule, "Fulfillment-Words in the New Testament," *NTS* 14 (1967-68) 313.

48. Thus D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956) 60.

49. R. T. France's distinction between the *authority* and *function* of OT laws is worth noting. To acknowledge that commandments remain authoritative, without a jot or tittle lost, is not to argue that they necessarily will continue to function or be applied in the same way (*Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* [Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989] 196).

50. See I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York: KTAV, 1967) 24.

the *appearance* of a lack of deeds.<sup>51</sup> The "righteous" had become the honorific title of those who avoided "sin." By Jesus' day, Pharisaical legalism had in truth become "illegal" (from the divine standpoint). The righteousness of the kingdom of God, by contrast, relates to character (cf. 5:3-12) and finds expression in social morality performed from the heart. On this count, scribal Judaism as portrayed by Matthew is found wanting.

While Jesus is *not* saying that entering the kingdom of heaven is based on works, he is declaring that, by *not obeying*, one suffers loss. The clear intimation from Jesus' lament recorded in Matt 23:37-39 ("Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets . . .") is that Palestinian Judaism was deficient. Had it observed the Torah too closely? To the contrary, "Jerusalem" was lacking a "better righteousness," and it was John the Baptist who had delivered a message of warning to that effect. Repentance entailed a change not in belief but in *deeds* (Matt 3:7-10).

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON MATTHEAN ETHICS

It has been said that Protestants have supreme difficulty in not underestimating the value of the Mosaic tradition in the corpus of divine revelation. Given the trajectory of much contemporary scholarship as it applies to Matt 5:17-48, it is difficult to disagree. The early Christian disciples, by contrast, traced their ethical teaching back to the revelation imparted at Sinai—an ethical standard that was reiterated by the prophets. While Matthew is at pains to show that Jesus is the *eschatological* fulfillment of OT prophecy, the Gospel narrative is equally meticulous in its attempts to show that the Christian *moral* life is consciously rooted in and in continuity with that of Judaism. (This continuity is implied in Mark 7:8, 9, which shows Jesus castigating hypocritical religion that "abandons" and "rejects" the commandment of God [*hē entolē tou theou*].) By making the important distinction between eschatology and ethics we do *not* wish to argue that the law, whether written or oral, does not go through important reinterpretation or recontextualization in the NT—for example, a reinterpreting of Jerusalem,<sup>52</sup> the temple,<sup>53</sup> or the Sabbath.<sup>54</sup> Rather, the law *as a moral guide*, which is the signification of the Matthean reference to "the law or the prophets," is binding for the Christian

51. On this phenomenon, see H. Braun, *Spätjüdisch-häretischer und frühchristlicher Radikalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1957) 4-6.

52. For example, Luke 13:31-35; Gal 4:25, 26; Heb 12:22; and Rev 3:12; 21:10.

53. For example, Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19, 27-33; John 2:13-25; 4:21-26; 7:37-38; and 11:49-52.

54. For example, Matt 12:1-14; Luke 14:1-6; and Heb 4:9.

disciple. In the mind of Matthew, the question of discipleship could not be divorced from "the core" of Jewish religion, which is *doing righteousness*.

Matthew is not advancing a form of "works-righteousness," nor is it legitimate to describe Jesus' ethic as "perfectionistic," "idealistic," or "interim."<sup>55</sup> Both antinomianism and legalism are portrayed as incurring divine judgment. In the mind of Matthew, the ethical demands placed upon the disciple are clear and unchanging.<sup>56</sup> Obedience both originates in the heart and executes the law's ethical demands.<sup>57</sup> Setting aside the ethical demands of the law and teaching others to do the same are spoken of in the harshest of terms. Those who promulgate such are depicted as "least in the kingdom"; those who both do and teach others the commandments are considered "great in the kingdom." Such a message is applicable to Palestinian Torah-bound Jews as well as Hellenistic "Torah-free" factions within the Christian community.

The placement of 5:17-20 within the Sermon on the Mount shows this material to be a call to do good works (5:16). By exhibiting a "better righteousness" (5:20), the disciple will have the effect of salt and light (5:13,14), thereby validating the Christian community in the presence of its critics.

55. Contra J. Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 1-12.

56. We agree with Donald Hagner that both continuity and discontinuity are to be found in the Gospel of Matthew and that the challenge of biblical theology is to give proper heed to *both* the old and the new ("Balancing the Old and the New: The Law of Moses in Matthew and Paul," *Interpretation* 51 [1997] 20-30); see also his exegesis of the text in *Matthew 1-13* [WBC 33A; Dallas: Word, 1993] 102-10). The stress of 5:17-20, however, is *continuity* with respect to the core of Jewish religion—namely, doing what the law and the prophets require.

57. For this reason it is inaccurate to speak of a "new Torah" and of a "new Law-giver" as W. D. Davies ("Matthew 5,17-18," 430) and others have done. Thus, Calvin, who understands Jesus not as a new law-giver, but as "the faithful expounder of a law which had been already given" (Institutes 1.8.7).