



HOW GOOD DO WE HAVE TO BE?

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:17-20

Ninth Message

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There is a growing sense in our day that there are no absolutes, that anything and everything is permitted. We have broken with our traditional and spiritual past and are lurching into a new dark age of uncertain and bewildering character. Evil influences lead us into ever deepening confusion. A clutter of distortions, half truths, outright lies, and an added notion of tolerance in all things, demand that we accept everyone's version of the truth. There are no absolute standards; everything is changeable, just like the weather.

G. K. Chesterton once observed that morality, like art, consists of drawing a straight line. Today, no one seems to know where to draw the lines. Once there were boundaries and absolutes. There were laws to protect every girl, every boy, every cat. Now, traditional notions of human sexuality and public decency have been so radically and thoroughly warped that most people do not know what is uplifting and beautiful and good. We struggle with questions like, Who knows which sexual proclivities are preferable? Is teenage sex all right? Is it good for Sally to have two mommies? Is daddy's new roommate okay?

There is no way to put an end to the confusion, because there is no final authority. We have lost the values and virtues that once prevented us from pandering to our darker instincts. We have pushed ourselves to new levels of personal and social wickedness. As David Roper says, "All of our doing without God has finally outdone us."

Who is at fault for this deterioration of values? Is it the media? The educators? The politicians?

As we return to our series in the Sermon on the Mount, I want to remind you where we left off last September. Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty {again}? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men." Jesus was addressing the nation of Israel, which had lost its savor. In AD 70, our Lord's prophetic words came true, when Jerusalem was trampled under foot by the Romans. What he said is equally true today with regard to the church: the church has lost its influence in the world. If we are ever to rebuild the soul of our nation, we must first rebuild the soul of the church.

The Sermon on the Mount is the best known, and probably the least obeyed, of the teachings of Jesus. The words which he uttered on that day are the nearest thing to a manifesto setting out what he wanted his fol-

lowers to become and what he wanted them to do. This sermon is the best explanation, and the clearest illustration, of what true Christianity is all about. Last fall, we spent eight weeks examining the beatitudes, those sayings which Jesus identified as the characteristics of the citizens of his kingdom, and the influence they would have in the world as they demonstrated those qualities in their daily lives.

In the rest of chapter 5, to which we now come, Jesus further defines that Christian character in terms of righteousness. These verses are important not only to help define what righteousness is, they shed light on the relationship between the New Testament and the Old, between the gospel and the law.

We pick up Jesus' discourse in Matthew 5:17,

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.
(Matt 5:17, NASB)

In these words, Jesus is referring to the entire Old Testament. This phrase, "the Law or the prophets," was how the Jews referred to all of the Hebrew scriptures. They divided the Bible into three parts: the Law: i.e. the first five books, which were written by Moses; the prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, some of the more prominent of the prophets; while the rest of the books were called the writings.

Jesus' public ministry had just recently begun, but already his contemporaries were deeply disturbed by what they perceived to be his attitude toward the Old Testament. Perhaps he had already stirred up controversy over his teaching with regard to the Sabbath.

From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, people were struck by his authority. "What is this? they asked. A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). They wanted to know the relationship between his authority and the authority of the Law of Moses. Was he setting himself up as an authority over against the sacred Law, the Word of God? It seemed that way to some. Hence their question, spoken or unspoken, which Jesus now answers unequivocally, saying: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets."

People should not think for one moment that Jesus came to do away with the Old Testament. He clearly says that the Old Testament scriptures have authority. That is why we as Christians accept it—because Jesus subscribed to its authority. As Christians, therefore, we

can have no other authority. If Jesus is Lord, then we have to be subject to him as Lord and we have to accept his perspective on all things. So when he says the Old Testament is authoritative for Christians, then it is. Far from coming to earth to abolish the Law, Jesus says, he came to “fulfill” the Scriptures. The verb means literally “to fill.” Rather than contradict the Law, Jesus’ life and teachings were an explanation and a filling up of them.

The relationship of Jesus Christ to all the different kinds of teaching in the OT differs, but the word “fulfillment” covers them all.

First, the Old Testament contains doctrinal teaching. The Torah (which means “revealed instruction”), the Old Testament, does indeed instruct about God and man and salvation. All the great biblical doctrines are there. Yet the Old Testament is but a partial revelation. Jesus “fulfilled” it all in the sense that he brought it to completion by his person, his teaching, and his work. Bishop Ryle summed it up in these words: “The Old Testament is the Gospel in the bud, the New Testament is the Gospel in full flower. The Old Testament is the Gospel in the blade; the New Testament is the Gospel in full ear.”

