

# JESUS TEACHING

Maranatha Sunday school Class at Grace Bible Church, Dallas, Texas

John Rhoads Teacher / Lesson #11

The Rules Matthew 5:17-20

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## Why do rules have such power over our minds?



## Teaching about the Law

<sup>17</sup> “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.

<sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. <sup>19</sup> So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the

Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>20</sup> “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”<sup>NLT</sup>

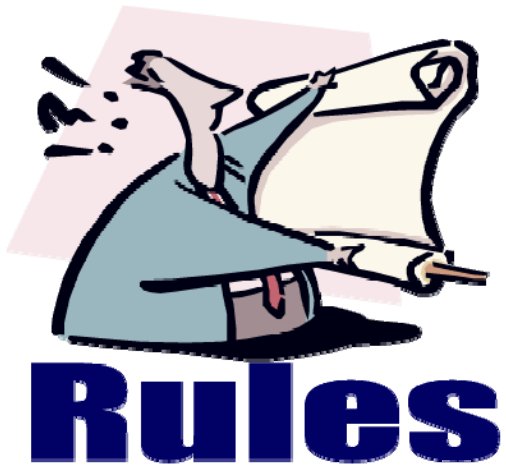
God gave moral and ceremonial laws to help people love him with all their hearts and minds. Throughout Israel’s history, however, these laws had been often misquoted and misapplied. By Jesus’ time, religious leaders had turned God’s laws into a confusing mass of rules. When Jesus talked about a new way to understand the law, he was trying to bring people back to its original purpose. Jesus did not speak against the law itself, but against the abuses and excesses to which it had been subjected



**5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”**<sup>NRSV</sup> Jesus did not come as a rabbi with a brand-new teaching that he had thought up and hoped to convince people was true. Instead, he came as the promised Messiah with a message heard from the beginning of time. He came not to *abolish the law or the prophets*, but to *fulfill* the promises in those Scriptures... Jesus’ reference to *the law* means the commands in the Pentateuch—the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. In synagogues on the Sabbath, a rabbi would read a portion from the Law and a portion from the Prophets. Unfortunately, many of the learned men of the day who should have seen in Jesus the fulfillment of their Scriptures completely missed him. The Pharisees attempted to follow meticulously the law and saw Jesus only as a lawbreaker. The Sadducees revered only the Pentateuch but missed the promises of the coming of the one through whom all nations on the earth would be blessed.

Our Lord's mission was not to destroy, but to construct. As noon fulfills dawn and summer spring, as manhood fulfills childhood and the perfect picture the rude sketch, so does Jesus gather up, realize, and make possible the highest ideals ever inspired in human hearts or written by God's Spirit on the page of inspiration.

F. B. Meyer



*THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW*

*What did Jesus have in mind when he claimed to fulfill the law? He illustrated his claim in the paragraphs that follow. Jesus repeated traditional applications of God's law and showed them to be shallow. He taught the principle of true application: understanding the deepest and broadest implications of a command in order to take immediate action. Jesus emphasized that the law wasn't simply "letter," but also "spirit." In the language of today Jesus might have said, "Don't believe those who try to deal with God by using legal technicalities. God knows your heart and will reject rationalizations." Unless we face the truth that God's standards will not be met by our halfhearted efforts, we will never recognize our need for a Savior. Jesus clarified the intent of the law; then he claimed to be our only way of escape from the judgment we deserve for our failure to obey God's commands.*

**5:18** “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” <sup>NIV</sup> Jesus used the words “I tell you the truth” (also translated, “Truly I say to you,” or “Verily, verily”) several times in his speaking. They signal that what he said next is of vital importance. In these words Jesus ascribes the highest authority to God’s Law... *Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen*, will be set aside or will disappear from the law book. In Hebrew writing, some letters are very small (the Hebrew letter “yod” is the smallest letter). Others are distinguished by just a slight stroke of the pen ... **JESUS UPHELD THE TRUTH OF EVERY LETTER OF EVERY WORD IN GOD’S LAW. FURTHERMORE, JESUS’ STATEMENT CERTIFIES THE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY OF EVERY WORD AND LETTER OF SCRIPTURE. GOD’S PLAN WILL NEVER CHANGE.** God’s Law recorded in Scripture looked forward to and prepared people for the One who would come and fulfill it. Everything prophesied in God’s Law will take place. No promise or prophecy in the Law will remain unfulfilled. Everything will be *accomplished*.



**Yod is the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet (aleph-beyt).**

**The numerical value of Yod is 10.**

**The character associated with Yod is the Hand.**

**The letter Yod sounds like a 'y' as in 'Yes'.**

**5:1** “Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” <sup>NRSV</sup> Jesus will fulfill and accomplish the entire Law and the Prophets (5:17–18). He explained, therefore, that his followers must also keep and practice the commandments included in the Law and the Prophets—even *the least of these commandments*. No one has the authority to set aside or alter any of God’s laws. In addition, teachers have the responsibility to live correctly and to teach correctly so that they do not influence others to break even the smallest law...

If Jesus did not come to abolish the law, does that mean all the Old Testament laws still apply to us today? Did Jesus mean that Christians today must follow every law recorded in the Old Testament? Not even Jesus stood for law keeping that was void of heartfelt worship (see the next verse, 5:20). Jesus was emphasizing an attitude of respect toward God’s Word and God’s will. The Old Testament includes three categories of law: **ceremonial, civil, and moral**.

1. The “**ceremonial law**” related specifically to Israel’s worship (see [Leviticus 1:2–3](#), for example). Its primary purpose was to point forward to Jesus Christ; these laws, therefore, were no longer necessary after Jesus’ death and resurrection. While we need not follow all these ceremonial laws, the principles behind them—to worship and love a holy God—still apply. The Pharisees often accused Jesus of violating ceremonial law.
2. The “**civil law**” applied to daily living in Israel (see [Deuteronomy 24:10–11](#), for example). Because modern society and culture differ so radically from that time and setting, we need not keep all of these guidelines specifically. However, the principles behind the commands are timeless and should guide our conduct. Jesus demonstrated these principles by example.
3. The “**moral law**” (such as the Ten Commandments) is the direct command of God; thus, it requires strict obedience (see [Exodus 20:13](#), for example). The moral law reveals the nature and will of God, and it still applies today. Jesus obeyed the moral law completely and expects his followers to do the same.

**5:20** “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” <sup>NKJV</sup> Jesus’ words in 5:19 may have sounded exceedingly difficult (“How can anyone keep all the commandments perfectly?”), but here Jesus made it seem even more difficult. Not only did he expect his followers to keep every part of the law, but he also expected them to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, an almost impossible task. The *Pharisees* were exacting and scrupulous in their attempts to follow God’s Law as well as hundreds of traditional laws. They spent their lives in rigid devotion to keeping every commandment. In Old Testament times, *scribes* prepared new scrolls of Scripture. By New Testament times, they had become teachers and lawyers in Jewish courts. How could Jesus reasonably call his followers to a greater righteousness than theirs?

### RIGHTEOUSNESS CHECK

**Jesus was saying that his listeners needed a different kind of righteousness altogether (love and obedience), not just a more intense version of the Pharisees’ righteousness (legal compliance). Our righteousness must**

- (1) **Come from what God does in us, not what we can do by ourselves**
- (2) **Be God-centered, not self-centered**
- (3) **Be based on reverence for God, not approval from people**
- (4) **Go beyond keeping the law to loving God who gave the law.<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup>Barton, B. B. (1996). *Matthew. Life application Bible commentary* (86). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.