

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 15, Chapter 5 Continued 3

I want to begin by acknowledging that we've spent the better part of 3 lessons covering only the first 16 verses of Matthew chapter 5; I know this is a very slow pace. I'm afraid that it is not likely to increase very much for a while. My goal, however, is not to teach you scriptural minutia or theology. My goal is to add the necessary context, some of it historical and cultural, and some of it language oriented, so that the true meaning of what we're reading comes to the surface unadulterated by unintended errors, manmade doctrines, and modern Christian spin that tries to make it compatible with contemporary beliefs and agendas. In the case of the Sermon on the Mount, the considerable amount of time that I am taking with the many detours and extended explanations is only because what those regular, everyday Jews who came to hear Yeshua held as common knowledge, is unknown and foreign to us in the 21st century.

The past 3 lessons have essentially been a build up to what we'll encounter today. And what comes today is nothing less than a plain, firm and unequivocal refutation of one of the most broadly held doctrines of the Christian Church, worldwide. Even more, what Yeshua says to the crowd of thousands and thousands of Jews that have come from as far away as the southern desert of Judea to the northern reaches of Syria, and even from several Roman provinces on the eastern side of the Jordan River (most of the people coming in hopes of a miraculous healing of their illnesses, injuries, deformities and demon possession) sets a foundation for all of His followers, Jew or gentile, then and into an indefinite future, of exactly how we are to understand His speech, and how we are to interpret all of His actions and words as recorded in the Gospel accounts.

Before we open our Bibles together I want to relate a brief story to you. For the

past 25 years I have had the privilege of taking several hundreds of people to Israel on tour. On some of the tours, especially when I had a Pastor or two on the bus, I took them to the Mount of Beatitudes. There we would spend a couple of hours on the lovely grounds not just for the beautiful view of the Sea of Galilee but also for a Bible lesson. Naturally we would read at least part, often all, of the Sermon on the Mount. Invariably I would ask a Pastor on the tour to read it for us; they were always kind to accommodate me.

Starting at Matthew 5:1, I could see the easy familiarity these Pastors had with the moving words of the Beatitudes (one or two of them even had it memorized), as often they spoke with teary eyes. But then, as I asked them to continue, they would encounter verse 17, then 18, then 19; some paused partway through perhaps not sure they wanted to proceed. Others had a deer-in-the-headlights look come over their faces. Some seemed puzzled as though after reading this chapter numerous times in the past, Jesus's words of verses 17 - 19 were suddenly new to them. Such can be the case when one visits the Holy Land of Israel. I'm sure it's obvious to you, as it quickly became to them, why I chose these Pastors in particular to read the Sermon on the Mount to the group: it was my intent to make an impact. And now it is my prayer that these words we are about to dissect make a similar impact on you.

So without further ado, open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5 and let's talk about what it is that makes these words so monumental, so important to our faith, and so unsettling to much of Institutional Christianity that they are often ignored.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 5:17 - 20

Let's go verse by verse and very nearly word by word. The opening text is, depending on your English Bible version, "Do not think", or "Do not suppose", or "Think not". I don't need to dwell on the meaning of this simple phrase because it is self evident. Christ means something like: "I know what some of you might be thinking about what I've already said, and how you might take what I'm about to say, but you'd be wrong". In other words, Yeshua is interrupting the regular flow of His speech to make a point because He knows that some will object to what He has to say and others will read into it things He does not mean. In fact, I can imagine Him making a rather dramatic pause; taking a few seconds, inhaling deeply, and then scanning the crowd making sure He has the attention of everyone listening. The purpose is to clarify the interpretation of His instructions and teaching in order that the people listening rule out a certain way of thinking

that some, maybe most of them, might automatically assume. Why might they automatically assume wrongly? Because they, like us, had mental filters.

