

Getting to the Heart of Things

Matthew 5.17-16

Introduction:

We all have different reactions to the law. Many of us respect it and treasure it. Others of us wish that some of them would be changed. Other people just break the law, disregarding it completely.

The same was true in Jesus day. Many people didn't like God's law – they wanted to be able to justify their sinful lifestyles. As Jesus began his message, it seemed almost as if he was telling them that the law of God was outdated, and he was giving them a new standard. Some of them were getting excited! Other people, who treasured God's law, were getting upset and offended. But Jesus, knowing all things, knew their hearts. Before those thoughts could go on much more, Jesus spoke out.

Jesus came to fulfill God's law.

¹⁷ "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5.17-18)

- Smallest letter = Hebrew "iodh". Much like an apostrophe
- Stroke = serif, little projecting part at the bottom of the letter.
- Not even the smallest detail will pass away!

Because Jesus came to fulfill God's law, as citizens of God's Kingdom we must live with kingdom righteousness.

How can we recognize this righteousness?

1. We must examine the demand for kingdom righteousness.

¹⁹ "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, 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. ²⁰ "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5.19-20)

Jesus warns us not to underestimate the Word of God and the demands of holiness that He places on our life. Our attitude towards the law of God is an index of our attitude towards God Himself.

A – The Models to Surpass (Matthew 5.20)

- At first, this seems completely unattainable – because it is!
- **Scribes** – professional students of religion. They gave their full time effort to the study of the Scriptures. Their main objective was working out rules and regulations.
- **Pharisees** – Accepted the teachings of the scribes, separating themselves from all of the ordinary activities of life to keep all these rules and regulations.

This must have sounded impossible to his followers. It was as if he were saying, "Unless you can hit a baseball better than Mark McGwire," or..."Unless you make

more money than Bill Gates...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." To us, these things seem impossible; surpassing the righteousness of the Pharisees seemed equally impossible to the followers of Jesus. And yet, Jesus told his disciples that not only is it possible, it is required if you want to enter God's kingdom.

B – The Mark to Surpass

Example: The law lays it down that the Sabbath day is to be kept holy, and that on it no work is to be done. That is a great principle. But the Jewish legalists had a passion for definition. So they asked: "What is work?"

All kinds of things were classified as work. For instance, *to carry a burden* on the Sabbath day is to work. But next a burden has to be defined. So the scribal law lays it down that a burden is "food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one to swallow, honey enough to put on a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten and eye-salve, paper enough to write a receipt upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen" – and so on endlessly. So they spent endless hours arguing whether a lamp could or could not be lifted from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether a woman might wear a brooch or false hair, even if it was permissible to go out on the Sabbath with false teeth or an artificial limb, or if a parent might lift a child on the Sabbath day. These things to them were the essence of religion. Their religion was a legalism of petty rules and regulations.

To write was to work on the Sabbath. But writing has to be defined. So the definition runs: "He who writes two letters of the alphabet with his right or with his left hand, whether of one kind or of two kinds, if they are written with different inks or in different languages, is guilty. Even if he should write two letters from forgetfulness, he is guilty, whether he has written them with ink or with paint, red chalk, or anything that makes a permanent mark. Also he that writes on two walls that form an angle, or on two tablets of his account book so that they can be read together is guilty... But, if anyone writes with dark fluid, with fruit juice, or in the dust of the road, or in sand, or in anything which does not make a permanent mark, he is not guilty... If he writes one letter on the ground, and one on the wall of the house, or on two pages of a book, so that they cannot be read together, he is not guilty." That is a typical passage from the scribal law; that is what the orthodox Jews regarded as true religion and the true service to God.

The Pharisees may sound a little comical to us. Who could be that worried about the rules that they miss what God really wants? It's funny until we realize we may be doing some of the same things with the rules:

- We know God commands worship – so we go to church once a week but avoid making worship a daily lifestyle
- A Christian single may make a commitment to remain a virgin until marriage – one of God's rules – but then engage in every kind of sexual activity short of actual intercourse
- Christian parents may take great pains to keep their children's minds and hearts pure – but after the kids go to bed...

- We may want to practice good stewardship, so we'll tithe to the penny – and not a penny more – to obey that rule while missing the point of generous giving out of a cheerful heart.
- A Christian may refuse to lie, but then she'll be intentionally misleading by not giving direct answers. And say, "I never lied!"
- We may want to give up a sin or bad habit for lent – but first get as much of it as we can on Fat Tuesday.

These are all attitudes of a Pharisee. A person who is more interested in keeping rules than loving God.

- A summary of these laws was made and codified – it is called the Mishnah. In English, it makes a book of almost 800 pages.
- Later, they produced the Talmuds, which were commentary on the Mishnah. These are over 72 volumes.
- How can we have a greater righteousness than this?

Transition: Well, Jesus told us that he had come to fulfill the law. One of the aspects of this is that he would bring out the true meaning of the law. You see, the righteousness that the Kingdom of God demands is not concerned only with outward acts of sin. It goes beyond the act to the heart, and deals with what a man is in himself before God. Kingdom righteousness says, "What you *are* is more important than what you *do*."

Over the next few weeks, we're going to see Jesus flesh out exactly what this means. Today we'll see one example of how Jesus goes after the real heart of the matter. Please don't miss this – the way Jesus demonstrates his authority as God's unique son here is unbelievable. What follows is some of Jesus most controversial teaching – the reason he was very unpopular among the Jewish leaders of the day.

