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The Gospel According to Matthew

The Law is Spiritual (2)

May 20, 2018

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:31ff

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:27-48

As we have been studying Jesus' words here in the Sermon on the Mount, we have learned that Jesus is explaining the true meaning and application of God's Law, contrasting it with the false teaching and application by which the Pharisees perverted the Law.

Mat 5:17-18 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (18) 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.

Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. His enemies were accusing Him of trying to abolish it but in fact they were the ones who were guilty of that very thing. Why? Because their external, superficial interpretation of the Law failed to hear what the Law really required. The Law is spiritual. It requires joyful obedience from a heart that genuinely loves God and His Law.

Psa 119:14-16 In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. (15) I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. (16) I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

And we have seen that WE must always be on guard against Pharisaism parading as Christianity, in our own hearts as well as in others. Unless WE hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God as revealed in His Law, we will never see the kingdom of heaven-

Mat 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Not only did Jesus perfectly obey the Law – *perfectly, from His heart* – HE is also the fulfillment of the Law. The Old Testament pointed to Christ, the Messiah, God’s Anointed King. And so we see the total insanity of the false religious system opposing Him. These evil ones would kill the very King they claimed they were looking for.

Our own righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees –

Mat 5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Once more, take care not to misapply these words. Jesus is not telling us that we must ramp up our own doings and not doings in law-keeping, being even more zealous and meticulous in keeping the very finest points of the Law in order to earn merit with God. No. That is impossible. No one will ever be justified by law-keeping Pharisee style. What Jesus means is that the perfect righteousness that the Law demands must be a reality, and yet that righteousness is completely unachievable even by a Pharisee as zealous as the Apostle Paul was –

Php 3:4-6 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

(5) circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; (6) as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

And then there is another aspect to this true righteousness which we must have if we are to see the kingdom of heaven. Namely, *in Christ this righteousness is imputed to our account AND written upon our new creation hearts. Therefore the actual practice of this righteousness begins to work in the Christian and increases as we are sanctified until one day when we are with Christ that righteousness is perfected in us. In that day, in the new creation, every Christian will obey and love the Law from the heart perfectly forever.*

Until then, we do battle – the Spirit against the flesh. Let me give you an example:

I was thinking this past week about how easily our sin entangles us – how it springs up so unexpectedly at times. Let’s say you and your spouse or a friend are going somewhere to do something you have been looking forward to. So you go together, but when you arrive you are focused on whatever it is – let’s say looking at something at Sportman’s Warehouse

(or Joanne's Fabrics) – you are so focused that you pick up your pace and walk ahead of your friend, leaving them some distance behind. Does that seem minor to you? It isn't. Because in my focus upon what I want or on what I am interested in, I just communicated "you aren't important at this moment." You shut the other person out. Yet if your spouse, for example, were to tell you how that makes them feel, chances are you would be oblivious. "What? I didn't do anything."

And that is just one single example of how commonly our sin springs to life and hurts others, AND breaks God's Law. Just like that. In an instant. This will NEVER happen in the new creation. All because Jesus came to fulfill the Law for us and to give us new hearts to obey it.

You Have Heard that it was Said:

Alright then, let's listen again to Jesus on the 7th commandment:

Mat 5:27-32 "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.

We saw last time that the Pharisees' meticulous religion was not meticulous enough. Jesus told them that if anyone tries to earn righteousness by law-keeping, then they had better be prepared to destroy their own flesh. Of course that would mean they would perish, and that was his point!

Now, I wanted us to look at vss 31-32 which Jesus begins with "It was also said...". In other words, He is still exposing and correcting the false teaching of the Pharisees. And He addresses the matter of divorce here because it relates to the 7th commandment, you shall not commit adultery. Look at it again:

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wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

It is vital that we keep the context in mind as we seek to understand what Jesus means here. So many false interpretations and applications of these verses have been written and taught to the great harm of innocent people and to the enablement of the wicked. What is the context? –

Jesus is addressing the false teaching of the Pharisees regarding adultery. He is not setting out to lecture on every nuance of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

And what was the false teaching? Well, first of all it was that as long as you didn't commit the actual physical act of adultery, you have obeyed the 7th commandment. Not true. Look, lust, and you are guilty. But also, the Pharisees legalized adultery by claiming that Deuteronomy 24 authorized divorce as long as the proper paperwork was done.

