

The Law of God and the Lives of Men

by Dick Woodward

Jesus teaches that his message is consistent with the Word of God and that righteousness must be internal and not external.

Duration: 22:35

Topics: "Law Of God"

Description

In this sermon on the Sermon on the Mount, the teacher emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and purpose of Jesus' teachings. He explains that the Beatitudes are the core teachings, challenging disciples to look inward and apply these attitudes to their lives. Jesus also urges his followers to look around and relate these attitudes to the world and different kinds of people. The teacher then focuses on Jesus' statement that he did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it, emphasizing the importance of using the law and love of God when applying the word of God to others' lives.

Transcript

Greetings, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and welcome to our study as we continue in the series of the Sermon on the Mount. Our teacher gives us greater insight in today's lesson into the law of God and the love of God that we are to use when applying the word of God to others' lives. Now here is our teacher as we begin a new session of the Sermon on the Mount.

Do you not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets? I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men to do so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. I have just read Matthew chapter 5 verses 17 through 20 where we begin a new section of the teaching we call the Sermon on the Mount.

We have seen in our previous studies that this Sermon on the Mount was not really a sermon, it was a retreat. The purpose and the strategy of the retreat on the part of the Lord Jesus Christ was to recruit solutions and answers. At the bottom of the mountain were thousands of people to whom Jesus was ministering and from among all those people, with all their problems, he personally invited certain disciples

to join him at a higher level as the mountain slopes upward around the Sea of Galilee.

There on that mountaintop he gave the teaching recorded in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. The purpose of the teaching was, as we saw in the verses we looked at last time, verses 13 through 16, that if you understand what Jesus was teaching there, then you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, you are like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden, you are like a candle on a candlestick. Jesus was recruiting solutions and answers to all those problems of the people at the bottom of the mountain. We should never forget the fact that the teaching was given in that context and is a part of his great strategy.

In the Beatitudes, with which chapter 5 begins, in verses 3 through 10, we see these beautiful attitudes, which many scholars say are the teaching and all the rest is application. The Beatitudes challenged the disciple to look inward and now, beginning at verse 11 and through the rest of chapter 5, there's a sense in which Jesus is saying, look around and let us apply, let us relate these beautiful attitudes that I have given to you, to your world, and then to the Word of God, and then to different kinds of people down there in that crowd of people at the bottom of the mountain. There's a sense in which Jesus is saying in verses 17 through 20, look down the mountain, you see all those people and all the problems they have? Now if you're going to be a part of my answer and a part of my solution for them, you need to understand something about the Scripture.

You need to know how to use the Scripture in people's lives. Someone has put it this way. The difference between the way the Pharisees and the scribes, the teachers of the law, as they were called, approached the Scripture and the way Jesus approached the Scripture could be described this way.

Before Jesus applied the law of God to the lives of people, Jesus passed the law of God through the prism of the love of God, and then he applied the law of God to the lives of people. Jesus, of course, never lost sight of the fact that the motivation for the Word of God, the reason why God gave his Word to man, was his love for man. He had the well-being of man on his heart, and all the law was given in light of that principle.

That is what the Apostle Paul calls the spirit of the law. The spirit of the law gives life because the spirit of the law is love. The spirit of the law reminds us that all the law of God or the Word of God came out of the heart of God's love for man.

Jesus always had that in focus. So you might say he passed the law of God through the prism of the love of God before he applied the law of God to the lives of people. The Pharisees and scribes did not do that.

They threw the book at people. They took the law of God and legalistically applied it to the lives of people, and the Apostle Paul called that the letter of the law. Paul said, that kills.

The Pharisees forgot about the love of God that motivated the Word of God. They applied the letter of the law to people and did not care whether it helped them or it hurt them. There's a sense in which Jesus is making two statements in verses 17 through 20.

First of all, he is saying this, what I have come to teach and what I have taught in these Beatitudes and what I will teach you as we apply these Beatitudes is consistent with the Word of God. Here Jesus is referring, of course, to the Old Testament, the law and the prophets. That's the way they referred to the Old Testament in New Testament times.

