



## Matthew 5:18

18 For truly I tell you, 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.

### Reflection

Here's Jesus delivering the most famous speech ever given in the history of the

world. Even people who aren't Christians rank the Sermon on the Mount as one of the most influential speeches of all time, even when they have no real idea what it means and don't believe what it says. And so as you can imagine the crowds are enthralled. No-one has ever spoken like this. But many amongst the crowd are beginning to experience a crisis of faith. You see many of them are devout Jews and what Jesus is teaching them seems fly in the face of what they've been taught by Rabbis ever since they were children. They're deeply moved by Jesus' powerful words, but they're also conflicted, is this a new religion he's starting, and if so what does it mean for the faith of my father, for the faith of my forefathers, for my very identity as a Jew?

So yesterday we saw Jesus answer the burning question that was on many people's hearts. Had he come to start a new religion? No. Emphatically no. 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' And in case they somehow missed it Jesus restates his point even more emphatically in today's passage:

18 For truly I tell you, 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.

Jesus begins with what will become his signature phrase, 'truly I tell you,' he's going to use it 31 times in Matthew, and no

other teacher is known to have used it. What it means is that Jesus isn't drawing on the teaching of some Scribal school or some tradition of Jewish thought, he's drawing on his own authority and he's speaking the God's truth. Truly I tell you the Old Testament stands, every part of it, every single word of it and as long as the universe stands it will stand. You can't get any more emphatic than that.

Now this statement is extremely important, but it is also extremely confusing. It's extremely important because Jesus is saying that the whole bible is God's word, every part of it, the Old Testament and the New, and there is no conflict between anything Jesus goes on to say or do with any part of the Old Testament. The whole bible is God's word and is perfectly internal-

ly consistent down to the letter, it contains no contradictions whatsoever. And so you can see that this statement is extremely important for how Christians view the bible. To use some technical language it is foundational to our doctrine of Scripture.

But this statement is also extremely confusing because later on we see Jesus and his disciples seeming to live in a way that contradicts some of the laws in the Old Testament and in the writing of Paul, the greatest early Christian teacher after Jesus, who went on to write most of the New Testament, Paul even says in Romans 10:4 in some translations that Jesus is the 'end of the law,' which again seems to be a direct contradiction to what Jesus is saying here.

But of course it isn't. We know this because of what Jesus said yesterday and what he's saying today. Yesterday he spoke in terms of coming to fulfil the Law, the Greek term has the sense of not just fulfilment but also of filling up, expanding and deepening it. And today Jesus is speaking in terms accomplishing the Law. So we get the sense of the Jesus furthering and deepening our understanding of the Law, and fulfilling it, accomplishing it in his life.

Now this may sound all well and good by way of explanation but how will we soon account for the fact that the Old Testament says very clearly not to work on the Sabbath, and yet Jesus and his disciples soon work on the Sabbath? Also, the Old Testament has very clear food laws which very soon Jesus will retract and his subse-

quently his disciples and the early Christian church will no longer follow them. The evidence would seem to suggest that many things are soon to disappear from the Law because of Jesus.

This problem remains today. Many Christians open up books of the Old Testament and read commandments that clearly no one follows anymore and for good reason given how severe some of these commandments seem to be. But these apparent tensions are simply misunderstandings of the law that Jesus' teaching came to resolve.

In essence Jesus helps us more fully understand the Old Testaments laws. And when we do, at the risk of slightly oversimplifying given that I only have so much

space left, we begin to see that the Old Testament laws can be loosely divided into 3 types: moral laws, ceremonial or religious laws and civil laws. The moral laws, like the 10 commandments, are true for all time. God's moral character never changes, so moral laws like the 10 commandments are true for all time. The civil laws are confined to the period in history when God lived amongst his people in the desert and into the Promised Land. The principles behind these laws are still valid, but the laws themselves were only for the Israelites in those times. For the religious laws, the principles behind them also still apply, but the laws themselves were only meant to last up until the time of Jesus.

Thus properly understood in the light of Jesus and his teaching, every word of the



Old Testament is precious and unchanging, but many of the specific laws are confined to a time in place in history or have been fulfilled and thus served their purpose. What remains however, the moral laws, are now going to be expanded upon and deepened and clarified in much of the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, but more on that over the coming weeks.

## **Think**

So again today it's likely that we've begun to feel a little out of our depth as we've discussed parts of the Old Testament. How is your working knowledge of the Old Testament law? Jesus has reminded us today of how important it is, how every word of it stands, how both the Old and New Tes-

tament are one book to which the interpretative key, the hinge that holds them together is his life, and death and resurrection. Often we're quite strong on the hinge and the second half of the book but how about the first half? So again today think deeply about Jesus words in this passage and then perhaps resolve to take the Old Testament more seriously. Don't shy away from parts that you find difficult to understand. Instead value them like Jesus and put in the hard work so you can see how the whole bible fits so perfectly together.

## **Pray**

And then pray for the ongoing desire and discipline that you will need as you put in the work to make the whole of Scripture to come to life for you. Pray that the Holy

Spirit would bless you in this endeavour and that what you learn would change your life and the lives of those around you.

Jesus is going to emphasize this a third and final time for us tomorrow. I'll see you then.