

How Did Jesus Fulfill the Law?

By Mark Moore

In Matthew 5:17-20 Jesus said that not a jot or tittle would pass away from the law while heaven and earth stood firm (cf. Luke 16:17). This indicates that the written law (especially encapsulated in the Decalogue), would endure as long as the material world did. However, Paul appears to contradict Jesus when he states that the Christian is no longer obligated to the law (Galatians 3:23-25), that, in fact, the law has been abrogated (Rom 10:4; Col 2:14; Eph 2:15). So how can the law endure according to Jesus but be defunct according to Paul? The typical answers go like this: Jesus fulfilled the law by fulfilling Messianic prophecies, by living out the moral imperatives of the law, and by dying sacrificially to satisfy the punishment of the law. There are all well and good. However, they don't account for verse 19, which suggests that *we* are obligated to obey the law.

1. We know that the Christian is not saved by keeping the law (Acts 13:39; Rom 3:21, 37-31; 6:14; 7:4-6; 8:1-4). The fact of the matter is neither were the Jews. They were saved by God's election and their faith in his promises to Abraham. These promises preceded the law by 430 years (Gal 3:5-9, 15-18; Rom 4:1-25). **The law can't make one righteous . . . it never did.**
2. The issue of Gentile observance of the Mosaic law was settled at the Jerusalem counsel of Acts 15. While the Gentiles were not without guidelines for unity (Acts 15:28-29), they were not obliged to keep the Mosaic law. **Obviously the church is not bound by the specific requirements of the written code.** Even Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19), thus abrogating the dietary laws.
3. **The law is a wonderful and necessary gift** of God (Rom 7:7, 12, 14, 16; 1 Tim 1:8). Furthermore, its functions are still very much in tact:
 - a. Induce guilt by activating one's conscience (Rom 3:19-20). The "natural law" functions quite apart from the written codes of Moses among those who do not have the law (Rom 2:12-15)
 - b. To punish those who do evil. Remember, the law cannot make one righteous, it can only condemn those who sin (Rom 3:19-20; 4:15; 5:13; 7:10-11; Gal 2:16-21; 3:10-13, 21). To make matters worse, it the law actually makes people worse by arousing sinful passions (Rom 5:20; 7:5) and educating us in what sin is and how to do it (Rom 3:20; 7:7-8). The law, in fact, is the power behind sin which leads to death (1 Cor 15:56). And even one transgression violates the whole law (Gal 3:10; 5:3; James 2:10; 1 John 3:4)
 - c. It leads us to Jesus (Gal 3:23-25) by:
 - i. Showing us how desperately we need a savior.
 - ii. Clarifying the holiness of God and the relationship he desires to have with us.
4. Just as Jesus fulfilled the hope and purpose of the Sabbath, the Temple, the Nation, the Sacrifices, etc., so too he, himself, fulfills the law (Luke 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 28:23; Rom 10:5-10; Heb 10:1; cf. John 1:17). **Ultimately, Jesus did not fulfill the law by what he did but by who he is.** This accounts for the immediate context of Matt 5:19 – our obligation to follow the ordinances of the law. It also accounts for the broader context of Matt 5:21-48 where Jesus interprets and extends the law. He is the holiness of God, embedded in the law; He is the means for our relationship with God and our righteousness before him (Rom 3:20-22; Gal 2:16) as well as our reception of the Holy Spirit (Gal 2:2, 5; 5:18). Clinging to the law destroys our relationship with Christ because it negates faith (Gal 5:3-5)
5. **What does this actually look like?** This law of Christ (Gal 6:2) is the law of love. For love encompasses all the other commands (Matt 7:12; 22:36-40; Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; James 2:8; even the Rabbis recognized this, Luke 10:26-27). Our redeemed minds do submit to this correctly interpreted law, it's our sinful flesh that doesn't recognize it has good (Rom 7:25; 8:7).