



I HAVE COME TO FULFILL THE LAW

Matthew 5:17-20

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Introduction

I have recently become a fan of Lauren Winner's book, *Girl Meets God: A Memoir*. It's a good a read; it's a fun read; it's an intriguing look at her conversion from nominal Judaism to Christianity.

As an adult convert, she has some interesting and honest things to say about Christianity, not least about Christmastime. "Christmastime," she says, "may be the hardest season for churches." She explains:

We are inured [i.e., so accustomed as to be deaf] not only to the Christmas story itself, but also to our pastors' annual rants against consumerism. Every creative attempt to make the season meaningful, to steal it back inside the church, away from the shopping malls and cheesy radio stations, has been tried, and most of those creative attempts have proved wanting.

But what's the problem? Winner goes on to explain:

Perhaps the problem is that we don't know what the meaning of this holiday, of Jesus' pushing into the world, is. If we did, we wouldn't have to worry about consumerism; if we knew what the Incarnation meant, we'd be so preoccupied with awe that we wouldn't notice all the shopping.¹

Now, if there is a Christmas prayer I'm praying for me and my family and for you, it is this: to be so preoccupied with awe at Christmastime that you don't even notice all the shopping.

But how do we become *preoccupied with awe* at the Incarnation? The key is to take a fresh look at what the Incarnation meant. Or, to ask: Why on earth did God's Son come to earth? This is the season of Advent. But what's the advent or arrival of Christ really all about?

There shouldn't be any confusion about why Jesus came to earth. He was quite clear about why he came. In fact, there are a number of occasions in the gospel where Jesus just comes out and tells us why he has come. He introduces them with this expression: "I have come." It's an unusual expression; that is, it's unusual for you and me to use. No one talks like that; not the people we bump into at the grocery or at the office. Only characters from sitcoms like *Seinfeld* talk like that; only Cramer talks like that. But that's precisely the point: he's bizarre, he's odd, and he's out of touch. It's an unusual expression because it indicates an awareness of divine mission: "I have come."

Jesus uses this expression in our passage today. And we learn that one of the reasons why Jesus came to earth was, as he says, to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (5:17). In fact, you might say that this is the first reason why Jesus came. For this is the first time in Matthew's gospel where Jesus says something like this; there are others, but this is the first. And Matthew's

¹ Citations from Lauren F. Winner, *Girl Meets God: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 35.

gospel is also the first writing of the New Testament; it touches the Old Testament and thus connects everything that's come before with what's to come after. This statement here in Matthew 5 creates an organic link between the two testaments, and thus merges the two into a single book, what we call the Bible.

Now, contrary to popular opinion, both then and now, both in Jesus' day and ours, Jesus *did not* come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. No, the Law is going nowhere; Jesus understood that. For the Law is ultimately the expression of God's good and holy and perfect will for the humanity; it's thus here to stay. "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (5:18).

Instead, Jesus came to fulfill the Law. That's a significant choice of words: *fulfill*. It's a pregnant word, if you will, one full of meaning and significance. Let's look at some of the ways in which Jesus came to fulfill the Law; with the hope that by doing this we will become preoccupied afresh with awe at the Incarnation, with what Christ came to do at Christmas.

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law in His Preaching

The first thing we can say is that Jesus came to fulfill the Law in his preaching. This means that his preaching, and his teaching, *clarified the intent of the Law*. From this passage we realize this is perhaps the first and most obvious way in which Jesus fulfilled the Law: he explained the true meaning and intent of the Law. We see this in what follows, where he gives a number of examples from the Law and offers his own clarifying and authoritative interpretation of the Law with the words: "But I say to you" (5:21-48).

Here Jesus is not altering God's Law, much less doing away with it and establishing his own Law; instead, he is recovering, as it were, the original intention of the Law from centuries of willful abuse and superficial misunderstanding. And in so doing he gets to the heart of the Law, by pointing out that *the Law has everything to do with the heart*. As we see in Jesus' preaching here, the heart of the matter is not ultimately murder, but a heart of anger (5:21-26); the heart of the matter is not ultimately adultery, but a heart of lust (5:27-30); the heart of the matter is not ultimately swearing an oath, but a heart of integrity (5:33-37). This, then, is what the Law is all about: the heart. And this is what Jesus clearly taught in his preaching.

But Jesus' preaching not only clarified the intent of the Law; his preaching also summarized the *essence* of the Law. So, toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gathers up the various strands of teaching in the previous three chapters, summarizing them this way: "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (7:12). Or we think of the time when Jesus was quizzed by some of the religious know-it-alls, who asked him: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Jesus answered in return:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:37-40).

Jesus thus fulfilled the Law in his preaching by clarifying that the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart; and by summarizing everything the Law has to teach in a single word: love.

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law in His Person

There is a second way in which Jesus came to fulfill the Law: not just in his preaching, but in his person – who he was in himself, his presence, we might say. What this means is that *Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies of Scripture*. Matthew makes this point repeatedly in the first three chapters of his gospel. We're told that the miraculous, virgin birth of Jesus was "to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel'" (1:22-23). The place of Jesus' birth, in Bethlehem of Judea, was the fulfillment of what prophet Micah had spoken: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rules of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (2:5-6). His fleeing with his family to Egypt was even a fulfillment of Scripture: "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet," Matthew tells us, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (2:15). Each of these prophecies of old – they all point to him, and are perfectly realized in him. Jesus fulfills the Law by fulfilling the prophecies of Scripture.