Humans have always had mental filters. Without even being fully conscious of it we all have, since we were very young children, developed a certain way of looking at our world. That view of our world colors everything we see and hear and come into contact with. Therefore our personal mental filters filter out some information, and allows other information to pass through. Some of the way our mental filters develop has to do with the temperaments we are born with and the sensitivities we develop along the way that might be inexplicable. Some of it has to do with our family history and family system. The culture we have been raised in and/or have joined plays a significant role as does the teaching (formal or informal) that we have received. Our personal experiences, and the prejudices and preferences we develop and so much more all take their place to help form our views and thus are the blueprints that construct our personal mental filters. The Jews that Christ was speaking to that day naturally all had their own mental filters. While not universal among every attendee, we can probably make some general conclusions about the nature of those filters.

First: the attending Jews were aware since their earliest age of their rich Hebrew heritage. They knew of their ancestral father Abraham, of their ancestors' time in Egypt and of their exodus. They knew of the Wilderness Journey, about the happenings on Mt. Sinai, and who Moses was and the lofty place He holds in Jewish religious history.

Second: the multitude were entirely aware of the Torah and the Law of Moses, even though most were not well versed in its details. Remember: at that time the Hebrew Bible was still being painstakingly hand-copied onto scrolls, and no one but the Priesthood possessed more than a book or two at best due to the expense and time involved in creating each copy.

Third: there was no question as to the continuing and never ending validity and truth of the Torah and the Prophets, and the entire **Tanakh** (Old Testament, Hebrew Bible) for that matter. Of this there was no debate even among the Jewish religious and academic elite.

Fourth: since the majority of the people of Israel had long ago dispersed to regions all over Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, few of the Jewish Diaspora were able to make the several annual Torah commanded pilgrimages

to the Temple in Jerusalem; whether that journey was to sacrifice to atone for their sins, or to attend a biblical festival. So their contact with Jerusalem, the Temple and the Priesthood was rare, if ever, unless they lived within the immediate area of the Holy Land or were both wealthy and religiously zealous.

Fifth: although the Torah itself commands that it is the Levite priests who are responsible to teach the Hebrew people the Torah, that had ceased to happen centuries earlier. The exile of the Jews to Babylon had created a huge vacuum in Jewish religious leadership and ritual as well as in the people's knowledge of Scripture.

Sixth: out of this vacuum was born the synagogue, as more or a less a necessity. Each synagogue was local and served a small community of Jews.... very much like the Church. Each synagogue was independent of the others and so the religious expression of each varied. In time, however, some Jewish leadership developed then standardized, to a degree, the synagogue system. The synagogue at first served the Babylonian exiles who had decided not to return to their homeland but to make wherever it was they were, their permanent home. Later the institution of the synagogue spread to the Holy Land, even though those Jews resided in relatively close proximity to the Temple. Therefore whatever religious training and instruction the average Israelite received came from his or her local synagogue. And who operated these synagogues? Who did the teaching? This was the province of the Pharisees for the most part. That is, the synagogue leadership and the teachers were lay people (non-priests) that had no connection to the Temple. And because the synagogues were dominated by the Tradition-driven instruction of the Pharisees, then it was Tradition and manmade Jewish Law (as opposed to the actual biblical Law of Moses) that the typical Jew learned and practiced.

So the mental filters that Jews had in the 1st century were created primarily on the basis of their distinct Jewish culture and on the Traditions and Jewish Law that their religious leaders taught them. Thus, this large crowd of Jews will (without realizing it) filter every word Yeshua says through their mental matrix of knowledge and viewpoint. Therefore much of what Yeshua says sounds new to them, even though it is old. Some of it sounds wrong, because they have been taught wrongly. Sometimes their skepticism of Jesus's words is because they don't know what the Torah actually says, and thus they don't have the proper reference point to judge the difference between the actual, biblical, God given Torah, and the manmade Traditions (the doctrines) they and their forefathers

have been taught in the synagogue all their lives.

This ought to sound familiar to us even if we might not be terribly happy to have it pointed out because it is like that in the typical Christian Church, and has been so since shortly after its inception. The people either don't have a Bible, or don't read and study the Bible, and so whatever the Church authorities say that the Bible says and means is what the people generally accept as unassailable truth. The name for these many interpretations of the Bible and the resulting rules is doctrines. Thus while the Church has nearly always been doctrine based, as opposed to Bible based, the synagogue has nearly always been Tradition based, as opposed to Torah based. Christ's concern, then, is that the people listening to Him will think that under His own authority He is either changing the Law of Moses, or effectively abolishing it and replacing it with new teachings of His own. So He begins with the words: Do NOT think.....

