

How Did Christ “FULFILL” the Law?

If Jesus Christ were to come to this earth and instruct you to **not** think a particular thing, would you respond by *thinking* the very thing that He instructed you to *not* think?!

Well, incredible as it sounds, that is exactly what *most* professing Christians do!

Jesus Christ said, “Do **not** think that I came to abolish the Law...” (Matt. 5:17, NASB;NIV). Yet, most churchgoers think that Christ *did* come to abolish, or do away with, God’s law!

Yes, Christ said to *not* think that! Yet, that is exactly what many people *think*. They think that Christ Himself *kept* the law while here on earth---and, having done so, there is **no longer need** for mankind to *keep* God’s spiritual law.

However, consider this. If mankind was required to *keep* God’s law, and then Christ came along and perfectly kept it---and His keeping it *resulted in* the law never needing to be kept again---then that would plainly be a case of Christ having **abolished** the law! The law *needed* to be kept, up until Christ kept it; and *since* that time it *no longer needs* to be kept. That would be *abolishing* the law---it no longer needs to be kept!

Yet, Christ said, He did **NOT** come to abolish the law!

How Did Christ Fulfill the Law?

Let’s now look at the *remainder* of verse 17: Christ said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I did not come to abolish but to fulfill**” (NASB).

So, the big question is, *how* did Christ fulfill the law? He fulfilled it in *two* ways:

(1) Christ **FILLED UP** the law---He filled it *to the full*.

When Christ said that He came to “fulfill” the law (verse 17), the Greek word translated here as “fulfill,” is the *same* Greek word used in the following scriptures: Matt. 13:48, which speaks of a fishing net being “**full**” of fish; Matt. 15:37, which speaks of seven large baskets “**full**” of leftover food; John 12:3, which says, “the house was **filled** with the fragrance of the oil”; John 16:6, which says, “sorrow has **filled** your heart”; Acts 5:28, where the chief priests accused the apostles of having “**filled** Jerusalem with your doctrine.”

Just as fish “fill” a net, food “fills” a basket, and a scent “fills” a room---likewise, Christ “filled” the law! To see *how* He filled (or filled up) the law, just continue reading this same fifth chapter of Matthew.

Notice verses 21 to 22: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not murder*, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I [Christ] say to you that whoever is **angry** with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...”

In quoting the statement “You shall not murder,” Christ was quoting one of the Ten Commandments. Did Christ, in the above passage, *relax* this requirement of the law? No...He made it even *more* binding!

For another illustration, look at verses 27 to 28: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not commit adultery*.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has **already**

committed adultery with her in his heart.” Again, did Christ take something *away* from the law---or did He *add* something to it?

What Christ did, in this Sermon on the Mount, was to move from “*just* the letter of the law” to “**also** its spirit and intent.” Christ emphasized the *meaning* of the law. He explained that the law must be *even* in our thoughts!

Far from “abolishing” the law, Christ was *developing* the law. He was **filling up** the law!

Furthermore, in His “filling up” the law, Christ was bringing to pass an Old Testament prophecy, which said that the coming Messiah would “**magnify** the law and make it honorable” (Isa. 42:21). The word “magnify” is from the Hebrew word “gadal,” which is used several times in the Old Testament, and carries the meaning of “making *greater* in size and *importance*.”

When you view something through a *magnifying* glass, that does not abolish it! Rather, it enables the thing to be seen in much greater detail. It brings the thing into focus. Christ made the law crystal *clear*. He *enlarged* the law in the eyes of humanity---so we could understand its underlying intent.

This verse in Isaiah says that Christ would not only “magnify” the law, but also make it “honorable.” That Hebrew word, “adhar,” means to “make something glorious or more majestic.” So, Christ revealed the *glory and splendor* of the law more fully!

Consider this excellent explanation of Matt. 5:17, from Stern’s *Jewish New Testament*:

Did [Jesus] **fill** or **fulfill** the [Law]? The common word *plerôsai* means “to **fill**.” [Yet, at Matthew] 5:17 most translations render it “to *fulfill*.” The theological implications *often* drawn are that [Jesus] fulfilled all the prophecies of the [Old Testament] pertaining to the Jews, so that none remain for them now; and that he kept the [Law] perfectly, so that no one need obey it today. But these conclusions **do not** follow *logically*, and in fact they **contradict** [Jesus’] immediately preceding statement that he did *not* come to abolish (or destroy) the [Law]. More fundamental for translation, however, is the question of whether *plerôsai* in this verse should be rendered “to *fulfill*” **at all**. [This] translator’s view is that [Jesus] came to **fill** the [Law] and the ethical pronouncements of the Prophets **full with their complete meaning**, so that everyone can know all that obedience entails. For this reason the *Jewish New Testament* says that [Jesus] came “not to abolish *but to complete*.” In fact, this is the *subject* of the **entire** Sermon on the Mount; and [Matthew] 5:17, understood in this way, is its **theme** sentence [1995, pp. xxii-xxiii].

So, Stern says that Christ’s statement that He came to fill---or **complete**---the law, is the “*theme sentence*” for the entire Sermon on the Mount!

