

The Believer And The Law

Matthew 5:17-20

Introduction

We have been looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began by looking at the people in the Kingdom (vv.1-16); Jesus spoke about their character and influence. Now His attention turns to the principles of the Kingdom (vv.17-48). His purpose is to elaborate on the Law of Moses.

Jesus reminds us righteousness is internal as well as external. The poor in spirit recognize their dependence on God; those who mourn grieve over personal and relational sin; the meek are willing to live under the authority of God; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness accept the rightness that comes from God. The merciful give undeserved relief to others in the face of misery, poverty, catastrophe. The pure in heart are clean on the inside. The peacemakers work to reconcile people to God and each other. Peacemakers are persecuted; but we are salt and light.

The Sermon applies to citizens of the Kingdom! The Sermon is for the true believer not the make believer. This is not a law to be obeyed but a description of the Christian life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit (see Rom.8:1-4).

What about Moses and the Law? Every faithful Jew listening wants to know where the Rabbi stands on the Law and the Prophets. Some of the Jews in Jesus day thought the Messiah might overturn the Law of Moses and establish an even purer form of the Law. Jeremiah wrote; "Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a New Covenant with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). Does this mean a new law? Many Jews thought so.

Many more were disgusted, burdened, sickened, by the overwhelming rules and regulations that the religious leaders had thrust upon the people. They were fed up with the hypocrisy and duplicity of their own leaders. Would the Messiah free them from the Law of Moses? Was the Law even possible to keep? What about the statements Jesus has already made? The standards of the Law and the even more strict standards of Jesus are impossible to keep apart from grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of God! This is one of the reasons why man made traditions exist. Human beings invent human traditions in order to make law keeping easier! The traditions multiply, complicate and eventually give a false sense of security. We think we are good. We think we are good and decent people. We think that keeping the Law or the Sermon on the Mount will invite God's favor—even gratitude—and we can be accepted by God—apart from faith in Christ—apart from the sacrifice of Jesus or the grace of Jesus! There was only one person in all of Jewish (and human) history who successfully observed every single Old Testament commandment. There was only one person who never sinned; in thought, word or deed. There is only one person who successfully observed every portion of the Law of Moses and the Sermon on the Mount. That person is Jesus.

Can The Believer Destroy The Law? (v.17a)

Matthew 5:17a (NKJV)17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets."

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The Law and the Prophets are a reference to the whole Old Testament. In addition to the Old Testament the religious leaders had what was called the Oral Law. The Oral Law were the rules and regulations handed down, that addressed specific circumstances. In Jesus day—there were two main schools of Rabbinic thought; the school of Hillel, and the school of Shammai.

Both agreed that there were 613 commandments given in the Law (these commandments are posted at chabad.org).

Some leaders cut all ties with the past. But not Jesus. Jesus does not dismiss the Law of Moses but rather upholds it and insists that it must be fulfilled. Jesus does not ‘abrogate’ the Law. The term ‘abrogate’ means to repeal or resend; Webster’s dictionary says;

“to end or cancel (something) in a formal and official way. : to fail to do what is required by (something, such as a responsibility). Is it "healthy" or “healthful”?

What are the demands of the Law? Does Jesus make those demands go away?
The Lord Jesus reminds us that the Law’s demands are as binding as ever.

What about the believer? The believer is united to Christ, the believer finds himself or herself in Christ who has fulfilled the Law. In Jesus we experience not only salvation from sin, we are free from condemnation (Rom.8:1).

Can The Believer Fulfill The Law? (vv.17b-18)

I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

The word ‘fulfill’ means to fill up or complete—in the sense where a law comes to completion. Any law can be completed. In what sense? When we obey that law we complete it (see Romans 13:8) or when the law is re-issued in a new form which is the meaning here. The contrast is found in (17a) “do not think that I came to destroy” (*not transgress*).

The coming of Jesus in part is to fulfill, to fill up, to make complete, by perfect obedience to that Law. Jesus fulfills “the law by keeping it perfectly, by embodying it in living form, and by paying the full penalty of the Law as the Substitute for sinners” (Kent, p.937; quoted in Vos p. 50). The Bible says that Jesus was “made under the law” (Gal.4:4). That means Jesus was circumcised as a little boy, he kept the law and was never guilty of breaking it either in letter or spirit even once! The religious leaders constantly accused him of breaking the Sabbath, but no one was able to accuse him of sin and make the charges stick!

How about you? Can your mother or father or family or friends point to areas in your life and say; “You are guilty of breaking God’s law”?

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Our breaking the law is proof positive—not in the law’s ability to save us—but condemn us!

