

## 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time



**Not to abolish but to complete**

1. This is a homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time.
2. The gospel for this Sunday comes from the gospel of St Matthew, chapter 15, verses 17-37.
3. To download the text of this homily as a PDF file, go to [sundayhomilies.au](http://sundayhomilies.au)
4. Whenever we listen to the Scriptures we must keep three groups of people in mind. If we forget any one of them, then our understanding will be lopsided. Who are these three groups?
5. They are, firstly, the people in front of the text;
6. secondly, the people in the text;
7. and thirdly, the people behind the text.
8. We who are reading the Gospel in the 21st century are the people in front of the text.
9. We are reading a text written almost two thousand years ago,
10. to people who lived in a different culture,
11. with a worldview quite different to our own,
12. and it is written in the Greek spoken at that time.
13. Therefore we need a translator—not only to read the Greek, but to help us understand a culture very different from ours.
14. The people in the text are those present in the Gospel stories: Jesus, his disciples, his opponents, and the crowds.
15. The people behind the text refers to the community for whom the Gospel was written.

16. They are separated from people who lived at the time of Jesus by a cataclysmic event: the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. That event changed the shape of Judaism forever.
17. A long tradition associates Matthew's Gospel with the city of Antioch in Roman Syria. Antioch was a major centre of Jewish life in the eastern Mediterranean, and it already had a substantial Jewish community. Matthew's community appears to be made up of Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They grew up in the synagogue; they prayed the Psalms; they honoured the תורה (Torah). They did not cease to think of themselves as Jews—quite the opposite. They believed that in Jesus, God had brought Israel's story to its promised fulfilment.
18. But now Matthew's community find themselves under pressure. With the Temple gone, Judaism was rebuilding around a renewed movement led by the Pharisees. This movement emphasised strict adherence to the Torah and firm boundaries between Jews and Gentiles.
19. Matthew's community, however, welcomed Gentiles. When a Gentile male became a Christian he did not require circumcision. Matthew's community no longer observed all the purity or dietary laws. To many of their fellow Jews, this looked like relaxing the Torah. And so they were pushed out of the synagogues and faced suspicion and hostility.
20. Matthew writes to reassure them. He wants them to understand that following Jesus does not mean abandoning the Torah. It means discovering its heart. It means seeing the תורה (Torah) through the eyes of the Messiah. Let's now see what that means.
21. Over the past two Sundays we have sat at the feet of Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. Two weeks ago he gave us the Beatitudes - a portrait of the kind of people who belong to the Kingdom of God: the poor in spirit, the gentle, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers.
22. Last week he told us that such disciples become salt for the earth and light for the world: people whose lives give flavour and hope, and lighten the way for others.
23. Today Jesus takes us a step further. He moves from describing the qualities of a disciple, and he begins to address the commandments and choices that shape a disciple's daily life. He begins to speak about the Law—what his Jewish listeners called תורה (Torah).
24. Before we go any further into today's Gospel, we, the people in front of the text, need to pause over that word, תורה (Torah). Unless we understand what Torah meant to the people of Jesus' time, we will miss the force of everything he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. The word itself is rich, layered, and far broader than our modern idea of "law" - which is the word often used to translate the Hebrew word תורה (Torah).
25. The very word תורה (Torah) comes from a Hebrew verb, ירה (yarah).
26. It has two related meanings: "to teach, to instruct, to guide,"
27. and also "to shoot an arrow" or "to aim at a target." These meanings illuminate each other. Torah is God directing his people toward the goal of life with him, just as

an archer directs an arrow toward its mark. But תורה (Torah) meant several things to the Jewish people of Jesus' time, and all of these meanings were present in their minds as they listened.

