



TRUTH IN LOVE

Shedding Light on the Word of God

DID YOU SACRIFICE YOUR SHEEP TODAY?

Matthew 5:17

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets.

I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

As part of preparing for Christmas, have you sacrificed a sheep? Such an activity is probably not in your list of Christmas traditions that make this the joyful season that it is, but doesn't God command in Scripture that regular sacrifices must be made to Him? For example, in Exodus 20:24, God says that sheep and oxen must be sacrificed to Him everywhere His name is remembered. If you want to remember His name this Christmas (as I'm sure you do) there is still time to fit a sheep sacrifice between your last minute holiday shopping and putting the frosting on your gingerbread cookies.

Oh, and by the way, you can't do any shopping, baking, cleaning, or decorating on December 23rd, because that is the Sabbath.¹ So you better get it done before then. And no Christmas ham this year either, since all pork is forbidden. Also, you had better put away those angels, nativities, and especially the statues of Santa. Graven images are an affront to God. Don't even get me started about Christmas trees (cf. Jer 10:2-4).

THE PROBLEM WITH THE LAW

Have I destroyed your Christmas cheer? Hopefully not, because you know I'm only joking. But really, what is wrong with what I've written? It all comes from the Word of God, and God does not change, right? If we fail to practice the Mosaic Law, are we not disobeying God?

Some Christians would say we are, and so practice everything in those two paragraphs—except the sheep sacrifice. When asked why they don't practice the sacrifices, they say that the Mosaic Law is made up of Priestly Laws and Moral Laws. We still have to keep the Moral Laws, they say, but not the Priestly Laws. Things like sacrifices are Priestly, and therefore don't need to be followed.

The problem with such reasoning, however, is that such a distinction is not Biblical, and is completely arbitrary. There is no place in Scripture that divides the Mosaic Law into these categories, and those who do try to divide them can't agree on which laws are Moral and which are Priestly. The dietary laws are an example. Can we eat ham and lobster? Some say yes; some say no.

But if we go the other way, and say that there is no distinction between Moral and Priestly Laws, we have a different problem. Since we can't pick and choose which laws are valid, we either have to say the Law is still binding, and obey all the Laws, or say the Law has been done away with, and we don't have to obey any of them. The first option reinstates animal sacrifices. The second option throws out the Ten Commandments. You can see why it's easier to come up with an arbitrary and unscriptural division of the Law.

A BETTER WAY

Thankfully, there's a better way, and Jesus introduces it to us in Matthew 5:17-20. In these verses, Jesus introduces and summarizes the body of His Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:2-16 was the opening illustration—the attention grabber of His Sermon. We've looked at that in previous studies. The body of the sermon is 5:17-7:12² and the conclusion is in 7:13-27.

In the Body of the Sermon (5:17-7:12), Christ reexamines some of the principles of the Law, and shows how they had been misunderstood and misapplied by the Jewish religious leaders. He is not "raising the bar" on the difficulty of the law as much as showing how the Law was originally to be understood and lived out. We will see all of this as we continue to study this sermon. So in the introductory summary to the body (5:17-20) Christ lays out the principle of what He is going to do. He did not come to abolish or destroy **the Law** and **the Prophets**, but to fulfill them. Since the phrase *Law* and *the Prophets* refers to the Hebrew Scriptures in their entirety—not just the first five books—whatever Jesus is saying about the Law must also be applied to the Prophets. This is a warning to those who say that Jesus is "doing away" with the Law. If that is true, then He is also "doing away" with the rest of the Hebrew Bible as well.

¹ Remember, *Saturday* is the Biblical Sabbath, not Sunday.

² Note the repetition of the phrase "Law and the Prophets" in 5:17 and 7:12.

Jesus begins the body of His Sermon this way because there had been rumors flying about during the early stages of His ministry that He was going to do away with the Law. But “in one stroke of utterance, Jesus not only put to silence any rumor that he would do away with the Law, he also showed that there was no discord between his teaching and the Law.”³ He stated that He had not come **to destroy** them, **but to fulfill** them.

The word *destroy* (*kataluō*) means “to tear down or come to nothing.” This shows right away that Christ did not come to do away with the Law and Prophets, or tear them down. So you can keep Psalms in your Bible. Whatever has been done with the Law and Prophets, they have not been done away with or become meaningless.

Instead, He came to *fulfill* the Law and the Prophets. *Fulfill* (*plēraō*) is a key term in the Gospel of Matthew and is nearly always used in reference to Christ instilling deeper meaning and significance into various passages from the Hebrew Scriptures which had been overlooked or misunderstood (cf. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; etc.). When Christ “fulfills” a passage, He is “filling it full” with more meaning, and content than the average Jew understood. When Christ fulfilled Old Testament texts, He instilled familiar passages with dazzling new significance that made them fresh and relevant.

The Law of Christ

What all this means for us in relation to the Law will be explained further in 5:18-20, but so that you don’t go out and buy a sacrificial lamb, let me ruin the surprise. Jesus was bringing a new type of Law—the Law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2). But in order to do that, He had to completely obey the Mosaic Law, which He did in His birth, life, and death. The resurrection is proof that He accomplished this perfect obedience. As believers living after Christ, we do not live according to any of the Mosaic Law—not even the Ten Commandments. Rather, we live according to the Law of Christ, which has many similarities to the Mosaic Law, but also many differences. For example, the Law of Christ contains nine of the Ten Commandments, but with an added twist on each. There are also numerous elements to the Law of Christ that the Mosaic Law did not contain.

While the Mosaic Law still helps us learn about God and how He has dealt with His people in the past, it is no longer a guide for our behavior today. Our guide is Christ and His instructions. More of this will be seen in 5:18-20, and especially in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is an explanation of some of the changes He is bringing.

So thankfully, there will not be any sheep sacrifices in our house this year. But we do put up a Christmas tree, have several nativity scenes around the house, and have bacon in our fridge. This Christmas Season, praise Jesus not only for coming, but also for the gift of change He brought with Him.

³ R. T. Kendall, *Just Grace* (London: SPCK, 2000), 8.

Family and Ministry Update

by Wendy

Merry Christmas friends and family! May your Christmas season be peaceful and filled with much joy! Our girls love Christmas. Now, I must confess they come by it naturally, since I am a child when it comes to Christmas. Everything from old traditions to making new ones—baking, decorating, wrapping—all are done with childlike joy and excitement. Our girls have definitely picked up on this, and are joining in. So far, they have helped bake and decorate many cookies and a gingerbread house, wrap presents, make cards, do crafts, and sing songs.

And our girls and sing! Their favorites are *Away in a Manger*, *Deck the Halls*, *Mary Did You Know?*, and *Jingle Bells*. They sing in the car, and in the stores, and in church, and everywhere they go, bringing smiles to all who hear. Their angelic singing constantly reminds me to draw closer to Jesus. One song I listen to frequently (but the girls don’t sing...yet) is by an artist named Evie who sings about a nativity shepherd boy who wants to be set closer to Jesus. I explained the song to Taylor last year and she took it to heart and is constantly dressing up like a shepherd and holding baby Jesus (a doll). Selah now does the same thing. In their innocence, they are doing all they can to be close to Jesus.

As I watch them, I smile at how great it is to be a child and how easy it seems to be near Jesus as that age. But the truth is that it is easy at any age—we’re just better at making excuses as we get older. So this year, may you be like the shepherd, and find a way to be near to Jesus.