

Earlier in the Beatitudes, the writing technique known as “*inclusio*” appeared. *Inclusio* is when verses act as bookends that mark out the theme of the verses in-between them (see notes on Matthew 5:3).

Matthew now uses this style once again to bracket Jesus’ teaching about the Old Testament’s relationship to Him. Matthew 5:17 is the first bookend and 7:12 is the other. In other words, we are entering a new section of Jesus’ teaching (5:17-7:12) in which He (1) relates the Gospel of the Kingdom to the Old Testament and (2) defines what true righteousness is.

This paragraph is of great importance in not only defining Christian righteousness, but also for the light that it throws on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and between the gospel and the law.

Matthew in particular, among all the gospels, is concerned that the reader understands the relationship between Jesus’ teaching and the OT law.

The Christian’s relationship to the law of Moses has been debated for centuries. There are at least six major views on the subject and many variations of each view. The support for and against each view is rather complex. The issue revolves around verses that appear to reach opposite conclusions. For example, in Matthew 5:18–19 Jesus endorses the eternal validity of the Law down to the “smallest letter” and “the least stroke of a pen” and warns that breaking even one of the least commandments will mean demotion in the kingdom of heaven. Similarly, Paul says, “we uphold the law” (Ro. 3:31) and “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Ro. 7:12). James says that the man who looks intently into the perfect law is blessed in what he does (Ja. 1:25). 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that the OT is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

On the other extreme, with equally clear assertions, the Bible says that “Christ is the end of the law” (Ro. 10:4), that “you are not under the law” (Ro. 6:14), and that “when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law” (Heb. 7:12). In 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 Paul said he is not under the OT law, but is under the law of Christ. This has resulted in a number of interpretations from people who approach the texts from different theological and confessional beliefs. I cannot interact with all the views here. No single view is “bullet proof”; all of them have strengths and weaknesses. My intent is simply to give you what I consider to be the best understanding of Matthew 5:17-20.

I believe there are two elements that are key to understanding this passage: First, Matthew 5:17-20 needs to be kept in its historical context. Christ is at the center of “salvation-history”. All of history that comes before His death and resurrection points to Him (Carson, Sermon, 41), and all of history that follows flows from His coming. Thus, although there is continuity throughout God’s redemptive-plan, there are also distinctions between the ages prior to and after Christ’s death and resurrection. Matthew 5 is in this pivot point of history as one era ends and another begins.

Secondly, we need to remember that the Bible reveals God's plan progressively; that is, God revealed more details over time. The NT gives a clearer picture of salvation than the OT does. Because of this, the OT must always be understood in light of what is revealed in the New.

My overall conclusion in studying the relationship between the gospel and the law is that the Mosaic law (the Torah) was given to the nation of Israel as part of God's covenant with them and is *basically* part of the Old Testament era. This era has come to an end in Christ. The OT law is therefore no longer a *direct* and *immediate* source of, or judge of, the conduct of God's people, for Christ initiated a new age with a new covenant in which His word (and that of the apostles) becomes the guide for His followers. In other words, we are not under the law of Moses; we are under "the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). As Moo says, "This 'law' does not consist of legal prescriptions and ordinances, but of the example and teaching of Jesus and the apostles, the central demand of love, and the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit" (Moo, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, 343).

**5:17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.**

In verses 17-20 Jesus takes pains to relate His teaching and place in the history of redemption to the OT Scriptures (Carson, 142). He wants to remove any misunderstanding that could arise suggesting that He is urging the abrogation of the law. Quite the contrary, He claims that He has not come to abolish the Law or the prophets. He then builds upon this claim in verse 18 by asserting the enduring validity of all the details of the OT – "not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law." Then, in verse 19, He urges the teaching of its commandments: "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." In short, it is clear that there is continuity between the OT and Jesus' teaching.

