



NOT TO  
DESTROY,  
BUT TO  
FULFILL

LINUS K.H. CHUA

# NOT TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFILL

Christ's Teaching on the Law  
in the Sermon on the Mount

by  
Linus K.H. Chua

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## FOREWORD

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The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. It is also one of the most profound and intriguing. This is so not only in the opening verses, which are commonly known as the Beatitudes. It is also the case in the second part of the sermon, where the Lord expounds the Law. There, we are immediately confronted with a doctrine with which the average modern professing Christian will find uncomfortable, namely, the Lord's declaration that He did not come to destroy but to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17). But isn't Christianity about freedom and grace? Isn't freedom and grace opposed to law-keeping? And as if this were not confrontational enough, the Lord makes it clear: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20). Weren't the scribes and Pharisees very rigorous in the keeping of the law? And if "there is none righteous" (Rom. 3:10), why does the Lord suggest that if we are going to enter into the kingdom of heaven, we are going to need to have a righteousness that is defined by law-keeping? And then to add to the complexity, as the Lord begins to expound on a few of the moral commandments, He makes it clear that His understanding of the commandments differed from what was "said by them of old time" (v. 21, 27, 33, etc). Now had the Lord actually made it clear that the law is not as rigorous and demanding as what they were made out to be by them of old time, our eyes might have brightened as we sigh a sigh of relief saying, "Ah, now I under-

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stand...” But this is not to be the case! For the Lord, it appears, actually raises the bar and the standard! How then do we understand what the Lord is teaching us?

This is what Linus is attempting to answer in this book. And he does it in a way, which, I believe, is engaging and accessible even to young believers. It is my prayer that this book may go a long way in clearing the confusions that surround this beautiful sermon of our Lord, and at the same time be used of the Lord for the strengthening of the saints and the conversion of professing believers who have hitherto walked in lawlessness due to ignorance or unsound teachings. To this end, I would heartily commend this book to the reader. Amen.

JJ Lim, 10 December 2009  
Pastor, Pilgrim Covenant Church

## INTRODUCTION

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When I was fifteen and sixteen years old, one of the subjects I took at school was Bible Knowledge. The syllabus for those two years was the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark and Luke). During my course of studies and in my own personal reading of the Gospels, I found quite a number of passages rather puzzling and difficult, and I struggled to remember what the school-teacher or the textbook or my Sunday school teacher said about them. Among these questions were these: Why did Jesus need to be baptized (Matt. 3:13-15), why was the unjust steward in the parable commended for his actions (Luke 16:8), what does taking the kingdom of heaven by violence mean (Matt. 11:12), what is the significance of putting new wine into old wineskins (Matt. 9:17), and to what do the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the subsequent binding and loosing refer (Matt. 16:19)?

Another passage that gave me a tough time whenever I came to it was Matthew 5:17-48, particularly the contrast that Christ appeared to draw between what the Old Testament law said and what He was teaching His disciples. Jesus repeatedly said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time . . . But I say unto you." Was Jesus setting aside the law of Moses and introducing a new code of conduct for His people? How could it be that it was acceptable in Old Testament times to require an eye for an eye or to hate your enemies but unacceptable in the New Testament era?

## *INTRODUCTION*

Over the years, and through various means, some of these passages became less and less puzzling to me. In the case of Matthew 5:17-48, I was greatly aided in my understanding of it when I did a course in biblical ethics<sup>1</sup> as part of my studies with Whitefield Theological Seminary. For once, I saw things much more clearly than I did before, and just as important, I found it easy to remember the key points for interpreting the passage. And so in my excitement to share with my brethren what I had discovered, I decided to embark on a short series of messages on this passage. This book is based on the six sermons that I had the privilege of preaching during the morning services of Pilgrim Covenant Church in 2008.

Linus Chua,  
Singapore, May 2009

# 1

## CHRIST AND THE LAW

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*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*

*Matthew 5:17-18*

**M**atthew 5:17-20 forms an extremely important section in our Lord's teaching ministry because here we see Him speaking openly and clearly about His relationship to the law of the Old Testament, about the present status of the law, and about what the proper response of His disciples to that law should be. In this chapter, we want to focus on just the first two verses.

When I was in school, the beginning of each new school year brought about some anxious moments for me—a new class, a new timetable, and, most of all, a new set of teachers. I was always concerned about who would be teaching my class. Would he be kind and sympathetic or fierce and harsh? Would he require a lot of homework, or would he allow us to get away with the bare minimum of work? Would he be lenient, or would he be a strict disciplinarian? These are questions of great importance to students. But such concerns are not confined to student life. They can be found in all other phases of life.

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When Christ first appeared on the scene, He immediately began preaching about the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And again in Matthew 4:23, "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people." Then in the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ lays out the characteristics of those who are citizens of His kingdom.

But one of the questions that must have pressed itself upon the minds of the Jews who were listening to Christ was this: "What is the relationship of Christ and His kingdom to the Old Testament, and especially the law?" Many people had the idea that when the Messiah came, He would radically revise or completely overturn the Mosaic law and establish His own standards and laws. In fact, many of them hoped that the Messiah would set them free from the numerous burdens and demands the scribes and Pharisees had placed upon them, which they had mistakenly thought were part of the Mosaic law. And so the Jews were very concerned to find out what this new teacher thought of the Old Testament law.

Unfortunately, in our present day, there continues to be much confusion about the proper relationship between Christ and the law, and one of the reasons for this is that this passage we are about to consider has either been neglected altogether or wrongly or inadequately interpreted. And so it is of great importance that we study the words of Christ carefully in their proper context and seek to understand their true meaning.

In verse 17, Christ tells us, negatively, what He did not come to do with respect to the law. He then tells us, positively, what He came to do with respect to the law. In verse 18, He gives us the reason for His teaching in verse 17, namely, the law's continuing validity and authority.

***WHAT CHRIST DID NOT COME TO DO (v. 17A)***

Christ begins with a prohibition. He says, "Think not," or "do not think." We could even translate it, "Do not begin to think."<sup>2</sup> Now we must understand that Christ was not answering any particular charge from His opponents that His teaching was contrary to the law; otherwise, He might have said something like, "Stop thinking." Rather, He said, "Do not begin to think." Christ was about to deal with this important subject of the law, and He was fully aware of the danger that His hearers might misunderstand or even distort His teaching; and so right from the very outset, He commanded them not to even begin having the wrong idea that the Messiah had come to destroy the law.

The Greek word for "destroy" is *kataluo*, and it literally means to loosen down or to demolish, dismantle, dissolve, or disintegrate. For example, it is used by Christ in Matthew 24:2 to speak of the utter destruction and tearing down of the temple at Jerusalem. Here in Matthew 5:17, the legal context of the verse requires us to understand the word metaphorically in the sense of annulling, repealing, abrogating, or invalidating.

Christ is saying that He did not come to abrogate or repeal or set aside the Law or the Prophets. Now it is important to understand that in the Bible, this word never

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takes on the meaning of disobey or violate or transgress. In other words, disobedience to or transgression of God's law is not the focus and emphasis of this verse. If we keep this fact in mind, we will be in a very good position to understand what exactly that difficult word "fulfill" at the end of the verse really means.

And so in this verse, Christ is not saying that He did not come to disobey God's law, although that is certainly true. Rather, He is saying something deeper, namely, that He did not come to abrogate or invalidate the law. As the great Prophet, Priest, and King, Christ had no intention of setting aside or undoing the will of His Father, as it is revealed in the Law and Prophets.

This brings us to the phrase "the law, or the prophets." What does it mean? When the words "the law" and "the prophets" are placed side by side, they usually refer to the entire Old Testament Scriptures. For example, Matthew 22:40 says, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." And again in Luke 16:16, we read, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it."

And so by speaking of the Law and the Prophets, Christ is thinking of the Old Testament Scriptures as a whole. But specifically, He is focusing on the ethical stipulations and content of the Old Testament. By ethical stipulations, I mean the commands and demands of God for His people—those things that He requires them to do. This is clearly seen from the fact that the rest of the chapter deals with God's law and will for His people. In fact, in Matthew 7:12, which is also part of the Sermon on the Mount, we read, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them:

for this is the law and the prophets.” The emphasis there again is on what God requires of us to do—His moral and ethical stipulations for our lives.

Now it is certainly true that Christ fulfills all the Old Testament prophecies and types concerning the Messiah and that in Him all the promises of God find their fulfillment. But that is not what He is concerned with in this verse. Rather, He is dealing with the moral and ethical demands of the entire Old Testament and not just those that are found in the first five books.

So let us summarize what Christ did not come to do. He tells us not to begin to think that He came to abrogate or invalidate or set aside the laws and commandments that are found in the Old Testament. But if Christ did not come to destroy the Old Testament law, what did He come to do with respect to it?

### ***WHAT CHRIST CAME TO DO (V. 17B)***

In verse 17, Jesus goes on to say, “I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” Notice how Christ gives further emphasis to what He had just said by repeating the idea that He did not come to abolish the law. He came instead to fulfill the law. Now this word “fulfill” is crucial for our understanding of the text. The Greek word is *pleroo*. But what does it mean in this context? Various suggestions have been given.<sup>3</sup> Allow me to briefly go through four of them before giving you what I believe is the best interpretation.

First, some have suggested that the word “fulfill” means “to put an end to.” But this can hardly be correct since Christ had just said that He did not come to abro-

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gate the law, which would be equivalent to putting an end to it.

Second, some have suggested that it means “to replace,” that is, Christ came to replace the old law with a new one. The problem with this view is the same as the previous one; for in order for Christ to put in place a new law, He would first have to abolish the old law, and Christ explicitly said He did not come to do that. Also, such a view fails to consider the very next verse, which speaks of the continuing validity and authority of the law. Finally, the New Testament never uses this word “fulfill” in the sense of replacement.

Third, still others have suggested that “fulfill” means to supplement or to add to. In other words, Jesus came to fill up and bring to perfection the Old Testament law, which was incomplete and inadequate. The problem is that this plainly contradicts what the psalmist says in Psalm 19:7: “The law of the LORD is perfect.” The rest of Psalm 19 speaks of the great value and use of the law. No, the law in the Old Testament lacks nothing. What is lacking may be a right understanding and application of it, but the law in itself is complete and does not need any supplementation.

Fourth, it has been suggested that Christ came to personally obey the law. Now it is true that Christ came to obey the law fully on behalf of His people and that the word “pleroo” can indeed mean the keeping or doing of a commandment. I do not have great difficulty with this interpretation, but I do not think this is our Lord’s main point here, and I say this for at least two reasons. First, the context shows that Christ is not dealing with the question of whether or not He has personally obeyed the law. Instead, He is dealing with the question of whether

or not His teaching is consistent with the law. It is His teaching concerning the law, and not His doing of it, that is the primary issue at hand. Second, we saw earlier that the word “destroy” never means to disobey or to transgress, and thus it is unlikely that the word “fulfill,” which, in this verse, is the direct opposite of “destroy,” means to obey or keep.

This brings us to what I believe is the best way of understanding the word “pleroo”. This word stands in strict and direct contrast to the word “kataluo”, as seen from the word “but.” Christ did not come to kataluo (destroy) the law but to pleroo (fulfill) it. If the word “kataluo” means to abrogate or repeal, then the word “pleroo” naturally means the very opposite of it. Now if you look in a dictionary of antonyms (words that mean the opposite) under the word “abrogate,” you will find entries like uphold, establish, ratify, endorse, validate, and renew. Probably the word that best expresses the opposite meaning of “abrogate” is the word “confirm.”

Let me give two examples, one from the Old Testament and another from the New, to show that “pleroo” can take on the meaning of “confirm” and “ratify.” First, in 1 Kings 1:14, we read, “Behold, while thou yet talkest there with the king, I also will come in after thee, and confirm thy words.” In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), the word translated “confirm” is the word “pleroo”.

Second, in James 2:23, we read, “And the scripture was fulfilled (pleroo), which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.” Clearly, what James means by the phrase “the scripture was fulfilled” is that Abraham’s faith in God, which was spoken of in Genesis 15:6, was openly manifested and

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ratified, or confirmed, by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac on the altar in Genesis 22.

Thus, I believe that the word “pleroo”, or “fulfill,” is best taken to mean “confirm” or “establish” or “ratify.” This is similar to the view of Calvin, who wrote, “By these words he is so far from departing from the former covenant, that, on the contrary, he declares, that it will be confirmed and ratified, when it shall be succeeded by the new.”<sup>4</sup> And more recently, in his discussion of Matthew 5:17 and the meaning of the word “fulfill,” John Murray wrote, “Jesus refers to the function of validating and confirming the law and the prophets.”<sup>5</sup> And, finally, Herman Ridderbos wrote, “There is no antithesis . . . between the principles of the Law of Moses and the Sermon on the Mount. The latter does not abolish the former but confirms it.”<sup>6</sup>

And so to summarize what we have been saying thus far, we could translate Matthew 5:17 in this way: “Do not begin to think that I am come to abrogate the law or the prophets; I am not come to abrogate but to confirm.”

### ***THE CONTINUING VALIDITY OF THE LAW (v. 18)***

But Christ does not end there. He goes on in verse 18 to strengthen and confirm what He has just said in verse 17. These two verses are in complete harmony with each other and should be understood together. In verse 18, Jesus says, “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” The word “for” indicates that Christ is providing the reason for His teaching in verse 17, while the word “verily”, or “truly”,

indicates that what is to follow is of great importance, and we would do well to take heed to it.

Verse 18 contains two important truths. It teaches us about the length of time in which the law is valid, and it teaches us about the extent of the law that remains valid.

As for the length of time, Christ says, “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass,” and at the end of the verse, He says, “till all be fulfilled.” In the Greek, it is clear that these two phrases are parallel and explain each other. What does “till heaven and earth pass” mean? “Heaven and earth” speaks of cosmic stability and durability, and thus it becomes a standard of comparison for God’s faithfulness. This phrase is used to express the unchangeableness, faithfulness, certainty, and stability of God, His word, and His covenant. For example, Psalm 119:89-90 says, “For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven. Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth.” Again, in Jeremiah 33:25-26, we read, “Thus saith the LORD; If my covenant be not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth; Then will I cast away the seed of Jacob, and David my servant, so that I will not take any of his seed to be rulers over the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Finally, in Matthew 24:35, we read, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

It is clear from these and many other verses that the phrase “heaven and earth” is used as a metaphor for stability and firmness. And so in verse 18, Christ is teaching us about the immutability of God’s law for all time. The law will have continuing and abiding validity, if not forever, then at least until the end of the world, that

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is, as long as this physical universe lasts. Carl Henry says that the law has “a basis firmer than the stability of the space-time universe.”<sup>7</sup> God’s law shall in no way pass away; that is, it shall not come to an end or disappear or lose its force or become invalid as long as heaven and earth remain.

