

“Jesus and the Law”
Matthew 5:17-20
July 12, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

About one-third of the Sermon on the Mount is devoted to the question of how Christians should view the Old Testament as a whole, and particularly the laws of the Old Testament. Jesus spends a great deal of time addressing a question very few of us, if any, woke up asking this morning. “How should I view the law of God?” Part of our fallen condition is that we don’t even know enough to ask the right questions. We often come to the Bible with questions arising out of our selfish desires and try to force it to answer those questions. I once heard of someone who thought the Bible answered the question of where in Israel he could drill for oil, and then raised a lot of money among gullible (and biblically ill-informed) Christians for his oil drilling project. We are better off paying attention to the kinds of questions the Bible itself chooses to answer and then submit to those questions and answers as the things we most need to know.

John Newton, author of the classic hymn, “Amazing Grace,” understood the critical importance of knowing the place of the law in the Christian life. He once counseled someone in a letter with these words, “Ignorance of the nature and design of the law is at the bottom of most of our religious mistakes.” In today’s passage, Jesus speaks more clearly than anywhere else about the nature and design of the Old Testament. Let’s pay attention to him as he instructs us both positively and negatively about this.

I. The Right View of the Law

Jesus summarizes the place of the law in the opening verse of our passage. **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** There were some who misunderstood Jesus to be saying that the Old Testament was no longer necessary. Jesus preached a message of grace that can be seen in the beatitudes we looked at two weeks ago. He pronounced blessing not upon law-keepers, but upon those who knew themselves to be law-breakers and whose hearts were sorrowful as a result of that. Some made the logical jump to assume that if we get God’s blessing through acknowledging our poverty of spirit and meekly bringing our need to God, then there is no more place for the law. Jesus clearly rejects that notion.

It is a mistake to conclude that Jesus is against the law. Jesus believed that the law is good. We need a reminder of this today, because our sinful

hearts believe the opposite of what Jesus believed. We believe that our lives would be better if God's law ceased to exist and we could do whatever we wanted. There was a heretic in the early church whose name was Marcion. He believed that everything in the Old Testament was abolished by the coming of Jesus. He rewrote the New Testament to fit his views and erased our current passage. Contrary to Jesus, he believed that the law was bad. Our sinful natures don't like to be told what to do by anyone, even by God. What does your heart want to do when you see a sign that says, "Wet paint—Don't touch"?

We forget that the first appearance of a law in the Bible was in the garden of Eden. God put a tree there that was called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Adam and Eve were told that they were not to eat of this tree. But do you know where the tree was located? According to Genesis 3:3, it was in the middle of the garden. It wasn't stuck off in a corner somewhere so that they would never see it or think about it, but in a place where they would pass it often as they walked around the garden. The tree would have been a constant reminder of God-given limits to which they were called to submit. And this was in paradise. Our sinful nature defines paradise differently, doesn't it? We think of paradise as the place where we are not bound by any law except ones we make for ourselves. But Jesus believed and taught that paradise is placing oneself under God's law. Doing only what you want and refusing to allow yourself to be limited by God's law, on the other hand, takes you out of paradise into the wilderness of hell.

Jesus' main statement here is that he came to fulfill the law. We need to spend some time considering what he meant by this. At its most basic level, it means that Jesus kept all the Old Testament law perfectly. But it also means that he completed it. From our New Testament perspective, we divide the law into the three categories of ceremonial, civil and moral. The ceremonial law was that part of the law concerned with ritual purity. Certain animals were deemed unclean, so Israel was not allowed to eat them. It was a ritual uncleanness. Touching a dead animal also rendered one unclean, as did numerous other practices. Making sacrificial offerings, on the other hand, rendered one ritually clean. Jesus fulfilled all these laws by bringing actual purity rather than mere ceremonial purity. When actual purity comes, there is no more need of those things that merely bring ritual purity. So we no longer offer animal sacrifices because the fulfillment has come in Jesus.

The civil law of the Old Testament governed Israel's life as a nation. These laws addressed issues every society needs to address, such as laws about the protection of life and property. The civil law of the OT expresses what it means to be a good citizen of Israel. These laws have also been fulfilled in Jesus as he has now begun a new kingdom in the church.

The moral law is summed up in the Ten Commandments. How does Jesus fulfill the moral law? He does so in two ways. First, he has kept it in our place

and now gives us credit for keeping it when he gives us his righteousness. Second, he gives us new hearts so that his law gradually becomes written on our hearts.

Why is this important? It is important because there is no other way back to the Garden of paradise. In the words of one author, we are all homesick for Eden. But we cannot live in the Garden while having a wrong relationship to God's law. And we cannot get a right relationship to the law on our own, so Jesus has fulfilled it for us.

II. The Wrong View of the Law

Jesus speaks of two wrong views of the law. The first is the partial keeping of the law, and the second is the application of God's law only to part of our lives. Let's begin by considering the first of those. Jesus makes a point of saying that not even the smallest parts of the law will pass away until it is all accomplished. He mentions the "iota" and the "dot," or the "jot" and "tittle" in older translations. The "iota" refers to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the *yod*, and the "dot" one of the small lines that distinguishes one Hebrew letter from a similar letter. The closest thing in English would be the difference between the lower case letters "e" and "c". The little line that closes the half circle at the top to form the letter "e" is what Jesus means by a "dot." So every last part of God's law, down to the smallest letter and the small differences between similar letters, is binding.