Nevertheless, to speak of "fulfillment" (5:17) is to envisage both a continuity with what has gone before, and also a discontinuity of newness, in that the "fulfillment" represents a new stage in the development in salvation-history in which the old is seen as provisional and anticipatory. The "until clause" in verse 18 suggests a change to the law as well: "Not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law . . . *until* all is accomplished in it"; that is, until all that is in the OT takes place as prophesied (Carson, 145).

As Lincoln says,

The Mosaic laws point forward (principally) to the teachings of Christ and have also been realized in them in a more profound manner [also see Osborne, 182; Morris, 108, note 60]. The word "fulfill" in 5:17, then, includes not only an element of discontinuity (that which has now been realized *transcends* the law) but an element of continuity as well (that which transcends the law is nevertheless something to which the law itself pointed forward). The element of discontinuity should not be limited to certain aspects of the law such as the so-called "ceremonial laws", for it is the law as a unit that is being spoken of both here and in verse 18, so that so-called "moral laws", like that which bans murder, have also been realized and transcended by Jesus' teaching (cf. 5:21ff.). In verse 18 the permanent validity of the law in all parts is asserted, and yet, on the other hand, the temporal qualification, "until all is accomplished" is introduced. . . Thus in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, especially as the

latter climaxes in death and Resurrection, all that the law pointed forward to is about to come to pass. The strong language of continuity and the clear element of discontinuity can only be brought together with reference to Jesus. *It is in His teaching that completes and surpasses, and thereby transforms that of the law that the permanent validity of the law continues* [italics mine] (Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 373, 374).

### ***What is the Law and the Prophets?***

The Jews referred to the Old Testament as “the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Act 28:23; Morris, 107; Carson, 142) or “the Law, the prophets, and the psalms” (Lk. 24:44). The “law” referred to the first five books of the Old Testament (Gen.-Deut.) which were written by Moses. This is also known as the “Torah”. The “Prophets” referred to the remainder of the OT. However, at times (as in verse 18) “the law” is shorthand for the entire Old Testament (also see Jn. 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; 1 Cor. 14:21). The disjunctive “or” in 5:17 (“the Law *or* the prophets”) makes it clear that neither is to be abolished; both are to be fulfilled.

This means that even the Mosaic law had a prophetic function that was *fulfilled* in Christ (see Carson, 268). Matthew 11:13 confirms this: “For all the Prophets and *the Law prophesied until John*”. “Until John” means up to and including John. Luke 16:16 indicates the same shift in history: “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed *until John*; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached . . .” John the Baptist “belongs to the last stage of the divine economy before the inauguration of the kingdom” (Carson, 268).

So both Matthew and Luke make it clear that there is a continuing relevance of the OT, and yet, they also show that the period in which men were related to God under the terms of the Law has ceased with John (Moo, *Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law*, JSNT 22 [1984], 5).

### **How does Jesus “fulfill” the Law and the prophets?”**

1. Some claim “fulfill” means “to establish” or “validate” or “confirm.” That is, Jesus didn’t come to abolish the Law, but to *endorse* it. This means the Law is still binding today.

However, if it’s argued that the entire law, even down to its jot and tittle, is still binding, one marvels that the early church misunderstood Jesus so badly (Carson, 142). And how does one explain that Jesus abolished the food laws (Mk. 7:19; Carson, *Sermon*, 37)?

2. Others say “fulfill” means “to do”, or “obey”, or “keep”; so, they claim that Jesus is saying He came to *keep* the commandments of the law.

This seems improbable for the focus of Matthew 5 is the relation between the Old Testament and Jesus’ teaching, not His actions. Any interpretation that says Jesus fulfills the law by doing it misses the point. (Carson, *Commentary*, 142). France also says that it is “improbable that when He contrasts ‘abolish’ with ‘fulfill’ He is speaking simply about obeying the requirements of the law and the prophets. ‘Fulfill’ (rather than obey’, ‘do’, or ‘keep’) would not be the natural way to say that, and such a sense would not answer the charge of aiming to abolish” (France, 182). In other words, the opposite of “keep” is to “disobey” not “abolish.” Fulfilling the law does not abolish it, although it may change the way people relate to it.