So the people are told not to think..... what, exactly? He says that they are not to think that He came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. What, exactly, did that mean to His listeners? A quick reminder: whatever we in the West might think, we have to always keep in mind that Matthew was a Believing Jew, whose thought processes followed a Hebrew path. So first: whatever the people sitting on that hillside think Yeshua is trying to tell them in His Sermon, He insists that nothing of what He says involves Him abolishing anything. Abolishing, over turning, or destroying is not what He came to do. The Greek word being translated as abolish is **kataluo**. The Greek lexicons all agree that it means to abolish or to over throw; so our English Bibles have it right. Second: the things He specifically emphasizes that He is NOT over throwing is the Law and the Prophets. So, precisely, what is Christ meaning by the Law and the Prophets? In Greek the term Law is **nomos**, and the term Prophets is **prophetes**. In this use in Matthew 5:17 the term "the Law" is referring to the Law of Moses, or more accurately in Hebrew thinking, the Torah (the 5 books of Moses). The term "the Prophets" is exactly what it sounds like it means: it means the books and works of the Old Testament Prophets like Isaiah, Daniel and Ezekiel to name a few.

Let's take a tiny detour to discuss a serious language issue that, to my great surprise, seems to go unrecognized by nearly every commentary written on the Gospels. One of the most difficult matters to sort out in the New Testament (not as much in the Gospels but far more so in Paul's writings) is the prodigious use of the word "law" (**nomos**) that we find. And we all know that the term "law" is, within most of Christianity, a negative. When translating from Hebrew to Greek,

and then further to English, the word **nomos** gets used in a number of ways that causes great confusion. Let me explain. When the Hebrew word is Torah, then the Greek translation used for it is **nomos**. So the English translation from the Greek is law. Thus Torah in Hebrew becomes " Law" in English, but that's NOT what Torah means (Torah means teaching or instruction... not law.... or it is referring to the entirety of the first 5 books of the Bible). So right off the bat we have a distortion built-into our English Bibles. Further, when the Hebrew thought is "the Law of Moses", then the Greek word chosen to translate it is also **nomos**; and so the English translation of the Greek becomes law. Few Christians know that the Law of Moses is but a section contained within the Torah, and not the whole of it. Another example: when the Hebrew meaning is Oral Torah (that is, Hebrew customs and traditions handed down for centuries that are said to have been given to Moses by God but were not recorded in the written Torah), again the Greek word chosen is **nomos**, and so the English translation is, once again, law. When the Hebrew term is **Halakah** (meaning Jewish Law, which consists of interpretations of the Law of Moses that the Pharisees used and expected the Jewish people to obey), again the Greek word used is **nomos** and so the English translation is law. One more instance. When the Bible talks about secular civil law (including Roman civil law), the Greek word used is... you guessed it..... **nomos**, which becomes law in English. Do you see the problem? The only Greek word used, and therefore the only English word used for all these quite different situations and varying elements of literature and law codes and Holy Scripture within Jewish religious practice and culture are translated using the same Greek word, and thus the same English word, and so because of our Western and Christian mental filters naturally it seems that they must be referring to the same thing; and whatever it is, that thing is negative and thus to be avoided.

So what *is* Christ actually referring to when we read in our English Bibles "The Law and the Prophets"? The good news is that when in the New Testament those two terms are coupled together (the Law and the Prophets) it is used as a single expression that is speaking of the actual Hebrew Bible and not of Traditions, Jewish law, civil law, or oral Torah. There is no doubt in my mind that the original Hebrew thought that Matthew had and probably wrote was "the Torah and the Prophets". That is because the Torah and the Prophets very early on in Jewish history became technical terms for naming 2 of the 3 sections that (in Jewish scholarship) together made up the Old Testament (the **Tanakh**). The Hebrew academic leadership saw the Bible as consisting of 3 parts: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. But, rather than having to say all those words

when referring to the entire Old Testament, then a standard expression used among Jews was "The Law and the Prophets". We'll see Paul use that same expression in several of his letters, indicating exactly the same thing: the entirety of the Hebrew Bible.

