



The Christian and the Moral Law:

Matthew 5:17-20

From the time that John the Baptist was imprisoned Jesus began to preach the gospel of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 4:12-17). This famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) is the most complete sample of a single sermon on this theme in the gospels. It was evident to those who listened that there was a sharp contrast between our Lord's teaching and that of the scribes (Matt. 7:28-29). Along with this there was an obvious distinction between what Jesus taught and what the Pharisees *practised*.

When the Son of God walked in Palestine it was widely presumed that the *teachings* of the scribes and the *lifestyle* of the Pharisees faithfully represented the Old Testament Scriptures. It was therefore generally suspected that Jesus of Nazareth's teachings were new and radically different from those revealed by Moses and the Prophets. This suspicion was expressly stated by Messiah's enemies who laboured to catch him in some evident contradiction of the written Word of God.

What Jesus Forbids

In answer to such surmisings and charges our holy Lord makes this magnificent statement concerning his gospel's relationship to the Old Testament Scriptures in Matthew 5:17-20. The Master said, '*Do **not think...***', precisely because people were thinking what he was about to deny. His imperative forbids such thought. Yet sadly, many of Jesus' followers today continue to think the exact ideas which he forbids in the strongest language. They do this when they teach that if a man were to obey Old Testament commands he would act as do the Pharisees and that therefore we must turn from Old Testament precepts to follow new teachings from Christ. You must not think in this way, Jesus teaches us.

Verse 17 speaks of the Old Testament Scriptures in their entirety in the phrase '*the Law or the Prophets*'. Verse 18 may also refer to the totality of the Old Testament in the words 'the law'. Yet the conclusion drawn from these two verses focuses on *commandments* in verse 19 and *righteousness* in verse 20. From this progressions in the text and from the issues selected for discussion in the Sermon through to Matthew 7:6 it becomes undeniably clear that our Saviour intends his primary focus to be on the moral law or the ethical teachings of the Old Testament. He does not discuss in any detail predictive prophecy, history, the civil arrangements, or other features of the Law and the Prophets. He gives instead a penetrating analysis of ethical standards.

As the Sermon on the Mount instructs on the moral principles of Jesus' kingdom, the Saviour develops two conclusions which he states at the outset.

- 1) He denies in the most vehement manner that the ethical teaching or behaviour of his kingdom is at variance with the moral system of Old Testament Scriptures. His kingdom is in entire agreement with the commandments of the Law and the Prophets.
- 2) He insists that the position of the scribes and Pharisees was so defective that anyone who failed to rise above their ethical understanding and practice could not so much as enter the kingdom of heaven.

These two categorical declarations placed in tandem, as they are in verses 17-20, necessarily imply that the scribes and Pharisees neither fathomed nor followed Old Testament revelation. This claim continues today, as in the ancient world, to shock men. Modern writers have failed to absorb

the plain import of Jesus' words and continue to insist that anyone following Old Testament ethics will act as did the Pharisees. It is this which the Sermon on the Mount sets out to disprove.

What we are *not* to think is that Jesus came 'to abolish the Law and the Prophets', especially in their definition of *righteousness*. He did not come to annul, abrogate, destroy, or make irrelevant and void the righteousness of Old Testament Scriptures.¹ How, then, can people to this day think, 'The Old Testament was for the Jews, but the New Testament is for Christians. If a thing is not commanded or repeated in the New Testament it can have no application in Christian ethics'? Our Lord did not come to subvert Old Testament ethics and to establish new rules of conduct on the ash heap of the Law and the Prophets. He does not drive a wedge between Old and New Testaments as do dispensationalists.

The Meaning of 'Fulfil'

Positively, Jesus said that he came to 'fulfil' the Law and the Prophets. Because many cannot accept Jesus' assertion of the utter compatibility of his mission, teachings and kingdom with Old Testament Scripture, they use the word *fulfil* to begin to modify or deny the phrase, *'Do not think that I have come to abolish.'* When they finish their explanation we have something like, *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to make them irrelevant so far as commandments are concerned.'* Such treatment of the text is nonsense.

If we allow Jesus to speak for himself, the meaning of *fulfil* is plain. In verse 18 everything (nothing excepted) will be *accomplished*. All will happen or be done. And when in particular this fulfilment is in the realm of commandment and morality (verse 19) it means the actual practice, teaching and not breaking of the ethical requirements. The Law and the prophets will be substantiated in Christ's kingdom by being done!²

Verse 18 gives further emphasis to Jesus' claim of full agreement between his kingdom's principles and the Law. Not the least part of the Law will pass away until all has come to be done. Here is the most demanding statement imaginable of verbal inspiration or of infallibility down to a small component of a letter of the Hebrew alphabet used in the Law.

Yet the sophistry of the human mind never desists from twisting the Scriptures, so that men take Jesus' most forceful comments to mean the very opposite of what he said. Eager to be rid of the moral commands of Old Testament passages, many explain verse 18 in this way: 'Well, of course Jesus kept the Old Testament commandments. And since he accomplished them, they are done away with, and we may ignore them.' But Jesus is not implying that a day will come when some parts of the Law will disappear.

