The “Better Righteousness”: Matthew 5:20

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This essay is presented as a “prequel” to my study of Matt 5:22 in BBR 20 (2010): 61–84. Its purpose to enlarge on a point made in the former article, namely, the righteousness “better” than that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20) is pointedly Christological. That is to say, the disciples of Jesus are no longer to be guided, commanded, or constrained by the Mosaic Torah or by subsequent tradition. Rather, they are to do his words, because he is the eschatological king of Israel: his teaching trumps all previous forms of instruction. Therefore, the “better righteousness” of the kingdom of heaven resides in the eschatological will of God for a new covenant community, as embodied in and proclaimed by Jesus the Messiah.

Key Words: apocalyptic, Christology, eschatology, fulfillment, kingdom, new covenant, new creation, perfection, righteousness, Torah, tradition

The quality and character of the righteousness “better” than that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20) will probably always be debated. But even so, I would like to join the conversation. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who once advanced the seminal thought that this “better righteousness” is Christocentric in focus.1 In the same vein, Douglas J. Moo has called attention to the “Christological ἔγω” that pervades the “antitheses” of Matt 5:21–48.2 The present undertaking stems from these insights and endeavors to develop them.

MATTHEW 5:20 IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Elsewhere, I have submitted a lengthier treatment of this section of the Sermon on the Mount (SM).3 Suffice it to say here that our text falls within

what Dale C. Allison calls the “core” of the discourse, which can further be subdivided into “three pillars”: “Jesus and the Torah” (5:17–48); “the Christian cult” (6:1–18); “social issues” (6:19–7:12). Matthew 5:20 thus falls under the domain of the “first pillar,” which has an extended introduction, consisting of two parts. One is 5:13–16: the disciples are told that they are salt of the earth and the light of the world. This passage thus serves as a transition in which Jesus moves from the life of the blessed future (promised in 5:3–12) to the demands of the life of the present (5:21–7:12). The theme, accordingly, switches from the gift to the task and describes the treatment to be received by those who embrace the conception of the kingdom as preached by the Christ and live according to the directions of 5:21–7:12. The other is 5:17–20, which can be compared to Lev 18:1–23 and Eccl 3:1–9, as well as the rabbinic kělāl, a summary or declaration that heads a section consisting of various particular cases or instances. These verses thus perform a negative and a positive function. Negatively, 5:17–19 anticipates an incorrect interpretation of 5:21–48, namely, that Jesus came to jettison the law irrespective of fulfillment. Positively, 5:20 announces what 5:21–48 is all about: the righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees is one that breaks the mold of Judaism and articulates a norm of behavior germane to the new, Christological/eschatological state of affairs.

FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

In order to appreciate the impact of Matt 5:20, it will be necessary to back up to 5:17–19, the opening portion of the subsection entitled by Allison “Jesus and the Torah.” As every student of the SM knows all too well, it is the relation of Jesus’ words to the Mosaic law that is one of the “hot buttons” of NT interpretation. Among the leading treatments of Jesus and the law are Loader, Jesus’ Attitude; Robert Banks, Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition (SNTSMS 28; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Paul Foster, Community, Law and Mission in Matthew’s Gospel (WUNT 2/177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); John P. Meier, Law and History in Matthew’s Gospel (AnBib 71; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1976); idem, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 4: Law and Love (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2009); Roland Deines, Die Gerechtigkeit der Tora in Reich des Messias: Mt 5,13–20 als Schlüsseltext der matthäischen Theologie (WUNT 177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). Deines’s book is summarized in his essay, “Not the Law but the Messiah: Law and Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew—An Ongoing Debate,” in Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew (ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 53–84. Convenient summaries of the various views of Matthew’s use of νόμος are provided by Moo, “Jesus and Authority,” 4; Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Matthew and the Law,” in Treasures Old and New: Contributions to Matthean Studies (ed. David R. Bauer and Mark
that Jesus has no intention of modifying even the most minute element of the Torah; on the other, it is evident from the antitheses of 5:21–42 that he does indeed set aside, or at least modify, certain of the commandments. Can these perspectives be reconciled? The answer is yes, and the resolution of the problem, I propose, resides in 5:18: *until heaven and earth pass away, neither an ἰῶτα (= *) nor a κεραία will pass from the law until all is accomplished.* The verse exudes the language of apocalyptic eschatology.\(^7\) The idiom of heaven and earth passing away is a compendious gathering of apocalyptic metaphors for the removal of the present creation and the onset of the new.\(^8\) The same expression occurs in Matt 24:35: "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*" That is to say, his words transcend the finale of the present aeon and have validity for the age to come.\(^9\) Therefore, to assert that nothing will depart from the law until heaven and earth pass away is ipso facto to declare that the Torah will remain intact up until the time the new creation comes into being, that is, ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται.\(^10\)

In view of these facts, Matthew’s notation that darkness and a shaking earth attended the crucifixion (27:45, 51) is hardly accidental, nor is his report that an earthquake preceded the resurrection (28:2). These are the prophetic/apocalyptic phenomena of heaven and earth being shaken and removed (Hag 2:6–7, Heb 12:26–27). It is within this sort of salvation-historical continuum that passages such as Deut 11:21 and Jer 31:36, 33:25 assume perspective: each speaks of the covenant with Israel enduring as long as the elements remain. Yet, with these occurrences, the elements are dissolved in the sense intended, and a new creation emerges. In short,
heaven and earth have passed away.  

To be sure, the cross and resurrection represent only the first phase of the new era, with the final segment yet outstanding. Nevertheless, with these events, the ages have taken a decisive turn (cf. 1 Cor 10:11), thus paving the way for the final passing of the elements at “the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).  

These findings entail at least two corollaries. (1) The law was not designed to stay intact until the end of time.  

(2) The alleged anti-Paulinism of Matthew is exposed as fallacious: for the First Gospel as well as for Paul, God’s law in its Mosaic form exits the stage once it has served its purpose, when πάντα γένηται.  

As the functional equivalent of ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται, Sim points to Matt 19:28, Jesus’ promise that the disciples will sit on twelve thrones ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ. Sim argues persuasively that παλιγγενεσίᾳ is future-eschatological and points to the re-creation of the cosmic order after its prior destruction. Apart from 24:29, Matthew refers twice more to the eschatological destruction of the existing cosmos, 5:18 and 24:35, both of which articulate the notion of the present heaven and earth passing away.  

Sim then appropriately comments (on 24:35): “The point of this text is conveyed


12. Analogously, John 19:30 relates the saying from the cross, τετέλεσται, that is, Jesus’ work of making all things new. This too is an idiom of eschatological accomplishment, drawn from the work of God in the first creation (Gen 2:1–3). John’s τετέλεσται finds its precedent in the LXX of Gen 2:1–2, with συνετελέσθησαν and συνετέλεσεν.  


in the contrast of the two subjects; while the words of Jesus are eternal, the present cosmic order is temporary." So far, so good. But then Sim wrongly defers the departure of heaven and earth exclusively to the eschaton, up until which the law remains valid. The problem is that Sim fails to take into account the basic factor of the “already” and the “not yet” and thus misses the apocalyptic/eschatological impact of the events that accompany the Messiah’s death and resurrection. In principle, ἡ παλιγγενεσία is realized in these instances of kingdom power.

