

ChristReformationChurch

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The Gospel According to Matthew

The Law is Spiritual

*May 13, 2018
(Ascension Sunday)*

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:27ff

Scripture Reading: Acts 1:1-11

I read from Acts 1 this morning because the church calendar marks today as Ascension Sunday, a day to remember the doctrine of Christ's ascension into heaven, there to assume His exalted position at the Father's right hand. There are many important aspects of the ascension we could consider, but let me, before we turn to the Sermon on the Mount once more, remind you of just one truth the ascension of Christ shows us.

We believe and teach a supernatural religion. What we believe is amazing

stuff. Take the ascension of Christ. While the disciples were standing there watching, right in front of them, Jesus "was lifted up." Into the clouds, then out of sight. Then angels showed up and said that He was going to come back again in the same way, right out of the clouds! And of course all this came after that most amazing event, the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

But that's not all.

1Th 4:16-17 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. (17) Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Do you believe this? If so, then how is it that we are so dull? Why do we look to so many other sources for "excitement"? I can tell you. Unbelief.

It still plagues us to one degree or another. "Lord, help my unbelief" is a prayer every Christian still needs to pray constantly.

Christ is risen. Christ is ascended. And Christ is coming again.

Now to the Sermon on the Mount:

"To observe the Law is to do what the Law bids with a free and generous heart; that is, it is to gladly live for God, and to do well, yes, even if we had no Law." [John Rogers, and friend of William Tyndale, martyred by Queen Mary in 1555]

We have been hearing Jesus explain the real meaning and requirement of the Law of God. Specifically, the moral Law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments. Furthermore, He is plainly and forcefully exposing how the religious leaders of that day completely missed it, taught the people falsely, and created an external edifice of a religion that left men's hearts stone cold. Just as it is today among the famous and powerful in the religious realm, the doctrine of the new birth had no place in the thinking of the Pharisees. You see it in Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus:

Joh 3:3-10 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (4) Nicodemus said

to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (5) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (8) 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." (9) Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" (10) Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

This is something we must all remember. You must be born again if you are ever going to see and enter the Kingdom of heaven. God must make you a new creation.

The false religion Jesus is exposing here is the inevitable result of unconverted people taking God's Law and running with it. Understand? The thing is inescapable. Anyone who takes the Bible and resolves to read it and live it and even teach it, but who is unconverted, cannot become anything but a Pharisee. A phony.

1Ti 1:5-7 The aim of our charge is

love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (6) Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, (7) desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

One lady wrote me recently and said this about her ex-husband who abused her terribly:

“He sits in church, pious because he’s never had a drink of alcohol, smoked anything, or taken any drug. He was (and still is) the good Baptist boy who didn’t smoke, drink, or take drugs, but he beat his wife. At one of the churches he attended he was actually leading the men’s group.”

It is my conclusion that most local churches are infested with such Pharisees. Devoid of the Spirit. Yet they not only are members of congregations, they stand in pulpits, they lead worship, they teach classes – but the love of Christ is not in them and if you cross them or become their target, you will certainly experience that such is the case.

Listen to the Apostle Paul talk about the Law:

Rom 7:7-14 What then shall we say?

That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." (8) But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. (9) I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. (10) The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. (11) For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. (12) So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (13) Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (14) For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

As long as Paul thought that the Law concerned external actions alone, he was quite satisfied that he was doing just fine keeping the Law. But then along came that pesky 10th – you shall not covet. Coveting. How do you covet. Within yourself. The Law, he says, is spiritual, and by that I believe

he meant the same thing that Jesus is teaching here in the Sermon on the Mount-

Mat 5:21-22 "**You have heard that it was said to those of old**, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' (22) **But I say to you** that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

And so Jesus continues. Let's read right on through the 5 more examples He gives, then come back and make some specific observations:

Mat 5:27-48 "**You have heard that it was said**, 'You shall not commit adultery.' (28) **But I say to you** that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (29) If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. (30) And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

(31) "**It was also said**, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a

certificate of divorce.' (32) **But I say to you** that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

(33) "**Again you have heard that it was said to those of old**, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' (34) **But I say to you**, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (35) or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. (36) And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. (37) Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

(38) "**You have heard that it was said**, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' (39) **But I say to you**, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (40) And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. (41) And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (42) Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

(43) "**You have heard that it was said**, 'You shall love your neighbor

and hate your enemy.' (44) **But I say to you,** Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (46) For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47) And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48) You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

To Those of Old

Notice first of all that the traditional false teachings of the Pharisees was quite old and longstanding. In other words they were looking waaaay back to the authority and teachings of rabbis of old – thus supplanting God’s Word with their tradition. We must always take care that we don’t make the same error. It is a good thing to read the writings of godly people who have gone before us, but we can easily slide into setting the Bible aside and looking instead to the Puritans or some other noteworthy author or teacher in history.

So Jesus is really bucking a mountain of tradition here!! He was indeed a troublemaker for the establishment.

What he taught here would turn things totally upside down, and rightly so because the Pharisees had things upside down. Their religion was devoid of the most important thing – love for God and love for their brother. And as a result – note this very carefully – the Pharisees abused people. Here is an example:

Mar 12:38-40 And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces (39) and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, (40) who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

We must not make the mistake of considering the Pharisaism of Jesus’ day which we find in Scripture as an isolated, past, historical false religion recorded only because Jesus encountered it. No. The Lord exposed Pharisaism for us *because He is warning us that this counterfeit will always be trying to deceive us in every age of the church. And that, in fact, it is at the heart of every false religion that claims to represent Christ. That means it is with us today and that its leaven, which Jesus warned us against, has spread throughout the visible church very, very widely.* Therefore it is no wonder that we see so many

examples of oppressive abuse within local churches.

