

“Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place” (Mt 5:18). When we think of the “passing away” of heaven and earth, we call to mind the Apocalypse and the end of the existing universe. Jesus has something more immediate in mind. The death and resurrection of Jesus will usher in a new age. Those to whom the gospel writer Matthew is speaking are already living in the new and final age.

The Prophet Isaiah had spoken of a world renewed. “See, I am creating new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered nor come to mind” (Is 65:17). “During Jesus’ ministry when the kingdom is already breaking in, his mission remains within the framework of the law, though with significant anticipation of the age to come” (Note Mt 5:18).

Jesus often debated the Pharisees and the scribes about the law. They held people accountable to the letter of the law without properly following it themselves. Beyond the hypocrisy, they tried to enforce the letter of the law without understanding its spirit. So, let us take a closer look at what Jesus means. He is quite clear in spelling that out:

- In some cases, Jesus accepts the Mosaic law but deepens it:
  - “You have heard that it was said..., ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (5:21-22).
  - Adultery is committed both by the physical act and the lust in a person’s heart (5:27-28).
  - The Law taught: “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (5:43-44). As children of God, we must imitate the example of our heavenly Father, “who grants his gifts of sun and rain to both the good and the bad” (5:45).
- In other cases, Jesus calls us to a higher standard thus rejecting the Mosaic Law:
  - Moses allowed for divorce in certain circumstances because of the hardness of people’s hearts (Mt 5:31-32). Jesus calls men and women to unite themselves to God in an unbreakable covenant. “What God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Mk 10:9).

- “Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all” (5:33-34).
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil” (5:38-39). Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek.

Throughout Lent, we are called to fast, and pray and offer alms. Jesus calls us to reflect on our lives and grow in love of God and neighbor. Where we have failed, Jesus calls us to confess our sins and to extend God’s mercy to others as he has first done for us. Jesus showed his love for us through his sacrifice on the cross. His supreme sacrifice is the gold standard for our own behavior.