The other eschatological idea of v. 18 is “fulfillment,” as voiced by πληρόω. In tandem with v. 17, v. 18 declares that nothing will pass from the law “until all is accomplished.” As is commonly recognized, πληρόω (= πληρέω) carries distinctively salvation-historical overtones, inasmuch as it signals the “eschatological measure,” the completion of the eternal plan of salvation in Jesus the Christ (e.g., Matt 5:17, Mark 1:15). This is why C. F. D. Moule can speak of “the total realization of a right relationship” that has come to pass in terms of the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise. Hence, the law is fulfilled, that is, attains its reason for existence, when Jesus opens his mouth and delivers the new law of the kingdom; its only purpose was to point to him and his people as the grand end of God’s eschatological designs (cf. 1 Pet 1:10–12). As is well known, πληρόω is central to Matthew’s vocabulary. Meier, for example, reminds us that the verb echoes “Matthew’s theme song of fulfillment of prophecy in the various events of Jesus’ life.” “Fulfill,” accordingly, summarizes the whole purpose of Jesus’ ministry.

Of particular relevance for the subject at hand is the additional comment of Banks that πληρόω should be given the same significance when it is used of the law as when it is used of the prophets. That is to say, the prophetic teachings point forward principally to the actions of Christ and have been realized in them in an incomparably greater way. The Mosaic laws point ahead principally to the teachings of Christ and have also been

17. Ibid.
realized in them in a more profound manner. “Fulfill” in 5:17 thus includes not only an element of discontinuity—more than the law has now been realized—but also an element of continuity—what transcends the law but is, nevertheless, something to which the law itself pointed. Deines writes to the same effect: πληρόω is an exclusively Christological term, which in the context of the First Gospel could only be understood in the framework of a salvation history that reaches its peak in Jesus. His fulfillment of the law and the prophets takes place not only by his deeds or teaching but through his entire mission that includes his teaching, deeds, and especially his messianic works up to and including his death, resurrection, and ascension. It is crucial, Deines states, to see the expression “the law and the prophets” as canonical, that is, as summarizing God’s revelation that has taken place so far. This is the era that is coming to an end in favor of the kingdom of God (Matt 11:13). “Because of this, 5:17 may be compared to a new treaty that relates what will be in force from now on but based on an existing foundation.”

These data comport with πληρόω as Matthew’s key term for depicting the impact of Jesus’ coming on the Scriptures of Israel. As encapsulated by this verb, the history of Israel attains to its apex and achieves its raison d’être (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35, 48; 23:32; 26:54, 56; 27:9). Matthew thus propounds a salvation history wherein the entire period of Israel is contemplated as anticipating the Christ. His Gospel envisages a period during which the law remains in force, the period of Israel and “the law and the prophets” (= Tanakh), but afterwards, when it is fulfilled, it departs the scene. Matthew thus divides history into two epochs, after the manner of prophecy and fulfillment. In other words, while there is to be a supersession of the law, it does not occur irrespective of fulfillment.


25. See further J. Andrew Overman, Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 74–78. David Daube suggests that lying behind πληρόω is δυναμικός, “to uphold,” in the technical sense of showing that the text is in conformity with one’s own teaching (The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism [London: Athlone, 1956], 60). But even if he is right, Jesus can still be understood as highlighting an element of continuity between his instruction and the Scriptures, all the while promoting his teaching as the end the Torah had in view.

whereby the Torah would be discarded as irrelevant in salvation history.\textsuperscript{27} It is, rather, a displacement of the law very much in line with salvation history, consequent on its accomplishment with the Christ event, when “heaven and earth pass away.”\textsuperscript{28} Consequently, the question of whether Jesus is “for” or “against” the law misses the point. Instead, it is a matter of acknowledging that the law performs a function up to a certain point in history and, thereafter, once it has served its purpose, gives way to a new body of instruction for the ἐκκλησία of the Christ.\textsuperscript{29} In the language of Mark, his words are the new wine that cannot be contained by the old wineskins and the new cloth that cannot be accommodated by the old garment (Mark 2:21–22).

However, a question arises: how could Jesus introduce these changes before the cross? It would appear that in so doing a contradiction is posed to 5:19. To make a long story very short, I would suggest that the most satisfying explanation is that Jesus’ teaching, as accompanied by many of his actions (for example, his disregard for the purity and dietary regulations and the Sabbath), takes place within a transition period designed to prepare the way for the time that would dawn with the removal of heaven and earth, when God’s purposes would be accomplished in the complex of his death and resurrection. This supposition is buttressed by the heilsgeschichtlich datum that, as the first man of the Spirit, Jesus enters the new creation by himself, in order afterward to bring his followers into the same phase of world history by virtue of the gift of his Spirit at Pentecost.\textsuperscript{30} Matthew,

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Meier, \textit{Law and History}, 123. The words “think not that I have come to destroy the law and the prophets” (5:17) assume that an opinion such as this was in existence. Donald A. Hagner plausibly maintains that Jesus’ “sovereign interpretation” of the law was so out of step with contemporary thought that it seemed to many he was going against the law (\textit{Matthew 1–13} [WBC 33a; Dallas: Word, 1993], 104). From the perspective, say, of 1 En. 104:10–13, the exercise of this sort of sovereignty would have made Jesus indistinguishable from the “sinners,” who “alter the word of truth.” Hans Dieter Betz writes that to be accused of propagating abolition of the law and the prophets was an extremely serious matter within the Judaism of all periods, because it amounted to nothing less than being branded a heretic and apostate (“The Hermeneutical Principles of the Sermon on the Mount” in Essays on the Sermon on the Mount [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 43). That Jesus was characteristically accused of this sort of deviation from the truth is demonstrated by Michael F. Bird, “Jesus as Law-Breaker,” in \textit{Who Do My Opponents Say I Am? An Investigation of the Accusations against the Historical Jesus} (ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica; LNTS; London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), 3–26.


\textsuperscript{29} To the same effect, Ben Witherington writes of Paul’s view of the law: “Paul’s most basic problem with the Law is that it is obsolete and therefore following it is no longer appropriate. It is not the rule of the eschatological age and it is not to be imposed in the new creation which is already coming to be” (\textit{Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians} [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 354).

then, has positioned Jesus squarely within the age of fulfillment, but in a way such as to anticipate subsequent events.

EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 5:20

So much attention has been devoted to the fulfillment of the law just because eschatology is of the essence of understanding the “better righteousness” of the kingdom; it is just in terms of eschatology, or salvation history, that this peculiar righteousness is to be unpacked.31 As for Matt 5:20 itself, the components of the verse may now be analyzed in turn.

