

Straight Talk from Jesus

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Matthew 5:17-20

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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For the past month, the emerging theme in every sermon has been placing the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus in the context of the arrival of God's kingdom to earth. Everything about Jesus' ministry points to this. From the start he preached, "The kingdom of God is at hand."

His parables were kingdom centered. Many of them started off with, "The kingdom of God is "like a growing seed," or, "a sower out in the field..."

According to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven finally coming to earth is what everything is all about. Even the stories and prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures point to the eventual arrival of God's kingdom.

He said to the Pharisees, "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came. Since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed..."

Hearing this, the Pharisees and scribes went spitting mad. Like Jesus, they believed the Kingdom was coming too, but following and submitting to the law and the prophets was the backbone of their belief system.

Going from defense to offense, they accused Jesus of breaking with Israel's sacred traditions by declaring himself above the law and superseding the prophets.

But that wasn't Jesus intention. He assured the Pharisees, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

If we think this sounds like double talk, especially since Jesus broke the law when it suited him, then we really can't be too hard on the Pharisees for not getting it either. Keep in mind this broadside hit them harder than us because the law and the prophets was the bedrock of their faith. They argued if the Law of Moses is treated like a "choose only what you like buffet dinner," and the authority of the prophets dissipates, God would be within his rights to revoke the Jews' "chosen nation" status and the Messiah would never come to set things right.

As far as they were concerned, Jesus' promise, "not one letter or stroke of a letter would pass from the law," was cold comfort. They reasoned, this carpenter from Nazareth doesn't have the authority to abolish or fulfill anything. At worst, he's a heretic, at best he's a lunatic. Either way, he's dangerous.

It never occurred to the Pharisees that Jesus was the Messiah, let alone the son of God. To be fair, at this point in the story neither did his disciples. As time went on, even they started questioning whether or not they hitched themselves to the right rising star.

Fast forward to the present. Living in post resurrection times, we know the rest of the story. But that doesn't take us off the hook. We still have to make sense out of, "I have not come to abolish but to fulfill the law" even though he broke the law multiple times in full view of the Pharisees with a "stop me if you can" attitude.

The key to understanding Jesus' words is found in what he said next.

"Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called the 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."

It still sounds like doubletalk! If the breakers of the law will at least be the least in God's kingdom, then why did Jesus add, "Unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven?"

Usually at odds with the Pharisees, it seems Jesus was throwing them a bone, hoping to appease by complimenting their righteousness.

It all seems curiouser and curiouser, but there's still a satisfactory explanation clearing things up.

Ask the question, "What does it take to get into heaven?" and most people will answer, "Being a good person." Others will say, "By accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior."

Either way, the answer implies you have to do something or be someone good enough before you earn the visa getting you into the kingdom.

This is called the "good works" mentality. Whether it's following the rules or even making a commitment to Christ, either way it's a good work, doing the right thing or believing the right thing to get you through the gates.

Carefully listen again to what Jesus said: "Whoever breaks these commandments will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever keeps them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Again, Jesus declared both the law keepers and the lawbreakers are "in" the kingdom. Apparently, the law breakers aren't kept "out." They may be the least in the kingdom, but at least they're in. Hearing that should make us feel relieved.

It seems even more confusing until we realize the saying, “everyone must go beyond the righteousness of the Pharisees before entering the kingdom of heaven,” isn’t about our good works earning our way into the kingdom.

Then what does it mean? It means if you’re determined to follow the law as a requirement, you better be prepared to keep it perfectly.

Since none of us can, Jesus was actually offering a friendly warning: If you choose to live by the law you will surely die by the law.

Jesus’ teachings, summarized in the Sermon on the Mount, goes beyond the letter of the law to living into the spirit of law. The spirit of law helps us see the Ten Commandments as sacred, nonnegotiable guiding principles. The Commandments help us live peaceably under God and with each other in the kingdom.

