



Sermon

But I Say ...

Matthew 5:21:37

16th February 2014

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Last week, I was frustrated in not being able to address an important part of the gospel reading. It was the last major thought of that reading:

Matthew 5:17-18 "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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

I still can't take much time on this, but let me address the issue of the standing of the Old Testament scriptures.

When you have a major body of rules which are important to obey there will be areas of doubt and uncertainty. This was a major concern for the teachers of the Law. They attempted to decide how to apply the Law to life.

Jesus started by asserting that he upheld the Law. How could it be otherwise when God had given the Law and he is the second person of the Trinity? Of course, he would not only uphold the Law but know better than any other what the intention of the Law is.

So he stated, "I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfil them." This expression "the Law and the Prophets" means the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus said he had come to fulfil them. How might we understand that?

1. Matthew makes a point of showing us how events in Jesus' life fulfilled prophecies. We have heard a number of those through the telling of the Jesus birth¹: a virgin conceiving, the child would be "God with us"; the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem, the sojourn in Egypt, growing up in Nazareth, his ministry in Galilee. There are many more examples. The Old Testament is laced with pointers to the Messiah and he fulfils these as Prophet, Priest and King.
2. He fulfilled the Law by personally obeying it.
3. His death on the cross fulfils the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant – it pointed to that event; in his sacrifice those countless animal sacrifices found their meaning and effectiveness. The teaching in the Law on death and the shedding of blood to atone for sin is no longer expressed

¹ Mt 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16

through the temple sacrifices but the underlying principle remains valid and helps us make sense of Christ's sacrifice.

4. Jesus interpreted the Law clarifying God's intention in it through his teaching, example, death and resurrection.

Jesus gave huge weight to the scriptures as he affirmed their inspiration. He said not the tiniest part would fall away while heaven and earth remain. The smallest letter would be the Hebrew *yod* and the least stroke of the pen is the small serif which distinguishes various Hebrew letters.



The least character of the Hebrew alphabet, "yod"

ב (beth) is close to כ (caph)

ח (cheth) is close to ה (he)

ר (resh) is close to ד (daleth)

The difference between these letters lies in "the least stroke of a pen."²

What Jesus said was that the actual words are inspired by God – that is a challenge to some of us perhaps!

Having asserted the permanence of the revelation of God, Jesus moves to six statements in which he challenges the interpretations of his day. "You have heard it said... But I say to you." The four we heard today concern: murder, adultery, divorce and oaths.

Some assume Jesus was refuting the Law in these instances: "Do not commit adultery, but I say..." In each case, he clarified and supports the intent of the Law against contemporary interpretations. Their interpretations distorted the law sometimes to be more rigorous than God intended, sometimes to let people wriggle out of unwelcome restrictions.

Murder

First he addressed murder by going deeper to its – anger. What was the progression for Cain in Genesis 4? Abel offered a lamb from his flock to God. Cain offered vegetables he had grown. God did not accept Cain's offering because it was not according to the principle of sin offerings. Cain became angry. God warned him, "Why are you angry? ... sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."³ Cain allowed that anger to grow into hatred which flowered into murder as he attacked and killed Abel.

Jesus goes to the root of the problem and addresses anger and its abuse of others. He warns us about being angry with each another – we become liable to judgement. As we hold anger, as we abuse others we do not honour the life from God and the image of God which they carry.

The abuse, "*Raca*," was Aramaic meaning empty-headed. The word behind "fool" was "*mōre*" from which we get "moron" – so like calling someone an idiot. Jesus takes these surprisingly seriously – to treat another with contempt is to strip away his personal identity and wrongly make him something he is not.

A current application is the rise of internet flaming and abuse. It is extraordinary how vitriolic comments made online can be. And not just in rare cases – there seems to be a disconnection with reality when people type so they will write things I hope they would never say face to face. Even in the comments sections of the

² I acknowledge these graphics came from <http://lavistachurchofchrist.org/LVanswers/2007/10-05a.html>

³ Genesis 4:6-7

major newspapers, people's comments on an article can rapidly become personal, unpleasant and abusive. When people email others, they often seem to forget themselves and their words can be vicious. We need to remember if we are arguing a point, not to resort to attacks on the person with whom we disagree. Let us be careful of our words when we speak or write to others.

Jesus is not saying all anger is sin. There can be righteous indignation against sin as when he, himself, cleansed the temple. Paul wrote, "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."⁴ But in practice, few of us are able to hold the line of righteous anger without slipping over into sinful anger. So Jesus instructs us to be reconciled with our brother or sister believer. If you are about to offer something to God but realise you have a wrong attitude to someone else, go and get that sorted out first, then come back with your offering to God.