We deserve punishment! But God gives us a Savior!

Unlike the religious leaders Jesus knew what the Law really meant and what the Law really required.

The Lord Jesus will make sure that people understand that obedience to the Law was not something simply external; but internal. The Lord Jesus demonstrates that no sinful human being could ever obey its commands as Jesus interprets and applies the Law.

Paul will expand this notion and remind the Galatians that the Law’s purpose in part is to convince the sinner of sin and the need of Christ as Redeemer and Righteousness (cf. Gal. 3;19-24).

18For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

The Lord Jesus says; “assuredly” meaning this is certain. Jesus never says anything trite or unimportant. Now Jesus points to the permanence of the Law and the impermanence of the Universe. The jot is the smallest Hebrew letter (yodh) and the tittle is a pen stroke or brush stroke or projection that distinguishes one letter from another. It would be like a dot that differentiates an “i” from an “L”. Jesus taught the Word of God—the Scripture are the very Words of God.

How long will the Law last? The Law will last as long as the universe lasts. But there is something interesting. The words of Jesus will outlast the universe. Heaven and earth will pass away but the Words of Jesus will never pass away. The point of verse 18 is that the law exists in the present world. Jesus is in effect saying, all the Hebrew Scriptures are important, even the parts that seem unimportant. Read it with respect, and be prepared to obey even its most insignificant commands.

Can The Believer Do And Teach The Law? (v.19)

19Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

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Does Jesus invite the believer to be a law breaker? The answer is no. In Christ we receive salvation, in Christ we are free from condemnation, in Christ we are given the power to obey what we were powerless to obey!

In verse 18 Jesus recognizes the authority of the Scripture; and now in verse 19 He recognizes we have a responsibility to obey the Bible. In the original language Jesus says, “So whoever loosens up even one of the least of these commands, and so by his behavior, teaches others to do the same, will be called “least” in the kingdom of heaven” (Bruner; p.169). What are the least of the commands is Jesus making reference to? What is Jesus suggesting? Unimportant passages in the Old Testament? Jesus has already made it clear that the whole of the Scriptures are important.

Nine of the ten commandments are repeated in the New Testament as commands to the Church. The moral law of God has not changed. The only commandment which not repeated is the Sabbath commandment; which was given as a sign to Israel (see Neh. 9:14).

Paul puts it this way (Rom.3:31); “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.” In what way? We place the Law on a more sure foundation, on an even firmer footing—**we do not regard it as a means to salvation or justification or sanctification or glorification—but rather as proof of justification!**

Can The Believer Exceed The Righteousness Of Scribes And Pharisees? (v.20)

20For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

Who were the Scribes? They were the scholars who studied, interpreted and commented endlessly on the Law. Who were the Pharisees? They originated in Babylon. When the First Temple was destroyed (Solomon’s Temple); a group of people got together and decided to remain ‘separate’ from the pagan customs and idolatry of Babylon. They were called *parashim* or *the separated ones*. According to Jewish Tradition they kept the most minute details of the Law—but of course were unable to offer the sacrifices required by the Law in Jerusalem or the Temple. I believe they started out right—and ended up wrong! Like so many people who love God and love God’s Word, they began to focus on the definitions of the Law rather than the principles of living for the Lord. The Ten Commandments were principles that God gave for men and women to honor God and live with each other in peace. As the years went by, these principles were not enough. They needed specific rules, statutes, ordinances that would answer any and all circumstances. They argued that since the Law was divine in origin (given by God to Moses); every rule not explicitly stated must somehow be implied. So the Scribes and the Pharisees made it their business to come up with a rule for every occasion. They developed a passion, not for God but for defining the rules and the regulations!

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How can a person gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven? Our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees!

The Scribes and Pharisees were strict rule keepers.

They would define the rules, keep the rules, observe the Sabbath, and the ceremonies and the sacrifices. They kept every Jewish holiday. But none of these changed their hearts! None of them imparted righteousness. Jesus uses hyperbole (exaggerates a point to make a point) to drive home the truth—that external righteousness or religious observances will provide an internal reality that allows entrance into Heaven or the Kingdom of God.

What is the righteousness that God accepts? Perfection. But before you panic—but before you despair—God accepts perfection—a perfection He is willing to impart to the imperfect sinner willing to trust Christ! The Lord God will impute this righteousness to those who accept His Son as Savior. In 2 Corinthians 5:20-21; Paul writes; “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. (21) For He (God) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”.

What does true faith, saving faith in Christ accomplish? Acceptance by God. And a practical righteousness that Jesus will describe in the rest of His sermon.

Conclusion