

Today we continue our study through the gospel of Matthew. If you remember from last week, we began our study of the greatest sermon ever—the Sermon on the Mount. We looked at the Beatitudes and learned that the values and practices in God's Kingdom are very different from the values and practices we see on display in our Bay Area culture.

The key idea is that when we follow Jesus as citizens of God's kingdom we are distinctly different, so much so that God's Kingdom seems completely upside down from the kingdoms of the world.

Today, we will see that Jesus also turns religion upside down in his Kingdom. We will see that Kingdom values are distinctly different from the religious values of these religious leaders. Today when we hear Jesus refer to Pharisees and teachers of the Law, we should think religious leaders.

It's interesting, when we see Jesus around common the people, he is very compassionate to them. And the common people are attracted to Jesus. But when Jesus was around the religious leaders he strikes a very different tone—he is sharp and he calls them out. These religious leaders were angry, prideful and they felt threatened by Jesus and they tried to discredit him and eventually kill him.

For us to understand Christianity, for us to understand God's kingdom, and for us to understand the sermon on the Mount, we need to understand that what we see in Jesus isn't religion. Jesus in this sermon is contrasting life in religion and life in the kingdom.

The hard thing is that religion looks so similar to Christianity. I think the crowd on that mountain was perceptive enough to know that their religious leaders were not perfect. But I think they also saw them as better law keepers than they were. They must have thought, "Didn't they have to be holy in order to rise in the ranks to become religious leaders? Shouldn't they be more holy? Isn't following the law their full time job? They should be pretty good at keeping the law, at least better than I am."

Christianity is vastly superior to religion in every way because it embodies a person, Jesus, who is being revealed to us in this Sermon on the Mount. It's about this Jesus who didn't come to wipe away the Law. On the contrary, he elevates the Law above religion and displays for all of us the deeper heart principles behind the Law.

So how does Jesus feel about the Law? How does Jesus feel about the 10 Commandments? How does Jesus feel about the Old Testament scriptures that expound on the 10 Commandments?

Jesus Fulfills the Law

"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." (Matt. 5:17)

A quick look tells us that Jesus must have been accused of teaching that the law no longer mattered in his kingdom. But Jesus corrects that by saying, "I didn't come to destroy or change the Law or what the prophets said. I came to fulfill the Law and fulfill what the prophets said about me."

The meaning of the word "fulfill" is important here. The idea is that fulfill is to bring something to its destined end. By Jesus fulfilling the Law, he is saying, I am the 100% completion of the Law. When you look at me and see what I do you see the Law in its fullness. When you listen to me you will hear the full rich meaning of all the teachings of the Law.

Those in his audience might have seen Jesus as another great teacher or another great prophet in the long line of teachers and prophets we see in the Old Testament. But Jesus was not a prophet; he is what the words of the prophets spoke about. And we see evidence of this in the first chapters of Matthew. When Matthew quotes the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah that point to Jesus, he says, "To fulfill what the scriptures say." Matthew is careful to show how these great prophets pointed not to one with their same credentials, but to one infinitely greater than they were, the one they hoped for—their Messiah.

Jesus fulfills the Law through his life. His life is a manifestation of the 10 Commandments and as the book of Hebrews says, Jesus is the radiance of God, the character of God. He not only loved the Law, he kept the Law.

Jesus fulfills the Law through his death. The Law displays the holy standard of God, and it condemns sin. The nation of Israel was a nation of sinners and the Law made that clear. And the Law taught a temporary system of animal sacrifice to be done each year to provide atonement for the people's sins. It was always meant to be a temporary way to hold off judgment until their future Messiah would come to judge and save the world.

Jesus fulfilled the Law in his death because he became the once and for all sacrifice for the sins of the world. On the cross, Jesus absorbed all the sins of mankind, sins of the past, present and future. When he cried out, "It is finished!" he was telling the world and his Heavenly Father that the price of sin was paid through his death. The sins this Holy Law revealed and condemned were paid for in full.

As the hymn says, *"My sin not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, praise the lord, praise the lord, o my soul. It is well! It is well with my soul!"*

Jesus Values the Law

How did Jesus feel about the Law? Verse 18 tells us.

"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."

Jesus tells us that not one bit of the Law is to be changed. The Law is to have a permanent place in God's plan until that day, that future day of judgment when the old heaven and old earth will pass away and there will be a New Heaven and New Earth. Next, we see that Jesus has the highest regard for every bit of scripture.

"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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (v. 19)

In verse 19, Jesus tells us that "greatness in His kingdom" will be measured by how well one loves the whole Law that he loves so much. And it's not just a love through obedience; he also tells us that those who teach the Law accurately to others will also be called great.

