

Why Matthew 5:17 Should Define Every Day of Your Life

One of the most discussed passages in the Brit Chadasha (New Covenant) is Matthew 5:17. I have heard and read so many opinions on what Yeshua (Jesus) meant when He spoke those words over 2000 years ago. But looking at the words themselves seems like a straightforward approach.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill.”

Clearly, the intent of the statement is to contrast the words “abolish” and “fulfill.” So, any reading of the text that would conclude with the understanding that Yeshua was doing away with the Torah and Prophets (another way of saying Tanakh or Old Testament) would be doing exactly the opposite of what the intent of the verse says. So, if Yeshua is abolishing the Torah with this statement, what is He doing?

In order for us to understand this verse, we must first employ a primary rule of biblical study, and that is to keep the text in context. Anytime we remove text from its context, we will always end up with a faulty understanding of the writer’s intention.

In order to understand the context of these words, one has to read what event is taking place and what was said prior to and following verse 17. Yeshua is on the mountain preaching to His disciples. He begins to give what has become known as the Beatitudes in verses 1-12 and then continues in verse 13-16 with the following:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how shall it be made salty? It is from then on good for nothing but to be thrown out and to be trampled underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a basket, but on a candlestick. And it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Yeshua's instructions are for His followers to become world-changers and shine their light within the world so their good works would glorify the Father. Immediately after these words are spoken, Yeshua says the words we find in verse 17. The statement that He did not come to abolish the Torah and prophets is directly linked to the instruction to shine, do good works and glorify the Father. It is clear in context that Yeshua's intent was to reaffirm the instructions of Torah to His disciples, not as a means for justification or redemption. Rather, it was as a means to glorify the Father by demonstrating good works and letting their lights shine.

Looking forward, we find that not only does verse 17 continue the thought and instructions starting in verse 1, but the rest of the chapter continues to provide insight into what is meant by the words "but to fulfill."

Yeshua continued speaking in verse 18-20:

For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one dot or one mark will pass from the law until all be fulfilled. Whoever, therefore, breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do likewise shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no way enter the kingdom of heaven.

I think that we can all agree that heaven and earth have not

yet passed away and also that all of the prophecies prophesied in the Torah and Tanakh have not yet come to pass. So, clearly Yeshua is still not abolishing Torah with these words. As a matter of fact, these words appear to call for an even greater adherence to Torah, exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees and Torah scholars. The answer to understanding these difficult words and statements comes into clearer focus starting in verse 21:

You have heard that it was said by the ancients, "you shall not murder," and "Whoever murders shall be in danger of the judgment." but I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, "Raca," shall be in danger of the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, "You fool," shall be in danger of hell fire.

Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go on your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Reconcile with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will by no means come out of there until you have paid the last penny (Matt. 5:21-26).

Notice that Yeshua speaks in verse 21 with a Torah commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13). He then goes on to "bring fullness" in the next few verses by explaining to His disciples that in order to let their light shine and glorify the Father, they must obey the fullness of the commandment as expressed in verses 22-26. We find this same "bringing to fullness" demonstrated in verses 27-32 speaking

of divorce, verses 33-37 concerning swearing and verses 38-47 giving instruction for how to treat others.

Each of these are examples of how Yeshua brought a fullness not only to the understanding of the commandments, but instructed us on how walking out our faith in the fullness of the commandments allows us to be a light to the world. By doing so, we are able to, as it says in the closing verse of Matthew 5, "Therefore be perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect." {eo}

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