

What are the “least commandments” that Jesus referred to in Matthew 5:19?

Matthew 5:19 (ESV):

“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.”

If Jesus mentioned “least commandments,” then surely there must also be “greater commandments.” So what did He mean by these “least” ones?

ANSWER: Understanding the Context of Matthew 5:19

To understand what Jesus meant by “the least of these commandments,” we must consider the context, particularly Matthew 5:17, where He says:

“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, ESV)

Here, Jesus affirms that the Law (Torah) still holds authority. He wasn't introducing a new set of rules, as some Pharisees might have claimed, but was bringing the Law to its full and intended meaning—showing its true spiritual depth.

The scribes and Pharisees (Jewish religious leaders of the day) often classified commandments into categories: *major* and *minor*, or *weighty* and *light* (cf. Matthew 23:23). They tended to focus on outward observance while neglecting inward righteousness. But Jesus emphasized that even the commandments they considered small or insignificant had eternal value.

Examples of “Least” Commandments (as perceived by men, but affirmed by Jesus):

Jesus proceeds in Matthew 5 to reinterpret (or rather, clarify) the Law. He deepens its meaning by showing that sin begins not just with action, but in the heart:

1. Murder begins with anger (Matthew 5:21-22):

“You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder’... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...”

To the Pharisees, refraining from actual murder was enough. But Jesus says even harboring hatred makes one guilty.

2. Adultery begins with lust (Matthew 5:27-28):

“You have heard... ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery...”

Thus, Jesus includes hidden sins of the heart, which many considered minor or irrelevant.

3. Keeping your word is more than just avoiding false oaths (Matthew 5:33-37):

“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

4. Turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:38–39):

“You have heard... ‘An eye for an eye...’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.”

Jesus calls for radical humility and non-retaliation, which can feel “less important” than justice, but in the Kingdom they are weighty.

5. Love your enemies (Matthew 5:43–44):

“You have heard... ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

This teaching goes beyond human instinct—and many neglect or minimize it.

6.

Why Does This Matter?

These “least commandments” are not small in God’s eyes. Jesus is teaching that *obedience in even the smallest area of*

God’s will matters greatly in the Kingdom. Many believers today, like the Pharisees of old, may ignore these inner, relational, or moral commands because they seem less urgent than the “big sins.” But Jesus says obedience is not to be selective.

He continues in Matthew 5:20:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This means: if your faith is only outward—rule-following without heart transformation—you are missing the Kingdom altogether.

What About the “Greatest” Commandments?

Jesus also acknowledged that some commandments carry foundational importance. When asked about the greatest

commandment, He replied:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”
(*Matthew 22:37-40, ESV*)

These are the summary of the entire Law. But loving God and neighbor isn’t only about big gestures—it includes the “small” acts of purity, integrity, forgiveness, mercy, and humility that Jesus emphasized.

Conclusion:

The “least commandments” are not lesser in importance, but often overlooked because they demand inward transformation. These include teachings such as:

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- Controlling our thoughts and emotions
- Forgiving others
- Speaking truthfully
- Avoiding revenge
- Loving enemies

To be “great” in God’s Kingdom, we must both do and teach these commandments—even the ones that seem small to the world. Obedience to Jesus’ full teaching is the mark of true discipleship (John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”).

Shalom.

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