He is emphatically saying the opposite. Since in his kingdom all will be accomplished, the commandments will endure forever. Heaven and earth can pass away sooner than can the smallest part of the Law (Luke 16:7). It is this that Paul insists upon in Romans 3:31. Faith in Christ does not nullify the Law. God forbid! By faith we establish the Law! Christ does not make the Law irrelevant. The law being fulfilled establishes forever the divinity of the standard. And in the kingdom of God anyone who annuls the least command of the Law and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:19).

The Focus on Moral Law

Because of Jesus' speaking as he does in such sweeping and absolute terms, practical and detailed questions will swim in the minds of most of us. Are there not Old Testament commands that Christians no longer need to obey? Answers to those questions can only be given in the following ways:

- 1) By carefully observing the commands addressed by the Lord in his sermon.
- 2) By the wider context of Scripture which does distinguish between moral, ceremonial and civil law.

Anyone who has failed to admit these distinctions has fallen into serious error in handling the Scriptures. Ceremonial law is that set of institutions and commandments whose purpose was to point attention and faith to the Person and work of the coming Saviour, Jesus Christ. Civil law is that set of institutions and commandments whose purpose was to preserve the national society in which Messiah would appear. Neither of these last two categories holds the attention of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount. Our blessed Teacher's own development of verses 17-20 is entirely in the realm of commandments of moral righteousness.

After verses 17-20 Jesus at once proceeds to discuss in sequence the sixth, seventh, ninth, first, second, third, and tenth of the Ten Commandments. Elsewhere in the gospels he teaches extensively on the fourth and eighth. Certainly the apostle Paul quotes and applies the fifth to Gentile children (Eph. 6:1-3), just as he quotes five of the other commands in Romans chapters 2 and 13. Jesus' subject (and Paul's in Romans) is *righteousness* in verse 20. It is clear what commandments of the Old Testament Scriptures shaped his concept of *righteousness*.

Still we have not called attention to the most striking feature of verses 17-20. We must notice the great prominence of the subject of moral law in Jesus' preaching of the gospel! This undeniable emphasis in his sermon has led extreme dispensationalists to deny that the Sermon on the Mount is the gospel! Because there is no escaping the dominant discussion of the Law and because they are predisposed to think that any mention of law with such ubiquity must necessarily imply a religion of salvation by works, they contend that Jesus is talking only to Jews and that he has left the Christian gospel out of the sermon. Many others, although not so brash as the ultra-dispensationalists, feel very uncomfortable with so much ethical content in a discussion of the gospel of the kingdom.

Law and Gospel Together

If this sermon is a fair example of Jesus' preaching of the gospel, then it is necessary to conclude that the Law (moral law, the standard of righteousness) is an indispensable component of the gospel! To misconstrue the Law will inevitably result in delusion or false conclusions about the gospel. Such error will not merely distort one's theology but also will so lead him astray in experience as to result in everlasting ruin when he is excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is not speaking in this sermon of a subordinate question such as, 'Have the Christians fine-tuned their ethics so as to address the great and complex social questions of their day?' He is not seeking to direct us to avoid lesser mistakes which may for a time make us sad, but which errors we can survive at last. If we misunderstand the Law as the scribes did and follow the Law as the Pharisees did, *'you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven'* (verse 20). *'In no case'* (KJv) will a person enter the kingdom of heaven unless he has a *righteousness* surpassing that of the Pharisees.

The Sermon on the Mount is an evangelistic sermon designed to awaken the conscience. The entire message is moving toward one point. It is a polished shaft pointed and driven with force to one conclusion: in the last day men will be judged by their works (by the standard of God's Law of righteousness). Those who do not do the will of the Father will be rejected with the words, *'Away from me, you evildoers!'* Matt. 7:21-23). Those who hear Jesus' words about the Law and put them into practice (verse 24) will withstand the judgment, but those who hear and do not put them into practice will meet with catastrophic ruin (verses 26-27). This subject of the Law and law-keeping relates to the ultimate destinies of men. This is the powerful conclusion of Jesus' sermon. All that goes before builds to this awesome ending.

From beginning to end the Sermon gives us a majestic display of *righteousness*. That is what Jesus' kingdom is about! It is the very same righteousness revealed in the Law and the Prophets (5:17-19). Righteousness was revealed in the Law, but it was neither the practice of the Pharisees nor the doctrine of the scribes (5:20). The righteousness of which Jesus speaks is none other than the very righteousness of God! *'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness'* (6:33).

If we were to take all the requirements of the moral law and roll them into one commandment it would be this; *'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'* (5:48). The moral law is only a reflection of God's perfection or of his righteous glory. This is precisely what Paul meant when he defined sin as *'falling short of the glory of God'* (Rom. 3:23). This is nothing but what the Law and the Prophets required, *'Be holy because I am holy'* (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2, 20:7, 1 Pet. 1:16). The Sermon on the Mount is about righteousness. The gospel is about righteousness. This is a fact that many modern evangelicals seem to have missed.

