

How Jesus Christ Fulfills the Old Testament: An Exegesis of Matthew 5:17-19

by

James Arlandson

Why don't Christians sacrifice animals to atone for their sins? Why aren't Christians required to keep a kosher diet (unless they want to do so out of free choice)? Why aren't they required to build a central temple in which to perform carefully prescribed rituals in a land specially chosen for them?

The three-year ministry of Jesus Christ, culminating in his death and resurrection and the establishment of his church, makes all the difference in the transition from the Old Testament or Covenant to the New Testament or Covenant. In those three short years (or fewer) he ushered in a new era of salvation, although the old era contained the seeds of the new.

The most salient and sometimes difficult statement on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples and the Old Covenant is found in Matt. 5:17-19, in the context of the famous Sermon on the Mount. The three verses read as follows in the New International Version:

5:17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 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. 19 Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

This is a complex passage because, among other reasons, at first glance it seems that the Law and Prophets (a New Testament way of saying the entire Scriptures; cf. Matt. 22:40; Luke 16:16) is still in full force until heaven and earth pass away. But as we just noted, the Old Covenant prescribes animal sacrifices, whereas Christians no longer perform them in order to pay for their sins. What is happening?

The Old Covenant is to the New Covenant what promise is to fulfillment. How did, does, and shall Jesus Christ fulfill the promises of the Old Covenant?

That story is complex. Christians are commanded to read the Old Testament and are allowed to benefit from it, but they do not take everything in it as final. Christians honor the Old Testament as the Word of God, just as Jesus did. But they read it, ultimately, through the vision of Jesus and the Spirit-inspired authors of the New Testament books and epistles.

Not everything as final? What parts still apply to them today, if any?

The Historical and Literary Contexts

It is imperative to analyze the Bible in its historical and literary contexts.

Historical Context

The following cultural fact is relevant to Matt. 5:17-19.

The sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem were still valid at the time of Jesus' ministry. The entire commands in the Torah (the law) and the rest of the Old Testament were still valid at that time. In fact, the sacrifices do not stop until AD 70, when the Romans under General Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian (ruled AD 69-79), destroyed the Temple—a relevant image since Jesus says that he did not come to destroy the Old Testament, as we shall see in the next major section. The sacrificial system means that Jesus will use words and ideas that contrast with it as a means of attaining righteousness before God. He will become the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world.

However, Jesus sometimes speaks to the people in terms of the entire law still being valid, but in the Gospel of Matthew he gradually reveals that he is in the process of reinterpreting the Old Testament and raising the people's vision to his own words and commands. Such are the last words he speaks before he goes up into heaven (Matt. 28:16-20). Jesus is causing a transition from the Old Covenant to the New, and he must do this in a way that people can receive and without destroying the Old.

Literary Context

The literary context is divided into two parts: the entire Gospel of Matthew and the smaller section called the Sermon on the Mount.

The Context of the Entire Gospel

The entire Gospel of Matthew is laid out in narrative or story form. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, various parts of the Gospel interact with others. No part of the Gospel is a mere arbitrary collection of sayings and events, but they are deliberately designed to flow together, with a plot, from beginning to end. So the structure and development is important, not only the individual pieces. The Gospel story has a beginning (Christ's birth), a middle (his three-year ministry) and a climatic ending (his death and resurrection). Jesus gradually and subtly reveals his priority and authority over the Old Testament in this story, but without destroying the older text. Matt. 5:17-19, our target verses, must be read in this large context because Jesus fulfills the Hebrew Bible through this divine story—and he is still fulfilling it today.

Further analysis of the entire Gospel can be organized in three stages.

First, it should be recalled that near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:18 says that the Old Testament shall not pass away until heaven and earth do and until “everything is accomplished” (key words that will be explained in the next

major section). At the end of the Sermon Jesus shifts attention away from the oral traditions and the Old Testament towards his own words—but without destroying the Old Testament. His last words in the Sermon show the shift (Matt. 7:24-26):

7:24 Therefore everyone who hears these *words of mine* and puts them into practice... 26 But everyone who hears these *words of mine* and does not put them into practice (emphasis added)

Jesus reveals to his disciples that his own words early in his ministry are beginning to take priority over all the words that have been uttered in sacred traditions and texts.