The next verse, verse 20, is arguably the most important verse of Jesus' entire sermon. He calls out the religious leaders and says, your religious ways don't nearly reach the bar of righteousness that the Law requires. And if that isn't enough for us this morning, he also provides the way for the Law to be fulfilled not just through him but also through us.

Jesus Fulfills the Law in Us

"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."

My first reaction is, He can't be talking about sinful me here. I'll never be admitted. My righteous is not enough. But the right reaction is, Why is Jesus, the perfect Law in the flesh, full of grace, and mercy saying this to me? Because he provides the way for us to fulfill the Law.

Jesus is saying, Kingdom righteousness far surpasses religious righteousness. It isn't surpassing like getting a higher

righteousness score. It's not Christians surpassing because they kept 620 laws and the religious leaders only kept 600, so the Christian beats the religious leaders righteousness by 20.

Kingdom righteousness is deeper; it's a righteousness of a different kind. It's a righteousness of the heart. Jesus exposes the religious leaders for their external and formal obedience to the Law. But Jesus teaches us here that God's demands are far more radical than that. I was encouraged this week when I read what God said through the prophet Jeremiah 31:33, **"I will put my law within them. I will write it upon their hearts."** How would God do that? As he said through the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 36:27, **"I will put my Spirit within you and you will walk in my statutes."**

So God's Spirit, the Law of God, righteousness and heart must all be knitted together for us to have any chance to apply verse 20 to our lives. Then he illustrates how kingdom citizens are to surpass the religious leaders by giving us six real-life scenarios. The first Jesus brings up is the 6th Commandment that says, don't murder.

What About Murder?

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder,'" (v. 21)

Jesus is saying to his audience, "You heard correctly when your religious leaders said, 'Don't Murder.'" And the religious got that literal part of the Law right. But Jesus takes it deeper. He explains how our righteousness is to surpass the literal murder. The Holy Spirit, heart, righteousness and law all expose the feeling of anger that drives the murderous action. Religion says, "I am so angry at my brother, but at least I didn't murder him, so at least I kept the Holy Law." That is religion. Jesus reveals the deeper meaning behind the commandment that applies to every one of us in the building or all those on the mountain that day.

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,' (literally, empty head, or numbskull, or nitwit, or blockhead. It's an abusive term used to insult a person's intelligence.) is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' (literally moron, but best translated as someone with poor character who lacks morals and integrity) will be in danger of the fire of hell." (v. 22)

What about the deeper issue of anger? Angry thoughts and insulting words may never lead to the ultimate act of murder, but Jesus is saying that they are still subject to judgment and hell as well. John sums up God's feelings toward hate in 1 John 3:15, **"Whoever hates his brother is a murderer."**

I love the 17th century painting by Gerrit van Honthorst of Jesus appearing before a religious leader. He is depicted as standing on trial. And the religious leader has his Bible open and is angrily pointing a finger at Jesus. We see a candle on the table and it's

interesting, the light is brighter on Jesus' face than on the open Bible, and even brighter than the candle itself. Jesus—the Light of the World, the one who actually wrote the Law and the only one who ever lived it out perfectly—is being judged by a religious leader to be a criminal.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes deep into the hearts of the religious leaders and reveals ugly things. He revealed their motives. He reveals their fear and their pride. The religious person who is motivated by fear says, "I had better not commit physical murder because if I do God will take me out. I can hate my brother but at least I kept the law and didn't follow through and kill my brother." And the religious person who is motivated by pride says, "I didn't murder anyone. And thank God that I am not like those people who do. I am more righteous than they are." This is such a shallow interpretation of God's holy commandments. Think about it—it's so uninspiring, so unattractive.

But a Kingdom citizen isn't to be ruled by fear. A fear of a hammer coming down if one violates the Law is not at the heart of the gospel. A kingdom citizen is not scared of the Law. A kingdom citizen loves the Law. As kingdom citizens we should love having God reveal things and tell us what we should do. Studying and applying the word of God is a positive and liberating thing in the Kingdom of God. God loves when we accept the challenge to deal with our anger, and he doesn't condemn when we fall short of his glory. He shows us grace.

How about pride in the kingdom of God? We don't say, thank God I am not like the heathen seated next to me, or the pagan who lives across the street from me. Kingdom citizens have confidence that God is our Father and he loves us unconditionally through his Son Jesus Christ. Kingdom citizens live with the assurance that God isn't condemning, because a good Father doesn't condemn his children.

As a kingdom citizen, I know that I am valued and safe as a child of God, so I can seek to obey the greater meanings of the Law that Jesus lays out. I can, and I will, want to engage and serve people not like me and not view myself better than they are just because God showed me grace.

I don't hear people say religion is attractive. Why? Because religious people tend to steer clear of people who are different from them and look down on them from a distance and give thanks that they are not like them. Religious people are not drawn to those who are hurting and they certainly do not draw those who are hurting to them.