(1) In terms of the verse’s basic structure, it is composed of a protasis and an apodosis: ἐὰν μὴ . . . οὐ μή. Hans Dieter Betz classifies the verse in toto as a “sentence of holy law.” Be that as it may, Betz is certainly right that it is a conscious formulation, if not a piece of literary artistry, on the part of Matthew.32

(2) The syntactical function of γάρ is not easy to discern. Verse 19 prohibits the “relaxing” (λύω) of even “the least of the commandments,” on pain of being called “least in the kingdom of heaven.” That is why it is difficult to infer that γάρ is causal, strictly speaking. How could the injunction of v. 20—the demand for the “better righteousness” of the kingdom—provide a grounding of the righteousness that pertains to the preeschatological state of affairs?33 Luz advances that, in fact, v. 20 seeks to develop the preceding ideas, to the effect that the “greater righteousness” does not eliminate the law.34 The problem is that most of the antitheses effectively do just that. Besides, it is not easy to accept that the “better righteousness” is simply a reiteration of the Mosaic commandments. If that were the case, then how could the righteousness demanded by Jesus be “better,” if it is merely a restatement of what everyone already knew and practiced? John Nolland acknowledges the problem and suggests that the primary link

34. Ulrich Luz, Matthew 1–7 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 221. The point is developed by Luz in “Fulfillment of the Law:”
is likely with v. 17. This too is problematic, because the γάρ is rather far removed from v. 17 and because Nolland does not address the question posed immediately above.

I would suggest that a glance at BDAG (p. 189) serves to alleviate the difficulty. Among the various functions of γάρ, the conjunction at times functions as a “marker of clarification.” As stated, the use of γάρ as a narrative marker expresses continuation or connection. In many instances, γάρ is used adverbially like the English “now” or “you see,” whereby the “temporal sense gives way to signal an important point or transition.” This being so, it is feasible to take γάρ as more or less the equivalent of ἀμήν in 5:22, 26; 6:2, 5. As applied to 5:17–20, the resultant meaning can be paraphrased in the following terms:

There is a righteousness that pertains to the kingdom this side of the passing of heaven and earth, during which time one must not relax its standards and requirements, lest one be called least in the kingdom. But, you see (γάρ), your end-time righteousness must surpass that of the people of old, as exemplified by the scribes and Pharisees. Otherwise, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven in its finalized manifestation.

(3) What is required of the disciples is δικαιοσύνη. Because the scholarship devoted to “righteousness” has spawned a virtual library of its own, the following remarks must be confined to the specific subject at hand. Normally, the question arises whether this righteousness is “imputed” or is a matter of personal conduct. To cut to the chase, whatever one makes of Paul’s letters, David L. Turner is right that in Matthew the stress is on “the practical side, the upright lifestyle.” Luz likewise affirms that nothing stands in the way of the “ethical interpretation,” which the ancient church “with good sensitivity advocated almost to the exclusion of all others.” Davies and Allison add that the meaning of righteousness is determined by the paragraphs that follow: “’Righteousness’ is therefore Christian character and conduct in accordance with the demands of Jesus—right intention, right word, right deed.” To the same effect is Robert A. Guelich, and the work of Benno Przybylski serves to buttress this sort of understanding of

36. Granted, “but” is not in the text. Yet the antitheses should be allowed some say, with their repeated ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω. It is notable that v. 20’s ἐγὼ γάρ λέγω ὑμῖν is followed in succession by ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν in 5:21–48.
38. Luz, Matthew 1–7, 196.
the term.\textsuperscript{41} In terms of Matt 7:21, righteousness is simply doing the will of Jesus’ heavenly Father. Just as basic a question pertains to the framework of the δικαιοσύνη required of the disciples. In other words, by what standard is the “upright lifestyle” to be determined? With exceptions here and there, the scholarly consensus is that righteousness is fidelity and obedience to God’s covenant.\textsuperscript{42} In the present instance, God’s covenant is a new covenant focused in his Christ. Foster insightfully comments that references to the righteousness of this covenant in 5:20 and 6:1 form an inclusio, and the Antitheses are intended as a hermeneutical guide to show how the community’s righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.\textsuperscript{43}

(4) There is the necessity of a “better righteousness.” The emphatic “\textit{your} righteousness” (ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη) is noteworthy, as it calls attention to the special position occupied by Jesus’ followers. Whatever may be predicated of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, the members of the latter-day kingdom are to be distinguished by a δικαιοσύνη that places them in a separate category. As for the verb περισσεύω, it is customary to query whether it is “qualitative” or “quantitative.” In the NT, according to BDAG (p. 805), the latter is more dominant, yet instances of the former are also present. Because of its usage in the present text, I take περισσεύω as “better,” to draw out the qualitative component. Of course, an argument could be made in the opposite direction. But in deciding, the common-sense approach of Richard T. France is to be commended. To speak of a righteousness that “goes far beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees,” writes France, might seem to be an impossible and even a ridiculous idea. Understood in terms of literal obedience, one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who attempted it more rigorously and consistently than the scribes and Pharisees. Accordingly, “Jesus is not talking about beating the scribes and Pharisees at their own game, but about a different level or conception of righteousness altogether.”\textsuperscript{44} I would add that in terms of sheer quantity it would be virtually impossible to top the 613 commands of the

\textsuperscript{41} Benno Przybylski, \textit{Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought} (SNTSMS 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). However, at least one qualification is in order. Hagner maintains that righteousness in Matthew is not “ethical” in every instance (contra Przybylski). According to Hagner, δικαιοσύνη in Matt 3:15 is salvation-historical, i.e., God’s saving activity (Matthew 1–13, 56). By way of application, Hagner then interprets Matt 5:6 as the hunger and thirst of the downtrodden and oppressed for the justice/vindication associated with the coming of God’s eschatological rule (ibid., 93). As regards Matt 3:15 and 5:6 specifically, Hagner appears to be right. Nevertheless, the “ethical” meaning of δικαιοσύνη in 5:20 is still to be preferred.


\textsuperscript{43} Foster, \textit{Community}, 95.

\textsuperscript{44} Richard T. France, \textit{The Gospel of Matthew} (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 189.
Garlington: The “Better Righteousness”

Torah, not to mention the multitudinous halakoth of the various enclaves of the Second Temple period.

