

## *The Upshot*

So what can we learn from Matthew 5:17-20? Whatever it is, it must take full account of the big picture. Here is the passage once again:

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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

The sinner needs a righteousness – a perfect righteousness to justify him before God: ‘Unless [his] righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, [he] will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:20). So said Christ. And that righteousness has to consist of both justification and sanctification – and that sanctification being both positional and progressive.

This must be linked with another vital pronouncement of Christ’s:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: ‘You must be born again’. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

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And that of the apostle:

Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom. 8:9).

To be acceptable to God, a sinner must be regenerated and receive a righteousness. Both are beyond the sinner's power (Rom. 3:10-20), but Christ has accomplished a perfect righteousness for all his elect: 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe' (Rom. 3:21-22). 'But now' is a phrase of immense eschatological significance; it is not a passing makeweight. Rather, it speaks of the change from the old to the new covenant, the importance of which cannot be overstated. In theological discussion it can be underestimated – it often is – and can be dismissed, but never – never – in Scripture. Let me quote from my *Christ Is All*:

Some think that the words 'but now' signal a mere change of paragraph, or simply a small matter of timing. They do not! To enfeeble the 'but now' in such a way is tragic. The 'but' and the 'now' must be emphasised, the 'but' as a contrast, and the 'now' in its historical sense. And it is far more than mere history, as I have said. Paul was speaking of the great eschatological 'now', the time of the new epoch, the 'but now' of the new era – the time of the gospel instead of the law, the age of the gospel contrasted with the age of the law, the age and realm of the Spirit and not law, the age of faith and not works.<sup>1</sup> No wonder these two words 'but now' have been justly called the most wonderful words in the entire Bible. Lloyd-Jones, for one, did. Quite right, too! As Paul thundered elsewhere: 'Behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2). Now! But now!

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<sup>1</sup> I am not saying there was no grace or faith in the Old Testament. I am talking about emphasis, overwhelming emphasis.

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If anybody should try to dismiss this by saying I am making a mountain out of the mole-hill of one passage, in addition to Romans 3:21, he ought to weigh Romans 5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 (second 'now' in NIV, NASB); 16:26; along with John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Corinthians 15:20; Galatians 4:9; Ephesians 2:12-13; 5:8; Colossians 1:26; Hebrews 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Peter 2:10.

Note the contrast between the two ages, the two systems, in Romans 4:13-17. The promise to Abraham 'was not... through the *law*, but through... *faith*. For if those who are of the *law* are heirs, *faith* is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the *law* brings about wrath; for where there is no *law* there is no transgression. Therefore it is of *faith* that it might be according to *grace*... not only to those who are of the *law*, but also to those who are of the *faith* of Abraham'. Paul's argument collapses if law is not contrasted with grace and faith. This would seem to be obvious. Sadly, not all can see it. On justification, the Reformers were clear about the distinction between law and gospel, but otherwise they were confused about the two. While they rightly forsook the legal ground for justification, they kept to it for sanctification. And where we find this muddle, we find believers who are virtual 'Mosesians' instead of Christians. In their covenant theology, over-emphasising the *continuity* as they do, they fail to do justice to the revealed *discontinuity* of the two covenants.<sup>2</sup>

In pursuance of this move from the old to new covenants, and all that that entailed, in accordance with God's eternal plan and purpose (Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Tim. 1:9-10; 1 Pet. 1:20, for instance), 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15). This he did through his obedience to his Father, earning the necessary righteousness under the law – thus meriting the name 'The LORD is our righteousness' (Jer. 23:6) – and shedding his blood to wash his people clean from every

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<sup>2</sup> See my *Christ Is All* pp77-78, in addition to other places within that book, including the Extracts.

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sin (Rom. 5:9; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Col. 1:14,20; Heb. 9:7-25; 10:19; 12:24; 13:12,20; 1 Pet. 1:2,19; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11), he being ‘delivered up for [their] trespasses and raised for [their] justification’ (Rom. 4:25). In short: ‘God... made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [believers] might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:20-21). ‘Therefore, since [they] have been justified by faith, [they] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5:1).<sup>3</sup> And, having been justified and positionally sanctified in Christ, by the Spirit believers live from that moment on in progressive sanctification to God’s glory.<sup>4</sup>

And this is what Matthew 5:17-20 is all about.