Second, the Old Testament contains predictive prophecy. Much of it looks forward to the days of the Messiah, yet this was only anticipatory. Jesus “fulfilled” it all in the sense that what was predicted came to pass in him. The first statement of his public ministry was, “Fulfilled is the time” (Mark 1: 14). Again and again, he claimed that the Scriptures bore witness to him. Matthew emphasizes this throughout his gospel by repeatedly using the phrase, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophets.”

The climax of all this was Jesus’ death on the cross. In that one event the whole ceremonial system of the Old Testament found its perfect fulfillment. On that day the ceremonies ceased. Yet, as Calvin pointed out, “It was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed.” They were but a “shadow” of what was to come; the “substance” belonged to Christ.

Third, the Old Testament contains ethical precepts, or the moral law of God. Yet these precepts often are misunderstood, and even more often disobeyed. Jesus “fulfilled” them by obeying them and by explaining their true interpretation. His purpose was not to change the Law, and still less to annul it, but “to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold.”

Notice that Jesus goes so far as to link the continuity of the Old Testament with that of the universe. Verse 18:

“For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. (5:18)

Here Jesus says that as long as the universe exists, the Scripture stands. The practical import of these words is

that Christians must always go back to the Scripture for their authority. Even its minutest details are important: “not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away.” You might be more familiar with the King James Version, which says, “not a jot or tittle.” The jot is the Hebrew *Yod*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is but a tiny mark. The tittle, or the horn, is a projection on a Hebrew character that distinguishes one letter from another.

The point Jesus is making is that even the words of Scripture are important. They had authority. For Jesus and the apostles, the Word of God was normative—and that authority extends to the very words of Scripture.

We shall see in our next studies that that authority is not a theoretical exercise: it speaks to relevant issues in our lives. And acknowledging the authority of Scripture means we must submit ourselves and our behavior to it. That is the point Jesus is making in this section. He says that his purpose is to bring out the full meaning of the Old Testament. His life and teaching filled out and explained those Scriptures to their fullest meaning.

Having emphasized the enduring validity of the Law, Jesus now goes on to draw certain implications arising from that for his disciples. Verse 19:

“Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (5:19)

Because he had come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law, and because not an iota or dot will pass from the Law until all has been fulfilled, *therefore*, according to Jesus, greatness in the kingdom of God will be measured by conformity to the law.

Next, Jesus makes a statement that most certainly astonished his disciples, as it astonishes Christians today. Verse 20:

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. (5:20)

The scribes and Pharisees were famous for their righteousness. Obedience to God’s Law was the very passion of their lives. They calculated that the Law contains two hundred and forty eight commandments and three hundred and sixty five prohibitions, and they aspired to keep all of them. How then can Christian righteousness actually *exceed* pharisaic righteousness? And how can this superior Christian righteousness be made a condition for entering God’s kingdom? Does this not teach a doctrine of salvation by good works and so contradict the first beatitude, which says the kingdom belongs to “the poor in spirit” who have nothing, not even righteousness, to plead?

The answer to these questions is not difficult to find. Christian righteousness far surpasses pharisaic righteousness *in kind* rather than in degree. It is not that

Christians succeed in keeping two hundred and forty eight commandments when the best Pharisees may have kept only two hundred and thirty. No, Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper: it is a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the Law, but here Jesus teaches that God's demands are far more radical. The righteousness which is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive, for "the Lord looks at the heart."

It was this new heart-righteousness which the prophets foresaw as one of the blessings of the Messianic age. This is the heart of the New Covenant that was promised by Jeremiah, when he said: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (31:33). How would God do that? He told Ezekiel: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (36:27). Thus, God's two promises to put his Law within us and his Spirit within us coincide. We must not imagine, as some do today, that when we have the Spirit, we can dispense with the Law, for what the Spirit does in our hearts is, precisely, write God's Law there. So these terms, "Spirit," "Law," "righteousness" and "heart," belong together.

One mistake many people make is they fail to distinguish between "law" and "legalism." Legalism is a wrong use of the Law. Legalism perverts the Law, making it into a way of salvation, or merely an external code, or both. What Jesus repudiated was Pharisaic legalism, not the Mosaic Law. His opposition to the morality of the Pharisees was not that their view of the Law was authoritarian, nor even that it was absolute, but that it was external. They were trying to make the Law less frightening and more manageable by organizing it into a set of man-made rules. They were obsessed with external, ritual purification: clean hands, clean foods, clean vessels. But Jesus revealed that God's standards were much higher and his scrutiny much deeper than the Pharisees realized.

The rest of Matthew 5 contains examples of this greater, or rather, deeper, righteousness. It is made up of six parallel paragraphs, each of which is introduced by the same formula, the words of Jesus: "*You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...*" He is not inaugurating a new law, one that contradicts the Law of Moses. He is contradicting, not the Scriptures, but tradition, not God's Word, but the false interpretation of which the Scribes and Pharisees were guilty. In each case they were attempting to reduce the challenge of the divine Law to suit their convenience, either by restricting what it commanded or by extending what it permitted. They were tampering with the Law to make it less exacting. The disciple of Jesus, however, must accept the full force and all the implications of the Law.