It is not enough to control your anger, we must attempt reconciliation. We cannot force that, but we are to work towards it. Whether you feel hard done by or you know the other person is offended, Jesus tells both parties to take steps towards re-establishing a good relationship.

This is part of the origin of the peace we exchange before communion. It arose from the need to make sure that relationships are good before coming to communion. If there is unforgiveness or offence it needs to be sorted out. It is not intended as a general chat and how-do-you-do. Sometimes we need that opportunity where there is unresolved offence between individuals.

Adultery

When Jesus turns to consider adultery he draws on the tenth commandment, "Do not covet ... your neighbour's wife."⁵

If you want to stop the big sin, nip it in the bud. Ask a farmer, it is easier to root out a young gorse plant than clear an entire field of gorse. Don't indulge the minor sins which will grow into major issues. Marital purity is exclusive devotion - to keep themselves only for the other. So looking with lust away from your wife/husband is a breach of that devotion. He uses exaggerated examples to drive home the seriousness of the matter. We are not really to gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands but he intends to shock us into taking the issue seriously.

Divorce

In the matter of divorce, there was a contemporary debate between two schools on the matter. The provision for a bill of divorce was made, Jesus says⁶ because of the hardness of their hearts. The Law allowed divorce in cases of indecency. The debate was over what that meant. Some argued that it meant only unchastity (i.e., unfaithfulness); others said even spoilt cooking was sufficient! Jesus warns against casual divorce which, being invalid before God, leaves the parties liable to the sin of adultery if they remarry. However, he does allow a condition for divorce which is marital unfaithfulness. The word he uses is not adultery (which carried the death penalty under the law), so it must be a lesser offence against the marriage although not frivolous. Perhaps one might understand it as a sinful activity which intentionally divides the relationship.

We should not push his words further than he does. He does not say unfaithfulness requires divorce – the wounded party may choose to forgive and pursue divorce.

He does not say remarriage after a legitimate divorce is invalid. The purpose of a bill of divorce was to make that legal.

He does not say divorce and adultery are unpardonable sins. They are serious but they are not the unforgivable sin.

⁴ Ephesians 4:26

⁵ Deuteronomy 20:14

⁶ Mt 19:8

Oaths

When Jesus turns to oaths, he addresses the way people pile up false assurances of their truthfulness. Have you noticed some rather 'dodgy' people keep throwing into their stories or statements claims of truthfulness. It is a sign they do not expect to be believed perhaps because they know it is not true. Jesus says, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'."

I am reminded of the old principle of honour and truthfulness is British finance where huge deals were conducted on a word and a handshake. Legal safeguards and elaborate contracts are only there because of distrust. If you know the character of the other party is true you can be far more relaxed.

The point is not to refuse to swear an oath in court setting - Jesus was put under oath in his trial. Rather he warns us of the importance of simple trustworthiness without the need for strong assurances of truthfulness.

Condemnation – forgiveness.

I want to add something very important to this subject. As I talk to people about their relationship with God I find that many Christians have problems with not being able to believe they are forgiven. We hear words like these in the Bible, we know we have done wrong and we feel condemned. But these are not unpardonable sins! Jesus has made full provision to deal with all our wrong doing.

Helen and I have sat with an man, released from prison after serving a sentence for killing a man. He had been told God would never forgive him. He was heavily burdened by guilt. We were able to show him from scripture that forgiveness is available as we trust that Jesus died for us and paid for our sins. His burden was lifted.

I can think of a church-going woman who carried the guilt of adultery for years. Yet with confession and the assurance from scripture of her forgiveness, she went away free. Another was driven into mental instability by the same guilt until she was assured of her forgiveness and her recovery followed.

We quote the words every communion service – we need to believe them. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."⁷

Grasp hold of that truth and apply to your live. Sometimes we need someone else to help us do that. You may want to come forward for prayer after the service and a prayer team member can help you know freedom. If the thoughts in your head go around and around telling you how terrible you are – that is not God, it is the work of the accuser. We need to claim the truth and tell the accusations to stop. Then the peace of God comes and you know you are forgiven.

Conclusion

Let me finish with a quote from the theologian Joachim Jeremias:

What Jesus teaches in the sayings collected in the Sermon on the Mount is not a complete regulation of the life of the disciples, and it is not intended to be; rather, what is taught here is symptoms, signs, examples, of what it means when the kingdom of God breaks into the world which is still under sin, death, and the devil. You yourselves should be signs of the coming kingdom of God, signs that something has already happened.⁸

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⁷ 1 John 1:9

⁸ Quoted in *Kingdom Vision eBook* by Scott McKnight from the Story of God Commentary www.storyofgodseries.com