The phrase at the end of verse 18, “Till all be fulfilled,” gives further emphasis to this thought. Now we need to take note of two important things about this phrase, or we’ll misunderstand it. First, the word “all” here cannot refer to the “law” or the “prophets” because it has a different gender from those two words. Rather, this word “all” is equivalent to the phrase “heaven and earth” and serves the same purpose. Second, the word “fulfilled” is not the same Greek word that we find in verse 17, so it does not mean confirmed or established. Rather, it means “coming to pass” or “happening.” Christ is simply saying that the law will not pass away until everything that is supposed to happen in history has happened.

If we put these two phrases together, it would go something like this: “For verily I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, that is, until everything has taken place . . .” And so the first thing we learn from verse 18 is the abiding and continuing validity of God’s law throughout this present age, even until the end of the world.

In verse 18, Christ also teaches us about the extent of the law that remains valid. In other words, He deals with the question of how much of God’s law has abiding validity. He says, “One jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law.” The “jot”, or “yod”, is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, equivalent to our

letter “i”, while the word “tittle” refers to a very little stroke or projection that serves to distinguish certain Hebrew letters from other similar letters.

Not only does Christ mention the jot and tittle, the smallest letter and stroke in the Hebrew alphabet, but twice He uses the word “one” to further emphasize His point. Not one jot and not one tittle shall pass from the law. The phrase “in no wise” is a double negative, which means it is very emphatic. Bahnsen wrote, “It is the point of slighness that Jesus brings forcefully before us. Not even the very least extensive number of the very least significant aspect of the Older Testamental law will become invalid until heaven and earth pass away! This statement is underscored in its importance by the double negative . . . and use of [amen] at the head of the sentence. It is hard to imagine how Jesus could have more intensely affirmed that every bit of the law remains binding in the gospel age.”<sup>8</sup>

And so in these two verses, Christ is confirming and upholding the full and exact details of God’s law—not just the law in general or merely certain parts, but every single bit of it. Christ did not come to abrogate any part of the law but to establish and confirm every part. And the reason He did so is because every part of it is valid for all time until the end of the world.

At this point, you might be asking, “But if every jot and tittle of the law has been confirmed and not one has been abrogated, then what about the ceremonial laws? Haven’t they been abrogated? Does not the Westminster Confession of Faith say, “All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament” (19.3)?

The way to resolve this apparent difficulty is by seeing that while the ceremonial laws have indeed been

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abrogated in one sense, in another sense, they have not been abrogated. This is what I mean: As a result of Christ's finished work, New Testament believers are no longer required to keep and observe these ceremonies in the same way that the Old Testament believers did. For a New Testament believer to do so would be to despise the finished work of Christ and to prefer the symbol rather than the Savior Himself. The book of Hebrews makes this very clear, and so in that sense, the ceremonial laws have been set aside or abrogated.

Nevertheless, in another sense, they have not been abrogated because the meaning of the ceremonial laws received permanent validity and confirmation in the person and work of Christ. So while the ceremonial observations no longer apply, their meaning and intention have not been cancelled but rather eternally validated by the coming of the Messiah. Far from contradicting Matthew 5:17-18, such a change from the Old to the New Testament is, in fact, a confirmation of the Old Testament law, for the Old Testament itself anticipated such a change, as implied in Psalm 40, Psalm 110, Isaiah 56, and Isaiah 66.

This answers the question about the ceremonial law, namely, that the meaning and intention of the ceremonial law has been permanently confirmed in Christ. But what about the judicial or civil laws of the Old Testament, those laws that governed the social, political, and civil affairs of the nation of Israel? Haven't they been abrogated as well? How should we understand them in light of our text, which teaches that Christ did not come to abrogate any part of the law?

Perhaps the best way to answer this is to look at the words of the Westminster Confession (19:4): "To

them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity therefore may require.” Notice that the Westminster Divines were very careful not to use the term “abrogate,” a term they used for the ceremonial laws. Instead, they used the term “expired,” and there is a reason for that. Furthermore, they taught that the general equity of the judicial laws continues to be binding today.

Now what all this means is that when the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, for which these laws were specifically worded, had passed away, the literal wording or the specific form of the judicial laws also passed away or expired. Nevertheless, the underlying principle, or the equity, of those laws continues to be applicable. An example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10, which the Westminster Divines cite as one of their proof texts for this section. In that passage, Paul uses the civil law regarding the muzzling of an ox to teach the Corinthians that they are to provide for those who preach the gospel, and the reason he can do that is that the underlying moral principle, or the equity, of the law continues to be in force today.

In other words, while the outward cultural form of the judicial law may have been altered, the marrow, or the underlying substance, of the law has not been altered or invalidated. And so in this sense, the judicial laws too have not been abrogated. Their outward form may have expired, but their inward substance abides.

Finally, we come to the third category of the law: the moral law. Now there can be little doubt that Christ came to confirm and establish the moral law, for in the rest of this chapter, and indeed in other parts of the

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Gospels, Christ explicitly touches on the moral law and teaches that it continues to bind all men everywhere.

We have looked at these very important words of Christ that teach us about His relationship to the Old Testament law. We saw that He did not come to abrogate the law but rather to confirm and establish it. Also, we saw that Christ confirmed the law for all time until heaven and earth pass away and that He confirmed every jot and tittle of the law, that is, the law in all its parts and details, be it moral, judicial, or ceremonial.

### *APPLICATION*

In closing, I would like to draw just one application from this text: that we should all seek to have a right attitude toward the law of God. We have seen what Christ's attitude toward the law is. What is ours?

There are at least three wrong attitudes toward the law that we should avoid. First, we should avoid an attitude of disdain and contempt for the law. Rather than viewing the law as something hateful and abominable, and thus to be avoided, rejected, and set aside as far as possible, we should love it, embrace it, and meditate on it day and night. How we need to learn from the psalmist, who said, concerning the judgments and statutes of the law, "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). And again, "Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them . . . I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments" (Ps. 119:129, 131). And finally, "I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies . . . I will meditate in thy precepts and have respect unto thy ways. I will delight

myself in thy statutes” (Ps. 119:14-16). Christ came to uphold, establish, and confirm the law of the Old Testament, and Christians should be the last people on this earth to despise and disdain it.

Second, we should avoid an attitude of embarrassment toward the law. We do not need to feel apologetic or embarrassed when talking to unbelievers or even our children about God’s law, and this includes the ceremonial and civil laws. The psalmist says in Psalm 119:46, “I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed.”

Just before the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses said to them concerning all the laws God had given, “Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?” (Deut. 4:6-8).

The law was intended to be Israel’s wisdom in the sight of the Gentile nations, and Israel’s obedience to it was intended to serve as an example and witness to those nations. Far from being embarrassed about the law, the people were to be proud of it and to uphold it, for it was their wisdom and understanding in the sight of the heathen nations.

Third, we should avoid an attitude of indifference to the details of the law. We often think that details are not important and that all we need is just the broad-brush or broad-stroke picture of the law; so we conveniently

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skip over all of its details. But we have seen that Christ upheld every last jot and tittle of the law, and thus we too should be concerned with its details.

We would do well to take heed to the words of John Murray on this verse: “Too often the person imbued with meticulous concern for the ordinances of God and conscientious regard for the minutiae of God’s commandments is judged as a legalist, while the person who is not bothered by details is judged to be the practical person who exemplifies the liberty of the gospel. Here Jesus is reminding us of the same great truth which he declares elsewhere, ‘He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much, and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much (Luke 16:10).’”<sup>9</sup>

May the Lord enable us all to have the right attitude toward His law—the kind of attitude Christ had when He said, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”

## 2

# CHRISTIANS AND THE LAW

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*Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

*Matthew 5:19*

**B**efore taking any examination, it is always wise to try to find out what the examiner or the examination board is looking for. Without knowing what is required of you, it is unlikely that you will do well on the exam. And so, for example, if you are taking an English exam, you will want to be careful about things like spelling, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, and so on and make sure that you nail them down as accurately as possible.

But if you are taking a mathematics or science exam, then you probably will not spend as much time checking your English and making sure you have word-perfect statements. Instead, you will put more time and effort into your calculations and solutions to the problems. Likewise, unless you are taking an art or technical drawing exam, you will not need to draw very straight lines or beautiful pictures or precise diagrams and charts.

When I was first learning about curve sketching in mathematics, I did not really understand the concept; so I

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would take out my ruler to draw the lines and accurately measure off all the points and then use a curve rule to connect them nicely together. Some time afterwards, one of my classmates told me that there is a difference between curve plotting and curve sketching. The first requires some accuracy, whereas the second does not. It would be foolish to waste time plotting a curve when all that is required is just a quick sketch of it. And if a student plotted every curve during an exam, he would be in danger of running out of time and doing very badly. The opposite is also true. If the question requires a curve to be plotted, then you will need to do it carefully and accurately, or your answer might be quite far off.

Have you ever wondered how God will judge His people in that great and final day of judgment before the eternal state begins? We know that all true Christians will not be condemned but will enter into God's kingdom of glory on the basis of Christ's work. Nevertheless, the Bible also speaks of a judgment that Christians will have to face. The question is this: What kind of "examination criteria" will God use to grade and assess His people? What will He be looking for in them? The first step in doing well in this final assessment is to find out what God requires of us.

In this chapter, we want to look at a verse that teaches us something about the criterion, or standard, that God will use in determining our relative position in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, how well or how poorly you fair in the kingdom will depend on your relationship to this measuring standard.

The word "therefore" at the beginning of verse 19 connects this verse with the previous two and confirms our interpretation of them. In our last chapter, we

mentioned a number of unsatisfactory interpretations of verse 17, especially of the word “fulfill.” For example, there are those who say that the word “fulfill” means to “put an end to” or “to finish” and thus conclude that Christ is teaching that the law has come to an end and is no longer valid or applicable today. But, as we saw, not only does such an interpretation contradict Christ’s teaching in verses 17-18, it also goes against what He says in verse 19. So however you want to interpret the word “fulfill” in verse 17, be sure to check your interpretation with verse 19, for this verse is useful in helping us understand what has just been said. And even more importantly, this verse demonstrates the practical consequences of Christ’s words.

I would like to consider this verse in two parts, looking first at what is required of us as Christians in terms of our relationship to the law and second at the result of our response to the law.

### ***WHAT IS REQUIRED***

Christ speaks of our responsibility toward the law in both negative and positive terms. Negatively, He teaches us that we are neither to break the least of the commandments nor to teach others to do so. Positively, He teaches us that we are to do, or keep, the commandments and teach others to do so as well.

Let us look first at what we are not to do. We are not to break the commandments. The word “break” translates the Greek word *luo*, which has the basic meaning of setting loose or releasing. The idea here is that of annulling God’s law or making it void by loosening, releasing, or freeing ourselves from its requirements and

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standards. Christ uses a stronger form of this word in verse 17 when he says, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law.” That word “destroy” is *kataluo*, and it means to abrogate or abolish. What Christ did not come to do, He likewise forbids us from doing. He did not come to annul or abolish the law, and He does not want us to do so either.

But how does a person annul or set himself loose from the law? Well, he does so in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, he does so by willfully disregarding the law and refusing to practice or keep what it says. Outright disobedience is a breaking of God’s law because, in essence, it is saying that I am not bound to this requirement and thus I am free to do as I please; and that is the very opposite of what the law requires. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the forbidden tree, but under the influence of Satan, they decided to loosen themselves from this requirement and to eat of that tree.

And since the fall, sinful men have a natural resentment for laws in general and especially for God’s laws. They hate to be told what to do or what not to do. Given a choice, fallen men want to be absolutely free in determining for themselves what they want to do or do not want to do, and they hate being bound to any code, standard, or law. And so the first way a person annuls the law is by personal and willful disobedience. But this is by no means the only way of annulling or breaking the law.

Second, a person may annul God’s law by adding or subtracting from what the law requires or by twisting the law and giving it a wrong interpretation or application. This is one of the major problems that the scribes and the Pharisees had, as we will see in later chapters. But let me just give an example of this here. In verse 43 of

this chapter, Christ said, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy, But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.”

Now if you check the entire Old Testament, you will not find God telling the people to hate their enemies. This is simply a Pharisaical addition to the law; and by adding this phrase, “thou shalt hate thine enemies,” the Pharisees had essentially set themselves free from loving a certain group of people, namely, their enemies.

Third, it is possible to annul the law by limiting it to certain areas of life and refusing to apply it to all other areas. What I mean is this: A person divides his life into many different spheres or areas and then arbitrarily decides that God’s Word and law applies only to this sphere or that sphere but does not apply to the rest. So, for example, he might say that God’s law is very useful in his religious and devotional life, but it cannot be used in other areas such as education, economics, science, arts, government, philosophy, and so on.

Such a dichotomizing and compartmentalizing of life restricts the Bible’s scope and application and contradicts the Bible’s own witness to itself when it says, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). And so a refusal to apply God’s law to all spheres of life is yet another way in which a person may set aside God’s law.

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Fourth, it is possible to break God's law by disregarding its details. We mentioned this already, but it might be good to emphasize it again. What do I mean by disregarding the details of the law? Well, for example, a person may say that all he needs to know and be concerned about are the two great commandments, namely, to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that is it. He does not need to bother himself with all the many details and minutiae of the law.

Now it is true that everything God requires of us may be summarized in the words, "Love God above all and love others as ourselves," and if we have done that, we have indeed fully discharged our duties. But the question is this: What does it mean to love God above all and to love our neighbor as ourselves? The moment we ask this question, we realize how much we need the details of the law.

A summary of the law does not cancel out the content of what it summarizes. You cannot simply say that you accept these two summary statements of the law and reject or ignore everything that it summarizes. If you do, you will be breaking God's law. Why? Because you will inevitably be redefining what love is and giving it a meaning that is foreign to the Bible. So, for example, you might say that you will not chastise your children because that is so harsh and unloving. Or you might say that the church should never discriminate against or exclude from its membership anyone who is a practicing homosexual because that would be unloving and unkind. And so by rejecting or disregarding the details of the law, you will be breaking the law.

