

OBEY GOD'S LAW
Matthew 5:17-20
The Commands of Christ – Week 5
By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The state of Louisiana has some strange laws (<https://www.morrisbart.com/blog/strange-louisiana-laws/>):
 - i. It's illegal to snore unless all the bedroom windows are closed and securely locked.
 - ii. Mourners at a wake may not eat more than three sandwiches.
 - iii. Snakes are not allowed within 200 yards of the Mardi Gras parade route.
 - iv. You may not tie an alligator to a fire hydrant.
 - v. You can't gargle in public.
 - vi. You can't wear a goatee in public without a paying for a special license.
 - vii. You can't dare a friend to lay down on railroad tracks that are owned by someone else. But if they own the railroad tracks, you can.
 - viii. If you're a woman, you can't drive in New Orleans unless your husband is waving a red flag in front of your car at the time.
2. These are all examples of real laws in Louisiana, and they are silly. We can laugh at them. And we can ignore them, because they are outdated and no police officer will arrest you for breaking them.
3. Today I want to talk to you about God's law. And according to Jesus, God's law is not silly. God's law is extremely important. God's law should be taken very seriously. God's law should not be ignored. We need to diligently learn it and keep it. We're going to study what Christ thought about God's law today.
4. This is week five of our sermon series on the commands of Christ. Right before Jesus ascended He gave the church its mission (Mt 28:19-20): To make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and then teaching them to obey His commands. In this series we are studying the commands of Christ.

II. TEXT

1. **Matthew 5:17-20** "17 Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven."

III. BIG IDEA

1. The big idea of this passage is to obey God's law. To uphold God's law. To honor God's law. To take God's law very seriously.
2. Let's look more closely at Christ's words.
3. **Matthew 5:17** "Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill."
4. Why did Jesus say this?
 - i. Some people criticized Jesus for being a sinner. He was criticized for being a glutton and a sinner, and for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. So, Jesus is responding to this criticism with the strongest possible words. He didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And He commands everyone to do the same.
5. What did Jesus mean by "the Law or the Prophets"?
 - i. This refers to the Old Testament. The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, or five books, is the Law. And the rest of the Old Testament is called the Prophets. Jesus didn't come to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it.
6. What did Jesus mean that He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets in several ways.
 - i. He perfectly fulfilled the law. He was sinless. He never broke the Ten Commandments. His disciples lived with Him for three years, and they said He never sinned (1 Pt 1:22-23; 1 Jn 3:5).
 - ii. He fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. The prophets foretold of a coming king of Israel whose reign would never end. The Jews referred to Him as the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. The Old Testament contains nearly three hundred Messianic prophecies that all find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Hundreds of years before His birth it was predicted that the Messiah would be born of a virgin (Is 7:14), reach out to both Jews and Gentiles (Is 42:6), be rejected by the Jews (Ps 118:22), perform miracles (Is 53:4), be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zech 11:12-13), die for our sins (Is 53:6), His hands and feet would be pierced (Ps 22:16), He would be buried in a rich man's grave (Is 53:9), be a descendant of David, that He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2), etc.
 - iii. He fulfilled the demands of the law. Most importantly, Christ fulfilled the law by His death. Because we have disobeyed God's law, the penalty is death (Rm 6:23). The law stipulated that you could not be forgiven without a sacrifice (Lev 17:11). So, Jesus died on the cross for our sins, fulfilling the demands of the law against us (Col 2:14). When Jesus died on the cross, His last words were, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). He actually said a Greek word, *tetelestai*, which was an accounting word that means "paid in full." When Jesus died, He paid the full debt that we owed according to the law so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God. Jesus came to fulfill, not to abolish the law.