The first four commandments, beginning with, “I am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods before me,” encourage reverence for God. We can’t commit idolatry by giving our ultimate allegiance to anything or anyone else. We stop abusing God’s holy name. We keep the Lord’s Day because we’re created to be in awe of God.

The next six Commandments teach us to respect one another. We honor our mothers and fathers. We must not murder. We can’t steal. We can’t lie or commit adultery. We must not envy our neighbor’s property or our neighbor’s spouse.

As you already know, Jesus summed up all ten into one great commandment: “Love God, love your neighbor and love yourself.” St. Francis of Assisi, inspired by the Holy Spirit, made it more pithy, “Love God, then do whatever you like.”

Jesus and Francis went beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. God’s law is really about showing reverence for God and reverence for human life.

Jesus came to fulfill the spirit of the law and bring it to completion. Look at Jesus and you see the spirit of love incarnate, in human flesh prepared to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

We must accept the fact we can only exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees because Jesus earned it for us. Through Jesus, for the first time we can see the law as it’s meant to be seen, through the prism of himself. Instead of keeping the law because you have to now you keep the law because you want to, out of your love for God, who sent his only son into the world to rescue sinners like us.

At the same time, the spirit of the law closes all the letter of law’s loop holes.

During one of his long illnesses brought on by alcoholism, the film comedian WC Fields was caught in his sickbed reading the Bible. His friend chided him, “Bill, you, old hypocrite, what are you doing reading the Bible?” Fields answered, “I’m looking for loopholes.”

We're all tempted to circumvent the rules. That's why we look for loopholes technically keeping us within the law but actually allowing us to bend the rules. But let's be honest. We may be fooling ourselves, but do we really think we can fool God?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus allowed us no wiggle room.

“You have heard it said... You shall not murder... But I say to you, if you are angry at a brother or sister... if you insult a brother or sister... if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the fire of hell.”

(Whenever I read this passage, I remember the times I curse erratic drivers on the Beltway and especially self-absorbed customers with more than ten items standing in front of me on the express line at the Giant.)

Anyway, according to Jesus, sinful attitudes are just as bad as sinful behaviors. When you're angry enough to hurl insults, in God's eyes you're guilty of breaking his law of love. You can't say, “I love God but I hate my neighbor.”

That's why you can't worship God with integrity if there's bad blood between you and your neighbor. The ability to offer yourself up to God is terribly compromised. Confession is good for the soul, but the real test of the genuineness of your confession is your willingness to attempt reconciliation.

You can't follow the letter of the law and then look for rationalizations or loopholes. Instead, do your best to emulate the spirit of Christ, the author of the law of love. I began by saying everything about Christ, his life, teachings, passion and resurrection is meant to be put within the context of God's kingdom. I suggested two weeks ago the Sermon on the Mount can be likened to the Constitution of the United States. This summary of Jesus' teachings sets the guidelines for the kingdom lifestyle. It's a radical lifestyle, founded on grace but also the law. Both are given as gifts, enabling us live into our new identities as God's children and Christ's disciples.

Sometimes Jesus' teaching sounds confusing until we hear in the context of Jesus and his teachings sparking a revolution in the life of Israel. Loopholes were closed but opportunities opened up to be drawing deeper into the Kingdom of God, not in the distant future but now, in the present time.

Once again I encourage you to make time to pick up your Bibles and reread the Sermon on the Mount. Meditate and all its implications for everyone who listens and hears the good news of Christ kingdom coming closer and closer. Then be prepared to be amazed as God unleashes the power of love through the power of grace so both can be unleashed through you.

In my study is a sign given to me as a gift. It reads, “Life doesn't begin until you step out of your comfort zone.”

Step out of your comfort zone. Go out into the world to be and make the difference. You know the drill. Bring health to the sick, raise the dead, touch the untouchables and kick out demons.

Do any of these things and God's kingdom will come near when you do God's will here on earth as it's always done in heaven.