Deines also endorses this qualitative take on περισσεύω. What is required, he says, is a different quality of life according to the kingdom of God that is about to appear. “It is the eschatological, overflowingly rich righteousness that Jesus fulfilled and made available to his disciples that from now on opens the way into the kingdom of God. Consequently, also for this verse [5:20] the paradigm shift in salvation history that is presupposed with the fulfillment terminology is decisive.”45 Before Deines, Meier had already proposed that περισσεύω means to be present in abundance, to be extremely rich, surpass, abound, etc. As applied to the present eschatological setting, the verb connotes

(1) a fullness present and proclaimed in the age of salvation, as compared with the old aeon, or (2) a new standard that is required in the new age. To this extent, περισσεύσῃ is an eschatological catchword, and fits in with the eschatological ethic of the Sermon on the Mount and the eschatological colouring of 5:17–19.46

Przybylski, in tandem with Banks, presses for an additional quantitative sense of περισσεύω.47 Przybylski in particular enlists Matt 5:48: the demand that the disciples must be “perfect,” even as their heavenly Father is “perfect.” According to Przybylski, by the greater righteousness Matthew points toward perfection, and the idea of perfection applies to all the examples of 5:21–47.48 Granted, “perfection” does apply to 5:21–47, yet the fallacy is the assumption that τέλειος is quantitative by definition.49 In point of fact, an argument can be made that perfection is not simply the aggregate of acts of righteousness. In his study of perfection, P. J. du Plessis concluded that תמים, as rendered by τέλειος, is principally a cultic term, indicating “wholeness, entirety and intactness.”50 “Perfection,” according to du Plessis, is wholeness in one’s relationship to God.51 Along similar lines, David Peterson maintains that perfection in the Hebrew Scriptures involves “loving

47. Przybylski, Righteousness, 85; Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding,” 242; also Luz, Theology of Matthew, 52.
49. It is to be acknowledged, however, that the other two occurrences of περισσεύω in Matthew, 13:12 and 14:20, are quantitative.
obedience to God as the one who, in his mercy, has initiated the relationship with man.”

As applied to God, his “perfection” is described “in terms of relationship with man, and with his covenant people in particular.”Kenneth L. Schenck thinks as well that perfection in the Letter to the Hebrews entails “completion” or “bringing to a goal.” The concept is applicable to both Christ and Christians. Naturally, Hebrews is not Matthew, but both documents draw on a common OT/Jewish heritage.

Michael Newton’s monograph has yielded similar results. According to Newton, the notion of perfection in the DSS is closely connected with that of holiness. More than once, the Scrolls speak of “perfect holiness” and related ideas (e.g., 1QM 7:4, 5; 1QS 5:13, 18; 8:17; 9:8; CD 1:20–21; 2:15; 7:5; 20:2, 5, 7). Comments Newton, “Qodesh and its derivatives in the biblical tradition are applied to those places, objects and things that belong to Yahweh.” Holiness, then, “refers to those objects and persons separated from the profane of the world.” While it is true that the community, quantitatively speaking, would never allow its members to pick and choose from among the commandments, including its distinctive halakoth, it remains that perfection = holiness pertains to covenant life and is, for that reason, relational in conception. That “perfection” at Qumran is not sinlessness is evident enough from the sect’s practice of ritual washings, not to mention the candid confessions of sin in 1QS 11:3, 9–10, 12, 14, 17; 1QH 1:21–23; 3:23–25; 4:29–30, 34–37. What counts is that “perfection of way” is tantamount to “uprightness of heart,” both of which are in God’s hand (1QS 11:2).

(5) The “better righteousness” is requisite to entering the kingdom in its future-eschatological manifestation. The protasis and apodosis of 5:20 are to be taken at face value: ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύη . . .

52. David Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews’ (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 24. Hence, “perfect” is tantamount to ἄμεμπτος, “blameless” (e.g., Luke 1:6, Phil 2:15). 4 Maccabees 7:15 terms Eleazar’s loyalty to the law “perfect,” that is, complete, by his martyrdom.

53. Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection, 25, quoting H. K. La Rondelle, Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-Ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfectionism (Kampen: Kok, 1971), 38. La Rondelle continues: “All knowledge or truth about Yahweh’s perfection is, consequently, encounter-truth, and deals with notions of His dynamic manifestation in definite historical situations in behalf of the keeping or fulfillment of His Covenant” (ibid., 38–39).


55. Contra Przybylski, Righteousness, 86–87, who assigns to τέλειος a quantitative sense—“doing more than others”—in disregard of this heritage.


57. The whole of Luomanen’s Entering the Kingdom is occupied with this question, esp. parts two and three. There is also Foster, Community, 205–9.
οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. Jesus’ intention is illuminated by Matt 7:21–27: the necessity of doing the will of his Father, as embodied in his words, in order to escape the floodwaters of final judgment. Yet there is another side to the coin. Guelich struggles with whether the righteousness of Matt 5–7 is an “entrance requirement” to the kingdom and deduces that only in a very limited way can one speak in these terms. He is concerned to press for the gift character of righteousness, inasmuch as the word and concept must be read against the backdrop of the OT. Consequently, righteousness in the SM is soteriological, connoting a new relationship between God and the individual. Righteousness is thus “a conduct concomitant with the ‘gift.’” Later, Guelich reiterates the point: “Righteousness for Matthew includes both the elements of status and conduct. It is the gift of God’s redemptive activity establishing new relationships with his people and granting the basis for the corresponding conduct that gives expression to this new relationship.”

Without relinquishing the “better righteousness” as the precondition of acceptance into the eschatological kingdom, any legitimate reading of δικαιοσύνη in the SM must acknowledge the validity of Guelich’s insights. I would add that the gift character of righteousness follows both from the structure of the SM and the salvation-historical setting of Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel to the poor and needy (e.g., Matt 9:35–38, 11:4–5; Luke 7:21–22). Vis-à-vis interpreters who conceive of Matt 5–7 as simply unremitting in its demands, with no particular hint as to how they are to be met, Allison counters that this sort of view fails to understand four crucial portions of the discourse: 4:23–5:2, 5:3–12, 6:25–34, 7:7–11. From these segments of the SM, he deduces: “The God who demands is at the same time the Father who from day to day is with and for his children; he is a giver of gifts and supplies their every need.” Allison further points to Matt 4:23–5:2 as the lead-in to the SM, Jesus’ compassion on the multitudes.

Before the crowds hear the Messiah’s word they are the object of his compassion and healing. Having done nothing, nothing at all, they are benefitted. So grace comes before task, succor before demand, healing before imperative. The first act of the Messiah is not the imposition of his commandments but the giving of himself. Today’s command presupposes yesterday’s gift.

58. In this light, there is no need to press for an “antinomian” faction within the Matthean community, as per Barth, “Mathew’s Understanding,” 159–64. Obedience to Jesus’ words is simply expected as the sine qua non of inheriting the eschatological kingdom. Among others, Barth has been answered by Foster, Community, 144–54; James Davison, “Anomia and the Question of an Antinomian Polemic in Matthew,” JBL 104 (1985): 617–35; Graham N. Stanton, A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 47–49.
60. Ibid., 172.
62. Ibid. See further Luz, Theology of Matthew, 46–50.
Because the antitheses easily comprise a study of their own, including their position within the SM, the following comments must be confined to the purposes at hand. To begin, “antitheses” as a literary phenomenon are not unique to the SM. John Kampen has forged a link between them and Qumran. According to Kampen’s data, the protasis of the Matthean formulations has to do with a prior revelation, and the new understanding either supersedes the old or becomes the authoritative interpretation of it. The proposal to be argued in short order is that the new understanding supersedes the old.