Jesus is saying, I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, I have come to fulfill them. Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen. I have not come to take anything away from the scripture.

If you understand what I am teaching, you will not break one of the least of these commandments and you will not teach other people to do that either. Whoever practices, notice the order here, and teaches the commandments of the law will be called great in the kingdom that I am telling you about. The concluding statement to this paragraph is where he begins to challenge the religious teachers, the religious establishment of that day.

He says to his disciples, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, unless your personal righteousness far surpasses that of these religious leaders, then you don't really understand what I'm teaching, which means you really don't understand me. You never really heard me.

There's a sense in which he is making two statements here. Jesus is saying that there is not anything about his teaching that will be in conflict with the spirit of the law and the prophets. You go back to Moses and understand the spirit of everything Moses said.

Nothing he is going to teach you will be in conflict with that. But the second statement Jesus is making is this, that his teaching does not necessarily agree with the religious establishment. In other words, he is saying, I'm not going to guarantee you that what I have to teach is not going to be in conflict with the religious establishment.

Those of you who are with us for our study of the gospel of John will perhaps remember what a long and hostile dialogue Jesus had with that religious establishment. That dialogue is described for us in all the gospels, especially in the gospel of John, but also in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus had a long and hostile dialogue with the religious establishment because he was very much in conflict with them, but he was not in conflict with the scripture.

What he seems to be saying here in this paragraph is, now before you think about applying my teaching to all your relationships, and especially to the lives of those there at the bottom of the mountain with all their problems, you need to understand something about the scripture. Everything that I am teaching you is scriptural. But there is another thing.

We call it tradition. It's based upon the way that many have interpreted the scriptures, or perhaps it goes beyond their interpretation of the scriptures. It is only their own ideas.

Jesus is saying here, what I have to teach you is going to be very much in conflict with tradition. Tradition is based upon two things when you apply it to these religious leaders. They did preach and teach Moses, but we will see in the next six paragraphs here in Matthew chapter 5 that Jesus did not agree with them in the way they interpreted and applied the teaching of Moses.

There was a sharp disagreement between Jesus and religious leaders about how to interpret and apply Moses. But then far beyond the law of God or the law of Moses, these religious leaders, as many also have today, had a book. They called their book the Talmud.

In that book, there was a lot of rules and regulations that they thought were an interpretation and application of scripture, but they weren't. In Mark chapter 7 and chapter 15, Jesus comes into sharp disagreement with the religious leaders about this matter. Remember in Mark chapter 7, he said, Moses

said, honor your father and your mother.

But you say, if a man decided to become a Pharisee, anything he owed his father and mother, he did not have to give back to them because he was giving it to God. In other words, they believed a person did not have to take care of his aging parents if he had decided to become a Pharisee. Jesus said, Moses did not write that.

That is not the word of God. That is part of your tradition. When your tradition is in conflict with the scripture, the tradition is the thing that guides your life.

And he rebuked them sharply for this. He said, when you put your tradition above the word of God, you make the word of God meaningless. You make the word of God ineffective.

It's of no value if your tradition is more important than the scripture. These religious leaders did that, and so sometimes the problem is going to be that Jesus did not agree with their interpretation or application of the law of God or the law of Moses. But sometimes there will be statements that Jesus will address that are not found in the word of God.

They were simply in the tradition of the religious establishment, and Jesus is going to say that he is in sharp conflict with that. So you see, Jesus is challenging the religious establishment here. He is also telling his disciple, now listen, if you really come to me and you continue in my words until you know the truth I have come to teach, you will discover that nothing I am teaching you will be in conflict with the spirit of the law and the prophets.

But do not expect that to be true of the religious establishment. These people who have been your religious leaders, I will not always agree with them. By now in the context of this great teaching, he is saying to them, if you're going to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, you need not only to understand the word of God or the law and the prophets, you need to understand how to use the law and the prophets, how to apply the law and the prophets to those people down there.