To Jews, the law was absolutely holy and divine. To change it, to undermine it, to hold it in anything but sacred awe was to commit blasphemy against God himself. When a prophet would speak, he would be careful to say only what God had said. "Thus says the Lord". As Jewish rabbis would teach, they would only go so far as to say, "There is a teaching that says..." But Jesus shatters all boundaries in what follows in the sermon. He doesn't say, "Thus says the Lord" or "There is a teaching". He says boldly, "*I* say to you." Five times Jesus is going to quote the law, and then substitute a teaching of his own. "You've heard it said... but *I* say to you..." This was unheard of! Greeks of Jesus day defined authority as the power to add and the power to take away at will. As we look at the first example Jesus gave, we see his absolute power as the master and Lord of all things.

2. We must examine an example of kingdom righteousness. (Matthew 5.21-26)

A – Effect on our view of ourselves

²¹ "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' ²² "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother,

'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. (Matthew 5.21-22)

Most of us would say that if there's any sin we've never committed, it's murder. We usually operate under a mindset that says, "Well, I can't be *that* bad. I mean, I've never killed anyone!" But Jesus turns the tables and really gets to the heart of the issue.

"...angry with his brother..."

- Two words in Greek for anger:
 1. *Thumos* – Like a flame which comes up quickly from dried straw. It is the anger which blazes up quickly and is then gone.
 2. *Orge* – Deep rooted anger. This is the anger of those who nurse their wrath to keep it warm and not let it die.
- "Judgement court" – small court of the local village. (people's court)

"...calls his brother good for nothing..."

- Literally is "*Raca*". This word describes a tone of voice as well. Its whole accent is contempt. It could be translated "brainless idiot, silly fool, or empty-headed." It is the word of one who despises another person with arrogant disrespect.
- "Supreme court" – Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jews.

"...says 'you fool'..."

- Fool = "*moros*". This is a moral fool, someone who is playing the fool.
- To call people *moros* was not to criticize their mental ability. It was to call into question a person's moral character – to take their name and reputation from them and brand them as loose-living and immoral.
- "Fiery Hell" – Gehenna, place outside of Jerusalem to burn refuse
- No punishment is too severe for those who tell malicious stories or the idle gossip who murders reputations.

In Summary:

- Long lasting anger is bad.
- Contemptuous speech is worse.
- Malicious gossip and character assassination is worst of all.

B – Effect on our worship of God

²³ *"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5.23-24)*

- Jesus is reminding them of a principle they already knew.
- The idea behind sacrifice was quite simple. If someone did a wrong thing, that action disturbed the relationship between that person and God, and the sacrifice was meant to be the cure which restored that relationship.
- To be effective, sacrifice had to include confession of sin and true repentance. This repentance always involved the attempt to rectify any consequences sin might have had. No sacrifice could avail *unless people were first reconciled to their neighbors.*
- These sacrifices were meant to be a substitution. The symbol of this was that, as the animal was about to be sacrificed, the worshipper placed his hands upon the animal's head and pressed the down upon it, as if to transfer

his own guilt to it. As he did so, he said: "I entreat, O Lord; I have sinned, I have done perversely, I have rebelled; I have committed... (here the sacrificer specified his sins); but I return in repentance, and let this be for my covering."

- If any sacrifice was to be valid, confession and restoration were involved. The picture which Jesus is painting is very vivid. The worshipper, of course, did not make his own sacrifice; he brought it to the priest, who offered it on his behalf. The worshipper has entered the Temple; he has passed through its series of outer courts. The worshipper is standing at the rail of the Court of the Priests, ready to hand over his animal to the priest; his hands are on it to confess; and then he remembers his falling-out with his friend, the wrong done to his neighbor. If his sacrifice is to avail, he must go back and mend that breach and undo that wrong, or nothing can happen.
- Jesus is very clear on this – we cannot simply come and go through the motions of worship. We must be in right relationship with God and others!

C – Effect on our relationships with others

²⁵ *"Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent. (Matthew 5.25-26)*

- Under Greek law, there is a process of arrest called summary arrest. In it, the plaintiff himself arrested the defendant. He caught him by his robe at the throat, holding the robe in such a way that, if the man struggled, he would strangle himself.
- In view of this custom, it was by no means uncommon to see a plaintiff and defendant on their way to court together.
- If a man was found guilty, he was handed over to the court officer. It was his duty to see that the penalty was duly paid. If it was not paid, he had the power to imprison the defendant until it was paid.
- **Summary:** When personal relationships go wrong, in most cases immediate action will mend them, but if that immediate action is not taken, they will continue to deteriorate, and the bitterness will spread in an ever-widening circle.

Transition: But here we are, still stuck with the implications of verse 20. Jesus tells us that unless our righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. We saw that Jesus came to fulfill the law – to bring out its true meaning. As we saw that, it makes our situation even worse – not only are our actions corrupt, but our hearts are corrupt also. How can anyone have this kind of righteousness?

3. We must examine the source of kingdom righteousness. (Philippians 3.4-9)

A – Recognize our inability

⁴ *although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. (Philippians 3.4-6)*

B – Put faith in Christ

⁷ *But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.* ⁸ *More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,* ⁹ *and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, (Philippians 3.7-9)*

C – Be transformed by His grace

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. (1 John 2.3)