

Sermon. Ethics of Grace – Matt.5:17-48 (selected verses only to be read)  
For 11-02-24.

## **Introduction, About the Law:**

### **Matt.5:17-20, The fulfilment of the law:**

<sup>17</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Two Modern misunderstandings about the law:

#### **(1) Law is superseded by Grace:**

Some are tempted to dismiss the Old Testament (OT), with its apparent problems and contradictions around paternal society and/or a conquering God, replacing it with Jesus of the New Testament (NT) where God is all about love and mercy.

Supporting scripture from the NT might come from Paul's letter to the Romans where he discusses at length about law, faithfulness and righteousness, telling them that 'apart from the law ... all are justified freely by his (Jesus') grace' (Rom.3:21&24), and 'you are not under the law, but under grace' (Rom6:14).

In this view the law is superseded by Jesus.

#### **(2) Following Jesus is a (new) ethical code:**

Others fully accept that salvation is through grace, but place great emphasis on following the rules, of behaving to an ethical code, because the law is not superseded but remains in place.

Two verses from our scripture today might (but don't) appear to support that view:

<sup>17</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

This view leads to a reliance on law and a legalistic attitude toward faith.

### **A correction to those misunderstandings?**

Both views do injustice to the OT. Yes, even that second one!

First, to dismiss the OT is also to dismiss Jesus' teaching because he does not abolish the law.

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God's Kingdom is so much more than 'cheap grace', a phrase coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to mean 'acceptance of grace without also the call to discipleship and holy living.' This is not uncommon in the western world where the comforts of materialism and culture of self-rights soften Christians into holding a private faith and/or avoiding the commitment to discipleship within the church. If you fancy more study on this, get Bonhoeffer's book, 'The Cost of Discipleship'.

Second, It is more than rules or ethical standards about behaviour. Typically, these Christians emphasise God's laws over the relational nature of Jesus. It might manifest itself in expecting a certain behaviour (especially within a church setting) and emphasises the 'thou shall nots' of the commandments. Maybe it is because their hearts can't quite accept grace as a gift, or in their attempts to avoid cheap grace they over-do it to the other extreme? The result is a Christian who still lives by fear because they are never good enough for God, and/or a Christian who is judgmental toward others.

The correction Jesus provides is all about a relational heart attitude with him. When he says he is the fulfilment (completion) of the law, this does not contradict his first statement but means the law is not enough on its own.

The disciples did not know this when Jesus' delivered his 'sermon on the mount' but Jesus was pointing to the reconciliation with God obtained through his sacrifice of the cross. As we consider the laws that Jesus now starts talking about, remember it is all within the context of a relational God who seeks humanity to have a healthy relationship with him, and from that place of shared love each person follows God's commands, even when they require a certain amount of self-sacrifice. This is not because of a legalistic attitude, but because of love for God. Jesus is showing that the inner state leads to action – therefore it is about receiving a pure heart and guarding it. (See also James' letter)

**So, now Jesus refers to some of those commands:**

**Matt.5:21-22, Murder**

<sup>21</sup> 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, "Raca," is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus starts with an easily acceptable command, that both legalists and grace-ists can agree on. Do not murder!

But again, he gets under the skin of what this command is saying. Murder starts in the heart. It starts with dislike, jealousy, non-acceptance of the other, anger at them and taken to the extreme this can build up to the act of murder. Not only that, but the build-up itself is hurtful and sinful – which will be judged righteously for what it is – a failure to obey the command to love.

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Raca would have been a common phrase to show contempt. A swear word, a curse. We have such words in our language – in fact all languages have curse words. Even this set-apart family, these Tribes of Israel have disparaging curse words in their language.

Notice it! Says Jesus. And if you have said a curse against someone, even in the quiet of your mind, without speaking it you have already entered the territory of a failure to love. Did that shock the disciples? Maybe so, and it is good that Jesus gives them a way to resolve the problem. Go, he says to his disciples and get reconciled as quickly as you can!

We learn later about the golden rule and about the Cross as symbolising reconciliation. This is a godly act; as we are reconciled to God, so we are to be reconciled with each other.

Next up is a more difficult subject – possibly even more so in the modern society where worship of the self is widespread:

### **Adultery**

<sup>27</sup> 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

**1<sup>st</sup>C Culture** generally 'held that a married man could have sexual adventures as long as they did not involve a married woman.'<sup>i</sup>

However, Jesus points out to them that this is wrong understanding of the law: God's law made no distinction between a man or woman, as both should be faithful. In his example Jesus cites only the male perpetrator to correct the human-made error of using God's law to differentiate, placing a greater burden on the woman.