Second, to repeat, Matt. 5:18 says that the Old Testament shall not pass away until heaven and earth do and “until everything is accomplished.” Jesus said this at the beginning of his ministry. At the end of his ministry, he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem where God has ordained that Jesus would die. He predicts the terrible events that will happen just before the Last Day (Matt. 24:1-35). He nails down the certainty of his predictions with words that reflect those in Matt. 5:18. Matt. 24:35 has a universal aspect that rises above the long discourse on the Last Days that he just spoke:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Matt. 24:35)

The difference between Matt. 5:18 and 24:35 is subtle, but important. Matthew 5:18 seems to place time restrictions on the Old Covenant. Its words shall not pass away until heaven and earth do and “until everything is accomplished.” On the other hand, Matt. 24:35 says that Jesus’ words will never pass away, even when heaven and earth do. This places no time restrictions on his words. His words subtly and quietly take authority over the previous sacred text.

The third and final stage in the larger literary context takes place after Jesus’ death and resurrection (Matt. 28:16-20). It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of these two unified events in terms of his fulfillment of the Old Covenant. By them he fulfills most of the promises, but he is still fulfilling others. Some will not be fulfilled until his Second Coming. But he himself ushers in this fulfillment. Be that as it may, after his death and resurrection, his mission is complete and final. He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Before he ascends into heaven, he instructs his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Then he tells his disciples which words to teach the nations:

[Teach] them to obey everything *I have commanded* you. (Matt. 28:20, emphasis added)

The revelation to his disciples about Jesus’ authority in words is now complete. He commands his disciples to teach all nations his words first and foremost. But he does

not destroy the Old Testament—far from it. His followers are encouraged—commanded—to read it. But Jesus’ words take priority in the Christian’s life. The disciples read the Old Testament through Christ’s words and the rest of the New Testament. A longstanding adage wisely says: The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.

These three stages should not be misinterpreted. It is not as if Jesus grows in his authority. He always had it. Rather, he reveals his authority gradually. That was his way. He did not boast to the world about his true nature as the Son of God, but he kept it a secret for the most part. He accepted the popular (but ultimately incomplete) titles of Prophet, Teacher, and Rabbi, but to his inner circle and sometimes to those on the outside he revealed his true status as the Son of God (Matt. 16:15-20 and 26:63-64).

But these three stages reveal a subtle shift from the Old Covenant (without destroying it) to the New Covenant and Jesus’ new leadership. He is in the process of unfolding God’s plan of salvation to the world, and he does this gradually.

The Context of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:17-19 must also be interpreted in the immediate literary context in the Sermon on the Mount, early in Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus delivers the Sermon to his disciples on a mountainside—perhaps an allusion to Moses on Mt. Sinai. He lays out the ethics and proper conduct for members of God’s kingdom. One aspect of the Sermon contrasts the way of Jesus with the legalistic oral traditions and sometimes the Old Testament itself (Matt. 5:21-48). Jesus uses a formula or a variation of it: “You disciples have heard from long ago . . . but I say to you.” This means that Jesus is reinterpreting the traditions of the elders or the Torah itself. Thus, Christians read the Old Testament through the vision of Jesus. He did not come to destroy the sacred text, but to fulfill it in a variety of ways, as seen in the next major section.

Now we analyze the words of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, when he first discusses the Old Testament in terms that his disciples can understand. The Old Covenant is in full force during the Sermon on the Mount, and he moves gradually to shift their attention to the New Covenant.

An Exegesis of Matthew 5:17-19

Matthew 5:17-19 is best analyzed verse by verse, sometimes clause by clause, and even word by word.