Second, lying at the heart of the Antitheses is their exemplarity. In this regard, Luz’s discussion is much to the point. Luz explains that Jesus’ commandments frequently took the form of generalized propositions, which then had to be made concrete by his listeners. In the SM, Matthew heightens this aspect still further by linking general proposals with concrete examples, thus stressing the examples’ claim to general validity. The Antitheses as a whole serve as examples of love, and the demands of the central section of the SM are instances of “active behavior motivated by love in consonance with the Golden Rule (7:12).” Luz’s observations are certainly in accord with Matt 27:34–40 and argue for a qualitative understanding of the “better righteousness.” As for the Golden Rule, Luz continues, it imparts an elemental and universal character to all the directives of the SM. Conversely, these commandments offer a guide as to how the Rule is to be applied. The injunctions, “love your enemy” and “do for others what you would have them do for you,” make sense only in the concrete experiences of one’s own life. “It is precisely this concreteness that, in turn, makes the commandments of Sermon humane, transforming their upholders into truly free men and women rather than imposing excessive demands on them.”

This analysis is entirely perceptive. Instead of unrelenting demands that are beyond the pale of human ability, the antithesis provide specimens of the love that is “perfect” (5:48). On reading these requirements, especially the prohibition of lust, Luther famously threw up his hands in despair and concluded that the SM forms an “impossible ideal,” intended as a “praeparatio evangelica in that it reveals to man his impotence; by driving


64. John Kampen, “A Reexamination of the Relationship between Matthew 5:21–48 and the Dead Sea Scrolls” (SBLSP; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 36–44. Foster has provided a more detailed account, particularly as regards 4QMMT (Community, 80–93). In addition to the DSS, there are literary parallels in rabbinic texts. See Daube, Rabbinic Judaism, 55–62; Betz, Sermon, 206–7.


66. Luz, Theology of Matthew, 55.
him to despair it opens his eyes to the wonder of the mercy of God. 67 But if each of the antitheses is a concrete example of “love = the Golden Rule,” then even the radically demanding second antithesis (5:27–30) becomes “doable,” simply because a man will not objectify a woman, but rather he will exhibit toward her “perfect love,” as she is the image of God. If love may be roughly defined as seeking the highest good of others according to “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2), a man will not use a woman as a means of self-gratification but will, instead, regard her as a member of the human family, one with the God-given potential for the service of the Creator. From this perspective, the “better righteousness” is none other than the love that emulates the perfect love of God. 68

For these reasons, it strikes me as surprising that France takes Jesus’ “alternative rulings” to be so demanding that those who fully grasp his intention often declare them to be unworkable in the real world. For France, this portion of the SM poses formidable problems for those who would treat it as a “straightforward code of conduct.” Even more strongly, France thinks it is only the most sanguine of disciples, or those with little self-awareness, who can “comfortably attempt to put into practice this teaching,” which culminates in the insistence that our lives be as perfect as the heavenly Father. 69 Because the idea of perfection has been addressed above, I would simply note here that Matt 5:48 requires that our “love,” not “lives,” be perfect. But more importantly, what France terms a “straightforward code of conduct” Jesus calls doing the will of his Father (7:21) and “my words” (7:24), both of which are regarded as nonnegotiables in the final judgment. The same is true of 5:29–30. Even with full allowance made for the obvious element of hyperbole, Jesus is altogether serious that it is better to lose an eye and a hand than for the whole body (person) to be consigned to hell.

Third, a perennial problem in the interpretation of the SM is the recurring formula of 5:21–48, “You have heard that it was said to the people of old . . . but I say to you.” 70 The question is whether these expressions actually form antitheses or whether the latter member of the pair provides a complement to the former. In answering, it must be recognized that the bulk of the antitheses is directed at the Torah itself (respectively, vv. 21–26, 27–30, 31–32, 38–42), and in one instance the Torah as abused by tradition (vv. 33–37), with the final one taking on a straight piece of tradition (vv. 43–48). In my estimation, the very “antithetical” makeup of the language—ἡκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη . . . ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν—tells the whole tale. 71 In every

68. Betz writes that the SM regards ethical relationships as instances of “neighborhood” (πλησίον), the key concept of the love-command (Sermon, 205).
69. France, Matthew, 195.
70. Luz points out that ἡκούσατε, if rooted in rabbinic usage, can be understood in the sense of “receive as tradition” (Matthew 1–7, 229–30). However, this identification is called into question by Guelich, who maintains that “you have heard” is simply an expression of the common Jewish experience of hearing the law read and expounded in the synagogue (Sermon, 181–82).
71. On ἐγὼ in Matthew, see Levison, “Better Righteousness,” 175–76.
instance, Jesus makes a pronouncement, and the pronouncement marks a significant alteration of what was commonly believed and practiced. The things spoken to “the people of old” (τοῖς ἀρχαίοις) are identified with the preeschatological era, before the advent of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, by contrast, occupies a place within the epoch of fulfillment (cf. Mark 1:15), and his words constitute the final form of what God has to say (cf. Heb 1:2a). Matthew, in other words, represents Jesus’ teaching as surpassing all instruction—scriptural or otherwise—that came before Him.

Betz engages the quest for parallels with “but I say to you.” He concludes that there are not any, apart from the possible rabbinic formula “but you must say,” that introduce a substitute for a doctrine being refuted. Yet there is an outstanding difference between the two: tone and authority. Not only is there the first person, “I say,” but also “to you” is lacking in the rabbinic version. “The tone is not academic but final, prophetic, maybe somewhat defiant. Nor is there any reasoning. The correct attitude is simply stated with no argument or a minori ad maius, or the like.” Davies and Allison concur. The parallel between Matthew and the rabbinic texts breaks down with the implicitly Christological ἐγώ and the fact that Jesus does not support his interpretations by appeals to Scripture. Larry W. Hurtado also agrees: “The apodictic way that Jesus here specifies right behavior, and the repeatedly emphatic ‘I’ with which he speaks in the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount, combine to make the teaching given in the discourse a profound statement of Jesus’ authority and unique significance for the author and intended readers.” No wonder the SM concludes with

72. Banks observes that ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω is not particularly distinctive, as it can be paralleled elsewhere. But, in its present context, “it gains a new significance through its associations with the unique instructions that it introduces, and raises the question of the identity of the one who has uttered them” (Jesus and the Law, 202). Levison translates δέ as “and,” thereby arguing that the antitheses are not actually antithetical, but rather Jesus anchors his teaching in a continuous relationship with the law (“Better Righteousness,” 174). However, without intending to, Levison effectively diminishes the “clout” of ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω. A certain continuity between the SM and the Torah is easily demonstrable, but equally demonstrable is the rather stark discontinuity of most of the antitheses vis-à-vis the law.

73. Grammatically, τοῖς ἀρχαίοις could be instrumental: “by the ancients.” But because the second member of the antitheses is uniformly “I say to you,” it makes more sense that Jesus is contrasting two groups of recipients: the ancients and those to whom he is speaking. It is of interest that the full formula ἠκούσατε ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις occurs only in vv. 21 and 33. The variations—ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη (vv. 27, 38, 43) and ἐρρέθη δέ (v. 31)—are, it would seem, shorthand for the longer formula.

