

Matthew 5:13-20
February 8, 2026

Jots and Tittles

It is the first weekend of the 2026 Winter Olympic Games, mostly involving sports that I never watch except during the olympics, I will watch, I admit it.

Today is also Super Bowl Sunday. Even though it is the Patriots against the Seahawks, New England against the Great Northwest, Boston against Seattle, which means I am not really rooting for either team. I will, however, along with many other people, watch the game.

Some will tune in for the commercials, and for the half-time show, neither of which mean much to me. Some might watch simply because these two events are cultural phenomena. Some may look to be inspired. I will watch just to see who wins.

The talking heads will talk all day, they are on the air now . . . talking. I plan to skip that part, but if I had to make a guess it would be that before they are done someone will suggest that one of the keys to victory is attention to detail, which also applies to the other attractions, and to other arenas of life. We certainly don't want to see some kind of malfunction for lack of attention to the small things.

Generally speaking, attention to detail is helpful in all of life's endeavors. I tend to be a, "big picture," kind of person, that is my natural disposition. You have

probably heard that the devil is in the details. Life has taught me that details matter too.

It has been suggested by people of both the Christian and Jewish faiths, who share as scripture what we call the Old Testament, especially the first five books known as the Pentateuch, that attention to detail is a valid part of its interpretation. The English word we use to translate things is one of the details that matters. Torah in the Hebrew, Nomos in Greek, are commonly translated into English as, "Law."

One can see why. The central feature of the first five books is the Sinai experience, the time in-between the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land. The second half of Exodus, and all of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are devoted to it.

We are the Ten Commandments and all the other regulations that had been given to Moses on the mountain in, well, detail, as the religious and political life of the emerging nation of Israel was formed. Torah, Nomos, Law.

The suggestion has been made that the term, "law," might be reconsidered. It raises images of a penal code in a justice system, thus distorting its meaning. The term, "teaching," or, "instruction," is offered as an alternative translation, because it better conveys its meaning.

It situates listeners and faithful readers of the bible in an educational setting, rather than a legal or juridical one, a classroom rather than a courtroom, and it applies to everyday life, and not merely the times when judges and juries have to intervene, and clerks have to make sure the “i”s are dotted and the tees are crossed, and all the papers filed correctly.

One of the accusations against Jesus is that his interpretation of Torah, however one translates it, is that he was somehow against it, that his beliefs tended to tear at its foundation, his ideas diminish its credibility, even to the point of destroying it, to some extent because he supposedly disagreed with the level of detail one is required in its practice. He objected.

In the Sermon of the Mount, he is quoted as saying that, instead of destroying it, he came to fulfill it, and in the KJV that until heaven and earth pass away, neither a, “jot,” nor a, “tittle,” would pass away from it. Some of you may be wondering what is a, “jot,” and what is a, “tittle?”

A, “jot,” can be thought of either as a, “yod,” which is a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, corresponding to English, “y,” and which doesn’t take up much space to write. It looks like a comma. Or, it could be a reference to a letter in the Greek alphabet called an, “iota,” which corresponds to the English letter, “i.” It also doesn’t use up very much space when written.

As for a tittle, which is sometimes translated as, “the least stroke of a pen,” refers to an even smaller mark than a comma.

Taken together, they imply small things, details. Jesus is saying that not one single detail of the instruction will pass away. He did *not* proclaim that the details were unimportant and could be ignored or dismissed. That accusation was a misunderstanding of his message.

One might hear Jesus as making one form of the argument commonly made about the distinction between the, “letter and the spirit of the law.” In 2nd Corinthians Paul wrote, “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” That interpretation, however, is also misleading. Here, Jesus is not directly addressing the issue of legalism, the overemphasis on minutia.

Rather as the context reveals, he is speaking about a voluntary acceptance, a love for, and a sincere devotion, as Psalm 112th has put it, “to the demands of God, accepted as a gift and celebrated as a map leading to an abundant life and eternal salvation.

The subsequent passages in the Sermon on the Mount stress the deepening of the demands that are given in the teaching. The examples of murder and adultery are offered as illustrations indicating how a person can keep a command unfaithfully, as a grudging attempt to steer away from guilt rather than as a faithful act of love before God and people. One must be more than faithful in deed, but in the inner life,

addressing the foundational anger and lust that turn into acts of murder and adultery.

In the next few weeks, the readings from the Gospel will shift away from the Sermon on the Mount, with its emphasis on the internalization of the instruction. Next Sunday is Transfiguration Day, and then Lent begins with a look back to Matthew's account of the Temptations of Jesus. So, in the meantime we are given justification for a little emphasis on the remaining Sermon and the inner life.

It is our task to consider the assertion that the small things matter, though we should not be overly attached to them, and the idea that for Jesus the implication is that the jots and tittles actually refer to the depth of the inner life associated with devotion to the Torah.

In terms of sports, or even the music and the dance routines, attention to the small things, or for that matter, discovery of the overall plan or mission, the wider canvas, is worthless in the long run if it is not founded in a love for the endeavor. Anything done as a grudging task will eventually invite disappointment, drudgery, lethargy, apathy, and failure.

All these considerations are even more important when applied to one's relation to God and the life of the Spirit. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus goes on to examine others of life's features; marriage, swearing of oaths, performance of duties, religious activities such as prayer, the giving of alms, fasting.

He addresses the anxiety that plagues us and all people, and says to let it go (I am not very good at this one). He points to the lilies of the field and birds of the air who are not anxious but cared for nonetheless.

He says to love our enemies and live by the Golden Rule; to ask and to seek and to knock, not out of desperation but because we are in love with God and with the gracious gift of life, and the redemption that is the result of Christ's sacrifice, and because the Bible speaks in terms of a blessing for all the nations, a love for the world, and all God's people, even our enemies.

Is it possible to be steered away from a setting or mindset in which the primary issue is the distinction between details and the bigger picture, and towards one in which the internalization of the law is emphasized because the demands linked to God's instructions are accepted in love even as they have been given in love, and in that way fulfilled?

He suggests, then, that we are to shine forth this gospel in all we do, and at the end, that this love and this devotion serve as the foundation of a meaningful life, deeply imbedded in the mercy and love that can sometimes make us better than we are, and withstand any of life's stormy blasts.

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