Verse 17

17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Antinomianism means to oppose law. Jesus was not an antinomian. He was not against the law. As a devout Jew he honored it. But he must make the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from the law of Moses to the law of Christ. That is his mission.

The following three clauses and words in v. 17 are important for understanding this verse.

I have come: These words make the entire four verses Christ-centered. Indeed, this fits into the four Gospels. He is the one who fulfills the Old Testament by his sinless life. He is the one to fulfill its prophecies about his first coming. He fulfills it by his death and resurrection. He is the one to fulfill it by the establishment of his worldwide church. And he will fulfill it at his Second Coming.

Abolish: this translation is appropriate for a literary context, but it does not express the full meaning. The Greek word is *kataluô*, whose primary meaning is “destroy,” “demolish,” “dismantle” as in a house or temple, or “detach a stone from a building.” It is found in the context of destroying the temple in Jerusalem (Matt. 24:2; 26:61). But outside of the New Testament in a literary context, it can mean to rescind not a law here or a law there, but the whole law at once, thus destroying the People of God (2 Maccabees 2:22; 4:11; 4 Maccabees 5:33) (Meier p. 70). This is revealing of Matt. 5:17. Jesus does not destroy the law as a whole, but he does fulfill passages, such as animal sacrifices.

Maybe an analogy or illustration will help. Let’s suppose that an Old House represents the Old Covenant Scriptures, and a New House represents the New Covenant and Christ’s ministry and the New Testament. Christ does not demolish the Old House, but he keeps it intact. Instead, he builds his New House next to it or even connected to it, sharing the same divine foundation. Christians live in the New House, which is grander and taller and has newer furnishings. They are allowed to visit the Old House. That is, they may read Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, histories, the Torah, and so on. They may be edified by the stories and principles found there, just as a visitor to the grand Old House can learn a lot from and enjoy the old furnishings and old-style architecture. But the Old House does not hold them in. They live in the New House.

All analogies are flawed, and in this case the New House may not accurately represent the organic connection to the Old House, as a tree would (Rom. 11:11-24). Also, the analogy should not be misinterpreted. The Old House does not represent the house built on sand, nor does the New House represent the house built on the rock (Matt. 7:24-27). Both the Old Testament and the New Testament share the same bedrock foundation of divine inspiration. But in favor of the analogy, it shows how to preserve the Old House and not destroy it, while the New House can exist next to it or even connected to it. Jesus was a carpenter in his earthly life, and now he is a spiritual carpenter, so to speak.

Fulfill: This word means to complete a promise or a prophecy or a prediction. The Old Covenant is to the New Covenant what promise is to fulfillment. The Old Testament contained types and shadows, which find their full meaning and substance in Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment in his very being and in his coming to earth.

What are some of the areas or themes in the Old Testament that Christ fulfills? The following five major ones represent others.

(1) In the Torah, the three main traditional divisions are fulfilled: moral, judicial, and ceremonial. I realize scholars may not hold to this threefold division because it is too simple. But for our purposes, it works.

First, Jesus fulfills the moral law. This is the foundation of the Old Testament. It demanded that the people of God keep the commands, but could they? Even the most devout may have been good, but they were not good enough. However, Christ in his sinless life fulfills all of the demands because he walked in perfect love. One day, an expert in the law sought to trap Jesus, asking him what the greatest commandment was. Jesus replied:

37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt. 22:37-40).

Jesus fulfilled both of them perfectly. Now we ask for His Spirit so we can do the same, always depending on his love and mercy when we fail—and fail we will.

Some Christian scholars and pastors believe that the Ten Commandments are still binding on them because they contain the essence of the moral law. That is a plausible interpretation. However, it may be better if all Christians focused on loving their neighbors. That is the best way to fulfill all of the moral law in obedience to Christ. In Rom. 13:8-10 the inspired Apostle Paul repeats some of the Ten Commandments (e.g. do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, and do not covet), but he concludes that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (v. 10).