74. Luz remarks that the Reformation introduced a new tone in the study of the antitheses. That is to say, Jesus is in agreement with the OT and opposed to its Jewish-Pharisaic interpretation. For Calvin in particular, Christ is not a new lawgiver. My argument is to the contrary: the Messiah is precisely that, a “new lawgiver.” France is of the opinion that Jesus’ dialogue partner is not the OT but the law as currently and sometimes misleadingly understood and applied (Matthew 1–7, 196). That will work with antitheses four and six but not with the others.

75. Betz, Sermon, 208, tying into Daube, Rabbinic Judaism, 55–62.
76. Betz, Sermon, 209, citing Daube, Rabbinic Judaism, 58.
77. Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1.506.
78. Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 334.
the astonishment of the crowds that Jesus spoke with authority and not like one of their scribes (7:28–29).

The identity of τοῖς ἀρχαίοις is germane to this discussion. Betz’s detailed account of the phrase includes rabbinic, Philonic, and Greco-Roman parallels.79 As to the rabbinic, the literature demonstrates that “the people of old” can be biblical authorities or, from a later perspective, the early rabbis.80 Philo associates οἱ ἀρχαίοι with the law. He distinguishes between the general and the special laws, the former being the originals and the latter copies. The originals are embodied in the men of old, whom Philo praises in Abr. 4–8. The special laws are first of all those of the Decalogue, which have been transmitted by scholars: “These are the explanations handed down to us from the old-time studies of divinely gifted men who made deep research into the writings of Moses” (Spec. Leg. 1.8). In the Greco-Roman sources, Cicero and the Stoics looked to the veteres or maiores as the first interpreters of civil law. Of the three, Philo comes the closest to Jesus’ οἱ ἀρχαίοι. But the fact is, we are not told precisely who they were or just how old is “old.” Reasoning from the text itself, antitheses one, two, three, and five are clearly references to Torah, making the “ancients” the recipients of the law at Sinai. The others, four and six, entail traditional applications of the law. In these cases, τοῖς ἀρχαίοις at least implies that the traditions in question were relatively long standing and perhaps that the synagogue was accustomed to hearing the law in the guise of these halakoth.81 In any event, as suggested above, “the people of old” are the preeschatological recipients of the law, including its various interpretations and implementations. Accordingly, with “I say to you,” Jesus claims that his teaching has rendered all that went before obsolete, both biblical and traditional. For this reason, the issue is not that Jesus “opposed” or “contradicted” the law but that he sets it aside in favor of his words (7:24), once “heaven and earth” have run their course.

In the fourth place, there is the question of “internal” and “external” in Jesus’ implementation of the commandments for his community. Although these categories pertain only to the first and second Antitheses, a great deal of debate has centered around whether he introduces an inner or “spiritual” dimension absent from the law of Moses or provides a commentary on its original intention. I should think the latter is closer to the truth, given that the Hebrew Scriptures themselves recognize the element of internal holiness. Of many examples, in the Decalogue a straight line can be drawn from the tenth commandment back to the first, making covetousness the equivalent of idolatry (as confirmed by Col 3:5). It is certainly eye catching that the last commandment prohibits an Israelite from coveting his neighbor’s wife. Moreover, Deut 10:16, 30:6, as echoed by Jer 4:4, are emphatic that the heart must be circumcised, not only the flesh. David’s penitential

80. Texts are catalogued by Str-B, 1.253–54.
81. If halakoth such as these are equivalent to “the tradition of the fathers” (Matt 15:1–20; Mark 7:1–23; Gal 1:14) and “the tradition of humans” (Mark 7:9, 13), then οἱ ἀρχαίοι are equivalent to οἱ πατέρες.
psalms, 32 and 51, are the transcript of a soul that desires to be washed and cleansed from sin. Psalm 119 is replete with David’s longing for God and his delight in the law. The whole of the Psalm is epitomized by v. 9: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”

Against this background, Jesus’ handling of the sixth and seventh commandments is not particularly novel. A godly Israelite must have known intuitively that the logical outcome of hatred is murder, especially on a reading of Gen 4:4–8, and that eying a woman for the explicit purpose of lust (πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτὴν) is tantamount to adultery. These commandments taken by themselves bespeak physical acts, but their place in the covenant life of Israel strongly suggests that their employment was to comprehend the thought-life as well. If so, it may be inferred that Jesus addresses these injunctions because a number of his contemporaries were tending to confine their scope to literal and overt acts and were taking false assurance that self-restraint on the level of the “flesh” was sufficient to satisfy the law’s obligations. But in the kingdom of heaven, things are different.

Finally, there is the presence of the “Christological ἐγώ” in the antitheses. In a nutshell, Matthew exhibits a Christology “from above.” The uniqueness of Jesus is exemplified from the beginning by his infancy and temptation narratives, in which the evangelist portrays him as a person to be worshiped in his own right. Just as impressive is a comparison of Matt 5:2 with 4:4: “Every word that comes out through the mouth of God.” Gun-


84. David’s lust after Bathsheba is represented by the author of 2 Samuel (11:2) as the source of his adultery with her. Banks points to rabbinic texts that denounce illicit desire (Jesus and the Law, 190), though these sources postdate Matthew. More to the point is Pss. Sol. 4:4–5b: “His eyes are on every woman indiscriminately. . . . With his eyes he speaks to every woman of illicit affairs” (emphasis added).

85. In this specific regard, the thesis of Levison’s “Better Righteousness” is apropos: there is a “responsible initiative” to be taken on the part of Jesus’ hearers, one that constitutes a righteousness better than that to which they were accustomed (e.g., 191). There is also Levison’s “Responsible Initiative in Matthew 5:21–48,” ExpT 98 (1987): 231–34.

dry comments: “When he opens his mouth, therefore, his disciples hear nothing less than the Word of God. To make this point clear, Matthew will repeatedly conform Jesus’ phraseology to the OT Word of God.” Consequently, ἐγώ is far more than an everyday first-person-singular pronoun. It is, in fact, a signpost to totalitarian claims on the part of Jesus. In combination with other “I” sayings in Matthew (5:17, 11:28), along with Mark (2:17) and Luke (12:49, 19:10), he claims authority over the Torah and all forms of tradition. This authority is further confirmed by the “amen” of 5:18.

It . . . becomes apparent that it is not so much Jesus’ stance towards the Law that he [Matthew] is concerned to depict; it is how the Law stands with regard to him, as the one who brings it to fulfilment and to whom all attention must now be directed. For Matthew, then, it is not the question of Jesus’ relation to the Law that is in doubt but rather its relation to him.