Now, the same is true of those who accept only the Ten Commandments and disregard the rest. There are some evangelicals who say that all we need are the Ten Commandments and nothing else. Again, it is true that the Decalogue is an excellent summary of God's law and we should all seek to be very familiar with it. But the Ten Commandments cannot be properly understood and applied without the explanation given to them throughout the rest of the Bible.

Let me try to illustrate this. I once had a Christian friend who told me that she was very troubled in her conscience because of something she had done recently. She said, "The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not kill,' and that means we should not take a life, right?" I said, "Yes, that's right." Then she said, "But a few weeks ago, I sent my pet dog to the vet to have it put down because I could not care for it anymore. Am I guilty of murder?" You might laugh, but she was really serious and troubled, and I had to assure her that she was not guilty and that putting an animal to sleep is not murder.

Let me give another example. My wife and I took a holiday to Western Australia some years ago, and we visited the Fremantle Prison, which has been converted into a tourist attraction. During the tour, the guide, who was an ex-prison officer, brought us to the prison chapel, and one of the things he asked us while we were there was, "What is the sixth commandment?" And I said, "Thou shalt not kill." He said, "Right, but take a look at the writing of the Ten Commandments on the chapel wall. What does it say?" We looked up and saw the words, "Thou shalt not murder." Now why did they deliberately change it from 'kill' to "murder"? The reason is that the state still carried out capital punishment in

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those days, and they did not want any of the prison inmates to think that the state was also breaking the sixth commandment by executing certain criminals.

Now the question is this: Why is putting an animal to sleep or why is executing a capital criminal not considered a breaking of the sixth commandment? Or how about killing an enemy in combat or killing an attacker in the process of self-defense? Are those considered a breaking of the sixth commandment? How is killing to be defined? What constitutes a violation of the sixth commandment, and what does not?

The only way to answer such questions is by looking at the rest of the Bible to see how it defines murder. We must allow the Bible to define its own terms and never impose our own ideas as to what it should mean. The same is true for all the other commandments. We must not take the commandments out of their biblical context.

And so here are at least four ways in which a person may break or annul the law, namely, by personal disobedience, by modifying and weakening the law, by limiting the validity of the law to only certain areas of life, and by disregarding the details of the law.

This last point regarding the details of the law is further strengthened by the phrase, “one of these least commandments.” Christ tells us not to break any one of the commandments, no not even the least of them. Now the question may be asked, “Which is the least of the commandments?” Some have tried to restrict the term “commandments” to just the Decalogue, and so the least of these would naturally refer to the last one, namely, “Thou shalt not covet.” This is possible, but I am not altogether convinced.

First, there is no reason to restrict the “commandments” to the Decalogue, especially in light of what Christ said in verses 17-18—that He came to confirm not just part of the law but every single jot and tittle, that is, the law in its exhaustive detail.

Second, we know that the rabbis, during the time of Christ, divided the law into 613 commandments, of which 248 were positive and 365 were negative, and they carried on lengthy debates about heavier and lighter commandments. As to which is the heaviest or greatest of the commandments, Christ, in Matthew 22:37-38, gives us the answer: “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.” So we are not in doubt as to which is the greatest. But as for which is the least, some of the rabbis considered Deuteronomy 22:6, which has to do with not carrying off the mother bird together with her young, to be the lightest or the least significant of them all. Now could Christ be referring to this when He spoke of the least commandment? It is possible, although we cannot be very certain.

But of this much we can be certain—that even the least of the commandments should not be taken lightly or broken. It is true that not all commandments are of equal importance. There is indeed a gradation or ranking in terms of the commandments. Remember when Jesus was rebuking the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23, He said that they were more concerned about paying tithes of their insignificant garden herbs than they were about the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. These weightier commands are what they ought to have obeyed without leaving the others undone.

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It is clear that even Christ regarded some commandments to be of greater importance than others. Nevertheless, He insists that every commandment of God must be kept, and nothing must be annulled or cancelled, not even the least of them.

We are not to set ourselves loose or release ourselves from the least of the commandments, but neither are we to teach others to annul the commandments. It is bad enough for a person to break the commandments himself, but it is even worse if he teaches others to do the same. And so James writes in James 3:1, “My brethren, be not many masters [teachers or instructors].” Why? He goes on to say, “Knowing that we [teachers] shall receive the greater condemnation [or judgment].” Every believer is accountable for himself, but those who teach are also accountable for the ones whom they teach.

But the words of Christ in verse 19 do not just apply to official or formal teachers in the church. Every one of us is a teacher in some way or ways. Parents have the responsibility of teaching their children. Older siblings have the responsibility of teaching their younger ones by setting a good example for them to follow. And all of us have the responsibility of teaching and admonishing one another in the church according to Colossians 3:16.

And so, whether we realize it or not, all of us are teachers. When we speak lovingly and respectfully of God’s Word and especially of God’s law, we teach love and reverence for it. But when we speak disparagingly or slightly of the law, we teach disregard and disrespect for it. When we ignore or reject or lessen the law’s demands, we give loud testimony to its unimportance or irrelevance or inapplicability. How we live our lives and what our attitude toward God’s law is inevitably will be

seen and observed by those around us, and this will, in turn, have an impact on them, either for the better or the worse.

So, negatively, Christ instructs us not to annul or loosen even the least of His commandments nor to teach others to do so. But positively, He calls us to do or keep the commandments and to teach others to do likewise. And in order to do that, we must avoid consciously disobeying God's commandments, modifying or lessening what they require, limiting their use to only certain restricted areas of our lives, and disregarding their details. Instead, we must seek to know what the law says and seek to understand how it applies to us.

Have you ever wondered why God told Joshua to meditate on the law day and night (Josh.1:8) and why the psalmist teaches us to do the same (Ps. 1:2)? I can think of at least two reasons. First, all of us are very forgetful, and we need to be reminded of what the law says. But, second, we need to give much thought to how the law applies to our various situations in life.

One of the reasons Christians today are unable to answer many of the difficult questions and problems in the area of ethics, whether it is personal, social, medical, environmental, governmental, economic, or cultural, is not because the Bible is insufficient or that it is irrelevant to this present age. Rather, it is because Christians have lost a Christian perspective on what is going on around them. They are out of practice in terms of properly applying God's law. That is why we need to be constantly meditating on it; only then will we be able to practice and to teach others to practice even the least of the commandments.

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### ***WHAT WILL BE THE RESULT***

We have considered what Christ requires of us. Let us now consider what will be the result or consequence of our response to God's commandments. Christ says, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

What Jesus is teaching here is that our position, our ranking, our status, our standing within the kingdom of God will be determined by our relationship to the law. Notice that it is not our entrance into the kingdom that is determined by our observance of the law. That would be legalism, or the attempt to earn salvation and a place in God's kingdom through the keeping of the law and good works. As evangelical Christians, we utterly reject that position. And if there is anyone reading this who is not a Christian, you need to realize that there is no way you are ever going to get into the kingdom by obeying the law. The Bible tells us that a person can be saved only by the grace of God through faith in Christ and not by his own works (Eph. 2:8-9). Entrance into the kingdom is not based on law keeping. Nevertheless, our standing within the kingdom is affected by how we live on this earth.

This verse teaches us that there is such a thing as degrees of reward and degrees of glory in heaven. Those who say that Christians will be entirely equal and without any difference whatsoever in the eternal state need to read this verse more carefully.

Now the determining of our rank and status in glory is entirely God's prerogative and special privilege.

He decides what is the standard and criterion to be used. And Christ, whom God has ordained Judge in that great day, tells us that He will hold in lowest esteem those who hold His law in lowest esteem. There is no impunity for those who disobey, discredit, or belittle God's law. On the other hand, He promises that those who uphold every part of His law, both in their living and teaching, will be held in highest esteem.

Greatness in God's kingdom is not based on how gifted, talented, intelligent, skillful, wealthy, successful, or popular we are in this world. Rather, greatness in His kingdom is determined by our faithfulness to His law and His Word.

John Murray writes of this verse, "Here Jesus is reminding us of the same great truth which he declares elsewhere, 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much, and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much' (Luke 16:10). The criterion of our standing in the kingdom of God and of reward in the age to come is nothing else than meticulous observance of the commandments of God in the details of their prescription and the earnest inculcation of such observance on the part of others."<sup>10</sup>

Many Christians today think that a person who is concerned about obeying the details of God's law is a legalist and that a person who is not concerned about such things is the practical person who is living in gospel freedom. But that is a mistaken idea, for God will judge and reward His people according to how closely and carefully they have observed the details of His law. How we live today will have consequences not just on judgment day but also for all eternity. Will we be the least in the kingdom, or will we be great in the kingdom? Christ

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tells us that that depends on our relationship to the law in this lifetime.

Now I suspect there might be some who are thinking, “I am not the ambitious sort of person, and I don’t care if I am the least in the kingdom as long as I am in it.” I would like to say three things in response.

First, we need to understand that Christians are not competing with one another for a higher rank or position in the kingdom, so this is not a question of being ambitious or self-seeking or proud.

Second, we need to understand that when Christ speaks of someone being the least in the kingdom, He is not speaking of him in a complimentary or commendatory way. Instead, He is severely rebuking such a man, woman, or child. It is a shameful rather than honorable thing to be considered the least in the kingdom. In fact, a person who has no regard for God’s law at all is probably not even a true believer in the first place. Christ did not come to destroy or abolish or loosen the law, and He does not want His people to do so either.

But, third, we must understand that the concept of greatness in the kingdom of God is closely tied to our chief end and purpose in life. To be greatest in the kingdom of God is to glorify God the most and thus to enjoy Him the most. And the opposite also is true—to be the least in the kingdom of God is to glorify God the least and consequently to enjoy Him the least. For the sake of Christ’s honor and glory, none of us should ever be satisfied with being among the least in the kingdom. And so we should all strive to be among those who are great by keeping His law because that is most pleasing and honoring to Him. Ultimately, we want to be great in

God's kingdom, not for ourselves but because we want to glorify God and enjoy Him, which is our chief end.

### ***CONCLUSION***

We have considered what is required of us as followers of Christ in terms of our relationship to the law and what will be the result of a proper response to that law. We are not to break or teach others to break even the least of the commandments but are to strive, by His grace, to keep them and to inculcate in others a right attitude toward them. Those who fail to do this will be called least in the kingdom of God, whereas those who do so will be great in the kingdom.

In closing, I have three simple directions. First, let us meditate often upon these words of our Savior and pray that God will grant us a right attitude toward the law and strengthen our resolve to keep it. Second, let us take time to study God's law as we find it both in the Old and New Testaments. We must not be content with just the broad-stroke picture of the law and conveniently skip over the rest; we must study it in all its details. Third, let us consciously think about how the law can be applied in our lives and pray that God will grant us the wisdom, desire, and ability to do so.



### 3

## AN EXCEEDING RIGHTEOUSNESS

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*For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

*Matthew 5:20*

Having heard the words of Christ concerning His relationship and that of His disciples to the law, some of those who were present might have wondered about the scribes and the Pharisees, whom most regarded as being both doers and teachers of the law, and thought in their hearts, “Surely they will be called the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” And so Christ’s statement in verse 20 might have come as a shock to many in the original audience.

“What? Are you saying that the scribes and Pharisees are not even in the kingdom and that our righteousness has to surpass theirs in order to enter the kingdom, let alone be great in it?” Jesus’ words must have provoked such strong reactions in the people at that time. And they would have given all the more attention to the rest of His sermon.

Unfortunately, not many Christians today pay a lot of attention to this verse. I think I will not be too far off if I say that this is one of the most neglected verses among modern evangelicals. Many either ignore it or pass

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it by quickly or explain it in such a way that it loses much of its meaning and strength.

Most of us are more familiar, and perhaps more comfortable, with the words of Christ to Nicodemus in John 3 than we are with His words here in Matthew 5. To Nicodemus, who was a very prominent Pharisee, the Lord said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). But to non-Pharisees like us, He says, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Now when the Lord uses the word “except,” He is really laying down a necessary condition for something else to happen or follow. Christ is telling us that unless our righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, we are going to be shut out of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, there is a kind of righteousness that is fully consistent with His kingdom, but there is also a kind of righteousness that will have no place in the kingdom.

The word “exceed” is interesting. It is used of a river that is overflowing its banks; it speaks of that which is far in excess of the normal. Christ is not talking about a righteousness that is equal to or slightly more than the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. He is speaking of a righteousness that is far in excess of and that far surpasses theirs, both in terms of quality and quantity, and unless a person possesses this kind of righteousness, he is not going to be in the kingdom of heaven.

Now I wonder how many of us actually take this warning very seriously. If we are serious about entering

the kingdom of heaven, then we must take heed to this warning of the Lord.

***WHAT THIS VERSE DOES NOT TEACH***

Before we look at what this verse teaches, let us consider for a minute what it does not teach us. There are at least three things that it does not teach. First, it does not teach that we are saved by our righteous deeds or that the basis for our entrance into the kingdom is our own righteousness. We must remember that this verse is not everything the Bible has to say concerning salvation and entrance into God's kingdom. Scripture, in many other places, clearly teaches that salvation is a gift of God that is received by faith in Jesus Christ; it is not obtained by one's good works or observance of the law. So we can be sure that Christ is not teaching a works-based salvation. In fact, notice that Christ does not say anything about how this righteousness is to be obtained and developed. Instead, He simply lays out the demand and requirement.

Second, this verse does not indicate that the standard of righteousness we should strive for is that of the scribes and Pharisees. We must not have the wrong idea that the scribes and Pharisees were very close to the kingdom and that all a person needs to do to enter into it is to exceed their righteousness by just a little. Remember that the word "exceed" speaks of surpassing by a very great amount.

Nicodemus probably had this mistaken idea when he first came to Christ. Like the other Pharisees, he believed that he was already very near the kingdom. But unlike many of the other Pharisees, he felt that there was still something missing in his life, and so he secretly went

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to Christ by night, hoping that Christ would give him, as it were, the final pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that would make his life complete! Instead, Christ showed him that he was, in fact, very far from the kingdom and that unless he started from scratch all over again—unless he was born again—he was not even going to see the kingdom of God, let alone enter it. The Pharisees, for all their religious fanaticism, were no nearer the kingdom of God than a prostitute or tax collector.