The later incidence of a woman being caught in adultery and then brought to Jesus, examples this attitude. Where was the man? It was a human-made legalistic exception and not the God-made law they were following.

### **Modern Interpretation**

While some secular critics accuse God of being a misogynist, a view some Christians have tended toward in dismissing the OT as superseded by the NT, it is again a mis-understanding God's law and what patriarchal society truly meant for the Hebrews.

**First**, in seeking a righteous understanding the Christian the disciples must get a godlier worldview than the teachers of the law had who challenged Jesus' authority and identity as the son of God.

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**Second**, This command is way bigger than just being one aimed at the married – it is a command to prevent the objectification of others. Other people are not resources to be gained and manipulated for self-gratification.

It is so serious that Jesus says it is better to remove the eye or other offending bodily part used to fulfil the temptation. The disciples did not immediately go and gouge their eyes out – so don't think we have to.

What they are told is:

- to be mindful of the problem and centre oneself back into fellowship with the Godhead.
- recognise temptation as early as possible, force a distraction and get back in fellowship.

**Third**, the Church is the bride of Christ. Therefore, the teaching on Adultery includes the follower's heart toward God. We must be faithful to our Lord in living out our identity as his wife.

Jesus' challenge to the disciples' worldview continues:

### **Divorce**

<sup>31</sup> 'It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." <sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

As if the last command was not difficult enough, this much mis-interpreted one causes yet more tension to the faithful.

Health check: What I'm about to say may still be controversial –if any of what I am sharing today is stirring up problems in your heart and / or you disagree with my interpretation, then please make sure you tell me so that we can talk about it more.

### **1<sup>st</sup>C:**

During Jesus ministry he has several encounters where he accuses the religious leaders of hypocrisy – and divorce was one of those. There was no Law or Command for divorce and in this teaching, Jesus challenges how the concession was applied to justify impure behaviour.

All too easily, they had taken a concession that God had made where he allowed divorce because of their flawed humanness:

### **What is the concession?**

Deut.24:1, If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house.

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Abuse of the concession meant the man could divorce their wife for being displeasing – note it was not only about sexual sin albeit Matthew focusses on this. Neither Mark nor Luke include it – rather they are sterner in their reporting saying the problem of creating a victim of adultery was happening because of divorce.

Let's understand the problem a bit more before unpacking it and thinking of the modern context for Christians:

In the 1stC the Hebrews already practiced divorce and Jesus here is pointing out an injustice they have created by abusing the concession.

Those living under the law in a righteous attitude did not need a concession for divorce. But, because God's people, even his chosen people had impure hearts, concession was needed to provide some protection to those who are divorced.

**For the man:** A man can be protected from dishonour if the wife is found to have been promiscuous – think of Joseph & Mary where the Angel comes to Joseph who was thinking of a quiet divorce, but the Angel says, 'it's ok, this is a Holy-Spirit created virgin birth.'

**For the woman:** And a woman is protected from an erratic or harsh husband who was not permitted to send her away and then claim her back later.

It was more difficult for the woman, in that she had to petition the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) for a divorce and could not write a certificate of divorce, but it was permissible for her to make that petition.

This was important because the welfare of women was the men's responsibility and they had a duty to ensure that a divorced woman could retain honour and be provided for, normally but not exclusively, through re-marriage.

### **Putting men in their place:**

Jesus' focus is on the sin of the men and notice here that he describes the woman as the victim. The first husband who dismisses his wife is forcing her into adultery if she has no other provision for her welfare.

Needing a man to provide for her is not, as some may say, a 'man-first' God-way as some accuse God because of their own misunderstanding and prejudice of a paternal culture. Rather it was provided as a blessing so that a woman could look after their children, as and when that time came, without fear from loss of income.

Notice again, it is the man's responsibility to ensure that she is cared for, in order to care for those others. Jesus continues the scenario to say that the woman remains a victim even if another man marries her. That man buys into the first abuse, and it is he, not she, who also becomes an adulterer.