28. The most ancient meaning of תורה (Torah) referred to the five sacred scrolls of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These scrolls contained the foundational story of Israel's creation, God's promises to the patriarchs, the liberation from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, and the formation of God's people. To speak of "the Torah of Moses" was to refer to the very heart of Israel's Scriptures and to the story that shaped their identity.
29. Within these scrolls were the commandments—the מצוות (mitzvot)—the practical instructions that guided Israel's worship, their ethical life, their treatment of the poor, the stranger, and the vulnerable. These commandments were not experienced as a burden. They were seen as a gift that revealed God's will for their lives. Psalm 19 could praise the תורה (Torah) of the Lord as "more precious than gold" and "sweeter than honey".
30. But in Jesus' day, תורה (Torah) also had a broader meaning. It could refer to the whole of the Scriptures—what Jesus calls "the Law and the Prophets." This was a way of referring to what today Christians would call the Old Testament.
31. Torah also referred to the ongoing interpretation of Scripture—what today we would call the "oral tradition" - in other words, the teaching handed down in homes and synagogues, the discussions among scribes, the practical guidance offered by rabbis in response to real situations. This was called תורה שבעל פה (Torah she-be'al peh), the "Torah upon the mouth"—the spoken, interpreted Torah that helped people know what God required of them in the complexities of ordinary life.
32. The Pharisees accepted this oral tradition as authoritative and believed that Moses had given both a written Torah and an oral one; the Sadducees rejected this entirely and held to a strict interpretation of the written Torah alone. This difference explains many of the debates we see in the Gospels, where Jesus often engages with Pharisaic interpretations rather than matters of written law itself.
33. For those gathered around Jesus on the hillside, תורה (Torah) was not simply a written code.
34. It was Scripture,
35. commandment,
36. stories of God's faithfulness,
37. prophetic challenge,
38. and the living tradition that shaped how God's people thought, acted, prayed, and lived.
39. Torah was covenant.
40. Torah was identity.
41. Torah was the way God aimed his people toward mercy, justice, and holiness.

42. Jesus now turns directly to the Law and addresses a suspicion that some people had begun to raise about him. It was not startling to hear a teacher affirm the Law and the Prophets—that was expected of any faithful Jew. What would have shocked his listeners was the idea that he might be setting the Law aside or relaxing its demands. And so Jesus confronts this head-on: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.” He wants them to know that he is not discarding the תורה (Torah). He is not lowering the standard demanded of a faithful Jew. Instead, he is saying something far more demanding: that in his life, his teaching, and his mission, the תורה (Torah) reaches its true goal, its intended completion.
43. Then he goes even further. He adds, “Until heaven and earth pass away, not one dot, not one little stroke will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”
44. Here he is speaking of the Hebrew script. The smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet is the י (yod), a tiny mark, hardly more than a flick of the pen.
45. And the “little stroke” refers to the small projection or serif that distinguishes one letter from another—such as the slight mark that distinguishes ד (dalet) from ר (resh).
46. Remove that mark, and you can change one letter into another, and so change the meaning of a word. Jesus’ point is unmistakable: nothing in God’s Law is trivial or disposable. Every yod and every small stroke has its weight and significance.
47. But now we face a problem that every thoughtful Christian must recognise. Jesus insists that not even the smallest mark of the Law will pass away until all is accomplished. And yet, within a generation of his death and resurrection, his followers clearly were not observing every part of the תורה (Torah).
48. Think of the dietary laws. Leviticus carefully distinguishes between clean and unclean foods - foods that can and cannot be eaten. These distinctions were central to Jewish identity. Yet the early Christians—especially Gentile Christians—did not keep these food laws.
49. Think of circumcision. In Genesis 17, circumcision is given as the defining sign of the covenant for every male in Israel. Yet the early Church did not require Gentile converts to be circumcised. Saint Paul fought this battle fiercely, and the Council of Jerusalem agreed with him.
50. Think also of the purity laws. In the Torah these laws do not refer to moral purity in the way we might use that word today. They are not primarily about sexuality. Purity, in the Jewish Scriptures, refers to a person’s ability to enter God’s presence in the Temple. Certain ordinary, everyday experiences—contact with death, certain illnesses, childbirth, or bodily fluids—placed a person in a state of ritual impurity. It was not sinful; it was simply part of life. The Torah provided ways of returning to a state of ritual readiness for worship. But the early Christian communities, who no longer centred their worship on the Jerusalem Temple, did not continue to observe these purity regulations.
51. Think also of Temple worship. The Torah prescribes sacrifices offered by priests in Jerusalem as the heart of Israel’s worship. Christians did not simply abandon sacrifice because the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD; they already believed

that Christ's death was the definitive sacrifice, fulfilling all that the Temple rites anticipated.

