

Matthew 5:17-18 in the Navajo Bible

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Bee haz'áanii Mózes baa deet'áanii áádóó Diyin God yá dahalne'ii bizaad ázhdooldííł biniyé jiníyá t'áadoo dashíínóh'níní; nahjį' kódeeshkíł doo biniyé náyaa da, nidi bi'deeshkíł biniyé náyá. ¹⁸ Háálá t'áá aaníí ánihidishní, Yádiłhił índa nahasdzáán bił yóó'ahóoyáajį' t'ááláhigo dah alzhin áádóó t'ááláhigo adeesdzo nidi bee haz'áanii bits'áádóó doo bił yóó'ahodoogáał da, nidi altsó bohoolyaago índa. (Matthew 5:17-18).¹

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (Matthew 5:17-18)²

Introduction

In Matthew 5 Jesus is giving us part of the Sermon on the Mount. The first part of this sermon has to do with God's law and Jesus' relationship to it. What we think that relationship is, however, will depend on our concept of which law He was talking about.

Which Law?

The Navajo translation says, *Bee haz'áanii Mózes baa deet'áanii* ("The Law given to Moses"). Actually, adding the words *Mózes baa deet'áanii* ("given to Moses") is not entirely wrong. They are not in the text, but "the Law and the Prophets"³ is how Jewish people referred to the Old Testament – the only Bible the early church had. In this formula "the Law" is everything Moses wrote and "the Prophets" is the work of all the others who contributed books to the Old Testament. Sometimes the formula had three parts rather than two, i.e., "the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (or Writings). People used these formulas to refer to the entire body of Old Testament Scripture.

This covers a lot of territory. In Matthew 5 does Jesus have any special part of the Law and the Prophets in mind, or is He speaking generally of the whole Old Testament? In vss. 21-48 He is not speaking generally. His focus is on the Law and the specific part of the Law that He talks about is the last five of the ten commandments.

If we take the Navajo just as it reads, the added words could be used to make a valuable point. The focus is not on a law written by Moses (*Mózes yee ak'e'aschíinii*), but on one *given* to

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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³ See Matthew. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; 23:29; Lk. 16:16; 24:44; Jn. 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21.

Moses (*Mózes baa det'áanii*). My point here is that the law we're talking about in the present passage was already written by the time Moses got it. So it would be correct to say (as the Navajo translation says) that this is a law "given to Moses," but less correct to say (as NIV has it) that it is the law "of Moses." This law did not come from Moses. It came from God.

Which Part of the Law?

I mentioned above that in Matthew 5 Jesus focuses on the last five of the ten commandments. In vss. 21-26 Jesus quotes the sixth commandment ("You shall not murder," Matthew 5:21; Exodus 20:13). In vs. 27-32 He quotes the seventh commandment ("You shall not commit adultery," Matthew 5:27; Exodus 20:14).

In vs. 33-37 Jesus doesn't quote a commandment, but it's easy enough to tell what He has in mind. He's talking about our use of words. Which commandment is that? Actually it's not number eight, which we would expect to come next, but number nine. For some reason commandments eight and nine are presented in a different order (nine then eight) in Matthew 5. What Jesus says about our use of words on this occasion is, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (vs. 37). In Exodus God said, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). In such a context, if you're in a position to give testimony about your neighbor, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'" (vs. 37). Tell the simple truth in a simple way. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe of Indians from the Northwestern United States (now Oklahoma) once said, "It does not require many words to tell the truth."⁴ This is the point Jesus was making.

In vss. 38-42 Jesus discusses the law against stealing. What He says about that is, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (vs.42). Jesus does not quote the words, "You shall not steal" (see Exodus 20:15). Instead He says, "Give" (vs. 42). The opposite of "You shall not" is "You shall," and the opposite of stealing is giving. Jesus' remarks in this section are in every way germane to the commandment. They are precisely on the mark.

So far we've talked about commandments six (Matthew 5:21-26), seven (vss. 27-32), nine (vss. 33-37), and eight (vss. 38-42), in that order.