7. **Matthew 5:18** “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished.”
 - i. Jesus said that not until the world ends will the law pass away – any part of it.
 - ii. The KJV says not “one jot or one tittle” will pass away.
 - iii. The Greek word for “smallest letter” is literally the Greek letter *iota*. It is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet. Have you heard someone say, “I don’t care one iota.” In other words, they don’t care even the smallest amount.
 - iv. The phrase “one stroke of a letter” refers to the serif on a letter. There are two main types of fonts -- those that have serifs, and those that don’t. Sans serif means without a serif. A serif is the small line protruding from the end of a letter. For example, Times New Roman is a serif font, and Arial is a sans serif font. If you look closely at these two fonts, you will notice that Times New Roman has little lines protruding from the letters. Those little tiny lines, or strokes of a letter, are serifs. That’s what Jesus was talking about.
 - v. Jesus said, not one iota, not even one serif of the law will pass away until the end of the world.
 - vi. Jesus is saying in the strongest way possible that we need to uphold the law.
8. **Matthew 5:19** “Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”
 - i. The kingdom of heaven refers to the Christians who are a part of God’s kingdom.
 - ii. The Jews believed that some commands were greater than others. And that’s true. The command to not murder is greater than the command to not lie. The command to love God is greater than the command to love your neighbor. So in one sense, some commands are greater than others.
 - iii. So, Jesus is saying, the greatest Christians, those who are most pleasing to God, are those who keep God’s commands and teach others to do the same. But the worst Christians, those who displease God, are those who break God’s commands – even the least important of the commands. Once again, Jesus is emphasizing the importance of upholding God’s law.
9. But that brings up an important question. What does Jesus mean by “law”? What does He mean by “commands”? Is He talking about all the dietary and sacrificial laws? Here Christ says that not one iota or one serif of the law will pass away. But later in the New Testament it says that Christ is the end of law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rm 10:4), and that we “are not under law but under grace” (Rm 6:14). How do we reconcile these two? When Jesus speaks of God’s and God’s commands, He is referring to God’s moral law represented by the Ten

Commandments. The Law (first five books in the Old Testament) contains three kinds of laws.

IV. THREE KINDS OF LAWS

1. The ceremonial law.
 - i. This is also called the ritual law; it related to Israel's worship. It included laws about how to present offerings and sacrifices, Sabbaths and other holy days to observe, how to dress, how to cut your hair, circumcision, things you couldn't touch (such as a dead body), things you couldn't eat, etc.
2. The civil law.
 - i. This is also called the judicial law, or the political law. These laws applied to Israel's national situation when they were a theocracy. This would include laws about slavery, marriage and divorce, lending money, and penalties for breaking the law.
3. The moral law.
 - i. The moral law is God's will for human behavior toward God and each other. An example would be the Ten Commandments.
 - ii. The New Testament teaches us that the ceremonial law was only a shadow of the good things to come (Col 2:16-17; Heb 10:1). It all symbolized the gravity of sin and the cure for sin – the shedding of blood. When Christ died on the cross, He was the one true sacrifice, and through faith in Him we are reconciled to God. Since the time of Christ, the ceremonial law is no longer binding upon Christians. We don't have to limit ourselves to kosher foods and keep up with all the Jewish holidays, for example.
 - iii. As well, the nation of Israel as God's theocracy ceased to exist after Christ died with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, and the Jews were scattered to the surrounding nations. So, the civil and political laws are not binding upon Christians. Even the current nation of Israel doesn't follow them.
 - iv. However, the moral law is based on God's unchanging character, so it never passes away. When Jesus said that not one jot or tittle of the law will pass away from law until all things are possible, He was talking about God's moral law. When He said that whoever obeys and teaches these commands will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, He was talking about God's moral law.
 - v. We see this in the New Testament.
 - vi. **Colossians 2:16-17** "16 Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ."
 - vii. Paul was making it very clear that Christians no longer need to keep the ceremonial laws.
 - viii. Or take the issue of circumcision. According to the ceremonial law, ever since the time of Abraham all Jewish boys has to be circumcised on the eighth day

(Lk 2:21; Acts 7:8). Next to keeping the Sabbath, this was probably the most important ceremonial law in the Bible. Yet look at what Paul said.

- ix. **Galatians 6:15** “For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation.”
- x. Circumcision means nothing? What a statement! Paul was saying that now that Christ has come and provided the once-for-all perfect sacrifice, the ceremonial law has been fulfilled and is no longer necessary.
- xi. However, when it comes to the moral laws, such as the Ten Commandments, Jesus and the apostles upheld it and demanded that it be followed. Christians must avoid idolatry, they must honor their parents, and avoid murder, and stealing, and lying, and adultery, etc. These laws reflect the unchanging character of God and will never pass away.
- xii. When Jesus commanded us to keep and honor and uphold God’s law, He was talking about God’s moral law.
- xiii. That brings up another question. How do we know which laws in the Old Testament are the still-binding moral laws? Because they aren’t all labeled “moral,” “ceremonial,” or “civil.” We know from the New Testament. The laws that the New Testament upholds are the eternal moral laws that we must uphold.
- xiv. What Jesus was doing in this passage was addressing two wrong views of God’s law.