52. Even Sabbath observance changed. The Torah lays out strict commandments about resting on the seventh day, forbidding various kinds of work. Christians continued to honour a day of worship and rest, but they gathered on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection, and they did not carry over all the detailed Sabbath regulations.
53. So how do we make sense of this tension? How can Jesus say that not one yod, not one little stroke of the Law will pass away, and yet within a generation his followers were living in ways that no longer included some parts of the תורה (Torah)?
54. The key lies in listening carefully to what Jesus actually says. He does not claim that every commandment will remain unchanged for all time. He says that nothing in the Law will pass away until all is accomplished. He is not speaking about a static list of rules. He is speaking about the purpose of the Law—the goal toward which the Torah has been directing Israel for centuries.
55. Some commandments express God's eternal will for human life—fidelity, justice, compassion, truthfulness, reverence for life. They endure because they reveal what God has always intended for human beings, in every age and every circumstance. These are not temporary regulations but lasting expressions of the life God desires for his people.
56. Christians, reading the Scriptures in the light of Christ, came to see that some commandments had served a specific role in Israel's history. Practices such as dietary laws, purity regulations, circumcision, sacrifices, and sabbath observance had marked out Israel as a distinct covenant people. These commands functioned as boundary-markers that safeguarded Israel's identity and faithfulness to the covenant in a world of surrounding nations, and many of them were tied directly to the life of the Temple, where God's presence was encountered.
57. But when Christ came, and when Gentiles began to enter the people of God, these very commandments created a new and pressing question: how could Jews and Gentiles share one table, one worship, and one communal life if the laws that once protected Israel's identity continued unchanged? The early Church, under the guidance of the Spirit, discerned that these commandments had reached their goal. They were not abolished; they were fulfilled. Their purpose—to safeguard Israel's identity and covenant faithfulness until the time when God would gather the nations—had been accomplished, because Christ himself had become the place where God meets his people and the one in whom Jews and Gentiles are united. This is, of course, a distinctively Christian conviction; Judaism understands these commandments as enduring gifts of God. But for the Church, their historical role had come to completion—not because they were discarded or treated as obsolete, but because in Christ the promises for which they had sustained Israel had come to fulfilment.
58. So Jesus' words mean this: Every part of the Torah will remain in place until it has achieved the purpose that God gave it.
59. But how do we know what that purpose is? How do we know what stands forever and what is fulfilled and therefore falls away?

60. This is where Jesus turns to the prophets—especially to Hosea. Jesus quotes Hosea twice in Matthew’s Gospel, and in both places he says, “Go and learn what this means.” That is extraordinary. Jesus rarely tells Scripture experts to go back and study a text. But here he insists on it, as though Hosea reveals the very heart of the Law.
61. Hosea lived in a time when the sacrificial system was operating exactly as the Torah required. The rituals were performed, the offerings made. Everything looked correct. But Hosea saw beneath the surface: injustice, exploitation, unfaithfulness, indifference to the poor. Rituals were intact; compassion had vanished. And so Hosea announces God’s verdict: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”
62. And here we must pause, because the word “mercy” can sound soft or sentimental to our ears. But the Hebrew word  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (chesed) is anything but soft.
63. It is one of the richest words in the whole Bible.
64.  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed) is steadfast love, covenant loyalty, compassionate faithfulness, generosity of heart, kindness that acts, mercy that does not give up. It is love that keeps its promises; love that endures betrayal; love that bends toward the weak; love that expresses itself in justice; love that flows from the very character of God. The English word “mercy” is too small for the Hebrew  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed).
65. Jesus does not use this Hebrew word in the Sermon on the Mount, but the Sermon breathes its spirit. And the sayings of Jesus elsewhere give us the key to his understanding of what the Law is aiming at. When he is criticised for eating with sinners, he tells his opponents: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed), not sacrifice.’” And when his disciples are condemned for plucking grain on the Sabbath, he repeats the same prophetic citation: “If you understood what this means, ‘I desire  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed), not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.”
66. In other words, you cannot understand the Torah unless you understand  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed). You cannot fulfil the Law unless you practise  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed).
67. You cannot know the heart of God unless you live  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed). Everything the Law was aiming at—every commandment, every yod, every tiny stroke—finds its fulfilment in  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed).
68. If  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (hesed) is the heart of the Torah, then we should expect Jesus to show us how the commandments lead us toward that kind of steadfast, covenant love. And this is exactly what he now does in the section of the Sermon on the Mount that we call the antitheses. Jesus takes familiar commandments—well known to every Jewish listener—and presses them deeper. He does not oppose them; he uncovers their inner meaning. He does not relax anything; he reveals what those commandments were always aiming for.
69. He begins with the commandment against murder. Everyone agrees on this; it is woven into the fabric of human life. But Jesus goes to the heart of the matter: “If you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.” He is not talking about a fleeting flash of irritation. He is speaking about the anger that hardens into contempt, the anger that refuses to see the other as brother or sister. That kind of anger fractures communion long before any violent act occurs.