Several commentators have picked up on the Christological features of the antitheses. Luz’s observations are especially useful. According to Luz, the decisive question is not how much more authority Jesus claims than a rabbi or apocalyptic teacher. Rather, how he claims his authority is crucial. That is to say, he appeals not to anyone else’s authority, not even God’s, but exclusively to his own. Says Luz, “his authority resides in what he himself says. Behind his proclamation of God’s will is his total personal involvement.” In the same vein, for Hagner, Jesus expects a new and higher kind of righteousness, one that rests upon the presence of the eschatological kingdom. This δικαιοσύνη finds its definition and content in his definitive and authoritative exposition of the law. “Jesus’ remarkable use of the ‘but I say to you’ formula is to be explained by his identity as the messianic bringer of the kingdom . . . It is the Messiah’s interpretation of the Torah that is finally authoritative.” Turner likewise discerns that as the law’s “ultimate authoritative interpreter,” Jesus demands a “higher righteousness than that taught and followed by the religious leaders.” Because their practice of the law does not regard him as its fulfillment, it is deficient. Therefore, Christology is the foundation of Christian ethics: “Jesus, the one to whom the law points, emphasizes the higher righteousness

87. Gundry, Matthew, 67.
89. Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding,” 242. Meier concurs: “In Mt, the law-question is a question of salvation-history, prophetic fulfillment, realized eschatology, and high Christology. No one who misses that point can interpret 5:17–18 correctly” (Law and History, 89).
90. Luz, Matthew, 1–7, 231; idem, Theology of Matthew, 57–58; Witherington, Christology of Jesus, 181. Contra Betz, Sermon, 210–11, who simply dismisses Jesus’ messianic consciousness for no substantial reason. In this gospel, the disciples have only one καθηγητής—ὁ Χριστός.
92. Ibid., 111.
that is the true ethical intent of the law and that enables the disciples to enter the kingdom.” I. Howard Marshall’s comment on Luke 6:1–5 applies to Matthew’s antitheses as well: “Jesus claims an authority tantamount to that of God with respect to the interpretation of the law.”

DOES JESUS INTERPRET OR SUPERSEDE THE LAW?

The point of departure here is the outlook of scholars such as Hagner, Turner, and Marshall that Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of the Mosaic law. All are entirely correct that the antitheses display a very high Christology. But does it follow that Jesus’ messianic authority is exercised as an expositor of the Torah? Przybylski is quite certain that this is the case. Assuming the significance of “perfection” as “doing more than others,” Przybylski maintains that both the disciples and the scribes and Pharisees possess righteousness insofar as both groups live according to the demands of the law. However, this does not mean that their righteousness is identical, because Jesus requires that the δικαιοσύνη of the disciples must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. In so doing, they are to live not according to a different law but according to a different interpretation of the law, “an extremely meticulous and strict interpretation which appears to be based on a principle related to making a fence around the Torah.” Yet apart from the anachronism of “making a fence around the Torah” (‘Aboth 1.1), Przybylski’s argument suffers both from a misapprehension of τέλειος and a failure to distinguish one commandment from another in the antitheses. In fact, a common problem among scholars is an inclination to speak of “the law” generically without recognizing that the phrase is too broad and that the discourse needs to be more nuanced. Allison’s breakdown of the antitheses is illustrative:

Moses forbade murder
Jesus forbids anger;
Moses condemned adultery
Jesus condemns the adulterous thought;
Moses permitted divorce
Jesus restricts that permission;
Moses gave rules for taking oaths
Jesus rules that oaths should not be taken at all;

93. Turner, Matthew, 163–64.
96. Przybylski, Righteousness, 86.
97. Ibid., 87. To the same effect are Overman, Matthew’s Gospel, 86–89; Stanton, Gospel, 300–301; Philip Sigal, The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth according to the Gospel of Matthew (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 20.
98. Luz, for example, writes that Jesus’ Antitheses mean for him a heightening of “the Torah” and by no means its abolition (Theology of Matthew, 57).
Moses recommended the precept, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.”
Jesus denies the precept’s application to personal disputes;
Moses required love of neighbor
Jesus requires love of the enemy, in effect, love of all.99

From this simple comparison, it should be evident that there is a difference among the respective antitheses. Respecting one and two, I should think that Jesus draws out the intended significance of the sixth and seventh commandments for his generation. Attitudes associated with murder and adultery inherent in these commands were actually clarified by the wider scope of the Scriptures, and now he makes these explicit. I would submit that the same is true of six. He challenges the conventional wisdom that Lev 19:18b, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” logically entails hatred of one’s enemies.100 All one has to do is read the preceding sentences: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people” (vv. 17–18a). The comeback would have been that one’s enemy is not one’s neighbor, but with Jesus an argument such as this would have never have flown. As regards three and five, it should be apparent enough that Jesus does not “interpret” the law and impose on the disciples essentially Mosaic stipulations. Quite the contrary, he makes alterations to the commandments that would have been deeply disturbing to many of his fellow Jews.101 Who is he to take on Moses in such an up-front manner?! In four, he addresses traditional applications of oath-taking.

Does Jesus, then, interpret or supersede the law? The answer is both, depending on the commandments in question.102 The important thing is that in both cases he utters the Christological ἐγώ, and that is the end of the matter: his authority resides in what he himself has to say. Yet his pronouncements are not arbitrary, because they correspond to a dramatic transformation of history. With the emergence of a newly reconfigured people of God (the “my church” of Matt 16:18), heaven and earth pass

100. Meier demonstrates the absence of “love your enemy” in Second Temple literature (Marginal Jew, 537–44).
101. Pace Moo, “Jesus and Authority,” 28, Jesus was in fact a “sensation-causing revolutionary,” who did not adhere to the law entirely in his own life. He is the one who declared all foods to be clean (Mark 7:14–23), touched a coffin and a corpse (Luke 7:14, 8:49–56), lepers (Matt 8:2–4, Luke 5:13), and ill persons (Matt 8:14–15), who allowed himself to be touched by a woman with a flow of blood without protest (Matt 9:20–22, Luke 8:43–48), as well as the diseased (Matt 14:35–36, Luke 6:18–19) and “a sinner” (Luke 7:39). He broke the sabbath (Mark 2:23–27, John 5:10–18), forbade a man to bury his father (Matt 8:21–22), pronounced forgiveness of sins immediately and directly apart from the sacrificial cultus (Mark 2:5–12), and ate with sinners (Luke 15:1–2). It was for reasons such as these that he was denounced as the reprobate of Deut 21:18–23 (= Matt 11:19, Luke 7:34) and nailed to the tree as one under God’s curse (Joseph B. Modica, “Jesus as Glutton and Drunkard,” in Who Do My Opponents Say I Am? An Investigation of the Accusations against the Historical Jesus [ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica; LNTS; London: T. & T. Clark, 2008], 50–73).
away, and the kingdom of heaven has arrived as a new covenant set within
the cadre of a new creation.\textsuperscript{103} Therefore, in a manner analogous to Heb
7:12, when there is a change of covenant, there is necessarily a change of
law as well. For this reason, Jesus and his words supersede Moses and the
Torah, as is only appropriate for the “eschatological now.”\textsuperscript{104} Because a new
Moses has ascended “the mountain of teaching,”\textsuperscript{105} the original Moses must
give way to former’s declarations of the latter-day will of God.\textsuperscript{106} Even
in the instances of the sixth and seventh commandments, these are now
incorporated into the body of his teaching and have become part of his
law.\textsuperscript{107} Allison puts it so well: “Jesus is the Moses-like Messiah who pro-
claims the eschatological will of God on a mountain typologically equated
with Sinai.”\textsuperscript{108} This conclusion is in keeping with the thesis of N. T. Wright
that Jesus takes the story of Israel and redraws it around himself and his
followers.\textsuperscript{109}