No, Jesus did not contradict the Law of Moses. That, in effect, was what the Pharisees were doing. What Jesus did, rather, was explain the true meaning of the mo-

ral law—with all its uncomfortable implications. He extended the commands which the Pharisees were restricting and restricted the permissions which they were extending. To him, Moses' Law was God's Law. Its validity was permanent and its authority must be accepted. In the Sermon on the Mount, as Calvin correctly expressed it, we see Jesus not as "a new legislator, but as the faithful expounder of a law which had been already given." The Pharisees had "observed" the Law; Jesus "restored it to its integrity."

Because we are "not under the law" does not mean that we have no relationship to the Law. What these words mean is that as Christians we don't look to the Law for our justification or our sanctification. It would be useless to do so, because of the Law's "weakness." Paul says in Galatians: "God has done what the Law, *weakened by the flesh*, could not do." The weakness is not in the Law, but in us. Because of our fallen nature, we cannot, by ourselves, keep the Law. The Law, then, can never justify us or sanctify us. Instead, by sending his Son and his Spirit, God has done for us and in us what the Law could not accomplish. God justifies us through the death of his Son; and he sanctifies us through the indwelling of his Spirit.

God's way of acceptance is not accomplished through striving to be good enough by trying to obey the Law; rather, it is by means of the finished work of Christ. His way of holiness is not gained by striving to obey the Law, but through the inward work of the Holy Spirit. If we were to describe a Christian in terms of a tree, one who is a believer could be said to look more like a fruit tree than a Christmas tree. Our holiness is not an artificial human decoration; it is a natural process of fruit bearing, by the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Jesus told his disciples in the Upper Room: "I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Man's greatest need is to know what his greatest need is! We think we can get by with a little churchgoing, a little patch applied here and there, a little mending, a little polishing and painting up the outside. If this is how we think, we are ignorant of the extent of the fall.

Theologians have two terms for sinfulness. They talk about "original sin" and "total depravity." Original sin doesn't mean that we sin in original ways. Most of us sin like everyone else. "Original" sin means that we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity for doing wrong. We are like a baseball with a spin on it: sooner or later we break, and the break is down and out. Total depravity simply means that sin touches the totality of our being. If sin were a color, we would be that shade of color all over. We sin because we are sinful!

"The one spiritual disease," G. K. Chesterton wrote, "is thinking that one is quite well." That is why Jesus re-

served his harshest words for those would not admit there was something basically wrong with them, those who still believed there was something good about them that God ought to accept. Amazingly, it was the clergy of Jesus' day who had this problem. "Hypocrites" was what he called them. The word seems harsh unless we understand its meaning. A hypocrite is one who is outwardly correct but inwardly corrupt. The Pharisees taught decency, but their hearts were defiled. Their rules could not correct the state of their own hearts, nor could they correct others.

The problem with sin is that it lies *within* us. Nothing external can cure it. Rules don't work. In fact, they only make matters worse. And yet people keep insisting that traditions or rites or rituals will modify us. But they won't. Even our disciplines fail us. In our determination to right some wrong we may read the Bible, pray, memorize Scripture, or go to church more often. But, as good as these activities are, they can't change us. They can only draw us closer to the One who can. The way to change is to ask him to change us by his own working—from within.

When we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us—and the Holy Spirit is nothing more and nothing less than the Lord Jesus himself. In fact, that is the work of the Holy Spirit: to come and make the life of Jesus continuing and real. That is what Paul

describes as the "treasure" within earthen vessels. Do you realize that the same Lord Jesus who walked here on the earth, and who did those mighty works, now lives in you? That is the genius of the Christian life. We grow and become effective by laying hold of God's power which resides within us.

The cable cars of San Francisco do not have engines to drive them up and down those formidable hills. In the belly of each car sits a clamp, which is attached to a lever. When the brakeman pulls back on the lever, the clamp grabs on to a cable that runs beneath the street. It is the same with Christians. We have no independent source of power within ourselves. We cannot change our own lives, our own faulty behavior, never mind the world's. But there is an endless cable inside, the risen life of our Lord Jesus, manifested through the Holy Spirit, which is available to us. All we have to do is clamp onto that life for it to become available to us. This is what will enable us to stand in the face of adversity; to do whatever it is we are called to do; to have the moral courage to make decisions that are tough, but which we know are right.

Perhaps you have not yet invited Christ into your life. Will you admit to him today your own poverty of spirit, and claim his work on the cross in your behalf? If you do, he promises to forgive you and cleanse you of all your sins.

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