Second, Jesus fulfills the ceremonial or ritual aspect of the Torah. Hebrews 9:11-14 says:

11 When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not manmade, that is to say, not part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of heifers sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself

unblemished to God, cleanse out consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we serve the living God.

This passage contrasts the sacrificial system in the Old Covenant under a fallible high priest, a temporary tabernacle and the blood of animals with Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, which ushered in the New Covenant as he entered the perfect, heavenly tabernacle. The Old Testament makes promises by using temporary signs and copies, whereas the New fulfills them with their reality.

Besides the atonement or blood sacrifices, Christians are permitted to eat whatever foods their conscience allows them (Mark 7:14-19). If they voluntarily keep away from traditionally unclean animals like swine, then they are free to do this. But this is not a requirement from Christ or the New Testament authors. In Christ, all foods are ritually clean.

Third, Jesus fulfills the judicial aspect of the Torah. His death on the cross takes away the severe penalty of death for sins like homosexuality and cursing parents. His death takes their place because divine wrath for human sins was poured on him on the cross. Criminals like thieves and murderers should be punished, because of the principles of justice behind the particular rules. But they can have their sins forgiven while they suffer the just consequences of their crimes. Jesus and the New Testament authors never rescinded justice.

(2) Christ fulfills a geographical promise. God gave the land of Canaan to Abraham, the father of the ancient Hebrews (Gen. 17:8). That promise was repeated to Moses (Ex. 6:4). Joshua, the successor of Moses, spent most of his later life purging the land of debased and degraded Canaanites. However, Jesus said in Matt. 28:18-20 that he sends his disciples to all nations. He raises his and our vision higher than a small geographical region, up to the entire world. Now the Church—as the Church—is called to wage spiritual (not military) warfare only by praying and by preaching the gospel to everyone. The calling of the first Joshua after Moses is spiritually fulfilled by the later Joshua—Jesus' name in Hebrew is Joshua.

(3) In the Old Covenant, God gave commands on how to build a mobile tabernacle (Ex. 25-27). Then he gave special permission to Solomon to build a permanent temple (1 Kings 5:1-6:38 and 7:13-8:66). However, Jesus fulfills this earthly temple in his own person and in his church. Jesus says to the Pharisees, referring to himself: "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6). Jesus said this in the context of keeping the law and sacrificing in the temple. He now fulfills the temple sacrifices and becomes a living temple through his new people of God: his church (1 Cor. 3:16 and 1 Pet. 2:4-8). His church is found around the world now, so his living temple is worldwide.

(4) Christ fulfills prophecies that predicted his first coming. This theme relates to a major part of the Old Testament in Matt. 5:17—the "Prophets." They promised a new era of salvation, and Jesus fulfills that promise. The primary example among many, many others is found in Is. 53, which describes the suffering Servant-

Messiah. Verse 5 says: "But he was pierced for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." This is a perfect description of Jesus' death on the cross, since he was wounded and pierced. His death brings us peace from God because it atones or pays for our sins. He fulfills every prophecy that predicted his first coming.

(5) Besides Christ's first coming, some prophecies have been partially fulfilled and are still in the process of being fulfilled. They will be completely fulfilled in the future at his Second Coming. Joel 2:28-32 is a good example. God promises his people restoration after divine judgment. He promises them that he will pour out his Spirit on them to restore and bless them:

2:28 I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

In the New Testament the Apostle Peter applies this prophecy to the church that Jesus established. It is the Day of Pentecost, a celebratory feast (see Ex. 23:16). God sends his Holy Spirit like a mighty wind and fills everyone who was praying in an upper room. Acts 2:1-4 describes the blessed scene:

2:1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

This is a holy moment. Joel promised that God would send his Spirit to his people, and Jesus promised that he would also do this (John 16:5-16). That promise was fulfilled in Acts 2:1-4. Peter understands this, so he applies the prophecy in Joel to this holy moment (Acts 2:16-21). And it is still being fulfilled. God continues to send his Spirit into people who ask him.