Let’s now look at the *second* way in which Christ “fulfilled” the law.

(2) Christ FULLY LIVED the law!

He fulfilled the law by *fully living it*---**living it not only by the letter of the law, but also by its spirit and intent!**

Furthermore, now that the Holy Spirit has been made *available*, those who *receive* God’s Holy Spirit, are *enabled by* that Spirit dwelling in them, to *likewise* live by the spirit and intent of God’s law. In that sense, *you and I also* must fulfill the law! Of course, unlike Christ, we won’t keep the law perfectly. We will oftentimes fall short. We sin from time to time---yet, each time *confessing* our sin to God, asking His forgiveness, and *striving* ---with the help of the Holy Spirit in us---to sin no more.

Paul says, “that the righteous requirement *of the law* might be **fulfilled *in us*** who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). And the Greek word translated here as “fulfilled” is the *same* Greek word translated as “fulfill” in Matt. 5:17, which says that **Christ** came to fulfill the Law.

So you and I must also fulfill the law---and we do so by living by both the letter of the law **and** by its spirit and intent. This can be done *only by* having the Holy Spirit within you.

Paul said that “love **is** the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10). But he also said that God’s “law is *spiritual*” Rom, 7:14). So, in order to fulfill a *spiritual* law, it requires *spiritual* love---agape love---God’s *own* love. In fact, the word “love” in Rom. 13:10 is translated *from* the Greek word “agape.”

So, how can you and I fulfill the law? Agape love is a *fruit* of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22). When a person receives God’s Spirit---receives agape love *from* God---and then *expresses* that love (either back to God, or to fellowman), then the person is *fulfilling* the law---fulfilling the “righteous requirement of the Law” (Rom. 8:4). As Paul said, “he who loves [agapao] another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8).

Yet, it’s vital to understand that agape love---God’s *own* love---is expressed **within** the confines of His *law*!

Let’s now consider that *what* we’ve just discussed, **disproves** what most people believe. They believe that Christ obeyed the law, thereby fulfilling it---and that this relieves us of any obligation **to** obey God’s law. Yet, we just saw that Paul said that “the righteous requirement of the law” needs to be fulfilled in each one of us! And he said that it’s by loving one another---with God’s own agape love---that we do fulfill the law (Rom. 13:8,10; 5:5). (Also see the article “Does ‘Love’ REPLACE God’s Law?”)

In conclusion, Jesus Christ *fulfilled* God’s law. He fulfilled it *by His teachings*---magnifying and filling it up---and He fulfilled it *by the way He lived*---living by not only the letter of the law, but also by its spirit and intent. Yes, Christ fulfilled the law when He walked this earth 2,000 years ago; and He will likewise fulfill it over and over again---*in your life and mine*---as we yield, to let Him live *His* life in us!

Notes:

(1) Much of the above article is an adaptation of **John Ogwyn’s** fine article entitled “How Did Jesus Fulfill the Law?” (*Living Church News*, July-Aug. 2004, p. 4).

(2) Speaking of Matt. 5:17, notice the following comment from *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*: “To *fulfill* (Gk. plēroō) is probably *not* so much to obey them [although Christ *did* obey them] as to ‘**give them their full meaning**’.” (December 1979, p.823)

(3) Consider **Matt. 5:18**. Here, Christ said, “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” Saying, “not one jot or tittle” is similar to saying, “not a dot over an i or a cross of a t.” So, here Christ *upholds* the authority of the law right down to the “least stroke of a pen.” And He essentially says that the *written* law will remain in effect “**till all is fulfilled**.” What does He mean “till all is fulfilled”?

In the phrase “till all is fulfilled,” the word “fulfilled” is translated from a totally *different* Greek word than the word “fulfill” in verse 17. Verse 18 simply means “till all is accomplished,” as it’s rendered in the RSV. So, what does Christ mean “till all is accomplished”?

He was referring to a still future time, which will occur *after* the “great white throne” judgment, spoken of in Rev. 20: 11-15. At the *completion* of this judgment, the only people who will still be in existence will be those who have been changed into perfect, spirit-composed beings. (The *others* will have been destroyed in the lake of fire, spoken of in verses 14-15.) These spirit-composed beings had gone through a process, during their *physical* existence, of having God’s laws “placed in their minds and written on their hearts” (Heb. 8:10). Now, as glorified, spirit-composed beings, those laws will be **totally** “placed in their minds and written on their hearts.” They will then be in *perfect* harmony with God, and live *perfectly* according to God’s law of love. Consequently, then---and only then---will there be no more real **need** of the *written* law.

(4) Bible Commentaries tend to *avoid* being plain about what they teach regarding Christ’s statement that He came “to fulfill” the law (Matt. 5:17). They *hint* at the idea that Christ fulfilled the law and therefore **we** don’t *have* to keep God’s law. But they refrain from plainly saying that. Why? Because they realize that if they say that, then they are in effect saying that Christ not only fulfilled it, He also abolished it! And they know that this would be **contrary** to what *else* Christ said in verse 17---“Do **not** think that I came to destroy [or abolish] the Law”!