V. TWO WRONG VIEWS OF THE LAW

1. Antinomianism.

- i. “Anti” means against, and “nomos” is the Greek word for law. Antinomianism literally means “against law.”
- ii. It’s also called licentiousness or libertinism.
- iii. **R.C. Sproul** describes it well. “Some believe that they no longer are obligated to keep the moral law of God because Jesus has freed them from it. They insist that grace not only frees us from the curse of God's law but delivers us from any obligation to keep God's law. Grace then become a license for disobedience.” R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 263
- iv. The Bible teaches that salvation is by grace through faith, and not by works. Some conclude that since we don’t have to earn our salvation by being good, then we don’t have to be good. God’s law is unimportant.
- v. The New Testament teaches against this mindset. It repeatedly tells us to pursue holiness (1 Pt 1:14-16), to put sin to death (Col 3:5-11), and to imitate Christ in our character, conduct and convictions (Eph 5:1; 1 Jn 2:6).
- vi. Far from being unimportant, the Protestant Reformers taught that God’s moral law has three purposes:
 - 1. The civil use.
 - a. God uses the law to restrain evil in society.

- b. When people hear God’s law and that He will hold them accountable, and when the civil government punishes people for breaking the law, it serves as restraint on evil in society. It motivates people who otherwise don’t care about honoring God to modify their behavior.
 - c. In this way the law somewhat protects the righteous from the unjust.
- 2. The pedagogical use.
 - a. The word “pedagogy” means teaching.
 - b. The laws serves as a teacher in that it helps us to see our sinfulness and need for a Savior.
 - c. The more we compare our lives to God’s law, the more sinful we appear, and the more we realize that we are in danger of God’s wrath, and we need a Savior.
 - d. If you think you are a good person, it’s because you have a very limited understanding of God’s law.
 - e. Romans 3 says that all have sinned; no one is righteous, not even one.
- 3. The normative use.
 - a. The third use of the law is to teach us what is pleasing to God. It teaches us God’s character and how He wants us to live.
 - b. Some people that Christianity is not just a bunch of do’s and don’ts; it’s not just a list of rules. That is true. Christianity is more than a bunch of rules. At its heart is a relationship with Jesus Christ. But it is not less than rules. There are rules. There are laws. And it is very important to Jesus that we obey God’s law.
 - c. **R.C. Sproul** wrote, “Christianity is not a religion that sanctions the idea that everything has the right to do what is right in his own eyes. On the contrary, Christianity never gives anyone the 'right' to do what is wrong.” RC Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 264

2. Pharisaism.

- i. The second wrong view of the law that Jesus addresses is called Pharisaism. Another word for this is legalism. It is called Pharisaism because it is named after the Pharisees during the time of Christ.
- ii. **Matthew 5:20** “For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”
- iii. This is an astounding statement because the Pharisees were highly respected among the Jews as the most holy men; the most righteous; the most devoted

to the law. To His audience, being more righteous than the Pharisees was impossible. What did Jesus mean?

- iv. Jesus reserved His harshest criticism for the Pharisees. An entire chapter, Matthew 23, is Jesus scolding the Pharisees. He publicly called the hypocrites, children of hell, blind fools, whitewashed tombs, blind guides. He told people not to follow their example. He told them they were going to hell. They were the ones who plotted Christ's death. So Jesus wasn't saying that we need to out-Pharisee the Pharisees. He was saying that our righteousness – our obedience to the law – must not be like the Pharisees.
- v. The Pharisees made at least four mistakes in their pursuit of obedience.

vi. The Four Mistakes of the Pharisees

1. They obeyed God's law to earn their way to heaven.

- a. They believed that they could earn their way to heaven, and worse, that they were deserving of heaven.
- b. In a parable (Lk 18:11-12) Jesus told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray; one was a tax collector, and the other was a Pharisee. The Pharisee thanked God that he was so righteous, unlike the sinful tax collector. But the tax collector didn't even look up to heaven. He just said, "God have mercy on me." The Pharisees thought they were righteous; they didn't see how sinful they were. And they thought that righteousness would earn them a ticket to heaven.
- c. The Bible says the only way you can earn heaven is by being perfect. Unfortunately, all of us, even the Pharisees, are extremely sinful, so it is impossible to earn your way to heaven.
- d. The first mistake of the Pharisees was that they misused the law. They tried to use the law as a means to get to heaven when the law can't help us with that. We don't obey God's law to earn salvation, but out of gratitude for salvation. Not to earn salvation, but to please the God who has freely saved us.
- e. To receive salvation we trust in Christ, and then as a result of salvation we pursue obedience out of gratitude.