Exiting now our brief language lesson and the dilemma that some strained biblical language translation can cause, the incredibly important bottom line is this: in Matthew 5:17 Christ emphatically said that He did **not** come to abolish any part of the Hebrew Bible. And just so there's no confusion going forward: the terms **Tanakh**, Hebrew Bible, and Old Testament all mean exactly the same thing and so I'll rotate the use of them.

So, if what Yeshua has said and is about to say is decisively NOT to be taken to mean that He is in some way changing or scrapping any part of the Old Testament, then exactly what is it that He is doing in His speech? That last half of verse 17 says in English: "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill". The KJV says "I have come not to destroy but to fulfill". Other versions are nearly identical, but whatever minor word difference occurs still amounts to the same thing. In other words, our English Bible versions are in full accord as to how to translate these words from Greek to English. Christ says He "came to fulfill".

This part of the verse is where the trouble begins. A large segment.... I estimate it to be the majority..... of Christian institutions fiddle with those few words to substantially change their meaning in order to accord with a long standing Christian doctrine that the Law of Moses..... which among so many denominations means the Old Testament in general..... is dead and gone and thus irrelevant to Christians. Some go so far as to make the Law of Moses (and most of the Old Testament) as a danger to Christians because delving into it or thinking that it still has relevance to us, could draw us away from our faith in Christ.

So let's look at this word by word. Notice that the term "abolish" is used again. That is, Christ first says "I did not come to abolish...", and now repeats Himself but also adds more information. In both instances the Greek word is **kataluo**, which the several Greek lexicons all agree that it means to abolish or over throw. Some language scholars claim it can also mean "destroy". Nonetheless, any of those possible meanings arrives us to the same place within this verse. But now what does it mean to fulfill? The Greek word used is **pleroo**. Here is the standard agreement among Greek lexicons as to the meaning of this word (this is a quote,

I'm not paraphrasing): 1) to make full, to fill up; that is, to fill to the full. 2) to render full, i.e. to complete.

Here's the rub: Christianity distorts the meaning of **pleroo** to include the concept of terminating, concluding, stopping. That is worse than error; it is a fraudulent changing of the meaning in order to uphold and defend a predetermined doctrine. **Pleroo** (fulfill) is the Greek word used in the Bible when describing the fulfillment of a prophecy, for example. Fulfilling a prophecy certainly doesn't mean to **stop** the prophecy, or to **terminate** it, or to **conclude** it. Some of the standard commentaries I've read on the matter claim that the meaning is to complete; and to complete means to terminate. The reason that Greek lexicons say it means to "complete" even say it means to "complete" within the context of "rendering full". A common example in Western society is for one spouse to lovingly say of the other that they "complete me". This is the proper sense of the word **pleroo**. It means to bring to the full, not to bring to an end. Under no circumstance nor usage does the Greek **pleroo** mean to end, terminate, stop or conclude.

One of the illustrations that I've used to help picture the meaning is that it is like in the old days when gas stations had service attendants to put gasoline into your car for you. They'd walk up to your car window and ask what they could do for you. A standard response was "fill it up". If we were speaking Greek we'd say "**pleroo**". That is, we want our gas tank to be made as full of fuel as it can hold. We want to bring it to its fullest capacity. We certainly don't mean to terminate our gas tank.