The first time I saw this as a result of studying this sermon on the mount and reading especially the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, I will never forget how the Lord showed me the importance of getting to the spirit of the law, which is the love of God for the well-being of man. I remembered that the counseling appointment I had was with a woman who had a very complicated divorce problem. And I remembered that the Lord had showed me the importance of passing the word of God through the prism of the love of God before applying it to the lives of people or to the problems that people had.

After my counseling session with that woman, her closing statement to me was this, Preacher, if you had rebuked me today instead of showing me God's love, I would have gone home and killed myself. I will never forget how I thanked God for showing me the importance of coming from the perspective of the love of God when applying the Scriptures to the lives of people because God's love is the spirit of the law. We should always remember to pass the word of God through the prism of the love of God before we apply the word of God to the lives of people.

If you throw the Bible at people when you use the Scripture and apply the Scripture to their problems, you can devastate people. Religious leaders did that. Think of that woman in John 8, verse 5, who they came and flung at the feet of Jesus and said, Moses says to stone her, what do you say? Or think of the man at the pool of Bethesda who was healed, who had been crippled for thirty-eight years.

When they saw him running down the street right in front of the temple with his bedroll on his shoulder, they didn't say one single word about the miraculous, joyful, wonderful event that this man was well and walking. They said, Mr., you are breaking a rule. They were only concerned about the fact that one of their rules had been broken.

I think that's completely missing the spirit of the law. Jesus would sometimes, as in this case, deliberately break their Sabbath rules so that he could get into a dialogue with these people and say to them, listen, God did not make a Sabbath law and then create a man to obey that law. God created man, and for man's well-being, because he loved man, he gave man the Sabbath principle.

If you lose sight of that, you really have a very poor insight into Scripture. Another thing we should see in the context of this important paragraph is verse 20 and what Jesus says about righteousness. Have you already noticed the importance of righteousness in the teaching of Jesus? In two of the eight attitudes, he mentions righteousness.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. He says, for they will be filled. He did not say, in a state of grace or spiritually prosperous, are those who hunger and thirst for prosperity or for those who hunger and thirst after happiness or fulfillment.

These are the things that many preachers talk about today. Jesus said, blessed are those who have a hunger and a thirst, a passion, if you will, for righteousness. Then Jesus said in the last of the B attitudes, blessed are those who are persecuted because of their righteousness.

They are persecuted not because they have bad breath or not because they make a fool of themselves by the way they apply the gospel to people's lives, but they're persecuted because they have righteous lives. When issues come up, whether it is right or whether it is wrong, and people have a passion for righteousness and have been filled full of righteousness, do what is right or take a stand for what is right, they will be persecuted for that. Then a little later in this teaching, we are going to find that Jesus is saying, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, Matthew chapter 6, verse 33.

In the second half of chapter 6, he's going to give a great teaching about values and priorities and he's going to talk to us about our values and our priorities. And as he talks to us about our values and our priorities, he is going to say, let me tell you what should be first, righteousness, the kingdom of God and his righteousness. What you should seek first in your priorities is the kingdom of God, meaning God being your king, which is God's rule over your life.

And in that same context, almost as if he is explaining what he meant by that, Jesus says, and what he shows you to be right, let that control your life. That should be your number one priority, your number one value. In chapter 6, Jesus tells us to make sure that we do not practice our righteousness before men to be seen of them.

When you study this teaching called the Sermon on the Mount, notice how important the concept of righteousness is. Jesus is going to say to his disciples and to us in the context of this righteousness, there is a difference between the righteousness of the scribes or the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and the righteousness that I have come to teach. What exactly was that difference? I think Jesus summed it up when he used the word hypocrite.

He so often said to the religious establishment, you hypocrites. He will say here on the mountaintop that there is a kind of righteousness that is hypocritical. The word hypocrite is simply the Greek word for false face.

In those days in the theater, actors often wore a false face or a mask to portray a character. Now that's all right for the theater, for the stage, but Jesus was saying that's not all right when it comes to your spiritual life. The righteousness that you possess should not be some kind of false face that you wear on Sunday.