Third, this verse is not teaching us that if one has been imputed with the righteousness of Christ and is justified by God, he will enter into the kingdom of heaven. While that is certainly true, that is not the point Christ is making here. Remember that the context in which this verse is found has to do with the importance of our own personal keeping of the law.

Far from destroying the law or even minimizing its importance in the life of a Christian, Christ teaches us that those who belong to the kingdom of heaven must practice the commandments. Commenting on this passage, Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, “Our Lord has not come to make the law easier for us or to make it in any sense less stringent in its demands upon us. His purpose in coming was to enable us to keep the law, not to abrogate it, and so he emphasizes here that we must know what the law is, and then must keep it.”<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to explain away this verse by simply saying that as Christians we have received the righteousness of Christ, which surely exceeds that of the Pharisees; and since His righteousness has become ours by faith, there is nothing to worry about! Now it is true that if we possess His righteousness, we certainly will enter into the king-

dom of heaven. Nothing more is required, and indeed there is nothing to be anxious about.

However, the deeper question still remains: How do I know that I have the righteousness of Christ? How can I be sure that His righteousness truly has been given to me? How do I know that my faith is real and that I am indeed justified before God? According to the Lord, one of the ways to tell whether our faith is genuine or not is to see if our righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. To me, that is the frightening part about the Lord's warning, and that is why we cannot simply and casually brush it aside. We need to take serious heed to His warning.

But before we go any farther, let us look at who the scribes and Pharisees were.

### ***WHO WERE THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES?***

The scribes were professional teachers and scholars who concerned themselves with the Scriptures, and particularly with the Jewish law, both in its written form and in its oral tradition. Some of them were priests, but most of them were laymen, and anyone could join their ranks as long as he was competent. The scribes were the great authorities on the Law and the Prophets. They were the textual experts of the Old Testament and devoted their lives to the study of it.

They were the ones who made copies of the Scriptures, exercising great care as they did so, and in time they came to be the primary interpreters and expositors of Scripture. So, more than anyone else, the scribes could claim to be lovers of God's holy law. But sadly, as Christ would later point out, they failed to understand what they

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studied and taught. For all their learning and scholarship, they missed the true meaning of the Scriptures altogether.

But who were the Pharisees? Most of us have a very bad impression of them, and rightly so, because they were the chief haters and enemies of Christ during His earthly ministry and were always looking for opportunities to trick and trap Him. But perhaps not so many of us realize that the Pharisaical movement actually started off quite well. There were no Pharisees in the Old Testament. They began as a kind of Puritan movement in Israel during the period between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New.

They originated as a group of men who were concerned about the inroads of paganism into their nation. Israel was becoming increasingly secular, and the people were moving farther and farther away from the LORD, and they wanted to keep the faith pure from contamination. They were called Pharisees because the very word itself means “separated ones.” They separated themselves from the paganism of the day and gave themselves to the zealous pursuit of righteousness.

Their concern for godliness was neither casual nor superficial but sincere and wholehearted. And so at its origin Pharisaism was both noble and good. The Pharisees were, if you like, the original Puritans of the church. But sadly, over time, their movement degenerated into a form of externalism and self-righteousness so that by the time of Christ they had become nothing more than religious hypocrites, having the form of godliness but denying the power thereof.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that during the time of Christ, the scribes and Pharisees were held in very high esteem by the common people. They were, in many

ways, the most outstanding members of society. People looked up to them as the benchmark and standard of spirituality and morality.

In fact, the Jews had a saying that went, "If only two people go to heaven, one will be a scribe and the other a Pharisee." The average person in the street would never dream of ever coming near to them in terms of righteousness and holiness. And so, it must have come as a great shock to the people when Christ said that in order to enter the kingdom, our righteousness must absolutely exceed their righteousness.

And in order to do that, we need to do two things. First, we need to avoid what they did wrong. Second, we need to do better those things that they did well. Matthew Henry, commenting on this verse, says, "Our Lord here tells his disciples that the religion he came to establish did not only exclude the badness, but excel the goodness of the scribes and the Pharisees. We must do more than they, and better than they, or we shall come short of heaven."<sup>12</sup>

Let us first consider some of the defects and mistakes of these religious leaders so that we may avoid them.

### ***WHAT WE MUST AVOID***

First, we must avoid external righteousness. The scribes and Pharisees were concerned only with the external observance of the law. They cared much more about the action than the attitude, the deed than the motive, the outward than the inward. For them, no matter how much they hated a person, as long as they did not literally kill him, they were not guilty of breaking the

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sixth commandment. And no matter how much they may have lusted in their heart after a woman, they did not consider themselves guilty of adultery as long as they did not commit the physical act.

Theirs was an external and formal religion rather than a religion of the heart. Christ gave a graphic picture of their externalism in Matthew 23:25 when he said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.”

The same was true of all their acts of religious worship—giving of tithes, prayer, singing of the psalms, reading and hearing the Word, fasting, Sabbath keeping, etc. If all these things are not done with a right spirit, they count for nothing in God’s sight. Rituals cannot substitute for true righteousness. It is easy to fall into the trap of external righteousness, is it not? After all, no one can see our hearts. Even we ourselves may not be aware of how deceitful our hearts are unless we make a prayerful and conscious effort to examine ourselves.

And so we must strive to avoid external righteousness but seek a righteousness that is genuine, internal, and deeply rooted. Earlier in His sermon, Christ had said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8); and in Luke 16:15, He rebuked the Pharisees, saying, “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts.”

Second, we must avoid incomplete or partial righteousness. The scribes and Pharisees neglected the weightier matters of the law and were content with the lesser ones. They would pay tithe of mint and cummin but neglect justice, mercy, and faith. They ought to have done the latter without neglecting the former (Matt.

23:23). As Malachi puts it, “They have been partial in the law” (Mal. 2:9). They would pick and choose their duties according to their interest or inclination. They found it in their interest to be very careful about paying their tithes, but they did not find it in their heart to show mercy to those in need or to help those who were oppressed.

To some extent, this second sin was caused by the first. They disregarded things like justice, mercy, and love because these things come from within a transformed heart and no amount of externalism can produce them.

Third, we must avoid modifying or redefining the law and the standard of righteousness. We talked about this in our last chapter, but it is useful to be reminded of it again. Modifying and twisting the law is one of the ways in which a person may annul or break the law. The scribes and Pharisees had many man-made rules and regulations they upheld and maintained even when the very law of God was being violated as a result. Many of their so-called traditions and rules were nothing but clever and subtle ways of evading the true demands of the law.

One classic example of this is found in Matthew 15:4-5, which speaks of a person setting apart something (money or possessions) to the Lord by pronouncing that thing “Corban” (cf. Mark 7:11), which means consecrated to God; then his needy parents could no longer benefit from it. Now this Corban possession was not necessarily handed over to the temple or synagogue immediately and could still remain in the person’s hands. Should he one day decide to use it for his own purposes again, tradition actually permitted him to do so simply by saying the word “Corban” over it again.

So in order to avoid giving up his possessions to support his parents, a person could simply declare those

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possessions sacred and unusable; but as soon as he wanted to use them for himself, he could just as easily reverse the vow. Such a tradition served the selfish interests of the person making this vow, and it became nothing but hypocrisy. And so the Lord Jesus said, “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Matt 15:6).

Fourth, we must avoid a righteousness that is self-centered. In the end, the scribes and Pharisees were really concerned only about themselves and their own glory. When they went about their religious duties, they were more concerned about their performance of the duty than about the glory and honor of God. They loved to pray long prayers in front of others and to sit in the chief seats in the synagogues and to be called “Rabbi, Rabbi” by men. They were concerned about looking good in the eyes of others, and their joy and satisfaction came when they received the approval and commendation of men.

What a contrast to the kind of righteousness that Christ requires of His people. He said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). And again, “Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogue and in the streets, that they may have glory of men” (Matt 6:1-2).

And so we must avoid these four things—external righteousness, partial obedience to the law, redefining the standard of righteousness, and self-centered righteousness. Let us now consider four areas in which we must do better than the scribes and Pharisees.

***WHAT WE MUST DO BETTER***

First, we must be concerned about evangelism. You may ask, "What has this got to do with the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees?" Christ said to them in Matthew 23:15, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves." This is really quite an amazing statement. Imagine the evangelistic zeal of a person who would cross land and sea for the sake of making just one convert.

Now it is true that the Lord marked the scribes and Pharisees as evangelists of hell, but there's no denying that they were very zealous about the work of evangelism. They put us to shame in their zeal and enthusiasm, even as many modern-day cults put true Christians to shame. Oh may the Lord enable us to exceed the Pharisees and the cults in our evangelistic zeal! Unlike them, we have the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us do more for its spread. Let us be much more in prayer for the souls of unconverted men, women, and children and for the raising up of more gospel ministers. And let us spend more time and effort thinking about how we can bring the gospel to others and especially how we can bring them to hear the preaching of the Word. There's always more that we can do in this area.

A number of years ago, I read an article on the desperate need for missionaries to re-evangelize Europe. Islam is fast sweeping across that continent, while at the same time the number of evangelicals is dropping rapidly. According to that article, Germany would be a Muslim country in seventy years through multiplication of the

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large families of immigrant Muslims. Yes, we must avoid all unbiblical forms and methods of evangelism. But at the same time, let us not lose the zeal for the work of the gospel in these perilous days. The Pharisees were willing to compass sea and land to make one proselyte. Are we as zealous in evangelism?

Second, we must tithe. The Pharisees were tithers par excellence. In Matthew 23:23, our Lord acknowledged that they were very scrupulous and thorough in their giving: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.” In those days, the tithe was usually paid in terms of produce or livestock. The firstfruits of the crop and herds were returned to the LORD. The Pharisees were so careful about tithing that they even tithed from their mint and cummin. That would be equivalent in our day to a person who, if you gave him ten cents, would be very careful to return one cent to the Lord.

In their desire and zeal to be religious and to do what is right, the Pharisees overemphasized the small acts of righteousness. We may laugh at the Pharisees for majoring in the minors and even judge them harshly for neglecting the weightier matters of the law. But let us be mindful not to go to the other extreme of neglecting altogether the little things in life and so end up robbing God. How tempting it is for us to downplay these small acts so that we end up neglecting both the small and the great matters. Again, let us remember the words of Christ in Luke 16:10: “He that is faithful in that which is least is

faithful also in much, and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”

We must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees by giving carefully, and yet at the same time cheerfully and heartily and with the conscious recognition that all things come from God and that we are merely returning a small portion to Him. Someone once said, “When you are deciding on the amount to give, don’t ask, ‘How much should I give to the Lord?’ Instead ask, ‘How much of the Lord’s substance should I keep back for my own use?’” No one could accuse the Pharisees of robbing God of their tithes. Can the same be said of us?

Third, we must pray. The Pharisees were men of prayer. Our Lord Jesus said in Matthew 23:14, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.” The Pharisees enjoyed making a public display of their piety. Their public prayers were long and eloquent and were designed to draw attention to themselves and not to the Lord.

They knew nothing of the kind of wrestling with God that David, for example, knew in his prayer life. While David’s pillow was wet with tears, the scribes and Pharisees’ pillows were as dry as the desert ground. But at least the Pharisees prayed. At least they went through the motion of it. Some of us are so barren in our prayer life that we don’t even go through the motion. Now the Pharisees probably weren’t very zealous about praying in private since the crowds could not fit into their prayer closets, but at least they were men of public prayer. Shouldn’t we be a people who are zealous of both private and public prayer? The Pharisees displeased God with

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their hypocritical prayers, but are we guilty of displeasing God by our failure to pray?

Fourth, we must read and study God's Word. Christ said to the Pharisees in John 5:39, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life." This verse may be translated, "You search the Scriptures for in them you think you have eternal life." In other words, Christ acknowledged that they did well in searching the Scriptures. There was no question that the Pharisees were very learned in the Scriptures. They could recite large portions of it from memory.

The problem was that they thought eternal life could be obtained by the mere act of studying Scripture; they thought they were sure of heaven if they could recite it from memory. Sadly, they missed its heart and soul. For all their study, they missed the one who is the key and the central theme of all Scripture, namely Christ Jesus. In Luke 24:44-45, Christ said to the disciples, "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures."

The scribes and Pharisees did not understand Scripture because they did not see Christ in it. But at least they were diligent in searching it. Many of us pale in comparison to them in the time and effort we spend studying God's Word. Let us not forget that the righteousness that pleases God is a righteousness that proceeds from studying, hearing, and keeping His Word.

Evangelism, tithing, prayer, and Bible study—these are but a few of the rigorous activities the scribes and Pharisees were engaged in. In all these things they

excelled. But they were hypocrites. They went through the outward motions of piety, but their hearts were far from God. They kept the letter of the law but killed the spirit of the law.

The Bible tells us that man looks at outward appearances but God looks on the heart. This is not to say that God cares only for the spirit of the law and not the letter of it. We cannot excuse external disobedience by appealing to an obedient heart within. The Christian life that pleases God is one that is both internal and external. Authentic righteousness keeps both the spirit and the letter. Inward faith and outward works go hand in hand.

### ***CONCLUSION***

As we conclude this chapter, let us ask ourselves this question: Does our righteousness indeed exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Christ teaches that unless it absolutely exceeds theirs, we will in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. But remember that by ourselves there is no way we can do it. In many ways, the scribes and Pharisees represent the highest level of righteousness achievable by fallen men apart from the grace of God. If we strive with all of our own might, we will at best be on par with the Pharisees. But if we want to far surpass and exceed them, we absolutely need the grace and strength of God. God alone can enable us to have the righteousness that is pleasing and acceptable in His sight.

But even after we have received the grace of God in regeneration and conversion, we still struggle to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees because of the corruption of nature that still cleaves to us. Satan

### *CHAPTER 3: AN EXCEEDING RIGHTEOUSNESS*

ever places before us the temptation to go to one extreme or the other. On the one hand, we must fight against the temptation to disregard God's law and to become lax or careless or indifferent about the way we conduct our lives. Let us constantly bring to remembrance the words of Matthew 5:19, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

But on the other hand, there's the temptation and danger of becoming just like the Pharisees, concerned with the letter but not the spirit of the law, concerned merely with fulfilling the law in an outward sense and maintaining the appearance of being righteous in the eyes of others, especially fellow believers. The Pharisaical movement started off very well but later degenerated into something ugly and repulsive. These people went from being Puritans to being Pharisees. Those of us who stand in the Reformed and Puritan tradition must be especially mindful of this second danger. If we are not careful, we will become Pharisees. Let us also constantly bring to remembrance the words of Matthew 5:20, "That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Oh how we need abundant supplies of God's grace to keep us from falling into either extreme. And how we need to follow more closely in the path of our Lord Christ. He is our best and perfect example of what it means to maintain a right relationship to the law of God. And how we long for His return to deliver us finally and

*NOT TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFILL*

fully from all sin and to confirm us in His everlasting righteousness!