2. They obeyed God's law to be praised by men.

- a. **Matthew 23:5** "They do everything to be seen by others."
- b. They gave to charity, fasted, and prayed so that others would see them and compliment them (Mt 6:1, 5, 16).
- c. The Bible tells us that we should do good works for the glory of God (Mt 5:16). Not so people will praise us, but so they will praise God.

3. Their obedience was only outward.

- a. **Matthew 15:8** “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”
- b. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs, which looks beautiful on the outside, but on the inside is filled with death and impurity. In the same way, the Pharisees looked righteous on the outside, but on the inside they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mt 23:27-28).
- c. God doesn't only demand right actions, but right motives, and right thoughts. Not just that we avoid murder, but that we avoid anger, and hatred, and unforgiveness. Not just that we avoid adultery, but that we avoid lust. Not just that we avoid stealing, but that we avoid greed and stinginess. Not just that we avoid lying, but that we avoid hypocrisy. He wants us to be pure in our actions and in our hearts and minds (Mt 5:8). Not just when people are watching, but knowing that God is always watching.

4. Their obedience was to man-made rules.

- a. They were more devoted to man-made rules than to God's law.
- b. The Jews believe that God gave Moses two sets of laws. He gave him the written law, which we know as the Pentateuch, but he also gave him the oral law. The Jews say that the written law contains 613 laws. There are 248 positive commands, one for every part of the human body; and 365 negative commands, one for every day of the year. The oral law was God's explanation of how to apply the law. They believe that Moses passed this down to Joshua, who then passed it down by memory from generation to generation. The oral law contained thousands of extra rules on top of the 613. For example, the written law says not to work on the Sabbath, but what counts as work? The oral law defined this very specifically. There was a rule for every situation you could find yourself in. The oral law defined exactly how far you could walk on the Sabbath (1,999 paces), exactly how much weight you could lift on the Sabbath, and exactly how much you could write on the Sabbath (one letter only). The scribes were the ones who memorized and taught this oral law, and the Pharisees were the ones who devoted their lives to keeping it.

- c. But the Pharisees were so focused on all the little rules that they were neglecting God's commands.
- d. **Mark 7:8** "Abandoning the command of God, you hold on to human tradition."
- e. God isn't impressed with obedience to man-made religious rules. He wants us to obey His laws, in the right way, for the right reason. That's what matters to God.
- vii. When Jesus said that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, He wasn't saying that we must out-Pharisee the Pharisees. He was saying that their "righteousness" is unrighteousness. We need to obey God's law, but not like the Pharisees.

VI. CONCLUSION

1. So, in this passage Jesus gives us another command: Obey God's law. Honor, treasure, respect God's law.
2. And Jesus warned against two wrong views of the law.
 - i. On the one hand, antinomianism, which is the view that we don't need to keep God's law. We do.
 - ii. On the other hand, Pharisaism. We need to keep and honor the law, but not like the Pharisees.
 1. We obey the law out of gratitude for salvation, not to earn salvation.
 2. We obey the law to glorify God, not to earn praise for ourselves.
 3. We obey the law with our actions and our hearts.
 4. We don't put man-made rules before God's laws.
3. There's something you need to remember about God's commands. God's commands are not burdensome; they are for our good (1 Jn 5:3).
4. In the summer after eighth grade, I went to the doctor because I had been having a serious pain in my right knee. It would occur when I jumped or walked up the stairs. The doctor said it was called Osgood-Schlatter disease, and it was very common among young men who were very active in sports. His prescription: Wear a cast on my leg – from my ankle to my upper thigh – for two weeks. And at the same time, do daily exercises to maintain the muscles in my leg. Needless to say, I was not excited about this, and it was not fun. But why did the doctor give me those orders? Not to hurt me but to help me; not to make me miserable but to improve my life. And he did. When the cast came off, the condition was gone and never came back.
5. God is the Great Physician, and He loves you very much. When He gives you orders, it is not to hurt you but to help you. It is not to make you miserable but to improve your life and make you happy. And after walking with Christ for thirty years, I can tell you that I am happiest and life is best when I am obeying God, and life is saddest and hardest when I am disobeying God. When you disobey God you damage yourself.
6. So, let me close with a question: Is there any part of God's law that you are disobeying? Are you obeying God with your hands? With your thoughts? With your

time? With your money? With your words? Are you obeying God with your sexuality? With your eyes? Are you obeying God in your relationships? In your marriage? In your relationship with your parents? In your relationship with your siblings? In your relationship with the church? In your relationship with the government? Are you obeying God at school, and at work?

7. Christians follow Christ's commands. And Christ's command is to obey God's law.