I think that the key here lies in our understanding of “adultery.” Adultery is “covenant unfaithfulness.” You see it applied as a metaphor for idolatry:

Jer 5:7-8 "How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and

have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of whores. (8) They were well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife.

Literal adultery, you see, but also covenantal adultery by worshipping and swearing by false gods. Adultery is covenantal unfaithfulness.

Marriage then is a covenant. Divorce violates that covenant – and take careful note – the violator is the one who deals treacherously with the wife or husband of his/her youth. Divorce was never in God's plan. And it is my conclusion that what Jesus is saying here is:

“...except on the ground of sexual immorality...” = “over and above sexual immorality, in addition to the actual physical act of adultery” you are guilty of adultery when you spuriously divorce your wife for any reason.” And in addition, YOU are responsible for the subsequent covenant unfaithfulness when some other man takes her as his wife.”

Understand? It is vital that we step back here and see the big picture of Jesus' intent. “You Pharisees are guilty of adultery in spite of all the legal paperwork you carefully do. You have failed to love your wife as you vowed

in the marriage covenant, and even though literal adultery did not take place in your marriage, you are guilty of adultery because you are unfaithful to your covenant made before God.

What is Jesus teaching here then about marriage and divorce and remarriage? Is he teaching that divorce is only permissible for literal adultery/sexual immorality? Is He teaching that remarriage after divorce is not permitted? And my conclusion is that Jesus is not addressing those subjects here. He is addressing the false, superficial, sinful teaching and practice of the Pharisees that was “legalized” covenant unfaithfulness and therefore, adultery and a breaking of the 7th commandment.

Incidentally, the Pharisees failed to give serious thought to the 10th and final commandment:

Exo 20:17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

Coveting. A sin of the heart. Thus the 7th commandment required heart obedience. This the Pharisees ignored.

Once more, we are driven to see our need for Christ. Paul says it-

Php 3:7-9 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (8) Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (9) and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--**

This righteousness is that which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you see, and it is in no way of our own doing. It is a righteousness of Jesus Christ's law-keeping which becomes ours only by faith.

Say Yes or No, and Mean it

Listen to Jesus as He turns to still another example of Law-breaking by the Pharisees:

Mat 5:33-37 "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.

Jesus brings us here to the 9th commandment:

Exo 20:16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Now, we know from Jesus' pattern here in this Sermon that when He says "you have heard that it was said," He is stating the false teaching of the Pharisees and scribes that the people had been falsely instructed in. In this case, He quotes their teaching this way:

'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'

That sounds well and good, but we know it isn't. Apparently, here is where they inserted their loophole – *but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.* In other words, *if they took an oath in the Lord's name, then they were obligated to keep that oath. Otherwise, they were not bound.*

From what Jesus goes on to say, here are other things they "swore" by –

- By heaven
- By earth

- By Jerusalem
- By my head

You still hear such things today, right? "By all that is holy...." Or "I swear on my mother's grave..." or "Stick a needle in my eye." Think of how people are asked to put their hand on a Bible and swear that they are going to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." And what are these things? They are all really designed to dupe people into thinking that one's word is going to be kept, when in fact the one swearing has no intention of keeping his oath.

Jesus said that all oaths are really in the Lord's name because He is sovereign over all and therefore the 9th commandment requires us to keep our word, to do our "yes" or "no" with none of this equivocation.

I cannot even begin tell you how rampant false oaths, lying, and promise-breaking are in the visible church today. Of course where Pharisaism is, you will always find this very thing. The real Christian however, is characterized by this:

Psa 15:1-4 A Psalm of David. O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? (2) He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; (3) who does not slander with

his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; (4) in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; **who swears to his own hurt and does not change;**

The Law of God requires truth in the innermost part of our being:

Zec 8:16-17 These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; (17) do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD."

A characteristic then of every single true Christian is *truth*. A person who is characterized by deceit and lying is simply not in Christ.

Rev 21:8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Joh 8:44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand

in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

From all this, Jesus sets us free – the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. So that we are now people who love His truth and therefore, love His Word.