We must bear in mind, of course, that Jesus was speaking in a time of transition; the old covenant was drawing to its close; it was now very near to its end, with the new covenant waiting in the wings for its establishment at Pentecost. Hence the ‘but now’ above. Consequently, in Christ’s words – as throughout his ministry – we meet a mixture of old and new covenant language. We, of course, must read this with minds informed by the new covenant.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the idea of the two covenants being distinct but intertwined in a passage is common in Scripture. The prophets did it again and again. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the writer to the Hebrews, for instance, linked the two interchangeably (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-32; Heb. 8:8-13; 10:1-18); again, the kingdom is both now, and yet to

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Christ’s Obedience Imputed; Justification; Hinge*, for instance.

<sup>4</sup> See my *Liberty*. Love is the motive, and Christ is the standard, for the believer’s obedience to the countless scriptural imperatives in Christ’s law. See my ‘Two Phrases to be Reckoned With’.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 18 of my *Christ Is All*.

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be;<sup>6</sup> the prophets, in the same breath, spoke of the return of Jews from exile, and the new covenant (Amos 9:11-15); and in Matthew 24, Christ intertwined the fall of Jerusalem and his second coming. Here, in Matthew 5:17-20, Christ was looking back and looking forward.<sup>7</sup>

But the ultimate question for believers is this: Do we go forward, by looking backwards or by looking onwards? In a sense, of course, we do both – we look back to Scripture and look on to Christ in the Spirit under the law of Christ. Roberts, however, as so many Reformed, wants us to look back to Calvin and Westminster. To put it another way, he wants us to press on in the new covenant under a hobbled Moses ruling us by a tiny portion of the old-covenant law. We have seen Paul's position. He left us in no doubt. Believers are in Christ, new creatures in a new covenant, under a new law, and, having the Spirit, are enabled to walk in that law by the Spirit. Of course, Paul was willing to illustrate his teaching from the old covenant – but only illustrate it by that covenant. He did not impose that covenant and its law on believers! Take the Passover. The apostle was unequivocal: believers

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<sup>6</sup> 'The kingdom of God in one sense has not been established on earth yet. It is a kingdom which is yet to come, yes. But it is also a kingdom which has come' (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*). It has come: '[Since] it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Luke 11:20; see also Mark 3:22-27). 'Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, [Jesus] answered them: "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say: 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of [that is, among] you'" (Luke 17:20-21). But it is yet to be.

<sup>7</sup> I have already mentioned Christ's command: 'If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift' (Matt. 5:23-24).

must observe the Passover: ‘Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival...’ (1 Cor. 5:7-8). I have deliberately broken off at this point. If Roberts is consistent,<sup>8</sup> he will have to argue that believers literally keep the Passover; this is their duty. Not so the apostle: ‘Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’ (1 Cor. 5:7-8). In other words, believers observe the Passover in a new-covenant way.

That is the principle. Let me spell out what it means. Believers have been miraculously and gloriously redeemed from Egyptian slavery under Moses; they have had their exodus; they have seen the end of all their enemies in the Red Sea; they have been given the sabbath and manna; they have come to God’s appointed mountain; they have, under their Moses, been given the covenant and its law. They have been saved by the ministration of their Great High Priest and his one offering. But although all these terms are old-covenant terms, believers do not experience them in an old-covenant sense. All of them – as the writer to Hebrews says at large – every one of them is fulfilled and enjoyed in Christ. Paul took three words (in English) to express it : ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11).<sup>9</sup> We, too, have entered our promised land. We are children of the kingdom, and we are under Christ’s law. That is the teaching of Matthew 5:17-20 as expanded and laid out in the post-Pentecost Scriptures.

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<sup>8</sup> But there is no risk of that: he would, no doubt, call on the ploy of ‘the ceremonial law’ to justify his playing ducks and drakes with Scripture, missing the glorious scriptural teaching on the covenants by sticking to his man-made covenant theology. What an exchange! What a loss!

<sup>9</sup> The full phrase in Greek reads: *ta panta kai en pasin christos*. The three words are *ta panta... christos*.