## 4

# YE HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID

## An Overview of Matthew 5:21-48

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**I**n Matthew 5, we can think of the relationship between verses 17-20 and verses 21-48 in this way: in the former, Christ lays down the general principles concerning the law, and in the latter He provides specific illustrations and cases of how those principles may be applied. This is similar to the way God gave His people the law in the Old Testament. First, He gave them the Ten Commandments, which may be considered a general summary of the law, and then He followed that up with particular cases, or case-law applications, to further explain, clarify, and illustrate the broad principles.

There are six parts in this section, and we can easily identify them by the words, “Ye have heard that it was said.” They are sometimes called the six antitheses because Christ follows up the words, “Ye have heard that it was said” with another statement, “But I say unto you.” The word “antithesis” simply means contrast or opposite. So here are six opposites or six contrasts.

The first, from verses 21-26, has to do with the sixth commandment. The second, in verses 27-30, has to do with the seventh commandment. The third, from verses 31-32, concerns the issue of divorce. The fourth, from verses 33-37, deals with the taking of oaths. The fifth, verses 38-42, has to do with retaliation; and, finally,

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the sixth antithesis, in verses 43-48, concerns how we treat our enemies.

Now the question is this: How should we view this series of antitheses or opposites? What exactly does Christ have in mind when he says, “Ye have heard that it was said of old time . . . But I say unto you . . .”? Unfortunately, many Christians interpret this section as a series of criticisms, disagreements, and dissents from the law. In other words, many understand these verses in terms of a sharp contrast between what the Old Testament law taught and what Christ was teaching. According to this approach, Christ was essentially saying, “This is what the law of Moses said, but that belongs to the past. It is outdated and no longer applicable now that I have come. Let us put it aside, and let me show you a better way.”

But is that what Christ was saying? Let me give three reasons why that cannot be so. First, we already have seen in the earlier verses that Christ did not come to set aside or destroy the law but to confirm and establish it, and that every part of the law continues to be valid for all time. If Christ were setting aside or replacing or adding to the law in these six antitheses, He plainly would be contradicting Himself and confusing His audience.

Second, if Christ were really contrasting His teaching with the teaching of the Old Testament law, then He would be very unfair in condemning and rebuking the scribes and Pharisees. Why? Because according to such an interpretation, the scribes and Pharisees were being condemned and rebuked for not keeping a law they did not know anything about! But how can that be? Indeed, everything about such an interpretation would be muddled up in light of verses 17-20.

The third reason Christ could not have been contrasting the Old Testament law with His own teaching is found in the phrase "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time." When Christ quotes from the Old Testament, He normally uses the phrase, "It is written," or a better rendering would be, "It stands written." We see this, for example, in His replies to the devil's temptations in Matthew 4, where, three times, Christ says to Satan, "It is written" and then follows it up with a direct quotation from the book of Deuteronomy. He never ever uses the phrase "It was said" as a formula for introducing quotations from the Old Testament.

In fact, none of the New Testament writers ever use the word "said" to introduce an Old Testament quotation without explicitly specifying that the source of the quotation is God Himself or His Word. And so it is clear that Christ is not referring directly to the Old Testament when he says, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time."

Now if He was not referring to the Old Testament, then to what was He referring? The simple answer is this: Christ was referring to the oral traditions of the rabbis and their understanding (or misunderstanding!) of the Old Testament law. In other words, Christ was speaking against and criticizing not the law itself but the false and inadequate understanding of the law which the scribes and Pharisees were teaching. This view is confirmed by the phrase "by them of old time." Christ was not opposing the content of what was written of old time. Rather he was opposing those persons of old who had misunderstood or misapplied the law.

The people who were listening to Christ would have understood that He was referring to the practice of

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the scribes to appeal for authority to what was said of old by the rabbis. The scribes commonly cited what the old rabbis said, and we have abundant evidence of this practice from ancient Jewish writings. For example in the Talmud, which is a record of rabbinic discussions on Jewish law and customs, one can find on almost every page statements such as “Our rabbis taught,” or “Rabbi Eleazer said,” or “Rabbi Judah says in the name of Rabbi Eleazer,” or “This is the view of Rabbi Meir,” and so on.<sup>13</sup>

So let us summarize what we have been saying so far. In this section from verse 21 to the end of the chapter, Christ presents a series of six contrasts, or antitheses, with respect to specific laws in the Old Testament. The contrast is not between His teaching on the law and the Old Testament’s teaching, but between a right understanding and use of the law and a distorted and inadequate understanding of it. Christ exposes the errors of the scribes and Pharisees and provides us with the proper interpretation and application of the law.

This is a very important point that I hope you will bear in mind when you read this passage. Let us now look more closely at these six contrasts, or antitheses.

## 5

# ARE YOU A MURDERER?

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*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.*

*Matthew 5:21-26*

**T**he Bible contains the names of numerous murderers in both the Old and New Testaments. The first criminal in history was Cain, who murdered his younger brother Abel. And since that time, murder has been a constant part of human society. Besides Cain, there was Lamech, who boasted to his two wives about having killed a young man. Then there was Pharaoh, who

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ordered the killing of countless Hebrew baby boys, and Abimelech, who slaughtered his seventy brothers (Judges 10), and the list goes on—Saul, David, Joab, Absalom, Jezebel, Ahab, Athaliah, etc. In the New Testament, the list includes Herod the Great, the high priests, Barabbas, Herodias, Saul of Tarsus, and Herod Agrippa. Biblical history, like human history in general, is filled with murderers.

Outward and physical murder is a terrible crime, and according to God's law, it is to be punished by death. But the two questions we need to ask ourselves are these: "Who is a murderer?" and "Am I a murderer?" It is very easy for a person who has never committed this crime to think nothing about the sixth commandment and about those passages of Scripture that warn against this sin. But in this passage, Christ attacks such self-confidence by showing that no one is truly innocent of murder. Why? Because the first step in murder is anger, and anger is a sin that every man, woman, and child has committed. And to one degree or another, it makes us all would-be or potential murderers.

We may divide this first antithesis into two parts. In verses 21-22, Christ deals with the relationship between murder and anger, and in verses 23-26, He gives two illustrations demonstrating the seriousness of anger.

### ***MURDER AND ANGER***

In verse 21, Christ says, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment." Now let us ask ourselves, "Where have the rabbis and scribes gone wrong in terms of their understanding of the

sixth commandment?" Let us first examine what is said and then what is not said. Remember that error can be discovered not just by what is said but also by what is left unsaid.

The phrase "Thou shalt not kill" is taken directly from the sixth commandment, but the phrase "and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment" is something the rabbis added. Is this a valid addition? There are some who would find fault with them at this point, but I think to be fair to the rabbis, what they added is indeed consistent with what the law taught. The words "shall be in danger of the judgment" simply mean that the person who has committed murder shall be brought before the court with at least two witnesses, according to Numbers 35, and be given the death sentence.

So on the surface, it would seem that no fault can be found with the way in which the rabbis interpreted the sixth commandment. But it is in what they did not say that their fault appears. Their interpretation of this law was terribly inadequate, for they restricted it only to the outward and physical act of unlawfully taking another person's life. As long as one does not do this, then he has kept the law and is free of guilt. Murder was seen as a purely civil issue to be dealt with by the civil court. The full wealth and meaning of the sixth commandment was overlooked by these experts of the law.

But Christ, as the true interpreter of the law, comes and restores to the people a right understanding of it. Verse 22 says, "But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." Christ is essentially saying that the beginning of the outward act of murder is sinful anger or hatred. Think of how many outward murders in history

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have been committed because of such an attitude within. Christ teaches us that to harbor such an ill-natured and evil attitude toward a brother is actually a breaking of the sixth commandment and deserves to be punished.

Now it is clear that the punishment here in verse 22 is different from the punishment mentioned in verse 21. In verse 21, the judgment, or punishment, refers to civil punishment or civil penalty that the state has the authority to carry out against the criminal. But in verse 22, the punishment refers to eternal punishment or the punishment God Himself will execute upon the sinner. No human judge can do that. No human law court has the authority and right to punish a person solely on the basis of the thoughts and feelings of that person.

But not so with God, who sees and knows all things, including the secret things of our hearts. David said to Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28:9, “And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts.” Angry thoughts, inner resentment, bitterness, and hatred toward another person are known to God. And though they are concealed by an outwardly friendly appearance and disposition so that no one in the world will ever suspect, God knows.

Some Christians have the wrong idea that in the Old Testament God was not concerned about a person’s heart and attitude and that it is only in the New Testament that God suddenly takes an interest in what goes on within. This is certainly not the case. Time and again, we are taught even in the Old Testament that God wants His people to be pure both in the inside and on the outside. Proverbs 6:16-18 says, “These six things doth the LORD

hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood [that is, outward murder], An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations [that includes inward murder] . . .”

Again in Zechariah 7:10, we read, “Let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.” And Zechariah 8:17 says, “Let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour.” Finally, in Leviticus 19:17-18 we find, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart . . . but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” The scribes and Pharisees ought to have known better. The sixth commandment cannot be limited and restricted to just the outward action of murdering another person. Instead, it also commands a positive and loving attitude toward others.

Again, let us remember that Christ does not change or add anything to the Old Testament law. He simply draws out its full implications based on what the Old Testament itself has revealed. Far from abrogating or doing away with the law, Christ shows us what the law meant, even from the Old Testament times.

In verse 22, Christ goes on to say, “Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” What does Christ mean? Is He speaking about some kind of progression and climax of sin and punishment? There are some who interpret this verse in such a way. They would say that being angry with your brother without a just cause is the least serious of the three sins mentioned. Saying “Raca” to your brother is worse and deserves greater punishment. But the worst of all is to call someone a fool; this deserves eternal damnation.

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It is true that there is such a thing as degrees of sin and degrees of punishment, but to interpret verse 22 in this way is to misinterpret it and to misunderstand the point that Christ is making. Christ is emphasizing just one central lesson here—that the root of evil lies in the heart. To be angry with your brother without a just cause is already a very grievous sin, and it deserves eternal damnation.

But what does it mean to say to your brother “Raca”? The word is probably an Aramaic term. It has no exact modern equivalent, and so in most translations it is simply transliterated. It is basically a term of abuse, derision, slander, and insult. In modern-day language, it is something like calling a person a brainless idiot, or a blockhead, or a worthless fellow, or a silly man. The seriousness of the sin lays not so much in the word itself but rather in the spirit in which it is spoken, namely, a spirit of contempt, disdain, and utter disrespect.

A person who shows contempt for a brother deserves to be judged and condemned by the council. This is a reference to the Sanhedrin, or the council of seventy, that tried the most serious offences and pronounced the severest penalties, including death by stoning. Similarly, Christ says that when in the same frame of mind and with the same spirit you call someone a fool, you deserve to be cast into the fire of hell.

Again, we must understand that it is not always wrong to call a person a fool. Psalm 14:1 calls an atheist a fool. The book of Proverbs contains numerous references to and descriptions of fools. We must not be afraid to tell someone, based on the standard of God’s Word, that he is a fool or that he is acting foolishly. But what Christ is

warning us against is calling someone a fool out of a spirit of contempt, hatred, and malice.

Let us summarize what Christ is teaching in these verses. He is saying that sinful anger (the kind that leads to bitter words) is, in its very nature, murder. It is murder committed in the heart, and unless he repents, the person with such an attitude faces everlasting punishment in hell. It does not matter that in the eyes of men, this kind of attitude and spirit is not considered sinful. In God's eyes, it is a sin, and such a person stands guilty before Him.

### *TWO ILLUSTRATIONS (VV. 23-26)*

In order to show the seriousness of this sin, Christ gives two illustrations. The first, from verses 23-24, is drawn from Old Testament temple worship; while the second, from verses 25-26, is drawn from the court of law.

In verse 23, Christ says, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee . . ." Now before we move on, I want us to notice two things. First, there is a change from the plural to the singular. In verses 21 and 22, Christ addresses the people in the plural "Ye." But now, in verse 23, he changes to the singular "thou." It is clear that Christ is becoming very personal now. He is addressing each individual in particular. Let each man examine his own heart.

Second, the word "therefore" shows that what the Lord is about to say follows directly from what He has just said. There is a close connection between a person's relationship with others and his relationship with God. A

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strained relationship with another person will affect one's worship of God.

In this illustration, Christ describes a person who, according to Jewish custom, is bringing an offering to the altar. But while he is there, he suddenly remembers that there is something that is not right in his relationship with one of his brothers. What should he do? Should he carry on with the sacrifice and then deal with the conflict later on? Christ says in verse 24, "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

The phrase "hath aught against thee" refers to a grievance our brother has against us. In other words, our brother is offended or unhappy with us for some reason, which may or may not be a legitimate one. It could be that we have done no wrong to our brother and we bear no ill feeling toward him. Nevertheless, we are aware that he has some grievance toward us. Christ teaches that we are to make every effort to be reconciled with him and to do whatever is required so that he will have no more grievance against us. The aim of going to that brother is so that the cause of disharmony might be removed and a peaceful relationship might once again exist.

Now this is indeed a very high standard that Christ requires of His people. Many of us would tend to reason in this way: "I have no grudge against him. I have done him no wrong. The fault lies entirely with him; so why should I be the one to initiate the process of reconciliation or go out of my way to restore the relationship?" But Christ is saying that regardless of who is responsible for this breach in relationship, we should seek to be reconciled with that person first before we come to worship God.

Who would have thought that the implications of the sixth commandment were so far-reaching? Not only does it require me to have a right attitude toward my brother, but it also requires me to be concerned about my brother's attitude toward me and to make every effort to remove any feelings of hatred and anger he may have toward me.