3. Still others, in various ways, believe that πληρώ (fulfill) means to “fill up” as it does in a few other places in the NT (I.e., Matt. 13:48; 23:32; Lk. 3:5. etc.). Jesus “fills up” the law by extending its demands or revealing the full depth of its meaning. Thus, they say, He held people accountable to the law in a higher way.

This is more defensible in the following context, however, *expanding the law only adds to the law*; it doesn't abolish the law's stringencies (Carson, Commentary, 143). This wouldn't explain why parts of the law aren't followed by Christians.

The above interpretations have serious flaws but most of all they overlook the manifestly eschatological and salvation-historical dimensions of the term “fulfill” (πληρώ). This is a key concept in Matthew who uses it fifteen times (compared with two in Mark and nine in Luke; Moo). This is Matthew's term of choice when he specifically wants to point out how something fulfills OT prophecy (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). In fact, almost every use of πληρώ (fulfill) in the NT has a demonstrable predictive force (Carson, 143).

In short, to “fulfill” “denotes the coming into being of that to which the Scripture pointed forward” (France, 182). Or as Davies says, “to bring to its destined end” (quoted by Morris, 108, n. 60). In other words, Jesus brought into being or brought to completion that which the OT had predicted. Integral to Matthew's gospel, then, is a scheme of salvation-history that pictures the entire Old Testament as anticipating and pointing forward to Jesus (Moo, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, 351).

### **How did Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets?**

The way in which Christ fulfills the OT varies.

First, He fulfilled **direct prophetic statements**. For example, Micah 5:2 predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. This was fulfilled according to Matthew 2:6.

The OT also pointed to Christ **through the history** recorded there. Often the events in Jewish history became prophetic pictures that paralleled events in the life of Christ. For example, in Deuteronomy 8 Moses reminded the people that they were tested in the desert for forty years where God allowed them to suffer so that they would learn that man does not live by bread alone (Deut. 8:3). In the same way, Jesus was tested for forty days in the wilderness and when tempted by Satan, He replied with Deuteronomy 8:3: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

Another example of how Jesus fulfills the history of the Old Testament is in Matthew 2:15. There Jesus' return from Egypt as an infant is likened to Israel being called out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1).

Thirdly, Jesus fulfilled Israel's **festivals, ceremonies** (Heb. 9-10), **and sacrificial system** (Heb. 9:8f; 10:1f.). Jesus was the reality of that which was only seen in symbols and shadows prior to His arrival. Christ is the High Priest who intercedes for us. He is the sacrifice whose blood atones for sin and the scapegoat who carries our sins away. He is the true vine and the Passover Lamb.

Lastly, **Jesus' actions and teaching** also fulfilled the OT. The Mosaic laws point forward (principally) to the teachings of Christ and have also been realized in them in a more profound manner" (Morris, 108).

The way Jesus' *teaching* fulfills the Law is best understood by looking verses 21-48 which make up the rest of Matthew 5. These verses have six blocks of material, each with the formula "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you" (v. 31 says "It was said"). In these antitheses Jesus is contrasting His own teaching to what the Jews heard in the synagogue. Some of the things were from the law; others were paraphrases with interpretational additions not specifically found in the OT text (see notes on Matt. 2:6; also see Moo, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, 347ff.). Jesus' teaching was more authoritative than both.

When Jesus' words are read alongside the OT passages that He quotes, it is hard to believe (as some suggest) that He is simply giving "the true meaning of the OT text", or He is "trying to establish the OT law" as it already exists. Nothing in the OT suggested that murder included anger (5:21-26), or adultery included lust (5:27-30). Jesus doesn't suggest that either of these commands are set aside but goes beyond outward action to the thoughts and attitudes that underline them. In verses 31 and 32 Jesus "dares to say that a man who duly follows the law in properly divorcing his wife and marrying another woman is in effect committing adultery..." (Meier, *Law*, 113). In the fourth contrast (5:33-37), Jesus refers to the law's demands of keeping one's oath. Jesus concludes that it is better not to take an oath at all. In the fifth example (5:38-42), Jesus juxtaposes the OT law of equal compensation with His own demand, "Do not resist an evil person." It is hard to figure out how that would be giving the true meaning of the text. In the last example, Jesus extends the principle of love way beyond what is stated in the OT law – ending by saying that we are to be perfect like our Father in heaven. In each antithesis Jesus is replacing the law with His own authoritative demand.

