

Session 5

What Did Jesus Do with the Law?

Series: Living The Torah | Dr. Randy White

“Turn it, and turn it again, for everything is in it. Look into it; grow old and gray over it, and do not move away from it, for you have no better rule than it.”

—Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag, *Pirkei Avot* 5:22

What Does It Mean That Jesus Fulfilled the Law (Matthew 5:17)

- Matthew 5:17 – “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.”
- Central verse in debates over the believer’s relationship to the Law of Moses.
- Jesus clarifies that His mission was not to overturn or abolish the Mosaic system.
- Common interpretations:
 1. Jesus fulfilled the Law by completing it so that it is no longer needed.
 2. Jesus fulfilled the Law by living it perfectly as an example.
- Both views contain elements of truth but fail to grasp the full intent in context.
- The terms “destroy” and “fulfill” must be studied linguistically and contextually.

Key Terms

Destroy (καταλύω)

- Meaning: to dismantle, dissolve, invalidate, or break down something that stands in force.
- Commonly used of tearing down a building, removing an institution, or nullifying an order.
- Scriptural examples:
 1. **Matthew 26:61** – “I am able to destroy the temple of God...” → dismantle a structure.
 2. **Luke 21:6** – Temple stones “thrown down” → literal demolition.
 3. **Galatians 2:18** – “If I build again the things which I destroyed...” → nullifying authority.
- Jesus’ denial of “destroying” the Law means He did not come to dismantle or render it void.

Fulfill (πληρόω)

- Meaning: to fill to full measure, to bring to completion, to reach the intended purpose.
- Does not mean to abolish but to bring something to its full expression or maturity.
- Scriptural examples:
 1. **Matthew 3:15** – “To fulfil all righteousness.” → completing what was fitting.
 2. **Matthew 13:48** – “When it was full...” → filled to capacity, not ended.
 3. **John 7:8** – “My time is not yet full come.” → completion of appointed time.
- The term signifies full performance or realization of purpose, not termination.

“Fulfill” Does Not Mean “Destroy” or “Abolish”

- πληρόω never means annihilation or cancellation.
- Implies accomplishment, completion, or performance to the fullest extent.
- Supporting passages:
 1. **Matthew 23:32** – “Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.” → complete a pattern, not end it.
 2. **Luke 7:1** – “When he had ended all his sayings...” → completed one discourse, not all teaching.
 3. **Acts 13:25** – John “fulfilled his course.” → completed his mission; preaching continued.
- Conclusion: Jesus fulfilled the Law by accomplishing its full intent, not by abolishing it.

An Important Distinction: Audience

- Jesus’ words were addressed to Israel under the Mosaic covenant, not to the Body of Christ.
- **Romans 15:8** – “Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision... to confirm the promises made unto the fathers.”
- His ministry operated entirely within Israel’s covenantal framework.
- Supporting passages:
 - **Matthew 10:5-6** – “Go not into the way of the Gentiles... but to the lost sheep of Israel.”
 - **Matthew 15:24** – “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”
 - **Luke 1:68-73** – Zechariah praised God for remembering His covenant with Abraham.
- The Law was Israel’s national constitution, governing worship and covenant standing.
- Jesus’ teaching pertained to that existing covenant, not to the later dispensation of grace.

The Law’s Continuance

- The Law remained in force throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry.
- His life and teaching demonstrated complete obedience and affirmation of Torah.

Under Jesus’ Earthly Ministry

- Jesus lived entirely under the Law (cf. **Galatians 4:4**).
- His family obeyed every requirement of Moses (**Luke 2:21-24, 39**).

- He was sinless (**John 8:46**), showing perfect covenant obedience.
- He instructed others to uphold the Law:
 - **Matthew 8:4** – Told healed leper to offer the Mosaic gift.
 - **Matthew 23:1–3** – “Whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do.”
 - **Matthew 5:19** – Breaking even least commandments results in least in the Kingdom.
 - **Matthew 19:17–19** – “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.”
- He lived and taught as one under the covenant, affirming its authority for Israel.

After Jesus’ Death

- Early believers continued temple worship and Mosaic observance.
 - **Luke 24:53** – “Continually in the temple, praising and blessing God.”
 - **Acts 2:46** – “Continuing daily... in the temple.”
 - **Acts 3:1** – Peter and John at the temple “at the hour of prayer.”
- Jewish believers were “zealous of the law” (**Acts 21:20**).
- The Great Commission commanded them to teach “all things” Jesus had commanded (**Matthew 28:20**), all given under Law.
- Peter’s dietary refusal (**Acts 10:14**) showed continued Torah observance.
- Believing Pharisees in **Acts 15:5** demanded Gentile circumcision, indicating the Law’s ongoing recognition.
- The Law remained active for Israel until the revelation of the mystery to Paul.

What Jesus Did Not Do

- He did **not** abolish the Law during His ministry.
- The Mosaic system remained operative for Israel throughout His life.
- He did **not** relax the Law’s standards but exposed its full moral intent (“Ye have heard... but I say unto you”).
- He did **not** extend the Law to the Gentiles; His mission was exclusively to Israel (**Matthew 15:24**).
- The Law remained Israel’s covenant alone during His ministry.

The Bible on the Law

- Modern meme humorously captures both truth and omission regarding the Law.
- The overwhelming testimony of Scripture (Exodus through the Gospels) is Torah-affirming.
- The Law is consistently upheld as binding upon Israel prior to the Pauline revelation.
- From prophets to psalmists to Jesus Himself, obedience to Torah defines covenant faithfulness.
- Only with Paul’s revelation do instructions for the Body of Christ, apart from Law, appear.