Why does Christ require us to go, as it were, this extra mile? John Murray provides something of an answer when he says, "The grievance entertained by the brother is something that disturbs the relationship between brethren; it causes disharmony and estrangement. And such estrangement is the fountain of the sin with which Jesus is here dealing, the sin of murder. This rupture of relations, the worshipper cannot ignore, even though he be faultless. This grievance on the part of the brother may be but the rudimentary movement of estrangement. Yet, if it is not remedied, it will fester and will develop into the antithesis of 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'"<sup>14</sup>

And so we learn that the sin of anger and hatred within a person not only affects relationships in the church, but it also affects our worship of God. John MacArthur wrote, "True worship is not enhanced by better music, better prayers, better architecture, or even better preaching. True worship is enhanced by better relationships between those who come to worship. . . . When there is animosity or sin of any sort in our heart there cannot be integrity in our worship."<sup>15</sup>

Again, what Christ is teaching is not new. Samuel said to King Saul, "Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). Later, in

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Psalms 66:18, we read, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."

The Lord's second illustration is found in verses 25-26: "Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."

This illustration has to do with a financial debt that has been incurred. In those days, it was common practice to imprison a person for an unpaid debt. Debtors were jailed till the debt was paid in full. Roman law provided that the offended party could bring the accused with him to face the judge. The two could still settle the matter themselves on the way to court but not after the court had become involved. If one has wronged another, he should settle the account with his opponent quickly before they appear before the judge, for if judgment is passed on him, there is no way out of prison until he has paid the last penny.

The main point of the illustration is to teach that we must make every effort, without any delay, to make our relationship right with our brother before it is too late. The emphasis here is on immediate action. The time of reconciliation is always right now. Tomorrow may be too late. We should not wait till just before coming for worship to seek to set things right. Instead, we should seek reconciliation as soon as possible, without delay.

In the final analysis, Christ is not speaking about an earthly judge but about the heavenly judge; and He is not speaking about an earthly prison but about the prison of hell. This is especially clear when we compare this

passage with the parable of the unmerciful servant. Christ ends that parable with the words, "And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Matt. 18:34-35).

If we do not deal with the attitude of hatred and anger in our hearts toward another in this life, then such an attitude would testify against us in the day of judgment, and we will never escape from the prison of hell.

### ***CONCLUSION***

In closing, let us briefly review the two things we have seen in this chapter. First, we saw that the sixth commandment forbids not only the act of murder but also sinful anger, the kind that leads to bitter and insulting words and in its very nature is murder. Inward anger and bitterness is but the beginning of outward murder, and both are hateful in God's sight.

Second, from the two illustrations that Christ gave, we saw that it is vitally important to seek reconciliation with our brethren without delay and regardless of whether we are at fault or not. Unless our relationships with one another are right, we will not be able to worship God aright, for as the apostle John says in 1 John 4:20, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"

If there is one thing that we must take away from this passage, it is this: we have all failed to keep God's law perfectly. If you are an unbeliever, you urgently need to

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seek salvation from the anger and curse of God that rests on all who break His law, even in the slightest point. But if you are a believer, these words of Christ also ought to shatter any self-righteousness and self-confidence that you may have and to drive you to Him, who alone has kept God's law at every point. Oh, how we need His mercy, His forgiveness, and His grace to enable us to follow Him more closely and to keep His law more fully.

## 6

# ADULTERY OF THE HEART

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*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

*Matthew 5:27-30*

As in the first antithesis, the problem with the rabbis and scribes was not that they misquoted God's law but that they limited and restricted it to the mere outward and physical act. They stopped short of giving a full and complete interpretation of the commandment. To them, a person was guilty of breaking the seventh commandment only when he actually engaged in the physical act of adultery.

The Bible strongly condemns the physical act, but it does not stop there. Even in the Old Testament we read that lustful thoughts are condemned. For example, Proverbs 6:25 says, "Lust not after her beauty in thy heart." In Job 31:1, Job said, "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?" Then

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in the tenth commandment, which is the most inward of all the commandments, we read, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife.” Finally, Genesis 6:5 tells us that evil comes from the thoughts of a man’s heart.

Once again, we see that Christ was not teaching something new here. He was simply correcting the error of the rabbis and drawing out the full implications of the law based on what the Old Testament itself had revealed. Far from abolishing or doing away with the law, Christ shows us what the law meant right from the very beginning.

In verse 28, Jesus says, “But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” It is clear that Christ is not talking about an incidental or unintentional glance. The Greek verb translated “look” is in the present tense, which speaks of a continuous action. Christ is referring to intentional and repeated gazing with the purpose of lusting and satisfying one’s evil desire.

We need to realize that lustfully looking at a person is but the expression of an evil heart. The eye is but the instrument of the desire. It is not lustful looking that causes the sin in the heart, but the sin in the heart causes the lustful looking. Adultery in the heart can occur even when the physical eye does not see anything. Nevertheless, it is true that temptation often comes through the things that confront our eyes. We live in a day of unparalleled sexual temptation. People propagate, promote, and exploit sexual passions through the most powerful and pervasive media ever known to man. You don’t need to go very far or wait very long to be tempted!

Now Christ does not condemn the often unexpected and unavoidable exposure to temptation. But He

does condemn the continual looking in order to satisfy lust. David was not at fault when he first saw Bathsheba bathing while he was walking on the palace roof. He could have immediately looked away, but he did not. His sin was in dwelling on what he saw, which eventually led him to the physical act of adultery.

Before we move on, we should note that although the Lord directly addresses men, this passage applies equally to women, and it applies not just to the married person but to the unmarried as well. Furthermore, all of us have the responsibility for not behaving in a way that would become a source of temptation for other people.

In the setting and context of marriage, the union of a man and a woman is a wonderful gift of God. But sadly, with the entrance of sin, it has often been abused, debased, and corrupted. Christ calls His people to purity of heart and life and to unbending faithfulness in their marriages.

In verse 29, Christ gives us a very important instruction with respect to dealing with sin in the heart: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." Then in the next verse, He repeats exactly the same instruction with respect to the right hand that offends. But what is Christ teaching?

Some have taken these words in a wooden, literal way and have gone so far as to physically mutilate themselves. Now I do not deny that there are some very extreme circumstances in which these verses may, in some ways, be applied literally; yet in general they are not to be taken so but should be understood as a figure of speech.

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In Jewish culture, the right eye represents a person's best vision, while the right hand represents his best skill. Together they represent the most cherished things that we possess. The word "offend" means to stumble or trap. The main truth that Christ is teaching is that we should be willing to give up whatever is necessary, even the most cherished things we possess, if they trap us morally and spiritually and cause us to fall into sin or to stay in sin. Drastic actions should be taken in order to get rid of sin and temptation in our lives.

There are three things we can learn from these two verses. First, we learn that this present life is not our only life. All of us, whether we are Christians or not, are headed for eternity. The only question is where we will spend it. Christ says, "For it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish [that is, perish in this life], than for your whole body to be cast into hell [that is, cast into hell after you leave this world]."

Second, we are reminded that there is nothing—no matter how precious it may seem to us at the moment—that should be allowed to turn us aside from our glorious destiny. Are we shortsighted when it comes to evaluating the worth of something? Do we place a lot of emphasis on things of the moment, of the here and now, rather than on things of eternity? Christ is teaching us that no matter how precious or valuable an object might be, even if it be our very own hand and eye, it must never be allowed to hinder us from our heavenly home.

Third, we learn that sin is a very destructive force and must not be indulged in or treated lightly. Temptation should be flung aside decisively and immediately. We should not play the fool or dillydally with it. The surgery

must be radical if the life is to be saved. Halfway or halfhearted measures will not do.

Some years back, I read about a climber who went out on a day hike all by himself. Along the way, he accidentally dislodged a huge boulder that pinned down his right hand and forearm. He was trapped in that position for five days, by which time all his food and water supplies had been used up. There was virtually no chance of anyone coming to his rescue, and unless he did something drastic, he would not make it out alive. So in the end, he decided to use what tools he had to cut off his own right hand in order to free himself and save his own life. I cannot begin to imagine the tremendous amount of pain and agony, both mentally and physically, he must have gone through while doing it! But then again, what was the alternative but certain death?

The Bible uses very strong terms when it comes to the Christian's relationship to sin. Romans 13:12 and 14 say, "Cast off the works of darkness . . . make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." Colossians 3:5 says, "Mortify [that is, put to death] therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Now we need to understand that the words of our Lord need not be restricted to sins against the seventh commandment. Rather, they should be applied to all other sins as well.

All of us have our particular temptations and weaknesses. It might be a particular book, or magazine, or comic, or clothing, or website, or movie, or music, or sport, or recreation, or computer game, or relationship, or possession, or position, or ability, or goal or desire, or

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ambition, or plan, or habit, or action, or . . . and so on. It is not the same for everyone. But everyone needs to do the same thing when it comes to sin and temptation in his or her life—cut it off before it is too late!

If we do not consciously and purposefully control and discipline ourselves in these things, then they will inevitably control us, and what we cannot control or discipline, we should discard without hesitation. As Paul wrote, “All things are lawful unto me . . . but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12).

But before we move on to the next antithesis, I want to point out an interesting connection between these verses and the concept of martyrdom. Commenting on this text, John Murray says, “Nothing of earthly possession is too precious to dispense with if sin is for us the inevitable cost of retention. This is the principle that alone explains and warrants martyrdom. The martyr sacrifices life itself, and therefore all of temporal possession, rather than commit the sin of betrayal . . . there is absolutely nothing of earthly possession, including life itself, that must not be surrendered rather than fall into sin.”<sup>16</sup> And so in the case of martyrdom or dying for one’s faith, we have an extreme example of applying the words of Christ in a very literal way.

## 7

# DIVORCE

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*It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.*

*Matthew 5:31-32*

**T**he background to this passage is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4: “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.”

Now before we proceed, I would like to just remind us again that Christ did not come to abolish the law or to loosen or relax its requirements in any way. Instead,

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He came to confirm and establish the law. Thus, any interpretation of our Lord's words that goes against what is found in the Old Testament law is to be rejected. We must be careful not to pit, as it were, Moses against Christ.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Christ was correcting the rabbinical abuse of Deuteronomy 24 and confirming the original teaching of Moses. The scribes and Pharisees had distorted the Old Testament teaching on divorce. They emphasized the wrong thing in their exposition of this law. Whereas Moses and Christ stressed the sacred and hallowed nature of the marriage bond, the scribes placed all the emphasis on the bill of divorcement. All they were concerned about was that when a man wanted to divorce his wife, he was to make sure that the certificate of divorce was properly drawn up and given to her—as if a piece of paper could dissolve a marriage!

But not only did they give a wrong emphasis to this law; they also gave a wrong interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. They taught that if a man did not like his wife for the most trivial of reasons, then he had the right to put her away with a divorce certificate. But that is not what the law said. Rather, the law was given to forbid the remarriage of divorced parties. If anything, Deuteronomy 24 warns against and discourages hasty divorce.

In contrast to the lax attitude of the Pharisees, Christ teaches that the only legitimate ground for divorce is fornication. Now fornication is not synonymous with adultery. It certainly includes adultery, but it is not restricted to it. The word “uncleanness” in Deuteronomy 24:1 and the word “fornication” in Matthew 5:32 refer to the same thing. They both speak of ethically abhorrent misbehavior with a focus on sexual immorality, which

would include such things as incest, homosexuality, bestiality, and prostitution. In other words, any kind of corrupt, perverted, indecent, and shameful behavior, that is, any serious violation of the marriage covenant, would constitute a permissible ground for divorce.

The point that our Lord is stressing in verse 32 is the utter sanctity of the marriage bond. How binding is marriage? Christ tells us that only the most severe sort of situation (the sort where fornication is involved) is a legitimate reason for divorce. While fornication is the only ground for divorce, this does not mean that divorce is the only way to deal with fornication. In other words, Christ is not saying that the moment one party commits fornication, then the marriage must immediately be dissolved. Where there is repentance and forgiveness, the marriage may and, in fact, should continue.

At this point, I would like to briefly address the issue of adultery and the death penalty in the Old Testament law.<sup>17</sup> The question might be asked, "If the law required the adulterer to be executed, then why was there a need for the provision of divorce in the case of adultery?" Various solutions have been proposed, but I think the best way of looking at it is to view the death penalty for certain crimes like adultery, homosexuality, and rape as the maximum punishment. This means that not every adulterer or homosexual in every case and without exception had to be put to death. The law allows for a certain degree of flexibility, and where there is repentance and forgiveness, the death penalty may be withheld. The only exception to this is murder, where the state has no option but to carry out the death sentence.

Divorce, then, was another way of dealing with adultery in marriage, even in the Old Testament. This

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explains why in Matthew 1:19, Joseph, being a just man and not willing to make a public example of Mary, was minded to put her away privately. This putting away privately refers to the bill of divorce, whereas making a public example of her refers to taking legal action against her, which, under the law, would lead to her execution. So the death penalty and divorce were both legitimate ways of addressing the problem of adultery in marriage. But of course the third and best option is that there be forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration between the husband and wife.

In verse 32, Christ goes on to say that if a man divorces his wife for reasons other than fornication, then he causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries her to commit adultery. What the Lord is saying is this: Whoever divorces his wife except for fornication must bear the chief responsibility, for if, as a result of his action, she later marries someone else, she becomes guilty of adultery, and the man who marries her is also guilty. John MacArthur wrote, “A man or woman who has no right to divorce has no right to remarry. To do so initiates a whole chain of adultery, because remarriage after illegitimate divorce results in illegitimate and adulterous relationships for all parties involved.”<sup>18</sup>

This whole issue of divorce and remarriage can be a very complicated one, and it is also a sad reminder that we live in a fallen world. But the lesson we must all learn from this text is that marriage is a most sacred institution and should be viewed with the utmost seriousness. As Christian husbands and wives, we must not do anything at all that would compromise our marriages. Instead, we should do everything in our power to preserve, strengthen, and build them up. Paul wrote, “Husbands,

love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25); and, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph. 5:22-23).

William Hendriksen gives an excellent summary of this section: “The more we study Christ’s teaching as presented to us in this passage the more we begin to appreciate it. Here, by means of a few simple words, Jesus discourages divorce, refutes the rabbinical misinterpretation of the law, reaffirms the law’s true meaning, censures the guilty party, defends the innocent, and throughout it all upholds the sacredness and inviolability of the marriage bond as ordained by God!”<sup>19</sup>



## 8

# OATHS

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*Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.*

*Matthew 5:33-37*

**W**e come now to the fourth antithesis or contrast that Christ brings to our attention. We have seen that the first contrast concerned the sixth commandment while the second and third concerned the seventh commandment. This fourth antithesis has to do mainly with the ninth commandment, which says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour."