70. And then Jesus gives a practical example. Imagine you are in the Temple, offering a sacrifice—the holiest action you can perform—and suddenly you remember that someone has something against you. Jesus says, “Leave your gift. Go. Be reconciled.” In other words: do not pretend that worship and broken relationships can coexist. Do not imagine that fidelity to God and estrangement from others can live in the same heart. Reconciliation cannot wait. Steadfast love— $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (*hesed*)—demands action.
71. Jesus then turns to adultery. Again, he deepens the commandment. He reminds us that sin begins not with the act but with the imagination—with the gaze that treats another as an object rather than as a child of God. Love is never predatory. Jesus’ language is intentionally strong—talk of tearing out an eye or cutting off a hand. He is not advocating self-mutilation; he is telling us that discipleship requires decisive action. If something in us leads us away from fidelity, we must confront it honestly and without compromise. A life shaped by  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (*hesed*) demands purity of intention.
72. Then Jesus addresses divorce. In his time, rabbis debated the grounds for divorce—some permitted it for almost any reason, others only for grave offences. Jesus does not enter the debate. He sees marriage through the lens of God’s original intention: a covenant of mutual fidelity. These words are not meant to condemn those who have endured the pain of a broken marriage. Matthew’s Gospel is pastoral, not legalistic. Jesus is reminding us that covenantal love reflects God’s own faithfulness, and that commitment is not to be taken lightly.
73. Jesus then speaks of oaths. In the first century, disputes about the binding force of particular oaths had become intricate. Jesus cuts through the complexity: “Let your ‘Yes’ mean yes and your ‘No’ mean no.” A truthful heart produces truthful speech. Elaborate formulas are unnecessary when integrity is already present.
74. In all these teachings, Jesus is showing us what it means to live the Torah from within. The commandments are not fulfilled by external compliance alone; they are fulfilled by a heart shaped by covenant love. The antitheses do not weaken the Torah; they reveal its deepest intention. They show us what happens when  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (*hesed*) takes hold of our lives. And this brings us to where today’s Gospel leaves us. Jesus is not offering a stricter law for its own sake. He is inviting us into a life formed by the same steadfast love that God has shown us. He is calling us beyond the minimalism that asks, “How far can I go without breaking the rule?” He is calling us into a way of life that grows from a heart turned wholly toward God.
75. Matthew wanted his community to understand this. They were accused of relaxing the Law. But Jesus’ teaching shows the opposite. To follow him is to embrace the Torah more deeply and more truly. It is to let God’s own  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (*hesed*) shape every part of our lives.
76. One of the most electrifying features of the Sermon on the Mount is the repeated formula, “But I say to you.” Matthew wants his readers to feel its full, unsettling force.
77. When Jesus says, “But I say to you,” he is not offering a rabbinic opinion or a fresh interpretation alongside others.
78. Matthew is presenting Jesus as speaking with a kind of immediate, personal authority that no scribe or prophet ever claimed.
79. Prophets began with “Thus says the Lord.”

80. Scribes anchored their teaching in the authority of past masters. Jesus, by contrast, speaks out of his own person. He does not appeal to Moses, the Temple, or the traditions of the elders. He places *his own word* alongside the Torah itself — and in doing so, he reveals its true depth and intention. Matthew wants his readers to recognise that Jesus is not simply interpreting the Law; he is claiming the authority of the One who gave it.
81. This is why, at the end of the Sermon, Matthew tells us that “the crowds were astonished at his teaching” (7:28).
82. But that doesn’t really capture the full weight of the verb Matthew uses. The verb is ἐκπλήσσω (ekplēssō) — literally “to be struck,” “to be driven out of one’s normal state,” “to be overwhelmed.” In classical and Koine Greek it often denotes astonishment that unsettles rather than delights.
83. Matthew employs it in the imperfect tense (“they were being overwhelmed”), which suggests not a momentary impression but an ongoing reaction of disorientation.
84. The crowds are impressed, but in a way that leaves them unsettled by the authority his words carry.
85. And that is precisely Matthew’s point. When Jesus says: “But I say to you,” he compels his hearers to make a choice about who he is. Anyone who speaks with this kind of authority over the Law is not simply a gifted teacher; he is claiming the authority that belongs to God alone. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus speaks not merely as a messenger of God but as the very voice of God. Faced with such a claim one cannot remain a neutral spectator.