Whoa... grace-ists, don't go shooting off ahead: this does not give a law or command to prevent re-marriage after divorce. The context of Jesus' teaching here is to correct male abuse against women that had developed and been given wrongful legal status by Hebraic council. Again, the woman being brought to Jesus is a case-in-point.

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Legalists, don't go shooting off ahead either – for Jesus is not preventing re-marriage either.

Back to 1<sup>st</sup>.C. The evidence of actual practice is that a man was not so much allowed, but required, to divorce an unfaithful wife. The context remains that both should be faithful, but a legalist approach here denies the opportunity for repentance and reconciliation.

That was not God's command at all. See the prophet Hosea for example who was told to marry an unfaithful woman, because the marriage itself was used as a picture of the Hebrews unfaithfulness toward God. In that picture Hosea paid for his wife to return to him, despite her adultery. This did not excuse the adultery but puts it into context with mitigating its sinful consequences.

So, where are we at?

- Matthew's focus in sharing this teaching is to highlight that the men were failing in their duties to the welfare of the women. Further, they were forcing women into adultery because they were abusing the concession for divorce.
- Both Mark & Luke mention only divorce, without the concession for sexual sin, highlighting that broken covenant - whether by the man or woman can force both men and women into adultery.
- God's concession was to mitigate the effects of adultery by creating a way to retain honour and a way for the woman to be provided for.
- Jesus' teaching highlights the problem a lack of faithfulness brings. If both are faithful, the whole thorny subject of divorce would not have been needed.

Jesus' teaching is that prevention is better than the cure.

### **Modern Problem?**

Christians of a different age have sometimes applied the same methods as the teachers of the law. While coming from good intentions of obedience to the law, it normally becomes the woman who is again placed under guilt if she is involved in divorce, except for the sexual sin of the husband. It is a legalistic hammer that crushes the soul.

**First:** we have the same problem as the Hebrews. We are meant to be pure and faithful, but our hearts are sinful.

Jesus' way was to restore honour - think of that woman brought before him. Think of the Samaritan woman he met at the well. In both cases he gave back their honour, telling them to sin no more, but publicly stating to the one brought before him that he did not condemn her - just as those around could not honestly condemn her when faced with the thoughts of their own sins.

**Second,** the context of sexual immorality has already been widened to encompass lust. E.g., not only the actual act of adultery. The context is about the poor state of the human soul.

In upholding the law, Jesus also upholds the need for God's concession to mitigate the sinful effects of human behaviour that has caused the reason for divorce. If a spouse (not always

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but often the man) will not repent and allow transformation through God's spirit, then the harm being done must be mitigated by allowing a spouse to exit a toxic relationship.

It is my strong belief that abuse – whether physical, emotional or spiritual is sufficient reason for divorce. Each does the same in cursing the spouse in favour of self-gratification.

Prevention is better than the cure and marriage is for life. However, we must have a model for reconciliation and restoration because divorce remains a reality of life.

- Our Jesus-led way must ensure that no-one, whether male or female is subject to abuse in marriage – regardless of whether that abuse is sexual, spiritual, emotional or physical.
- Our Jesus-led way should seek true reconciliation of heart by the perpetrator and if that is not possible because they will not accept it at that time, then that is between them and God. The door to assisting in reconciliation can remain open, but their sin is on their shoulders for they have been shown godly warning – a practice told to the Ezekiel.
- Our Jesus-led way should seek the welfare of the victim. Even in today's society it may be that the woman desires to remarry for her welfare, and the concession given through Moses still applies – that she can. The same requirement for her life going forward also remains - to be faithful to God and to her new spouse. In this way she is freed from the burden of single parenthood and freed into providing care for the children.
  - Even the apostle Paul, who asked followers to follow Jesus first and only marry if that desire cannot be overcome tells Timothy to encourage the younger widows to remarry and prevent Timothy from putting them on a list of widows to be cared for unless they are over sixty. Clearly, he is not talking about divorce, but he is talking about the principle of care for those in need and in that society, marriage was the vehicle for both women and children to receive care and honour, and it was the men's responsibility to ensure that.

I hope that puts a different light on the God-desired culture rather against a modern worldview of 'God favoured the men and is a misogynist.'

All commands Jesus brings to the light are conditions of the heart.

It is not so much about keeping rules, as it is in seeking close relationship with the Lord. For when we sacrificially submit to God's love then what flows from the heart is his.

- Proverbs 4:23 – Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

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<sup>i</sup> Morris, L, (1992) *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, p.117.