

# The revolution in context—Matthew 5:17-48

**Theme:** Jesus spells out how his revolution reflects God's character and so grows out of what God has demanded of his people so far

The trouble with revolutionaries is that everyone assumes they are starting from scratch, tearing down all that's gone before. But Jesus' revolution is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. So he spells out how his teaching grows out of and fulfils the Old Testament Law and how those who live according to the beatitudes embody the character of God revealed and reflected in that Law

## Questions:

1. In your daily devotions, how much do you read the Old Testament compared to the New?
2. What do you think Jesus means when he talks of 'fulfilling' the law?
3. How should Christians view the Ten Commandments: to be obeyed? To guide us? Some other way?
4. What do you think Jesus means by saying that we should be perfect as God is (5: 48)?
5. How do we keep our anger in check?
6. How can the church help people in our society to uphold the covenant of marriage? [Be as practical as you can]
7. Should we swear oaths in law courts in the light of what Jesus says in 5:33-37?
8. How do we show love to those who don't like us?
9. Does Jesus' teaching in v38-47 have anything to say about British foreign policy? If so, what?
10. What practical things can we do to help one another live up to the standards Jesus sets out for us in this passage?

## Your stories:

## Potted summary

Jesus has come to fulfil the Law. This means his life and teaching stand in continuity with what God has revealed of himself from Abraham on.

But it could sound as though Jesus is saying things that contradict the Law. Here he spells out how his lifestyle embodies all that the Law points to and shows that his revolution is more far-reaching in its loyalty to the purpose and goal of the Old Testament than the teaching of the Pharisees.  
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# What the passage is about....

When Pol Pot seized power in Cambodia in 1975, he declared that to be 'year zero', all that had happened previously was irrelevant. Jesus' revolution, however, happens in fulfilment of a plan God has been working to since he called Abraham. So if he isn't starting from scratch how does everything we've learned up to now and especially the Law and the prophets – what we call the Old Testament—fit with what he is teaching?

## 1) the principle of fulfilment (17-20)

Matthew has brought together four sayings of Jesus that focus on slightly different things in order to provide a complete picture of where the Law and prophets fit with the revolution. Matthew is keen to address two issues that were hot potatoes among his readers – as they are today:

**i) freedom from strictures.** Some argued that being a disciple meant the Law no longer applied to their lives. Jesus has set us free from all restrictions; we can do what we like. This is answered in v18-19

**ii) following like slaves.** Others argued that being a disciple of Jesus means that we have to obey the Law even more exactly and strictly than other Jewish groups. This is dealt with in v17 and 20

The key to understanding these verses lies in grasping what 'fulfilment' means. The word is one of Matthew's favourites when it comes to describing why Jesus came. It occurs ten times in relation to scripture: 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9. Plus a further three times in a slightly a different way in 2:5, 26:54, 56. Jesus uses the term about his baptism by John (3:15).

Obviously some thought he'd come to throw out the Law and replace it with something entirely new. Rather his revolution is a radical calling of the whole world to a way of life based on values that the Law and the prophets – the entirety of the Old Testament – had pointed to. He is the denouement of a long running story and the values of his new movement

are based on the character of God which is reflected in the Law but only fully revealed in Jesus. Jesus' goal is that we base our lives on seeking to be like God himself (5:48).

## 2) the practice of fulfilment (21-48)

Jesus gives six examples of how this principle works out in relation to specific aspects of the Law. Each example is about how the values outlined in the beatitudes work in real-life situations that were also addressed by Old Testament teaching.

**i) broken relationships (21-26):** few of us murder but we all say things like 'I wish you were dead', 'I'll never talk to her again', 'I'm so angry, I'll never forgive him'.

Such talk kills relationships and prevents us from living the values outlined in the beatitudes. Now Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't get angry – after all, he did (21:12-13; the woes against the Pharisees in 23:13-36). What we mustn't let anger do is destroy our relationships. Paul unpacks this in Ephesians 4:26 – be angry, but don't sin; don't let anger last beyond the day. So put things right, says Jesus (23-26).

*We imitate God, as we act as peacemakers*

**ii) lust (27-30):** anger isn't the only destroyer of relationships, so is lust. Self-control in the area of sexual conduct is very important. Lust starts in the heart before it acts in the world and it is fed by the eyes. Our society panders to it – advertising, porn, books, fashion. Note Jesus' startling advice: 29-30! It's a dramatic way of saying don't put yourself in the way of temptation. No good praying 6:13 and downloading porn from the internet!

*We imitate God by being pure – even to the extent of not looking on sin (Habakkuk 1:13)*

**iii) Marriage (31-32):** following directly on from lust, Jesus stresses that God's ideal is that marriage is permanent, a life-long covenant between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:3-9).

*We imitate God by being loyal to*

*covenant as he is.*

**iv) oaths (33-37):** these are only necessary in a society where people do not habitually speak the truth. Among God's people this should not be the case (Ephesians 4:15, 25). We should be known as people of truth in all our dealings with people within and without the church.

*We imitate God who always speaks the truth.*

**v) revenge (38-42):** the 'lex talionis' is the most famous bit of Old Testament Law. It was not a license for personal revenge. Rather it was a judicial limit on it. Jesus says we are people who love and pray for our enemies rather than put their eyes out. See Romans 12:14, 17-21 for how Paul this works this out for Christian groups in a pagan empire.

*We imitate God who is good to all (45)*

**vi) love (43-47):** the broader context for what Jesus has just said. People in Jesus' day did say what he quotes in v43. For instance, those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls enshrined this in their community rule. Jesus says that we should enemies like friends: Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 12:14-21.

*We imitate God who shows his love on his enemies – v45; Romans 5:6-11.*

## Three reflections on this:

- Temptation to soften what Jesus says – resist it! Let its very starkness shock you into being honest about your attitudes and the actions that flow from them. This enables us to follow the cycle of the first four beatitudes and grow in godliness
- Target for behaviour – we don't get this all at once. We grow in these attitudes and actions as we follow Jesus and trust in his Holy Spirit to grow in us the fruit that this behaviour resembles: Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; 1 Thessalonians 4:8 help us in this
- Together we're stronger – being a disciple isn't a solo venture: let's support, encourage and pray regularly, unceasingly for one another.