Moo says,

When the antitheses as a group are considered, it becomes clear that no single interpretive method explains all of them. In some it could be argued that Jesus is expounding the law (the third), and in others that He is "deepening" the law (the first and second). But a larger category is needed to explain the overall relationship between the Mosaic commandments cited and Jesus' own teaching. *What does consistently emerge from the antitheses is Jesus' radical insistence on what He says as binding on His followers.* He taught "as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt. 7:29). This independence from both Jewish tradition and from the Mosaic law itself gives us an important indicator for our interpretation of verses 17-19 (Moo, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, 350).

In sum, we can safely conclude that Jesus sees His own teaching as being organically related to the salvation-history in the law of Moses (Moo, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, 314). *He fulfills the Mosaic law by incorporating it into His own teaching.* "This teaching is neither a repetition nor an expansion of the law, nor is it based on the law. Nevertheless, it stands in a salvation-historical continuity with that law" (Ibid., 356).

Or, as Carson says,

Jesus is not primarily engaged in extending, annulling, or intensifying the OT law, but *in showing the direction in which it points on the basis of His own authority*. This may work out in any particular case to have the same practical effect as ‘intensifying’ the law or ‘annulling’ some element; but *the reasons for that conclusion are quite different*. . . Here Jesus presents Himself as the eschatological goal of the OT, and thereby its sole authoritative interpreter, the one through whom alone the OT finds its valid continuity and significance. . . The groundwork is laid out in the gospels for an understanding of Jesus as the one who established the essentially Christological and eschatological approach to the OT employed by Paul (Carson, 144, 145).

In other words, “the whole law pointed forward to Jesus’ teaching and ministry, ultimately culminating in His death and resurrection, and lives on only as it has been transformed through its fulfillment by Jesus” (Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, 374). “In all its details, the Scripture remains authoritative, but the manner in which men are to relate to and understand its provisions is now determined by the one who has fulfilled it” (Moo, *Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law*, JSNT 20 [1984], 27).

France offers the following paraphrase of 5:17:

“Far from wanting to set aside the law and the prophets, it is My role to bring into being that to which they have pointed forward, to carry them into a new era of fulfillment.”

He then goes on to say:

On this understanding the authority of the law and the prophets is not abolished. They remain the authoritative Word of God. But their role will no longer be the same, now that what they pointed forward to has come, and it will be for Jesus’ followers to discern in the light of His teaching and practice what is now the right way to apply those texts in the new situation which His coming has created. From now on it will be the authoritative teachings of Jesus which must govern His disciples’ understanding and practical application of the law. Verses 21-48 will go on to show how this interpretation can no longer be merely at the level of the literal observance of regulations, but must operate at the deeper and more challenging level of discerning the will of God which underlines the legal rulings of the Torah. If in the process it may appear that certain elements of the law are for all practical purposes “abolished” this will be attributable not to the loss of their status as the word of God but to their changed role in the era of fulfillment, in which it is Jesus, the fulfiller, rather than the law which pointed forward to Him, who is the ultimate authority. (France, 183).

In sum, “Jesus does not conceive of His life and ministry in terms of opposition to the Old Testament, but in terms of bringing to fruition all that toward it points. Thus, the law and the prophets, far from being abolished, find their valid continuity in terms of their outworking in Jesus. . . whatever is prophetic likewise discovers its legitimate continuity in the happy arrival of that which it has pointed” (Carson, *Sermon*, 39, 40).

***5:18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.***

Verse 18 further confirms and explains the truth of verse 17 as the “for” indicates (Carson, 145).