In verse 33, the Lord states what the Jewish rabbis said concerning the matter of oath taking: "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths." This is not a direct quotation from the Old Testament, but it is a summary of various passages concerning oaths, such as Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, and Deuteronomy 23:21. There is nothing wrong in the words of the rabbis at this point, but what is wrong

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comes out clearly in the next few verses, where Christ rebukes them and exposes their fault.

The scribes and rabbis had taught that an oath that is sworn to the Lord or in the name of God must be kept. However, an oath that was not made in direct connection with God's name but with other objects, such as heaven or Jerusalem, was of lesser significance, and a person did not need to be so careful and conscientious about keeping it. The scribes thought that by using a substitute for God's name when taking an oath, they could still keep the emphasis on the truthfulness of a person's statement but without absolutely binding or obligating him to the truth.

Thus, for example, if you wanted someone to believe what you were saying but you did not want to commit yourself fully to it, you could say, "I swear by Jerusalem that what I've said is true." But later on, if it turned out that your statement was false or you did not keep your word, then it was not so bad because God's name had not been used in the oath; and you are not subjected to the same kind of punishment as when God's name is used.

So what happened in those days was that oaths began to multiply in daily conversations. It became a very common thing to swear in order to make an impression or to spice up the conversation. Heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the temple, the altar, and other objects were being invoked in oaths as substitutes for God's name.

Christ exposed the utter hypocrisy and foolishness of such an approach to oath taking. He says in verses 34-36 that we are not to swear by heaven, for it is God's throne. We are not to swear by earth, for it is God's footstool. We are not to swear by Jerusalem, for it is the

city of the great King. And we are not to swear by our own head, for we cannot even change the intrinsic or natural color of our hair.

What Christ is teaching is this: It does not matter what object you choose to invoke or swear by; in the final analysis you are swearing by God, for He is the Creator and owner of this entire universe. Oaths in the name of other objects are just as binding as those in which the name of the Lord is expressly used. Furthermore, nowhere in Scripture are we taught to swear by anything other than God.

But at this point, someone might ask, "How do we reconcile the fact that the Bible, in quite a few places, especially in the Old Testament, allows for the use of oaths, whereas Christ says, 'Swear not at all'? Is the Lord setting aside the Old Testament law regarding oaths? And is He telling us that all oaths without exception are absolutely forbidden?" There are some groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Anabaptists who have understood these verses absolutely literally and thus have refused to take oaths, even in court. But this is not the right interpretation of the text.

First, we must remember the context. Christ was correcting the errors of the rabbis and scribes. He was not in any way setting aside or abolishing the Old Testament law. He came not to destroy it but to confirm it. Second, we have many examples in Scripture of oath taking. God Himself takes an oath. Hebrews 6:13 says, "For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself." And Hebrews 6:17 says, "Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath." The apostle Paul

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took various oaths in his epistles (Rom. 1:9; Phil. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:23). And even Christ Himself testified before the Sanhedrin under oath (Matt. 26:63-64).

William Hendriksen says, "In this world of dishonesty and deception, the oath is at times necessary to add solemnity and the guarantee of reliability to an important affirmation or promise. Nothing either here in Matthew 5:33-37 or anywhere else in Scripture forbids this."<sup>20</sup> In other words, because we live in a fallen world, God has provided for proper oath taking and swearing in His name as a partial remedy for sinful people's tendency toward dishonesty and a distrust of one another. The Lord knows that fallen people's inclination to falsehood causes them to distrust each other; and so, in certain situations of great importance and seriousness, an oath is taken in order to give greater motivation to the one making it to tell the truth or to keep to his word.

But what the Lord is absolutely forbidding in our text is all unnecessary, irreverent, hypocritical, and disguised oaths. Yes, there is a place for lawful oaths, particularly in civil and public matters, but under ordinary circumstances our simple word should be trustworthy and sufficient. This is what verse 37 means, "But let your communication be, Yea, yea: Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." Every normal word in the course of daily speech and conversation should be a truthful word—plain and unqualified as to its trustworthiness.

There are people in this world (and perhaps you have met some of them) who do not have a very good reputation for speaking the truth, and thus they are in the habit of injecting frequent oaths into their conversations to give credibility to their words. I well remember some

schoolmates of mine who were like that. One of them would often say, "Cross my heart." Another, who was a scout, would raise his hand and say, "Scout's honor," in order to verify that he was speaking the truth.

As an aside, it is interesting that when the scout movement first started in the early 1900s, the very first scout law stated, "A scout's honor is to be trusted." If a scout says, "On my honor it is so," that means it is so, just as if he had taken a most solemn oath. If a scout were to break his honor by telling a lie or by not carrying out an order exactly when trusted on his honor to do so, he would cease to be a scout and must hand over his scout badge and never be allowed to wear it again.

The problem is that when people, especially those who don't have a good reputation for truth, say such things or use such devices frequently and under normal everyday circumstances, they tend to raise even greater suspicion. Instead of being a mark of integrity, such oaths become a mark of deceit. And instead of promoting confidence, they actually promote skepticism and distrust.

This ought never to be so for us as God's people. Instead, let us seek to be plain, honest, and faithful with our words. And let us constantly teach our children the importance of this, in our words and especially by our examples. Let us teach them that while it is legitimate for Christians to take oaths, we may do so only in God's name, with all honesty, and only in very serious circumstances. We must never do it flippantly, insincerely, and unnecessarily. Ordinarily, a simple word from our lips should prove trustworthy and adequate.

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## CHAPTER 8: OATHS

We have covered the first four antitheses. We have seen the Lord correcting some mistaken ideas of the Jews concerning the sixth, seventh, and ninth commandments and giving His divine explanation of them. The sixth commandment has to do with the sanctity or holiness of life and is based on the fact that God alone is the Creator and Giver of life. The seventh commandment has to do with the sanctity of marriage and is based on the fact that God is pure and faithful. The ninth commandment has to do with the sanctity of truth and is based on the fact that God is true in all that He says and does.

If we, as His people, are to be good representatives of the image and character of God, then we must strive to uphold the sanctity of life, marriage, and truth. We must not do, say, or think anything that will violate these principles, misrepresent Him, and bring shame to His holy name. Purity of thought, deed, and word ought to be the goal that we strive toward each day and each moment.

But what if we have failed, and perhaps even failed miserably, in these areas we have talked about? Allow me to end with an encouragement from two familiar persons in the Bible. The first is David. While walking upon his palace roof, he saw a beautiful woman bathing. That was no fault of his and was not sin. But instead of immediately plucking out his right eye and cutting off his right hand (to use the words of our Lord), that is, instead of taking drastic actions to deal with the temptation, he lingered and dwelled on what he saw. How many times have we done the same? David looked on her to lust after her and was guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart. But he did not stop there. Being the

king and having the opportunity of going further in his sin, he inquired about her and then summoned her to him, and eventually became guilty of outward adultery.

David failed to pluck out his right eye and cut off his right hand. He refused to allow his members to perish even when they led him to sin. He preferred the pleasures of sin for a season rather than the pleasures of fellowship with God. And so what he deserved was for his whole body to be cast into hell forever. But blessed be God for those precious words spoken through Nathan the prophet, "The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (2 Sam. 12:13). And David himself wrote in the Psalm 32:5, "I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."

The second person is Peter. The Lord had been brought into the house of the high priest to stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Peter sat outside in the courtyard. A servant girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth," to which Peter, the leading disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, immediately took an oath and swore, saying, "I do not know the man" (Matt. 26:71-72). It was bad enough that he had lied. It was even worse to call upon God and to use God's holy name to bear witness to his lie. No wonder when he heard the cock crow and remembered the words of Jesus, he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter was afraid to lose everything that was precious to him for the sake of Christ, including his own life, so he denied Christ under an oath. Like David, he too deserved to have his whole body cast into hell forever. But thank God for those merciful words the great Prophet, Priest, and King spoke to Peter even before he

## CHAPTER 8: OATHS

sinned: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31-32).

Truly, as the psalmist said, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared” (Ps. 130:3-4).

All of us have failed to attain to God’s holy standard. We have not kept ourselves pure in thought, word, and deed. But there is one who has, and through His precious blood, we have been redeemed. Turn to Him again this day in humble repentance and grateful acknowledgement for His boundless mercy. And seek Him for added grace to strive against all sin and to be found of Him in peace without spot and blameless (2 Pet. 3:14). “Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).

## 9

# RETALIATION

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*Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.*

*Matthew 5:38-42*

**I**n this fifth contrast, Christ deals with the question of personal retaliation and revenge. Again, remember that He was not contrasting the law of Moses with His own teaching. I cannot stress this point enough because it is so easy to think that since the phrase, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” is taken directly out of the Old Testament law, Christ was somehow contradicting or modifying or abrogating that law.

The phrase “Ye have heard that it hath been said” indicates that Christ was not quoting directly from the Old Testament. Instead, He was referring to the oral traditions and teachings of the rabbis and scribes, which contained many errors and misinterpretations of the Old Testament law, some of which we have already seen.

But before we consider the rabbinical misapplication of the law, let us consider what this law originally

## CHAPTER 9: RETALIATION

meant and the purpose of it. In Exodus 21:24-25, we read, “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” To this list, Leviticus 24:20 adds, “Breach for breach,” that is, “fracture for fracture,” and Deuteronomy 19:21 adds, “life for life.” At first reading, this law seems rather cruel and harsh, and we may be inclined to think that it has been done away with in the New Testament era. But remember that Christ did not come to abolish the law but to confirm it in all its details.

Another thing we need to note about this law is that it is given in very striking and dramatic language in order to make an impression on the hearers, but it is not actually applied literally. In all likelihood, such phrases were used as idioms, and the people in those days would have understood them as such. An idiom is basically a group of words with a special meaning that is different from the meanings of the individual words. Some examples are, “It’s raining cats and dogs”; “The exam was a piece of cake”; or, “She was over the moon when she heard the news.” So too, “an eye for an eye” was probably used idiomatically in those days.

In fact, the Old Testament itself teaches that the penalties were not imposed literally. Just a few verses before the phrase “eye for eye” appears, we read in Exodus 21:18 that if a man strikes another man and injures him such that the victim has to be confined to his bed for a while, then the offending person has to pay for his medical expenses as well as for the loss of his time. Similarly, a few verses later, the law says that if a man strikes his slave and damages his eye or knocks out his tooth, then he must let his slave go free (Exod. 21:26-27). The point to note is that the law is not applied literally.

So what does “eye for eye” and “tooth for tooth” really mean? The basic principle in this law is that of proportional justice—the punishment should match or fit the crime. Far from being a harsh or cruel law, it is actually a very merciful and beneficent law because it prevents excessive punishment beyond what the offense deserves, and it protects the innocent in society by restraining and deterring evildoers.

Now, when discussing what constitutes a fair or just punishment for particular crimes, the Scriptures provide us with our highest authority and standard. We do not turn to natural law, or legal positivism, or the categorical imperative, or situationism, or any of the numerous ethical and legal theories devised by unbelieving thinkers through the ages. By what standard do we judge these things? We judge them by no other standard than the Word of God.

Contrary to what many people think, the penalties that God’s Word prescribes for civil crimes are never cruel, unusual, or excessive. Rather, they are perfectly just, and they reflect God’s justice for human society. Under God’s law, a criminal receives what he deserves, no more and no less. Hebrews 2:2, referring to the law given at Sinai, says, “Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward.”

Early in human history, we read of how Lamech, one of the wicked descendants of Cain, boasted to his wives, saying, “I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold” (Gen. 4:23-24). In other words, Lamech killed the young man who caused him some injury, and he boasted about it. The “eye-for-eye” principle was instituted to prevent exactly this sort of

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excessive punishment based on personal vengeance and angry retaliation.

And so, far from abrogating this principle, Christ confirms it (Matt. 5:17-18). But what He does not confirm or approve is the abuse of this law by the scribes and Pharisees. The eye-for-eye principle was given in a legal context and has to do with the civil justice system of the nation. It was part of the order of public justice instituted at Sinai and was to be used only in the civil court. The Pharisees, however, took this law out of its original context and without regard for its original intention and used it to justify personal revenge and retaliation.

Nowhere in the Old Testament did God ever allow His people to take matters of civil justice into their own hands. Yet that was exactly what the Pharisees had done. What God had given to the civil magistrates for the maintenance of law and order in the land, Jewish rabbis had turned into individual license for revenge. And so in this way, God's holy law had been twisted by their tradition to serve the selfish purposes of unholy men. The irony is that whereas the eye-for-eye principle was given to prevent personal retribution, the rabbis used that very principle to justify revenge.

These Jewish teachers had either totally forgotten or, more likely, totally ignored those passages in the Old Testament itself that forbade personal revenge. For example, Leviticus 19:18 says, "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD." And Proverbs 20:22 says, "Say not thou, I will recompense evil: but wait on the LORD, and he shall save thee."

The next time someone hurts you or offends you in some way, never turn to the “eye-for-eye” and “tooth-for-tooth” principle as an excuse to hit back or to get even with that person. If you do, you will be guilty of misapplying and breaking God’s law, just as the Jews of old.

Now with this background in mind, we can then look at the words of Christ from verse 39 onwards: “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.”

When Christ tells us not to resist evil, He is speaking in the context of harm that is done to us personally by someone who is evil, and He is teaching us not to respond with personal resentment, spite, and vengeance. Unfortunately, there are some who have misinterpreted this passage to mean that any resistance whatsoever to evil is forbidden. John MacArthur wrote, “Probably no part of the Sermon on the Mount has been so misinterpreted and misapplied as 5:38-43. . . . It has been used to promote pacifism, conscientious objection to military service, lawlessness, anarchy, and a host of other positions that it does not support.”<sup>21</sup>

These people, like the rabbis of old who misused the words of Moses, have misused the words of Christ to teach nonresistance in all circumstances. Let us be clear that God’s Word, both in the Old and New Testaments, does not forbid such things as self-defense, military service, civil justice, and the punishment of crime. In fact,

## CHAPTER 9: RETALIATION

both Paul and Peter tell us that the government is ordained by God as His instrument to punish and restrain evil, protect the people, and maintain order in society (Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:13-14).