In vss. 43-48 Jesus next discusses how we should think in our innermost hearts. Is there a commandment that deals with that? The tenth commandment tells us not to covet. "'You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor'" (Exodus 20:17). What does it mean to covet? It means wanting what other people have. Coveting is something no one can see, or hear, or know by any other means. It is entirely within us. Rather than wishing we had what we don't have, we should praise God for what He has already given us and done for us. Jesus doesn't quote the words, "You shall not covet" (above), but He shows that they have a breadth of meaning we might not have realized. What He does say is that our attitude toward other people should be that we want them to do well. We should love them, just as He does.

How does Jesus love people? Impartially. He doesn't love one person and hate another. There is a theology which suggests that He does love some and hate others. I disagree. It is

⁴ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/chief_joseph_2.html.

God's nature to love. This love comes from within Him, not from who we are or how good we are. God is one and so He loves all His creatures equally. This does not mean we will all be saved, but it does mean that His wrath is not an expression of hatred.

It is true that the ten commandments appear in a book Moses wrote, but he himself did not write them. God spoke them from Sinai and also wrote them down. When He finished doing that He gave them to Moses, and so the ten commandments – more than any other part of the Law – were truly "given to Moses" (*Mózes baa deet'áanii*). Receiving something already written is not the same as writing it. If someone gives you a book, that doesn't mean you wrote the book. In fact, one could say it means you didn't write it. And so the commandments, more than any other part of the Law, can be called the Law of God. In Navajo these two statements are mutually consistent (*bee haz'áanii Mózes baa deet'áanii = Diyin God bibee haz'áanii*; the Law given to Moses = the Law of God, i.e., the law God gave to Moses), while in English they give an appearance of conflicting with each other (law of Moses, law of God). How can one law have two points of origin? In Navajo this apparent problem – which is not a problem, but appears to be – never arises in the first place.

What Does "Fulfilled" Mean?

Already

If this is the "Law" we're talking about in Matthew 5, what does it mean to fulfill it? Saying that "fulfill" means "abolish" won't work. (I came not to abolish the Law, but to abolish it?) What Jesus says is, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17)? Whatever "fulfill" means, it does not mean "abolish." So what does it mean to "fulfill" the law?

Let me spend just another moment with what it doesn't mean. When Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized in the Jordan river, John didn't want to do it. He could tell that Jesus was holy and he knew that he himself was not, so he said that Jesus should be baptizing him rather than the other way around. But "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented" (Matthew 3:15). John did not abolish all righteousness by baptizing Jesus. He fulfilled righteousness. There's a difference – a contrast – between abolishing and fulfilling that we need to understand.

Jesus shows us what it means to fulfill the law He discusses by filling it with Himself. He does this by mapping His own holy traits of character onto the law, showing that He is what the law was talking about all along. Give life rather than taking it (commandment #6); be true and loyal to those who trust you (commandment #7); tell the simple truth simply (commandment #9); give to those who need your help (commandment #8). Hasn't He given to you? This is what He's talking about here. Do to others what He has already done for you. The law is fulfilled when, by our lives, we fill it full with Christ. This is why there's no reason to abolish the law "until heaven and earth disappear." Any law that's filled with Christ is worth keeping.

Not yet

The resurrection. In the 2000 Navajo *Diyin God Bizaad* Jesus says, *nidi attso bohoolyaago inda* ("but when everything is fulfilled, then," vs. 18), i.e., when everything is fulfilled, *then* the law will be abolished or destroyed. Is this what the passage means? If so, when was everything fulfilled? At the cross? Everything Jesus set about to accomplish through the cross was certainly fulfilled at the cross. All the prophecies that pointed forward to the fact that He would do such things were fulfilled then. But is it the case that everything – "everything" (vs. 18) – was fulfilled at the cross? I don't believe so, and I don't think you do either. Let me explain.

The cross was not supposed to be the end for Jesus. It was more like a beginning. To this beginning we must add the resurrection and the second coming. The resurrection was not an afterthought, but an integral part of God's plan. Paul says,

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Cor 15:17)

Jesus was not resurrected on the cross. Entering death is not the same as leaving it behind. So if Jesus was not resurrected on the cross, and if the resurrection is something that in God's wisdom had to happen in order for us to be saved, it follows that not everything was fulfilled at the cross. When Jesus died He still had to be raised from death. That's the reason *why* He had to be raised from death.