You must not be hypocritical about righteousness. Your righteousness must be real. But Jesus so often said that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was hypocritical.

It was not sincere. It was not genuine. It was a false face that they were putting on.

Another way to say that is that their righteousness was external. It was not internal. It was only on the outside.

It was not on the inside. Again in Mark chapter 7 and Matthew chapter 15, we are told that Jesus sat down to eat with these people. The religious leaders had their ceremonial washings in which they scrubbed up as a doctor getting ready to do surgery would scrub up today.

And the teaching to do that was not in the scripture. Rather, that was in their tradition. They criticized Jesus because when he sat down, he did not do that ceremonial washing.

You hypocrites, you are so concerned about the external. Do you not know that the important part of a man is not his outward man? It's his inward man. Do you not know that the important part of a man is not his external or his physical being? It's his internal spiritual being that is important.

The apostle Paul explains this further in 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 5. When he explains about the outward man and the inward man, he says that it is possible for the outward man to be perishing. But while the outward man is perishing, it is possible for the inward man to be renewed every day. Jesus said that the real value is the inner man, the inward man.

That is the part of the man that is spiritual. That is the part of man that is eternal. That is the part of the man that is going to live somewhere forever.

And that is the part of man that controls the outward man. And so the part of your being that you ought to be most concerned about is the inner man, not your outward man. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was nothing more than an external righteousness.

But inwardly, Jesus said, they were like white suppliacars, which was not a compliment. That was like a tomb filled with dead man's bones, a corrupt and awful thing. He once said to them that they were like unmarked graves.

Is it possible to walk across a cemetery and if the graves are not marked, you are walking over a grave and don't even know it? Jesus was saying to them that inwardly, they were dead spiritually. Their spirituality was only outward. It was a show.

So their righteousness was external, whereas the righteousness of the disciples was to be internal. The Pharisees righteousness was horizontal. It was simply for the appearance of things.

Jesus says in Matthew chapter six, that they would go to the street corner at midday when it was very crowded and pray on the street corner so that men would actually think of them as being religious. But Jesus said their prayers were not really addressed to God, but rather they were addressed to the people on the street corner. Remember his parable about the Pharisee and the publican? The Pharisee and the publican went up to the temple to pray and the Pharisee stood in a prominent place.

Jesus said he prayed with himself. He was not really asking God anything. He was not really talking to God.

He was talking to the people in the synagogue or in the temple or perhaps himself. It is possible to have a hypocritical righteousness that's just like that, that is only for men. The religious leaders of that day used to blow a trumpet at noon and when people would turn around to see what the noise was, they would very conspicuously drop a coin into a beggar's cup.

Jesus said hypocrite. You do that to be seen of men. When you give, you shouldn't give that way.

Your praying and your giving should be done in secret. It should be done as unto God. It should be addressed to him and him alone.

It should not be for men. It should always be for God. It should not be horizontal.

In other words, it should be vertical. As you follow Jesus through any one of the Gospels, you see that he's in this intense conflict with the religious establishment. And here he is making that very clear on the mountaintop to his followers.

Jesus is saying, now listen, first of all, if you're going to be part of my solution and part of my answers, you have to understand how to use the scripture. You have to pass the scriptures through the prism of the love of God before you apply the scripture or the law of God to the lives of people. And then you need to understand that what I'm going to teach you is going to agree totally 100% all the time with the scriptures.

But at the same time, you need to understand that what I'm going to teach you is not going to agree with the teaching of the religious leaders. That is why the next six paragraphs will begin something like this. They have been telling you, but now listen to what I tell you.

It has been said, or it was said to people long ago. And he will quote the religious leaders, but then he will say, but let me tell you the truth. Our prayer is that these lessons are helping you to grow in your faith and your commitment to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and that you are applying these truths to your life.

So be sure to join us next time as we continue to learn together. Now, until next time, may the grace and peace of our heavenly father fill you and bless you and give you his spirit of unity. And may he greatly bless you and your whole family through you.

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