Here then is another “you have heard it said...but I say to you” example from Jesus:

No Adultery

Mat 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' (28) But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Here is the 7th commandment as Jesus moves down the table of the Law. Avoiding outward, physical acts of adultery was sufficient to meet the Pharisees' law-keeping. (Although certainly we must wonder just how much of this outward physical adulterous acts really WERE avoided!). Jesus however takes them to the literal heart of what the law, which is spiritual, really requires – a pure heart.

Mat 23:25-26 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. (26) You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

Greed. Self-indulgence. That is what characterized their fallen, sinful, unregenerate hearts.

Mat 7:15-18 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (16) You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (17) So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. (18) A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

The heart of the matter. The root of the matter. That is what Jesus is showing them. The Law requires obedience *at that level from a heart that cheerfully loves God, loves His Law, and loves one's brother.*

Listen to a statement of true religion from the Apostle Paul:

Gal 5:16-25 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (17) For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (19) Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, (20) idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife,

jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, (21) envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (24) And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (25) If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

See it? *In this present life, the Christian is at war with his own corrupted flesh.* But as a new creation in Christ, he or she truly loves God, loves His Word, and loves the brethren. His flesh does not. So there is war. Our flesh rises up with its ugly desires as described by Paul in this ugly list. But the Christian, indwelt by the Spirit, rises up, by the Spirit, and hates these evils, puts them to death. It is much like Joseph:

Gen 39:7-12 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." (8) But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. (9) He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has

he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (10) And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. (11) But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, (12) she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

But all of this is not true of the Pharisee. Inwardly, the Pharisee *loves and desires the evil.* In fact, he devises ways to get around the Law so he can *indulge himself.* Therefore,

If there is no power operative within you that rises up and opposes the lusts of your sinful flesh, and the only reason you are avoiding such sin is because you want to appear “saintly” outwardly, then you are not a Christian. If when you do indulge your sin, you enjoy it and if you are afraid, it is only fear of getting caught or suffering consequences, then you are not a Christian.

On the other hand, if when you are tempted another Person springs to action within you, saying “no, this is wicked sin, it is sin against God and

it is sin against man. I will not do this” – then you are a Christian.

Right Eye, Right Hand

What then are we to do with Jesus’ words that immediately follow –

Mat 5:29-30 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. (30) And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Remember, Jesus is speaking here to His disciples concerning the false teachings of the Pharisees and the real requirements of obedience to God’s Law.

It appears to me that Jesus is speaking to anyone who has been following the approach to the Law practiced and taught by the Pharisees. And what he is telling them is something like this:

“Alright then, you who want to be justified by the Law, you who are following the righteousness of the Pharisees – If that is the way you are going to go, then you had better be prepared to destroy any part of your body that causes you to sin.”

Does your right eye see that other man’s wife over there and lead you to lust for her for yourself? Then rip out that eye. Does your right hand become an instrument by which you sin? Then cut it off. In fact, cut off and destroy any part of your body that might be used to sin and thereby lead you to hell.

“But if I keep cutting parts off, pretty soon there won’t be anything left!!”

And that is exactly right. Pharisaism leads to death and destruction. The thing is an impossibility. No one will ever be justified by trying to earn righteousness before God by law-keeping. It turns out in fact, *that as radically “holy” that Pharisaism looks, it is not at all radical and holy enough! The demands of the Law are meant to lead the sinner to desperation and hopelessness. To the realization that there is no way possible for me, in myself, to obey God’s Law and be counted righteous by Him as a result. No. I need Another. I need Someone else’s righteousness that somehow can become mine. I need Jesus Christ.*

Listen to Martyn Lloyd-Jones as we conclude:

The real trouble with the Pharisees [and it still is today] and scribes was that they had never even read the Ten Commandments properly. If they had

truly considered and studied them, they would have seen that you cannot take each one in isolation. For example, the 10th says that we must never covet our neighbor's wife, and that, obviously, should be taken in conjunction with this command not to commit adultery....The Law had always stressed the importance of the heart, and these people, with their mechanical notions of worshipping God and their purely mechanical conception of obedience, had entirely forgotten that.

Those who think they can worship God and obtain salvation in terms of their own actions are always guilty of this error. That is why they never truly understand the Christian way of salvation. They have never seen that ultimately it is a question of the heart, but think that as long as they do not do certain things and as long as they try to do certain good works, they can put themselves right in the sight of God.

Finally, listen as MLJ speaks to someone who asks "what must I do to be saved?" -

Thou shalt not commit adultery. Of course not! But is it in our hearts? Is it in our imagination? Do we like it? God forbid that any of us should be able to look at this holy law of God and feel satisfied. If we do not feel unclean at this moment, God have mercy upon us.

If we can conceivably be satisfied with our lives because we have never committed an act of adultery or of murder or of any one of those things, I say that we do not know ourselves nor the blackness and the foulness of our own hearts.

We must listen to the beaching of the blessed Son of God and examine ourselves, examine our thoughts, our desires, and our imagination. And unless we feel that we are vile and foul, and need to be washed and cleansed, unless we feel utterly helpless with a terrible poverty of spirit, and unless we are hungering and thirsting after righteousness, I say, God have mercy upon us.

I thank God that I have a gospel which tells me that Another who is spotless and pure and utterly holy has taken my sin and my guilt upon Himself. I am washed in His precious blood, and He has given me His own nature. When I realized that I needed a new heart, I found, thank God, that He had come and give it to me." [The Sermon on the Mount, Martyn Lloyd-Jones]