

FROM WHERE WE HAVE COME

We have been saying that the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded by Matthew in Chapters 5-7, is Jesus’ Kingdom Constitution – meaning that it is His treatise on the central principles that constitute the Kingdom of God. These are the principles that should govern a Christian - the citizen of His kingdom.

We have said that the 8 Beatitudes and His 2 successive statements about being salt and light are, as it were, the “Preamble” to the Kingdom Constitution – that is, of what “we the people” of the kingdom are to consist. They are not what we are supposed to be, or will try to achieve to be, but rather what we inherently are as His Spirit-dwelled Kingdom citizens. These characteristics are what “we the people” are by supernatural transformation.

We have further said that 5:17-20 is a transitional section that transitions us from considering who we are, to considering how we are to live out our new nature in the world. In this transitional section, Jesus makes it clear that He is not undoing or even remaking the Old Testament Law, but rather fulfilling it or completing it in Himself. He finishes this transitional section by stating that the righteousness of the Kingdom citizen must surpass that of the Pharisees and scribes in order to enter into the kingdom of God.

TO WHERE WE ARE GOING

I maintain that this last statement informs the remainder of the Sermon. By this I mean that the remainder of the Sermon, which speaks of how the Kingdom citizen is to live out His supernatural life in this world, speaks of how our life must ever surpass the superficial righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

- ✓ In the remainder of chapter 5 we learn how our interpretation of the Law of Moses must surpass that of the Pharisees
- ✓ in chapter 6 we learn how our giving, praying and trusting God must surpass that of the Pharisees
- ✓ in chapter 7 we learn how our judging of others and choices in life must surpass that of the Pharisees.

This understanding is critical to a correct interpretation of what follows. Jesus is not correcting the Law; rather He is correcting the Pharisees’ interpretation of the Law. He is giving the divine interpretation deserving full acceptance, for He alone is the divine King of the Kingdom.

THE 6 EXAMPLES FROM THE LAW (5:21-48)

For the remainder of chapter 5, beginning in verse 21, Jesus gives us 6 examples from the Old Testament law, following each by His interpretation. In coming messages we will examine each of them in turn. But today I think it prudent to examine them as a whole, that we might correctly see the intent of the examples and interpretations.

Many readers and commentators come to this section and conclude that Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament law and then giving his revised interpretation. This faulty conclusion leads to much error, not the least of which is that Jesus is undoing or redoing God’s perfect law. Let us look at the beginning statement of each of the 6 examples and try to determine what is being said:

5:21 (re: MURDER) NASB *“You have heard that the ancients were told ...”*

NIV *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago ...”*

KJV *“You have heard that it was said of them of old time ...”*

5:27 (re: ADULTERY) NASB *“You have heard that it was said ...”*

5:31 (re: DIVORCE) NASB *“It was said ...”*

5:33 (re: OATHS) NASB *“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told ...”*

5:38 (re: EYE FOR EYE) NASB *“You have heard that it was said ...”*

5:43 (re: LOVE FOR ENEMIES) NASB *“You have heard that it was said ...”*

From these alone, one of two interpretations are possible: either “you have heard it said from the ancient law long ago” or “you have heard it said about the ancient law of long ago.” Specifically,

either the Law is talking or the Pharisees are talking about the Law.

From these statements alone it is inconclusive. But from examining the 6 examples given, we see that it must be speaking of the Pharisees' interpretation of the law rather than the law itself.

1. "You shall not commit murder" is a direct quote from the 10 Commandment recorded in Exodus 20:13. But then added is and "whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." This was not a part of the law, but an interpretation of it.
2. "You shall not commit adultery" is a direct quote from the 10 Commandments recorded in Exodus 10:14. We can make no assessment based on this alone.
3. "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce" comes from Deut. 24:1-4, but is not a statement of what SHOULD be, but what COULD be under some circumstances.
4. "You shall not make false vows" is from Leviticus 19:12; "but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord" in a natural assumption, but not part of the law.
5. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" comes from Exodus 21:24 as a general summary principle for settling disputes, not as something to be taken literally
6. This sixth example is the clincher. It says "You shall love your neighbor" from Leviticus 19:18, but then "and hate your enemy" which is not a quote from the Law. In Deut 23:3ff they were exclude entry to the assembly of the Lord to heathen nations, but hatred is not cited.

From these 6 examples it appears that Jesus is stating portions of the Old Testament Law as seen by the Pharisees in their interpretation. This also makes sense as these 6 examples immediately follow Jesus' statement that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees.

And then, in each of the 6 examples Jesus says "but I say to you" giving his interpretation. If he was re-interpreting the Old Testament (which He wrote) it would not make sense. But it makes perfect sense that he was correcting the errant interpretation of the Pharisees.