Jesus goes on to speak more about this in the next verse when he says, **"Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."** Jesus acknowledges that some commandments are more significant than others. But if you were to rank all the commands in the Old Testament in order from the most significant to the least, and then take the one at the bottom of the list, then merely relaxing this commandment, not transgressing it, is a problem. We are not free to pick and choose which of God's laws we want to keep. You can't say, "I'll take the laws forbidding theft, but I'm not so sure about the ones that tell me to tithe." You can't take the laws about justice and ignore the ones about sexual purity. To choose which laws you keep transfers authority from God to you.

The second error concerning the law is to apply it in a superficial, external way instead of letting it penetrate deeply into the heart. That's what Jesus is talking about when he said something that must have shocked his hearers. **"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** There was a saying at this time that "if only two men are allowed to enter Heaven, the one will certainly be a teacher of the law and the other a Pharisee." So those who were

commonly deemed as most likely to get to heaven Jesus says will not. What was deficient about their righteousness?

The answer to that question can be seen in what Jesus talks about in the rest of the chapter. He is explaining the meaning of various laws by contrasting the right view of these laws with the one that was current in his day, which happened to be the view taught by the scribes and Pharisees. So Jesus starts with the sixth commandment, the one that forbids murder. The Pharisees read that simply as forbidding the unlawful taking of human life and nothing more. If they had refrained from doing so, they believed themselves to be in the clear. Jesus said that the right interpretation of the sixth commandment must go deeper than that, reading it as also forbidding a murderous heart.

CONCLUSION:

So far, we haven't been very practical in applying these verses to our lives, and I want to take the time we have left to do just that. I want to suggest that we do so by considering the three uses of the law that theologians have discerned in the Bible. The first one is to express the will of God for human flourishing. Satan's old lie is that if you go God's way, you will be less a person than otherwise. The truth is that when we transgress God's law, we don't really break God's law. We break ourselves instead. Breaking the law of God is like breaking the law of gravity. If you transgress the law of gravity by jumping from the sixth floor of a building, you don't break the law of gravity. But you will break yourself against that law.

The truth is that the first use of the law leads to trouble for us all, because none of us is able to keep God's law. It breaks us all. That leads to the second use of the law, to show us our need of Christ. Paul refers to this in Galatians 3:24 when he refers to the law as our guardian. The word there means literally "boy-leader." It was the servant who was put in charge of a young boy, usually at age 7, and was responsible to lead him wherever he needed to go. The law leads us where we need to go, and we need to go to Christ. We need to be poor in spirit, realizing our spiritual bankruptcy, and it is the law rightly understood that God has given to take us there. Think of it like this. You need to know the love of God for you in Christ. You need to experience that love. How are you going to get there? You get there through seeing your need for Jesus through the law.

Do you believe that the law of God is your friend or your enemy in renewing your heart in the love of God for you? Do you need spiritual renewal? I do, almost every day. I was feeling keenly my need of renewal earlier this week and I sent an email to several people asking them to pray for me. God was faithful, and met my need not only by showing me my need of him, but also his gracious provision for me in Christ. If you believe, as the Bible teaches, that

God's law is your friend, then there are several important applications of that. First, run toward it, not away from it. When your husband or wife challenges you about something, don't give the kneejerk response most of us give, that of defensiveness. Perhaps God is speaking to you through that person of ways that your heart is not in line with his will. That's your friend, not your enemy, because it renders you powerless and spiritually bankrupt, and it's only when you accept this as your condition that you will go to Christ empty-handed. This isn't just something we do when we first become Christians, but something we continue to do every day. A second application of this is to pay special attention to those parts of the Bible you like the least. It is often the case that the parts we find most distasteful are the parts where we are especially needy of God's grace because we are in violation of his law. If you don't like the parts about greed and generosity, pay careful attention to those parts and let God use them to bring his grace into your heart.

The third use of the law is to show us the character of our salvation. There is a wonderful promise in Jeremiah 31:33, where God promises to write his law upon our hearts. This is what God is doing right now in the lives of his people; he is in the process of writing his law onto our hearts. The heart is the place of your deepest motivations. Why do I sometimes wake up at 2:00 a.m. with a heart so full of fear and anxiety that I have difficulty going back to sleep? Because my heart has an idol of self-dependency that trusts me instead of God. But one day God's law will be perfectly written on my heart so that I won't just know I am supposed to trust God and not be fearful and anxious, it will be my nature to do so. Not trusting God will become as contrary to my nature as eating dirt is today. This use of the law transforms God's law into promise. We can read every single command in God's word as a promise of what he is doing and what he will finish in our lives by the power of his Spirit.

Let me say it like this as we close. The law is your friend, but only if you approach it through faith in Jesus. The condemnation of the law is removed because Jesus has fulfilled it for us. He frees us not from keeping the law, but from the condemnation of the law, and now empowers us to begin keeping it.