How indispensable is the Law to the gospel! The Law displays God's own righteousness. It does so because so pure and holy is the Maker of heaven and earth that he will only commune with and bless a man if he possesses righteousness like God's very own. Therefore the same law that makes known to us God's attribute of righteousness also makes clear to us what God requires of us. We must have a righteousness that measures up to his own glory, or we shall be cursed and ruined. On the Day of Judgment this standard – the Law, or God's own righteousness which radiates his glory – will be the yardstick by which we are judged. Nothing less than God's righteousness will do. We perish if we come short of it. Without this concept of the Law there is no gospel. The Law cannot be abolished or there is no point to the gospel!

Righteousness Within

If the true Christian has grasped anything in his heart, it is foundational truth related to the moral law. The truly blessed man is *'poor in spirit'* (5:3) and *'mourns'* (5:4), because in the law he has seen the perfection of God's glorious righteousness and the stringent demands made of himself for the Day of Judgment. He is brokenhearted at the great gulf between God's expectation and his own performance, and he realizes that God's wrath abides on him because of his great moral deficiencies. He is *'meek'* (5:5), being unable to promote himself in this self-conscious state of wickedness. He *'hungers and thirsts after righteousness'* (5:6). To the convicted conscience this is an inward passion unparalleled by any other desire. It has become his foremost goal. He *'seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness'* (6:33).

This is the paramount subject of the gospel. *'Therein is the righteousness of God revealed'* (Rom. 1:16-17). It is the thing about the gospel that attracted the Apostle Paul to it and to Christ. *'I have lost all things ... that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... having ... the righteousness of God by faith'* (Phil. 3:7-9). A heart awakened to moral deficiency goes to Christ for the righteousness of God. As Abraham and David had righteousness imputed by faith so do all who trust Jesus Christ (Rom. 4). Their righteousness, given as a free gift of grace, is provided for them by the crucified Lamb of God. *'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'* (2 Cor. 5:22). The moral law superintended the occurrences at the bloody tree. The Law executed its just sentence for law-breaking. Jesus Christ met the full demands of the law against God's elect. This gracious act supremely honoured and upheld the Law (Rom. 3:31).

When a sinner comes to Christ for the righteousness of God he is made *'pure in heart'* (5:8). The Holy Spirit writes the Law on the desires of his heart (Heb. 8:10). Having experienced a conscious awareness of lacking the one thing necessary for eternal life – God's righteousness – and having sought the righteousness of God in Christ with all his heart, moral issues can never be trivialized. He is willing to be persecuted for the practice of righteousness (5:10). He is determined that at any cost his *good deeds* will be seen by men (5:14-16). God will get the glory for his moral actions, for his righteousness reflects God's glory. Only by God's Holy Spirit are *'the requirements of the law fully met in us all'* (Rom. 8:4). If his search for justification has been genuine (seeking the righteousness of God in Christ as an object), then psychologically and necessarily sanctification must follow – a pursuit of holiness of life – defined by the same moral law.

An experience of grace forms in a converted heart an interest in the righteousness of God and an impulse to pursue the righteousness of God that for evermore absorbs him in the pursuit of bearing the very image of God's righteous Being. Therefore righteousness is done within God's kingdom by every member of that kingdom (not perfectly but decidedly). Doing the works of the Law is an evidence of having received the saving grace of God. Certainly this is the point of James 2:12-26. And it is the potent conclusion of the Sermon we are presently considering (Matt. 7:21-23).

Since sanctification follows faith, men will be judged by their conformity to commandments. Even before that final judgment those who fail to have in their lives a significant pursuit of the moral standards of God's Law have reason to question whether they are as yet citizens of Christ's glorious kingdom.

Moral law, then, teaches us what God's holiness is, what our sin is, what standard will judge us in the last day, what sense we are to make of the cross, what Christ provides for sinners, and how to glorify God in holy living when given his righteousness by faith. If, as many who are nervous about the Law and think little of it, we were to play down or cease to speak of the righteousness of God, then we would eviscerate the gospel itself and its central message. This would produce, as it is doing in modern antinomian 'gospels' a new breed of Christians who come to Jesus for many things but who have never hungered or thirsted for righteousness in him. It would fill churches with those who expect to get to heaven some day, but who see no point to working at being holy now, and who have no concept of what good deeds might be.

The centrepiece of the gospel must be a *righteousness* (Matt. 5:10) that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. It must be a righteousness which fully accords with the moral commands of the Law and the Prophets. It is this which Jesus declares to be available in himself by faith, and which by his Holy Spirit he will bring to real practice in those who trust him. In his Person and work first, and then in the redeemed, all will be *fulfilled*, to the praise of his glorious grace.

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Endnotes

¹ After all, Jesus and his apostles constantly proved all their teachings by quoting Old Testament Scriptures. This is especially striking in Paul's definitive theology of the gospel which we call *Romans*. Every part of our gospel rests on Old Testament texts and examples.

² See the impressive treatment of this text in Patrick Fairbairn's *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (Zondervan, 1957), pp. 223-42.