But, because I'm in process of discrediting one of the most widely accepted and passionately defended doctrines within Christianity, I'm going to say a little more about it. When one takes Christ's meaning in this passage as "terminating", then we have Him saying the unintelligible. That is, this false interpretation has Jesus say: "I come not to abolish but to terminate". This is gibberish. If I abolish a law, do I not terminate it? If I abolish destructive relationships in my life do I not stop them? Rather Yeshua is saying that all that the Hebrew Bible points to is Him. And yet in another sense (as we'll soon see), He means that He will bring all that the Old Testament has established to its fullest heights and intents. Thus in but a couple more verses He'll begin with: "You have heard that our fathers were told..... but I tell you". Although it is not a perfect analogy, it is not unlike when the atom was first discovered a little more than a century ago. At that time it was thought to be the absolute smallest particle that all matter consists of. But a few

years later it was brought to light that atoms themselves consisted of even smaller particles called neutrons, protons, and electrons. This new revelation didn't in any way end or terminate the atom. The truth of the existence of the atom as a building block of all matter remained true. The discovery of the deeper mysteries of the atom added necessary understanding of it; it didn't abolish it. We need to see what Christ meant about what He came to teach us, and what He certainly in no way intended to do with Holy Scripture, in the same light.

Clearly Yeshua felt that His definitive, unambiguous statement of verse 17 could still be misunderstood, or more likely intentionally corrupted, in order for various Jewish religious factions to find fault with Him or to support a doctrine that He did not establish or agree with. So He now expands upon verse 17 in verse 18.

^{CJB} Matthew 5:18 *Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.*

Other English versions have it essentially the same with the same meaning and intent but I'll quote a couple of the most accepted versions for you.

^{KJV} Matthew 5:18 *For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*

^{NAB} Matthew 5:18 *Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.*

So in verse 17 He says that nothing that He personally says or does is meant to add, subtract, change or terminate any part of the Scriptures.... the Hebrew Bible. In other words, by beginning with "Don't think **I have come to....**" He is saying that He is in no way advocating for nor will He be the responsible party for abolishing the **Tanakh**. But now in verse 18, His statement becomes more general and broad in scope. That is, however it theoretically could happen, and whoever might be the responsible party, is actually a moot issue because such abolition or change isn't going to happen. Period. And He then adds a statement that a casual reading of it sounds a great deal like a common expression that employs hyperbole..... exaggeration. He says that the Hebrew Bible and its relevance and content will remain as is, alive and in force until.....when? Until Heaven and earth pass away. For so many Believers this statement is very

similar to the meaning of "until Hell freezes over". That is, Hell isn't ever going to freeze over just as Heaven and earth are not going to pass. Not so fast. It turns out that indeed Heaven and earth *are* going to pass away and the Bible tells us when this is going to occur.

CJB Revelation 21:1 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there.*

John, who wrote the Book of Revelation, was quoting a much earlier prophet when he wrote down that prophecy.

CJB Isaiah 65:17 *"For, look! I create new heavens and a new earth; past things will not be remembered, they will no more come to mind.*

We won't spend too much time with this; you can go to my teaching on Revelation for a more extensive treatment on the passing of the heavens and the earth. But a few points do need to be made. First: all the major English translations agree on the wording of this passage in Isaiah. But notice that in Isaiah it is heavens (plural) that is being re-created. This is well understood to be referring to the physical Universe, not to Heaven where God dwells. But in Revelation 21, because commentators don't seem to acknowledge that John is quoting Isaiah, the meaning is changed from there being a new Universe to there being a new Heaven (where God dwells). That is simply incorrect. The intent is to say that all physical things that together make up our entire Universe will be broken down and then rebuilt sometime after the Millennial reign of Christ (assuming John's sequence of these events is the correct one).

Second: Clearly according to Isaiah and to John (John outlived Jesus), this re-creation of the heavens and earth upon the passing away of the old is a future event. And, obviously enough it has not yet happened. Yet I was personally confronted on this matter and told by serious people that the old heavens and earth had already passed away and it happened at Christ's crucifixion. In other words, this confrontation had mainly to do with whether or not God's Torah had passed away along with Christ. These folks agreed that it was not possible to accept Matthew 5:17 and 18 in any other way than that until the heavens and earth did pass away, to be replaced with new, that the Torah and all the Old Testament remained in force for Believers according to Yeshua. So the only solution was to determine that this event had already occurred. I am still at a loss

for words to reply to what is so obviously untrue. But such is the lengths that some Christians will go in order to defend the undefendable among long held Church doctrines.