Correspondingly, the problem with the “old righteousness” of the
scribes and Pharisees is that it blinds one to God’s presence in the redemp-
tive activity of Jesus the Messiah.\textsuperscript{110} Deines and Thielman state the point
so capably. According to Deines,

in the end, the question is where the foundation for the righteous-
ness that is valid in the kingdom of God lies: in the Torah or in the

\textsuperscript{103} The question arises, are the Messiah’s words more demanding than Moses’ words?
Davies and Allison (Matthew, 1:498) answer in the affirmative. With the possible exception of
divorce, I would say no. But in view of the case argued herein, the question is actually beside
the point. The appropriate query is “Are the Messiah’s words designed to regulate life in the
new creation?” The answer is yes.

\textsuperscript{104} See further Banks, Jesus and the Law, 203.

\textsuperscript{105} Terence L. Donaldson, Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology (JSNTSup
8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 105–21. Banks objects that the ideas of new Moses and new
law obviate the transcendent nature of Jesus’ teaching and place too much emphasis on the
law (Jesus and the Law, 229–34). But that is a non sequitur and too readily dismisses Matthew’s
Moses-Christ typology.

\textsuperscript{106} I should clarify that those who recognize a temporal element in the Sinai covenant
frequently invoke the term abrogate. But I prefer “supersede” because of the connotations at-
tached to abrogate, i.e., disregard, disrespect, and rejection of the law as irrelevant in salv-
tion history: Jesus came to “fulfill” the law, not to “dissolve,” “dismantle,” or “deconstruct” it
(καταλύω), as though it had no heilsgeschichtlich importance. See the excellent remarks of Deines,
“Not the Law,” 83; idem, Gerechtigkeit, 269–80.

\textsuperscript{107} Schreiner rightly maintains that there are elements of continuity and discontinuity
in Matthew’s presentation of the law (New Testament Theology, 626). But my point is that, even
where there is continuity, those elements retained from Moses are now part and parcel of the
law of the Messiah. Their association with Moses is henceforth a secondary issue; the Torah of
Israel is no longer paradigmatic for the community of the new age.

\textsuperscript{108} Allison, New Moses, 185 (and 190). Allison continues with the notice that Matthew
associated Jesus’ office as a teacher with his status as Messiah, with references to Jewish texts
(ibid., 185–86). Contra Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding,” 153–59. Opinions pro and con are
surveyed by Loader, Jesus’ Attitude, 137–54.

\textsuperscript{109} N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God
2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

\textsuperscript{110} Guelich, Sermon, 171; idem, “The Antitheses of Matthew V. 21–48: Traditional and/
or Redactional?” NTS 22 (1976): 457.
work and word of the Messiah. Because of that, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees misses the goal from now on, for they do not acknowledge Jesus as the one who fulfills the Scriptures and who makes the eschatological righteousness that is demanded now, available through his messianic status.111

As for Thielman: “Because the scribes and Pharisees refuse to acknowledge Jesus’ approach to the Mosaic law, they are mired in conformity to a penultimate ethic. Jesus has moved beyond them to an eschatological ethic that expresses the law’s ultimate concerns. His disciples, he says, must do the same.”112

**Summary**

The righteousness “better” than that of the scribes and Pharisees is to be assessed in terms of the duality of Christology and eschatology. The stage for Matt 5:20 is set by 5:17–19. In response to those who perceived Jesus’ attitude toward the law to be so out of step with contemporary thought that he seemed to be disrespectful of the Word of God, he insists that he has come to bring the law and the prophets to their eschatological realization, not to reduce them to nothing. Until heaven and earth pass away, the most minute element of the Torah will remain intact, “until all is accomplished.” However, in principle, heaven and earth are set to pass away with the apocalyptic events of Christ’s death and resurrection. Once that occurs, a new covenant, set within the frame of a new creation, will be regulated by the law of the Messiah, a body of instruction appropriate for this new state of affairs.113

Matthew 5:20 itself insists that there must be a righteousness superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees. This “better righteousness” is qualitative in nature, with the stress on the upright lifestyle of the members of the kingdom of heaven. Such δικαιοσύνη is the *sine qua non* of entrance into the finalized manifestation of this kingdom. It is the ensuing

111. Deines, “Not the Law,” 81. A bit earlier, Deines quite strikingly writes that Jesus enjoins on his disciples “the outflow of messianic righteousness for the kingdom of God” (ibid., 78), and that it is appropriate to summarize the Matthean concept of righteousness as “Jesus-Righteousness” (ibid., 81). Also Deines, *Gerechtigkeit*, 433–34; Meier, *Law and History*, 89; Thielman, *Theology of New Testament*, 89.


113. Thielman demonstrates that in Matthew Jesus is the embodiment of the law and Wisdom (*Theology of New Testament*, 89–91). He concludes: “Just as Jesus’ life fulfills the prophets’ expectations for the Messiah and just as Jesus’ teaching perfects the Mosaic law, so Jesus himself has replaced the Mosaic law as the perfect revelation of God’s will” (ibid., 91). (Thielman’s insights are complemented by Dale C. Allison, “The Embodiment of God’s Will: Jesus in Matthew,” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* [ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 117–32.) Beforehand, M. Jack Suggs maintained that for Matthew Jesus is Wisdom-Torah, yet still advocated (wrongly) that the law is permanent (*Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew’s Gospel* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970], 114–20).
antitheses of Matt 5:21–48 that clarify the precise quality of this righteousness. In a nutshell, each of the antitheses is an instance of “perfect” love (5:48) and corresponds to the Golden Rule (7:12), both of which are the summation of the law and the prophets (22:34–40).¹¹⁴ None of this would have come as a particular surprise to Jesus’ hearers. What must have been stunning, however, was his boldness in setting his teaching in contrast to what was received by the people of old—“but I say to you.” The reference is to both the law of Moses and the traditions that had sprung up between Moses and himself. In both cases, his law supersedes all that has gone before. Somewhat crudely stated, the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven is “better” that of the scribes and Pharisees because Jesus says it is; and he says it is because the age of fulfillment has arrived in him.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴. Stanton writes that for Matthew the Golden Rule and the love commandments express the very essence of Scripture: “These sayings of Jesus (and his whole coming) are a lens through which his followers now read the law and the prophets” (Gospel, 304).

¹¹⁵. See now the excellent overview of “Jesus as the Alpha and Omega of New Testament Thought” by Ben Witherington, The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 63–170. According to Witherington, “Jesus believed that the coming of the eschatological saving reign involved the deconstruction of the old paradigms and prejudices and boundaries” (ibid., 93).