But another part of the prophecy in Joel awaits fulfillment. God through Joel describes what will happen in the Last Days. God will show wonders in the heavens and on earth—blood and fire and billows of smoke. Then the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood (Joel 2:30-31). But the good news follows: "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 32). Jesus repeats this prophecy as valid and still waiting fulfillment (Matt. 24:29; cf. Is. 27:13; 34:4; Ez. 32:7). It will happen just before he returns in his Second Coming.

To sum up the exegesis of Matt. 5:17, Jesus has fulfilled, is fulfilling, and shall completely fulfill the entire Old Testament. The Old Covenant is to the New what promise is to fulfillment. He has ushered in the new era of salvation in the flow of God's plan of salvation begun in the Old Testament. All the promises of God are

absorbed in Christ's life and being. He becomes the fulfillment of the Old Testament without destroying it.

The exegesis of v. 17 has been prolonged, but essential. We now turn to the next verse.

Verse 18

The Old Testament remains until heaven and earth pass away and "until everything is accomplished."

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.

This verse demonstrates that the Old Testament has an expiration date that has not yet arrived. The two "until" clauses offer us hints on when that date will come. The first "until" clause says: "until heaven and earth disappear." There is nothing complicated here. God's Word remains until the physical universe is wrapped up. Alternatively, it could be the case that the words of Old Testament remains or exists forever, but some aspects, explored above, do not remain *in force*. Peter the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Spirit, says in 2 Peter 3:10:

3:10 But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night [a surprise]. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. (See also Heb. 12:27)

Further, it should be recalled that the very words of Jesus Christ will remain even after the universe disappears: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matt. 24:35). This means that Jesus Christ supersedes the Old Testament, fulfilling it back then, now, and in the future.

The next "until" clause says: "until everything is accomplished." Matthew is writing the life of Christ in narrative or story form. Matthew quotes many Old Testament references to Christ throughout his narrative. We should therefore understand the word "everything" in that light. Jesus Christ fulfills the Hebrew Bible at his birth. He fulfills it during his life and ministry. He fulfills it especially in his death on the cross and his resurrection because these two events ratify and confirm all else that precedes them. Next, he fulfills the promises in the Hebrew Bible in the new age of salvation, through his church and through historical events (though this last category is harder to detect). He will fulfill everything in the Hebrew Bible at his Second Coming. Finally, the Old Testament will become completely fulfilled only when God himself will wrap up the universe like a mantle of clothing, tossing it aside.

This is what "until heaven and earth disappear" and "until everything is accomplished" mean. God's Old Covenant Word—every smallest letter and stroke of the pen—will last as long as the universe does.

Verse 19

19 Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

This verse is divided into two main clauses: (1) those who break the commandments and teach others to do so; and (2) those who practice the commandments and teach others to do the same.

The first clause is easier to understand. The analogy of the Two Houses may clarify matters. When Christians go back to the Old House (the Old Testament), they are not allowed to break items in the Old House. They must not pick up an old dish (a command) and smash it on the floor. Instead, they should leave things as they found them when they return to the New House (New Testament). Leaving things alone is not the same as breaking them. Above all, if Christians become teachers, they should not teach others to break items in the Old House. Rather, they teach their fellow Christians to respect and honor the Old House as a whole, and the items found in it.

The second clause in v. 19 is a little more difficult to understand, but reading this verse in the context of the two preceding verses and of the entire Gospel of Matthew will make things clear.

In vv. 17 and 18 (analyzed in the two previous sections), we learned that Jesus has fulfilled, is fulfilling, and shall completely fulfill the promises in the Old Testament. Therefore, he must be our interpretive guide as we read, practice, and teach the commandments. To use the Old and New Houses again, when we enter the Old House, we look at it through the vision of Jesus and through his fulfillment. He is our authoritative tour guide, so to speak. We obey the commands as they have been conditioned by his new era of salvation.