Third: Because in His Sermon on the Mount Yeshua was not using the passing of the heavens and the earth as an expression and hyperbole but rather He was telling of an actual and real event that includes a real marker in the timeline of redemption history, it is self-evident that indeed the content and relevance of the Tanakh WILL end at some defined point. And that defined point is upon the passing of the old heavens and earth and the re-creation of a new heavens and earth. But, as He said, not until all that must happen, happens. By the way: because it was Isaiah who foretold the destruction of the old heavens and earth and the re-creation of the new, many Jews would have been familiar with this and not at all put off about such a statement coming from Yeshua.

And yet, Christ is so intent on getting this crucial understanding across to a crowd that obviously had been taught something different in their synagogues and who might scoff at what He is saying, or pervert what He is saying into something He is not saying, He goes even further. He says that not even the tiniest part of the Holy Scriptures will be abolished, changed, add to, or subtracted from leading up to the passing of the current heavens and earth. Not even one single letter in one single word will be altered by the only authorized entity that could legitimately do that: God. But, as He insists, that's not going to happen. And since Yeshua is the Word, that promise comes on pretty good authority.

Some of you hearing this may be wrestling with it. Some may be dismissing it altogether regardless of the plain nature of what these few verses say because this seems to fly in the face of all that you've heard at Church since becoming a Believer. Suddenly you're hearing that not only is it NOT wrong to keep following all the Old Testament, which includes the part that Yeshua is going to focus on, the Law, but you are obligated to do so. I feel your pain; a long time ago I was confronted with this as well. It took prayer, and some time, for me to realize that how I feel about it is not relevant. How shook up I am about it is merely the result of me not personally studying and then believing God's Word for what it says. Instead I was looking to the very religious authorities of certain Christian denominations whose jobs were to defend that denomination's existing doctrines; it was their sworn duty to maintain the status quo.

Let's face it: how nice it is to hear (and believe) that all you have to do is pray the

sinner's prayer, now you are saved, and so are relieved of any further obligations to God. You have the fullest freedom and liberty; no boundaries, no rules, and no duties. In fact, there's no reason that you can't go right back to your old sinful life because Christ paid for those sins anyway; so for you, there's no consequence. But should you be so foolish as to try to obey God's written commands you are doing wrong; you are being a legalist. And Our Messiah would NEVER want us to do that..... right?

CJB Matthew 5:19 *So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.*

That's the CJB version. What does the KJV sound like?

KJV Matthew 5:19 *Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

All the other English versions say essentially the same. Christ has given the instruction, and now He tells His listeners the consequences of obeying or disobeying. This is, sadly, another verse that has been intentionally spun and violated in order to pound a square peg into a round hole. I can't tell you how many sermons I have heard, many years ago, that this wasn't talking about the very thing Yeshua was talking about..... the Hebrew Bible... the Law and the Prophets..... this was talking about entirely new commands that He would issue that would abolish and replace the older ones. I have also heard a few sermons that claim that it ought to be the goal of a Christian to be the LEAST in the Kingdom of Heaven. For some that's an indication of humility and meekness, for other Pastors it is the Believers' reward for dutifully breaking God's commands (that Jesus has supposedly just abolished). So seeking to be greatest in God's Kingdom is as wrong as obeying God's old biblical commandments.

So what would Christ's words have meant to the ears of the many Jews hearing this directly from Him? It was the common traditional understanding in synagogues that there were lesser and greater laws. These amounted to the heavy and light commandments; the ones that brought the direst consequences for disobedience, as opposed to the ones that brought but a slap on the wrist.

Christ says that despite what the Scribes and Rabbis may tell you, I tell you that you are to obey all the laws and commandments of God with equal devotion. He says:

^{CJB} Matthew 5:20 *For I tell you that unless your righteousness is far greater than that of the Torah-teachers and P'rushim, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven!*

That's enough to ponder for today. We'll continue with Matthew 5 next time.