The word “truly” is literally “amen” (ἀμήν). In Hebrew, the root has the idea of “faithfulness”, “reliability”, and “certainty”. In the OT and later Jewish writings “amen” was used to affirm a solemn pronouncement made by someone else or to conclude a doxology. But Jesus’ use of the word is unique. It is a distinctive feature of His teaching style in which He proclaims the reliability or truthfulness of what He is saying (see France, 184). “Bengel points out that the prophets tend to say ‘Saith the Lord’ and the apostles ‘it is written’, but Jesus uses ‘I say unto you’” (Morris, 109).

The reference to “jot and tittle” (NKJV) establishes the extent to which the law will not be abolished. Christ viewed the OT as being accurate to the smallest letter and stroke (5:18). The smallest letter was the yodth that could easily be overlooked. The stroke was the projection from some letters that distinguished them from others (Carson, 145). “It will not do to reduce the reference to moral law, or the law as a whole but not necessarily its parts, or to God’s will in some general sense. ‘Law’ almost certainly refers to the entire OT Scriptures, not just the Pentateuch or moral law (note the parallel in verse 17)” (Carson, 145).

***Not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law:***

- ▶ “**Until heaven and earth pass away**” is a conventional way of saying “never” (i.e., as long as the present world order persists – Carson, 145). Thus, this first “until” clause is stating the impossibility of the law being destroyed. This points to the *duration* of OT authority.
- ▶ “**Until all is accomplished**” (γένηται) is the language of fulfillment. This clause is clarifying that the smallest details of the law would never pass away *until the time of fulfillment* has arrived.

The second “until” clause points to the *nature* of the OT. It speaks of the law’s intended goal. That is, the jots and tittles are not to be discarded or lost but taken up into the eschatological events to which they pointed forward (see France, 186). The OT reveals God’s redemptive purposes and points to their fulfillment in Jesus and the kingdom He is introducing and will one day consummate (Carson, 146).

France paraphrases: “The law, down to its smallest details, is as permanent as heaven and earth, and will never lose its significance; on the contrary, all that it points forward to will in fact become a reality.” Now that the reality has arrived in Jesus, the jot’s and tittles will be seen in a new light, but they still cannot be discarded (see France, 186).

In short, because the whole law pointed to Christ, He certainly did not come to get rid of any of it (not even the smallest letter or stroke); rather, He viewed His life and ministry as bringing the contents of the OT to the fullness of expression (Carson, 144).

***5:19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."***

The word “then” in verse 19 introduces the deduction that Jesus draws from the enduring nature of the Law in 5:18. It also reveals a vital connection between the Law of God and the Kingdom of God.

Some commandments were more important than others. For example, in Matthew 23:23 Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” Justice, mercy and faithfulness are weightier than tithing mint and dill and cumin. But Jesus’ point in Matthew 5:19 is that even the least commandment is important and should be kept and taught.

Because the Law is enduring, greatness in the kingdom is measured by conformity to it. However, to insist on the law’s value as a pointer to Jesus does not in itself entail literally observing all the commandments as regulations. If Jesus meant that His disciples need to keep the law in the same way that the Jews in His day observed it, He would be contradicting the entire tenor of the New Testament by declaring that, for instance, the sacrificial and food laws of the Old Testament are still binding on His disciples. In this context, however, with the emphasis on fulfillment, it seems more likely that this means that a Christian’s behavior is determined by how the law is interpreted by Jesus Himself (see France, 188). “Thus ranking in the kingdom turns on the degree of conformity to Jesus’ teaching as that teaching fulfills OT revelation. His teaching, toward which the OT pointed, must be obeyed” (Carson, 146).

To summarize, greatness in the kingdom is determined by obedience to Jesus’ teaching since that teaching fulfills OT revelation. But greatness is also determined by our faithfulness in teaching this truth to others (5:19; also see Matt 28:19). But more than that, entrance into the Kingdom is only given to those whose righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and Scribes.