1. The Pharisees taught simply to not murder. Jesus taught that murder goes beyond the taking of life, but includes the taking of life's respect in namecalling.
2. The Pharisees taught simply to not commit adultery. Jesus taught that adultery goes beyond the physical act, but includes the mental and emotional act.
3. The Pharisees taught that divorce was acceptable by a certificate of divorce (and for virtually any frivolous violation), whereas Jesus taught the sanctity and permanence of marriage in God's eyes
4. The Pharisees taught how to make a vow stronger in the way it was taken; Jesus taught that our word should be our bond
5. The Pharisees taught "an eye for an eye" literally, whereas Jesus taught the greater principle of grace
6. The Pharisees taught to hate your enemies, but Jesus taught to love even your enemies

I hope you can see from these examinations that we must not think that Jesus is correcting or even restating the Scriptures. Rather, He is correcting the misinterpretations of the Pharisees – those who believed in a strict code of following rules as a way to righteousness. Jesus was teaching the true spirit of the law, rather than the letter of the law – and that takes us deeper in our consideration of what it means to obey the spirit of the law as opposed to the letter of the law.

2 Corinthians 3:6 *"...for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."*

Paul is here instructing the Corinthian church on the inability of the Old Testament law to free them spiritually, as opposed to the living Spirit of God within the believer that can set one free from the bondage of sin. Here are some of his accompanying statements:

2 Corinthians 3:3 *"... you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."*

Here Paul hearkens back to Jeremiah 31 where the prophet said that in the coming new covenant, God would write His law in the hearts of men.

2 Corinthians 3:17 *"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is*

liberty.”

RULES OR PRINCIPLES?

So a question for you: do you think it's easier to follow a set of rules, or a set of principles?

As you ponder this, you might think of a husband who begs of his wife, “just tell me what I need to do to please you, and I'll do it.” And you would further think that the wife would respond, “you just don't get it, do you.” Because you can't please a wife, or a God, by simply following a list of rules. There are times I wish that marriage list existed – but it doesn't. In this example it is easier to follow a list of “love, honor and obey” than to live out the principles of mutual respect and love. In short, in order to be a good husband I must apply the spirit of the marriage to the rules of marriage. And it is difficult.

Or let's take the example of learning how to be a good driver of an automobile. If I learn the driver's manual perfectly and get to where I can pass every written test with no mistakes, would I be a good driver? And even if I learned what I needed to do to pass a driving test with an examiner in the car and did so with no mistakes, would I be a good driver? I think in both cases you would answer, “not necessarily.”

Surely knowing the manual and the drivers' test backwards and forwards would point me toward being a better driver – I certainly need to know the rules of the road. But being a good driver takes more than just knowing the rules, doesn't it? I must apply wisdom, experience, common sense and flexibility to difficult circumstances to become a good driver. In short, I must apply the spirit of the law to the law. And that is difficult.

Now let's apply this to being a righteous, or good, Christian. Is it easier to follow a set of rules, or a set of principles?

Well, the “set of rules” has been given to us in the Bible. There are plenty of “do's” and “do not's” to keep us busy studying for the rest of our lives. And, we must try to keep those rules the best we can with God's help. But try as we might we find we can't keep them – at least not all of them. And even as we do, we find it frustrating and constricting. Go to church. But don't fidget. Pray. But don't lose your concentration. Read your Bible. But don't fall asleep. Love your neighbor. And don't get mad at those who bug you.

Rules can be tough – yes, impossible to follow perfectly. Yet that is what the Pharisees were trying to do, and trying to make others do as well. So Jesus comes along and extends those rules into greater principles. Easier or harder?

Well, in one sense they are certainly easier. Paul said we are set free from the law. Whew! And Jesus said “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:30). Yes! But just as we find marriage is much harder than just following a set of rules, and being a good driver is more than just knowing the guide book, so living out the “spirit of the law” is truly harder than following the “letter of the law.” The Pharisees were expert “professionals” at following the letter, but they failed miserably at following, or even knowing, the spirit of the law.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says it this way in his chapter devoted to this topic:

“That is why the Christian, in a sense, is a man who is always walking on a kind of knife edge. He has no set regulations; instead he applies this central principle [of the gospel] to every situation that may arise.”

Though Jesus' yoke of love is “easy,” yet the living out of it day by day, ever yielding my will to His and trusting Him completely, even when the way is rocky, is difficult! It takes focus and complete reliance on something I cannot see – by faith.

Never say the Christian life is EASY – but it is GOOD. This reminds me of Mr. Beaver speaking to Susan in C.S Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," about Aslan, the Christ-figure:

Mr. Beaver: "Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." ... "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

DISTINCTIONS OF JESUS' INTERPRETATIONS (from Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

1. SPIRIT, not just the letter
2. MOTIVES, not just actions
3. POSTIVES, not just negatives
4. CHARACTER, not just rules
5. RELATIONSHIP, not just conformity
6. CHRIST-LIKENESS, not just comparisons

And Christ-likeness is our ultimate goal, because it is God's ultimate goal for us (Romans 8:29).'

May my life be a continual pursuit of the deeper spirit of the law, with pure motives of positively focusing on what I must do rather than on I what I shouldn't do, developing a godly character and intimate relationship with the God who indwells me, and becoming more like Christ ever day.
Amen.