But in addition to being the fulfillment to the prophecies of Scripture, we also need to realize that *Jesus is the answer to the promises of Scripture*. You see, the God of the Bible is a God of promises; from the very start He has been making promises. To Adam and Eve, God promised that the seed of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15; cf. Rom. 16:20). To Abraham, God promised that he would bless him and make his name great and through him bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:2-3; cf. Gal. 3:6-8). To Moses, God promised that he would raise up another prophet who would speak the very words of the Lord (Deut. 18:15-19; cf. Matt. 5-7). To David, God promised to raise up one of his offspring to sit on his throne forever, saying, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son" (2 Sam. 7:14). Indeed, on virtually every page of the Bible we find the promises of God, and they all point forward to their Yes and Amen in him, in Jesus Christ. "For all the promises of God," Paul tells us, "find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20).

You see, then, that this Book, the Bible, is all about Him. Jesus is its heart and soul. He is the center of Scripture. And we cannot understand this Book, if we do not understand it in light of this person, Jesus Christ. There is a wonderful illustration of this point at the end of Luke's gospel. Two men, followers of Jesus, were walking on the road to Emmaus, discussing between themselves their disappointment with the fact that Jesus didn't pan out to be who they were anticipating him to be. Jesus pulls up alongside these two men and engages them in a little conversation. After a short while, he then gently rebukes these two men, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (24:25-26). Luke then adds: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27).

Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Law in his person. He is thus the key to the Bible. He is its consummation and climax. He is its heart and soul and center.

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law in His Practice

There is a third way in which Jesus came to fulfill the Law. He came to fulfill the Law not only in his preaching and his person, but also in his *practice*, by how he lived and by what he did.

This means, of course, that Jesus fulfilled the Law in his *life*. This was clear from the start. As he said to John the Baptist, on the banks of the Jordan, just prior to being baptized by him: “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). And thus it was in the desert, in the wilderness of temptation, that he likewise fulfilled all righteousness in resisting the onslaught of the evil one, the tempter, the devil (Matt. 4:1-11). So, too, through the whole of his earthly existence, from birth to death, the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled all righteousness. To be sure, as the Book of Hebrews reminds us, he was indeed tempted in every respect just as we are; yet he was without sin (4:15). Our Lord Jesus Christ thus fulfilled the Law perfectly; as a result, he was able, as the Bible says, to “offer himself without blemish to God” (Heb. 9:13). A perfect life, a perfect sacrificial Lamb.

This leads us naturally, then, to another aspect of his fulfilling the Law in his practice: not only in his life, but also in his *death*. Which brings us to the very heart of the gospel, as the apostles understood it. Listen to the Apostle Paul:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures* (1 Cor. 15:1-3).

Jesus Christ’s death, though unjust, cruel and ugly, was no accident, but perfectly in line with the intention of Scripture itself. Commenting on this passage of Scripture, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: “The fulfillment of the law, about which Jesus speaks, could therefore come about only through his being nailed to the cross as a sinner. He himself, as the crucified one, is the perfect fulfillment of the law.”²

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law in His People

His preaching, his presence and his practice – in each of these Jesus came to fulfill the Law. But there is a fourth and final way in which Jesus came to fulfill the Law. He came to fulfill the Law *in his people*.

This is where what Jesus has done intersects with what we need. For you and I need to fulfill the Law. Of course, it is true that: “There is no fulfillment of the law without communion with God.” This was the mistake of the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ own day; it’s also been the mistake of countless religious people, Christian or otherwise, in every day and age.

But it is equally true that, “there is also no communion with God without fulfillment of the law.”³ This is why Jesus goes on to say what he says in 5:19-20.

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You see, it would be tempting – it’s always been tempting – to think that the problem is really out there, with the Law. That’s where we as humans tend to go: not to ourselves, but to

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 118.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 117.

the Law. But the problem's not ultimately with the Law, but with the people. We know this from Israel's own experience with the Law. And we know this from our own experience with the Law (cf. Rom. 8:13). The problem is not with it, but with me. It is not the Law that must be changed; it is the people who must be changed. The Law remains the same; the people must be made new. We must, through the person and work of Christ, be made to fulfill the Law.

And this is just what has happened. Listen to how the Apostle Paul explains the wondrous effect of Jesus having come to fulfill the Law in his people:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

This is, then, brothers and sisters, the double miracle of Christmas: not just a Christ who fulfills the Law, but a *Christian* who fulfills the Law as well. "God became man," wrote C. S. Lewis, "to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature." And for you and I to become people who fulfill the Law of God and walk in faithfulness with him – yes, this is indeed like turning a horse into a winged creature. But such is the miracle, the double miracle, of Christmas. Christ has come to fulfill the Law in his people.

Conclusion

So, then, let me ask you: How can we become preoccupied with awe at the Incarnation? By understanding the meaning of the Incarnation. By understanding why on earth God's Son came to earth. For this is what this Advent season is truly all about.

Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Law: in his preaching, in his person, in his practice. But he also came to fulfill the Law in his people: to make them – to make us – not just nice, but new. He came at Christmas to gift us with his life, where we see through his teaching and example what it means to fulfill the Law; he came to gift us with his death, where we find free and full forgiveness provided by the cross; and he came to gift us with his Spirit, his own presence in our lives and in the church, enabling us to fulfill the Law and thus enjoy, by his grace, both joy and peace.

Amen.