But I do hear people say the gospel is attractive. Why? Because Jesus attracted people who were not like him to himself and he went to help people who were not like him. If we live the deeper meanings of Spirit, law, heart, and righteousness we are attracted to people not like us and we are drawn to help people who are not like us because the gospel makes us distinct from religion.

Religious people seem to make people feel worse and burdened. Kingdom people are compelled to enter into situations that are breaking apart and want to bring relief for hurting families, hurting neighborhoods, hurting communities, such as a community of homeless vets in San Mateo County.

And the greatest theologian—Paul—explains why we have no need to live in fear and pride. *"For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our Spirit that we are God's Children"* (Rom. 10:14-15).

As Kingdom citizens, we live as children and not as slaves. We serve freely instead of out of fear. It's because God is our Father and he gives us his Holy Spirit to live in us. Religion isn't led by the Spirit. Religion doesn't set anyone free. Christianity sets us free to obey the deeper meanings of the Law.

I love the stanza from the great hymn writer, William Cowper:
*"To see the Law by Christ fulfilled,
and hear his pardoning voice,
changes a slave into a child
and duty into choice."* (Love Constrained to Obedience)

Jesus came to fulfill the Law and set us free from religion so we can live out the deepest meanings of the Law.

What about the deeper issue of personal reconciliation? In God's kingdom the priority of reconciliation is high. A deeper meaning to our instruction on murder and hate is the command to go and reconcile. It's so important that it's to be done before you come and offer your offerings to God in your place of worship.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." (verses 23-24)

I would expect that some of us may be prompted even today to go and seek out a person who has something against you. It's the deeper kingdom meaning. It's led by the Holy Spirit, it's from the heart, and it's righteousness; it's not religious.

We can't control how others will respond to our efforts to reconcile. It's right to say I'm sorry and to ask for forgiveness, and we do it with the attitude that Paul gives us in Romans 12:18, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."*

Everyone means not just our brothers and sisters, those we are close to, but also those we deal with in business and professionally. The example Jesus uses for the heart, the law and righteousness and being led by Spirit has to do with when we owe others money. We are to take the initiative to resolve it fully and quickly.

What about the deeper issue of unresolved debts?

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.” (verses 25-26)

I want to share a story that recently happened at CPC that embodies the deeper meaning of the Law. It happened a couple of weeks ago when we were in the middle of our Fill the Truck Campaign we had to bring relief to the victims of the Napa and Santa Rosa fires. This is from a man who attends our Higher Power Recovery Ministry at CPC on Friday nights as he was bringing some items to donate.

Working the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous has been a life-changing event that brought me into a close relationship with God. This change did not happen overnight, it was a slow process that is still continuing today. In working the 9th step of Alcoholics Anonymous, I made amends to people who I've harmed in the past. Between 9 and 12 months sober I made the bulk of these amends.

But there was one amends, to my stepfather, that I kept putting off out of fear. Fear that the harm done to him, and my mother, was so great the prospect of facing it was overwhelming. My mother remarried when I was 5 years old and my stepfather helped raise me. As a confused child, I never showed him the love and respect he deserved. The real harm came when at age 14 my mom was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She battled the cancer with incredible courage and strength. She finally passed away from the disease four years later. During this time, and especially in her last few months of life, I was not there for her as a son should have been. I was off in my addiction, only concerned with partying and my own selfish needs. I imagine what it must have been like

for my stepfather, to see the woman he loved dying, and the son she loves so much not there to support her. To make matters worse, during these years I'd been stealing money from a box in his closet.

It wasn't until over 3 years sober, as a result of faith in Jesus, I asked my brother for my father's phone number. But it wasn't until four months later, after dropping off a donation to the Fire Relief truck at CPC, that I was moved to make the phone call. I thought about that call every day for four months, but was overcome with fear. Then my fiancé and I pulled into the CPC parking lot with our fire relief donation. I was inspired by the people involved in packing up the truck and by those dropping off donations. I thought of all the people in emergency shelters who had lost everything, and how their faith was being tested, and the struggles they faced. As we were pulling out of the parking lot I was led to make the call. I immediately asked my fiancé to pull over. I said, "I have to do this now" and she knew exactly what I meant.

The amends was a complete success. Nothing like I had imagined. After greeting my stepfather, he got emotional and said, "not a day goes by that I don't miss your mother". He wouldn't accept the financial portion of the amends, but suggested I donate the money to a cancer-related charity. Since the amends, my stepfather has been to our house for coffee and will be attending our wedding in March.

This is kingdom living. This is the power of the gospel. This is the deeper meaning of the Law. This is the Law plus the Holy Spirit, plus a new love for righteousness, plus a heart tender to God. This is a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of any religion.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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