Jesus was raised on the third day. So when that happened, that's when everything was fulfilled. Is that right? Well, no. Even now, He has not yet come again the second time, in power and glory. Christians still have that to look forward. The second coming part is not an afterthought any more than the resurrection was. Instead it has always been an integral part of God's plan. And we can be glad of that, because the second coming is when all of God's children go home to heaven. We do not go to heaven when we die, but when He comes. That's what the second coming is for. Jesus comes to take us to heaven.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Discussion

In this context let's return to a phrase at the end of our passage. In NIV's English the whole verse reads, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (vs. 18). The key phrase is "until everything is accomplished." We've been

saying that not everything has been fulfilled, or accomplished, even now. So it's not time yet to set any part of the law aside.

Jesus says "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen," and yet people strike out the longest of the commandments. The Sabbath commandment occupies four verses in a law code that only has a total of 16 verses (vss. 2-17). When we count verses, the fourth commandment occupies 25% of the total. But these verses are longer than some, so when we count words rather than verses the Sabbath commandment occupies an even greater proportion of the total – about 40%. Forty percent is more than the smallest letter or the least stroke of a pen. But we tell ourselves that everything was fulfilled at the cross and so now we can ignore what we like, because the Sabbath doesn't count any more. Not so! The Sabbath is still with us today. The fourth commandment is still in full force and effect.

Returning now to the last clause of our passage – the one where the English says "until everything is accomplished" – in that clause the Navajo translation says, *nidi attso bohoolyaago inda* ("but when everything is accomplished it will"). Until heaven and earth disappear . . . until everything is accomplished, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law. But when everything is accomplished, then it will. This is what the Navajo translation says, but is this really what Jesus is saying? Is the purpose of His remarks to let us know when the law will disappear? If so, He has already told us by saying, "until heaven and earth disappear." Have they disappeared? Then the law is still intact. No part of it has changed or disappeared.

It is true that it might be inconvenient for us to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day when the whole world around us worships on the first day. Was it convenient for Jesus to die on the cross? Serving God is not about convenience, but about His honor and glory. Convenience is not the issue before us. Another issue that is not before is when the law will disappear. It hasn't disappeared yet, and it won't. The point Jesus is making that the law will remain as long as heaven and earth remain. This is an especially appropriate point to make just here, because the Sabbath commandment tells where heaven and earth came from.

Something has disappeared, but it wasn't the Sabbath or any other part of the ten commandments. It was the animal sacrifices that pointed forward to the fact that Jesus would one day come and die for our sins, taking our place in the same way that lambs died in the place of sinners anciently. When a man or woman sinned, that person deserved to die, but a lamb died in his or her place. Each lamb used in sacrifice pointed forward to Jesus. This is why John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, KJV; see also vs. 36). The laws that governed the animal sacrifices don't look forward to anything anymore. But we can still benefit from studying them, because of what they used to look forward to. They have much to teach us about Jesus.

Things that looked forward to what Jesus would one day do on the cross stopped doing that when He died there. Their purpose was fulfilled, i.e., filled full of meaning, by the reality that they had pointed to. What did the Sabbath look forward to? It didn't look forward. It looked back. That's why it starts with the word, "Remember . . ." (Exodus 20:8). What does it look back to then? To the creation of our world – the origin of our existence. For this commandment to lose its meaning something would have to happen that changes our origins. What sort of thing would that be? Not the cross. And not anything else. The cross, when understood together with the Sabbath, shows us that we are twice His. We belong to Christ by creation and by redemption. Neither one of these things removes the other. On the contrary, they strengthen and confirm each other.

Conclusion

The Sabbath helps us remember that we owe our existence to God. Through His Son God made our first parents on the sixth day of creation week. Is this something we should forget? I don't think so. But if it's something we should remember, why not let the Sabbath help us do that? Getting married doesn't change your birthday. What the Son of God did on the cross doesn't change what He did in the creation of our world. We should keep the Sabbath for as long as it remains true that God made us and everything around us (see John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-3). That is the meaning of commandment. How long is that? "Until heaven and earth disappear" (Matthew 5:18).

By keeping the Sabbath – on the seventh day, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday – we show that we are willing to rest in God's completed work for us. This willingness is the sign and seal, the visible evidence, of inner faith. Anything can be done wrong, but there are also ways to do this right. If we think of the Sabbath as our special time with Jesus, and His special time with us, that puts the matter in a different light. It's not about convenience, or days, or schedules, or laws, or letters – large or small – or strokes of a pen. It's about Jesus.