This conditioning is the theme of the entire sweep of Matthew's Gospel. As noted in the section "Historical and literary contexts," in v. 19, Jesus is speaking the Sermon on the Mount to disciples still living under the Old Covenant. After the Sermon is over, he gradually reveals a new direction. He is making a transition from the Old to the New, building the New House without destroying the Old One. When the Gospel culminates in the last chapter, Jesus instructs his disciples to teach all nations everything he commands (Matt. 28:20). As the fulfiller of the promises of God, he must take priority.

However, does this mean that the entire Old Testament has been demolished, dismantled, or destroyed (words that translate the Greek word *kataluô* in v. 17)? Not "until heaven and earth disappear" and not "until everything is accomplished." The Old House is still standing without one piece missing or taken from it. All the items and furnishings are still in it. Rather, Jesus lifts our vision to the New House and calls us into it. Every commandment that is contained in the Old Testament can still

be read, taught, and practiced for edification and blessing. But they must now be read through the fulfillment process and through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

For example, when Christians read about animal sacrifices in Leviticus, they focus on Christ's sacrifice, realizing that the old sacrificial system pointed to him. They "practice" it by offering a sacrifice of praise to God: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15). This Spirit-inspired verse was written in the context of Christ's sacrifice of his blood on the cross outside the city of Jerusalem.

Also, Paul says we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices: "holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1). Jesus Christ inspires all believers to lift their vision beyond the literal sacrifice of animals and look to him, the literal and once-for-all and unique sacrifice for all times. Then they "practice" their own spiritual sacrifice. Therefore, the Old Testament has been fulfilled in this area.

Thus, it is always wise to let surrounding verses interpret a target verse. In this case, vv. 17 and 18 interpret the target v. 19. And it is always wise to interpret a target verse in light of the entire text where it is found: the Gospel of Matthew.

A prominent New Testament scholar correctly says of v. 19 and Christ's fulfillment process being our interpretive guide:

The law pointed forward to Jesus and his teaching; so it is properly obeyed by conforming to his word. As it points to him, so he, in fulfilling it, establishes what continuity it has . . . (Carson, p. 146)

Another reputable New Testament scholar agrees:

In v. 19, then, the continuing practice of the commandments of the law must be viewed in light of their fulfillment by Jesus. It is the law *as fulfilled by Jesus* that must be done, not the law in the original form. (Moo, p. 353, emphasis original)

Conclusion

Jesus conditions and interprets the old commandments that we teach and practice. We look at them through his vision. This is how we Christians examine the Torah and the whole Old Testament. We use the wisdom and vision of Christ, as he fulfills the entire Hebrew Bible. The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.

If Christians want to practice the commandments in the Old Testament, they should learn from Christ's wisdom revealed in Matt. 22:24-40. As noted in the analysis of Matt. 5:17, the Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus with words, so one of them, an expert in the law, asked him which commandment was the greatest.

37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37-40)

Jesus boils down all the commandments in the Old Testament to these two. They are the best way to obey all of them. Jesus' followers should live a life of divine love through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name.

Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is in perfect agreement with his Lord and Savior, using the key words "fulfilled" and "fulfillment" (Rom. 13:8-10):

13:8 [F]or he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself. 10 Love does no harm to the neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Only the life and love of Jesus Christ that he sends into our hearts through the Holy Spirit can enable us to walk in divine love. Our love for God cannot be self-initiated. God draws us to love him by his Spirit. That is the first great commandment. Only as we love him, we love others. That is the second greatest commandment. As for righteousness coming from keeping the two greatest commandments, only Christ's righteousness that he offers us freely after his death on the cross and resurrection can save us. Our own righteousness cannot.

We must trust in Jesus Christ and receive the Holy Spirit and his righteousness in his name.

We Christians honor and revere the Old Testament, but we interpret it through Jesus Christ and the new era of salvation and fulfillment that he ushered in on the day he was born.

Further Reading

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This article has a companion piece: "How Christians Benefit from the Old Testament."