***20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.***

The scribes and Pharisees were known for their meticulous detail in observing the law. To speak of a righteousness which goes beyond the scribes and the Pharisees would seem to be an impossible, or even ridiculous ideal. It would be hard to find anyone who attempted it more rigorously and more consistently than they did. However, Jesus is not talking about beating the scribes and Pharisees at their own game, but about a different level or concept of righteousness altogether. For all the scrupulous observance of the Old Testament and other regulations, the scribes and Pharisees are still seen as standing outside of the kingdom of heaven. “Within the new regime different standards apply. Those who belong to God’s new realm must move beyond the literal observance of rules, however good and scriptural, to a new consciousness of what it means to please God, one which penetrates beneath the surface level of rules to be obeyed to a far more radical openness to knowing and doing the underlying will of your Father who is in heaven. Those who can do no more than simply keep the rules, however conscientiously, haven’t even started as far as the kingdom of heaven is concerned” (France, 190).

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Jesus by no means supports abandoning the Mosaic law; in fact, He explicitly commands that it be taught. “However, this teaching must always be done with due attention to the fulfillment of the law (v.



17) and the way in which this fulfillment affects the meaning and applicability of its provisions” (Moo, *Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law*, JSNT 20 [1984], 29, 30).

To state it differently, with the coming of Christ we are no longer under the Mosaic system. We are no longer living under the rule or power of the law, but under the power of the Spirit. However, this does not mean that we are not under any moral system, rather, obedience to the law is now properly practiced as it is viewed through the lens of Jesus and His teaching.

As Moo says,

First, and most basically, every Mosaic law must be, as Ridderbos puts it, 'placed under the condition of its fulfillment'. . . The whole law came to culmination in Christ. As the sole ultimate authority of the Messianic community, He takes up the law into Himself and enunciates what is enduring in its contents. . . The change in redemptive 'eras' brings with it a change in the locus of authority for the people of God, but it does not bring a liberation from authority as such (Moo, *Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law*, JSNT 20 [1984], 29, 30).

**ADDITIONAL NOTE:** A very popular belief is that we should view the law in ceremonial, civil, and moral categories. Therefore, whenever the Bible talks about not being under the law it means we are not under the ceremonial and civil aspects of the law. Likewise, when Jesus says He did not come to abolish the law He is referring only to the moral aspects of the law – the rest will be abolished. In other words, those that hold this belief insist that the moral law continues while the rest of the OT is fulfilled in Christ.

The first problem with this view is that neither the Jews, nor Jesus, nor any NT writer recognizes this tripartite division of the law. The idea is old, but probably doesn't antedate Aquinas (1225–74 AD: Carson, *Sermon*, 37).

The second problem is that this interpretation is particularly irrelevant here where every part of the law is emphasized (“not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law” - 5:18).

The third problem is that this is extremely subjective, allowing an interpreter to insert additional meaning into any text that either supports or opposes his theory.

Finally, as Carson says:

The problem with this threefold division is that it's not clear what “moral” then means. If it has to do with what is fundamentally right or wrong, I would want to argue that what God approves is fundamentally right and what He forbids is fundamentally wrong; and in that case, when God approves certain ceremonial sacrifices in the Old Testament, people were *morally* bound to practice them. Again, if God forbid certain civil practices in the Old Testament, it would have been *immoral* to proceed with them, just because it was God who prohibited them. So this definition of “moral” runs into problems if the threefold division– moral, ceremonial, civil - is adopted. The three categories are not sufficiently mutually exclusive. If on the other hand moral law refers to what God always approves, then we still face two difficulties: (1) if Jesus in 5:18 is arguing that only moral law never changes, He is arguing in a circle: “Only law which God always approves (and which therefore never changes) never changes.” (2) Alternately, if Jesus means to establish this definition of moral law, it is odd that He should use such inclusive language (5:18).

Appeal to the threefold division of law undoubtedly has merit in certain contexts; but I don't think it helps explain what Jesus means in Matthew 5:17 (Carson, Sermon, 37, 38).