So having established the basic principle of non-retaliation in the area of personal relationships, the Lord illustrates this principle with four examples. First, in verse 39, He says when a person slaps you on your right cheek, you should turn to him the other also, which literally means you should let him slap the left cheek as well. In Jewish culture, a slap in the face was one of the most insulting and demeaning of actions. Slapping a person represented a very serious attack on one's honor and dignity. Even a slave would prefer to be whipped than to be slapped in the face by his master's hand.

Thus being slapped in the face, whether literally or figuratively, is to suffer a great insult and to be treated with great contempt and disdain. The most natural response to such an action would be to slap back, but Christ tells us to turn to the one who slaps us the other cheek also. This turning of the other cheek symbolizes a nonretaliatory spirit. We see a wonderful example of this in Christ Himself. When He saw His Father's house being defiled by the money changers and sellers, He did not hesitate to resist them by driving them out by force. But when He Himself was insulted, He did not respond with personal vengeance.

Peter says, "But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again;

when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1 Pet. 2:20-23).

And so when someone attacks our dignity or insults us, we too are not to respond with retaliation. Rather, we are to leave the protection and defense of our dignity in the hands of God.

The second illustration Christ gives is found in verse 40: "If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy [cloak] also." The coat refers to an inner shirt, while the cloak refers to an outer garment that could also serve as a blanket at night. According to Exodus 22:26, this outer garment was seen as so indispensable that if it was used as a pledge, it had to be returned to the person before sunset.

In those days, the court could require a person who had no money or other possessions to pay the fine with his clothing, with the exception of the cloak, or the outer garment, which was considered an inalienable or untouchable possession. Christ tells us that when someone wants to deprive us of our possessions through legal means, not only should we refrain from taking revenge on that person, but we also should be willing to part with even what we may legally keep.

Now of course this does not mean that Christians may never contest their case in court or appeal to the judge against an injustice done to them. Remember how Paul and Silas protested to the magistrates in Acts 16 after they had been illegally beaten and thrown into prison at Philippi. The reason they made that appeal was probably so that the magistrates would be made to realize that what they had done to them was illegal and a violation of their own law.

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But notice that we do not find in Paul and Silas a spirit of anger and bitterness and a desire for personal revenge. When the attack is against our own person and even our own possessions, we should be willing to suffer loss; but when the attack is on truth, justice, and righteousness, we should be willing to go to their defense.

The third illustration has to do with going the extra mile. In verse 41, the Lord says, "Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two." Christ probably was thinking about the Roman law that allowed Roman soldiers to command and to compel civilians to carry their equipment for them up to a distance of one mile. For the Jews, it was not only a great inconvenience but also a great insult to have to carry the equipment and weapons of their oppressors. Yet Christ taught His disciples to be willing to carry this despised burden an even greater distance than what was legally required. The point is that when we are oppressed, we should be willing to surrender even more of our liberties and rights rather than retaliate or be bitter about it.

The fourth illustration, found in verse 42, says that we should give to the person who asks and not withhold from the one who wants to borrow. We should not turn a deaf ear to a needy person asking for assistance. Instead, we should give generously and not seek anything in return.

John Murray sums up this section well when he says, "The sum of the passage (Matt. 5:38-42) can be stated negatively and positively. Negatively, when subjected to wrongs of various kinds, when our rights are infringed upon and our liberties invaded, let us not be animated and our conduct dictated by vindictive resent-

ment. Positively, let us be generous and forbearing even to those who inflict wrong.”<sup>22</sup>

The apostle Paul gives an inspired exposition of our Lord’s words in Romans 12:17-20: “Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.”

This last mention of “thine enemy” leads us naturally to the final antithesis.



## 10

# LOVE THY ENEMIES

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*Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*

*Matthew 5:43-48*

In verse 43, we read, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.” This was what the Pharisees and scribes were teaching the people. But they had perverted the law in two ways.

First, they left out the phrase “as thyself.” We could call this a perversion by omission. Leviticus 19:18 says, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” They had conveniently left out the words that teach us to what extent we should love our neighbor. It is one thing to love your neighbor but quite another to love your neighbor as you love yourself. This second part just did

not fit into their scheme of things. They were proud, self-righteous, and selfish. We need only to turn to Matthew 6 to see how much they loved and cared for themselves.

To the scribes and Pharisees, it was simply unthinkable that they should care for anyone as much as they cared for themselves, so they softened the demands of the law by omitting the words “as thyself.” But that was not all. They also narrowed the definition of neighbor to those people they liked or approved of. Thus in Luke 10:29, one of the lawyers, or scribes, sought to justify himself before the Lord by asking Him, “Who is my neighbour?” to which Christ responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Gentiles and Samaritans were excluded from their definition. Even the tax collectors and other sinners, though Jews, were not regarded as their neighbor, and they were not obliged to love them. So their first fault was in omitting the words “as thyself” and in narrowly defining the word “neighbor” to leave out those people whom they did not like.

But, second, they added something to the law that is totally foreign to the Scriptures. We could call this a perversion by addition. The phrase “hate thine enemy” is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament. This confirms our interpretation that the phrase “ye have heard that it hath been said” does not refer to the Old Testament Scriptures directly but to the distorted teachings of the Jewish teachers.

This idea of hating one’s enemy was simply a false conclusion drawn from a false definition of “neighbor.” The argument might go like this: If the Gentiles and Samaritans and sinners are not included in the term “neighbor,” then I am not required to love them. But if I am not required to love them, then the only alternative

would be to hate them. And who are these Gentiles and Samaritans and sinners but our enemies? Therefore, I should love my neighbors and hate my enemies.

In response to these perversions of God's holy law, Christ says, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies." What a shocking statement this must have been to the rabbis and scribes! But this would not have been the case for those who truly understood the Scriptures. Although the words "Love your enemies" are not explicitly found in the Old Testament, they are nevertheless implied.

For example, we read in Exodus 23:4-5, "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him [that is, don't pass him by], thou shalt surely help with him." Helping an enemy's animal and thus helping the enemy is but an outward expression of loving him. Again, in Proverbs 25:21, we read, "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink." These too are acts of love.

And so Christ explicitly says, "Love your enemies." And then he gives us three examples of how we may love our enemies: we can bless them that curse us, we can do good to them that hate us, and we can pray for them that persecute us. On praying for our enemies, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God."<sup>23</sup>

What should we pray for when praying for our enemies? If they are not believers, then obviously we should pray that they might know the grace and forgiveness of God and be reconciled to Him. But what if they

## CHAPTER 10: LOVE THY ENEMIES

are fellow believers? After all, it is entirely possible to be persecuted by fellow believers. In that case we should pray that the Lord might open their eyes and soften their hearts and bring about a healing of the relationship that has been broken. If, when we feel a great sense of anger and hatred toward a person, we turn to God and plead for that person before the throne of grace, that sense of hatred evaporates. Instead, we feel a sense of love and pity for the person. Oh how hard it is to hate a person after you have brought him or her before the God of love and mercy!

Then in verse 45, Christ goes on to say, “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” We must not misunderstand our Lord’s words here. It is not that we become the children of our heavenly Father by loving our enemies and praying for them. Instead, it is when we love and pray for them that we show that we are truly the children of God. In John 13:35 Jesus says, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” And in 1 John 4:20 we read, “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

If we love our enemies, we demonstrate that we are God’s children by reflecting something of His character and nature. Christ tells us that our heavenly Father is a good God and He manifests His goodness through His providence by giving good gifts like the sun and the rain to all, regardless of whether they are evil or good, just or unjust. The emphasis of the verse falls on neither the evil

nor the good but simply on the Father's general love and goodness to all mankind.

Two things need to be said in connection with this love of God for all mankind. First, while gifts like the sun and the rain are common to all, there is no common response from all. The righteous person, that is, one who has been made righteous by Christ, returns thanks to God for all His blessings. The unrighteous person, that is, one who rebels against God, does not give thanks to Him and thus uses God's blessings to his own hurt and ultimate destruction. So while the gift is common, the response is not the same. One shows gratitude and the other ingratitude.

Second, we should note that the general love of God manifested in His providence to all is to be distinguished from the special love of God that is not shared by all. A failure to make this distinction will lead to universalism or the doctrine that all people will eventually be saved. Passages like Romans 8:38-39 and 1 John 3:1 clearly refer to the special and saving love of God that is in Christ and that God bestows upon some for the purpose of making them His children. What we have here in our text is not to be confused with that kind of special love.

It is an abuse of this passage to say that it provides the basis for preaching the gospel to all men and for teaching that God has a desire for all men to be saved. Again, we need to remember that this passage does not deal with God's grace in salvation. Christ is not speaking about saving grace but about God's general goodness to all and how we too are to show kindness to all, regardless of how they treat us. The reason the church must preach the gospel to all men is because Christ commands us to

do so. And while God does have a general goodness to and love for all men, He does not desire all men to be saved; otherwise all men will be saved. Job 23:13 says, "But he [God] is in one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desireth, even that he doeth."

So if the question is asked, "Does God love all men without exception?" the answer would be dependent on which kind of love we are referring to. If it is the love of salvation, then the answer would have to be, "No, God does not love all men." Scripture is clear on this: "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13). But if we are talking about a general love of benevolence and kindness that is manifested in providence, then, yes, God does show love to all men.

And so in verse 45, Christ calls us to manifest our sonship by loving our enemies just as our heavenly Father loves both the just and the unjust. Then in verses 46-47 Christ presents another reason for loving our enemies, namely, that we should exceed the standard of fallen men. He says, "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?" In some manuscripts, instead of "publicans" the word is "Gentiles."

Now the Pharisees utterly despised and detested the publicans and the Gentiles. They saw themselves as far better and superior to them. And yet Christ was saying that the Pharisees were really on the same level with the people whom they despised. There was no difference between the two groups, because they both loved only those who loved them and saluted only those who were their brethren or friends.

Christ is teaching us that the true sons of God are to have a much higher standard of love than the rest of the world. Christians should be distinguished from the world because they exhibit a love that is divine, a love that comes from above. Christians are people who love those who do not love them and who greet even their enemies.

Is that true of us? Do we rise above the level of love that is shown by fallen and unregenerate men? Or are we no different from them? Remember again the words of Christ in Matthew 5:20: "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Finally, in verse 48, Christ says, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." This verse provides a fitting summary, not just of the sixth antithesis, but also of the entire section. The word "perfect" means complete and lacking nothing. Christ is not teaching that we will ever attain that goal of perfection in this present life. Rather, He is calling us to strive toward it. We are not to be content with halfway or halfhearted obedience to God's law, as the Pharisees were. Rather, we are to be like our heavenly Father, who is perfect in all His attributes, and we are to follow our Lord Christ in His perfect and complete obedience to the law.



# CONCLUSION

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As we come to the end of this section of the Sermon on the Mount, I want to leave us with two thoughts. First, we must be careful not to misapply or misuse the words of Christ regarding retaliation, loving our enemies, oath taking, or any of the other antitheses we have considered. We must always remember the context: Christ is confirming the original purpose and meaning of the law in contrast to the distorted and inadequate explanations of it by the rabbis and scribes. Also, let us remember to interpret these words of Christ in a way that is consistent with other passages in both the Old and New Testaments.

Second, we must understand that Christ is calling us to attain and maintain a standard of righteousness that is utterly impossible to fallen men. By sheer determination and effort, we might be able to attain the same level of righteousness as the scribes and Pharisees. But to exceed them is beyond our own natural ability. The words of Christ in Matthew 19:26 apply here as well: "With men this is impossible but with God, all things are possible."

But thanks be to God that what He demands, He also provides. This impossible righteousness is made possible for those who trust in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. His perfect righteousness is ours by grace through faith. "For he [God] hath made him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

May the Lord open our eyes to see the poverty and worthlessness of our own righteousness but at the

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same time to see the beauty and excellence of His righteousness! And may He work that same righteousness in our hearts day by day through His sanctifying Word and Spirit. Amen.

## NOTES

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1. I benefited much from Dr. Phil Kayser's audio lectures on ethics, Dr. Greg Bahnsen's Theonomy in Christian Ethics (chapters 2 and 3), and Prof. John Murray's Principles of Conduct (chapter 7).
2. See Bahnsen, Theonomy in Christian Ethics, 49.
3. For a fuller discussion of the various views, see *ibid.*, 57-67.
4. Cited by Bahnsen, *ibid.*, 73.
5. John Murray, Principles of Conduct, 150.
6. Cited by Bahnsen, Theonomy in Christian Ethics, 73.
7. Cited by Bahnsen, *ibid.* 79.
8. *Ibid.*, 76.
9. Murray, Principles of Conduct, 154.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, 199.
12. Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 1632.
13. See Murray, Principles of Conduct, 158-59.
14. *Ibid.*, 165.

## NOTES

15. MacArthur, Matthew 1-7, 297.
16. Murray, Principles of Conduct, 167.
17. For a more detailed discussion on this question, see Kayser, Is the Death Penalty Just? 13-25.
18. MacArthur, Matthew 1-7, 316.
19. Hendriksen, Matthew, 306.
20. Ibid., 309.
21. MacArthur, Matthew 1-7, 329.
22. Murray, Principles of Conduct, 175.
23. Cited by MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 347.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**L**inus Chua is a member of Pilgrim Covenant Church in Singapore and a full-time ministerial student under the care of the church session. He was born August 1, 1974 in Singapore and is married to Shan Shan. They have three young children: Rebekah, Euan, and Luke.

After graduating from Imperial College London (UK) in 1999 with a M.Eng. in aeronautical engineering, Linus worked as an aeronautical engineer for five and a half years at DSO National Laboratories. He is currently pursuing the M.Div. degree with Whitefield Theological Seminary in preparation for the pastoral ministry.

Linus has written a book, *Catechism in Conversation*, in which he gives a brief introduction to the Westminster Shorter Catechism in conversational style.

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# NOT TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFILL

In Matthew 5:17-48, we see the Lord Jesus speaking clearly about His relationship to the law of the Old Testament and about how His people should understand and respond to that law. Unfortunately, this important passage of Scripture often is either misunderstood or totally ignored by many Christians today.

In *Not to Destroy, But to Fulfill*, Linus Chua presents what he believes is a proper understanding of this crucial passage. He also seeks to draw out some important applications and implications for the modern Christian.

**Linus Chua** is a member of Pilgrim Covenant Church in Singapore and is currently pursuing the M.Div. degree with Whitefield Theological Seminary in preparation for the pastoral ministry. He is also the author of *Catechism in Conversation*, which gives a brief introduction to the Westminster Shorter Catechism in conversational style.

