

GREAT TEXTS - MATTHEW 5:17-20

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 14, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Early in his public ministry Jesus took his disciples up into a mountain and there he preached to them the Sermon on the Mount. It began with the beatitudes, those crystal clear statements of the characteristics which Jesus wished his disciples to possess. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:3-9).

This greatest of all sermons ended with an illustration of warning, in these words, "'Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them shall be likened unto a wise man who built his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And every one that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall thereof.'" The scriptures describe the reaction of the multitude who heard the sermon, as follows, "And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were astonished at his teaching: for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." (Matthew 7:24-29).

Between these two great passages Jesus set forth much of the heart and center of the Christian religion. What the ten commandments were to the Law of Moses, this sermon is to the Law of Christ. In addition, this sermon deals with the very vital relationship between the old and the new law.

Unorthodox

By strict rabbinical standards, Jesus' life was quite unorthodox. Questions were raised in the minds of the religious leaders, because Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. When he was challenged for having done so, Jesus pointed out that if it was legitimate to pull an ox from a ditch on the Sabbath, surely it was not wrong to heal a human being. Jesus was further questioned, because he did not always perform the ceremonial washings before eating meals. Jesus also allowed his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath, as they walked through the fields. When challenged on this matter, he compared it to the time when David and his men ate the "shew-bread" as they fled before King Saul. In all of these Sabbath violations, according to the traditions of the Jews, Jesus was only demonstrating the precedence of human need over law.

The tension that was created by Jesus' departure from the orthodox behavior pattern of the Rabbis led Jesus to say in this great sermon, "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall he called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:17-20).

Actually, Jesus upheld the law. Notice that he came "not to destroy, but to fulfill" the law. Not even the tiniest particle of the law would pass away until it had served its purpose or was fulfilled. In his life, he fulfilled the Mosaic Law completely, and then took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross. Christ did not discredit the Law of Moses, for he considered it like a calendar, which is vital for a time, but to be removed when it had served its purpose. In Colossians 2:14, the apostle Paul speaks of the "bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross." Not until it was fulfilled, not until it had served its purpose completely, was the old law removed.

Not Destroying the Law, But . . .

Jesus was not destroying the law, but rather the accretions and additions to the law. The "Traditions of the Elders" had been written down in the *Mishnah*. Then the Babylonian and Jerusalem *Talmuds* had been written to explain the *Mishnah*. In these writings it was declared that a man could not write as much as two consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet on the Sabbath. A man could not apply wadding smeared with ointment to a fresh wound on the Sabbath. It was permissible to apply wadding to such a wound, provided it had not been dipped in ointment. Wives could not wear a brooch or ornament on the Sabbath, for this was considered to be the carrying of a burden. Jesus came to destroy such interpretations of the Law of Moses as had been added by the traditions of man.

Jesus was not destroying the law, but rather an attitude of legalism that had become divorced from the spirit of the law. For example, the Jews could not light fires on the Sabbath, but they considered it legitimate to hire Gentiles to do this service for them. We recall

the penetrating words of Jesus, "This people honoreth me with their lips: but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men." (Matt. 15:8-9).

However, the most scathing rebuke of this attitude of legalism is found in Matthew 23. Although the entire chapter is devoted to pointing out the inadequacies of such legalism, we will notice only verses 23 and 24, which read, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye tithe, mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith: but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone. Ye blind guides that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel!"

Jesus was not destroying the law, but rather the idea that obedience to law is the method or means by which men can be lifted to the level of righteousness. The hope of making people good by the threat of law is a vain hope. In our day we sometimes say it, "you cannot legislate a moral principle." While the laws can serve the purpose of delineating sin, within themselves they do not furnish the incentive or motivation for lifting men to righteous living. It takes something more. It was this something more that Jesus came to add, as he fulfilled the old law and took it out of the way.

The Spirit and the Incentive

By emphasizing the spirit as well as the letter of the law Jesus stressed the deep underlying motives behind the overt act. Christ deepened and widened the old law. In a large measure, negatives were converted into positives. Where attention had been on the act, he turned it inward to the motives. There is an inwardness about Christianity which the Law of Moses never had.

In the Sermon on the Mount there are six uses of the expression, "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time ... but I say unto you ..." In each case is taking a teaching of the old law and giving it a new statement, this making it a deeper, wider, and higher commandment. We also recall Christ's magnificent pair of illustrations in which he pointed out the inadequacies of the old law. First, he said it in terms of not putting new wine into old wine skins. Then he used the illustration of the foolishness of trying to sew new cloth on old garments.

Most important of all, Christ brought himself as the incentive for keeping the law. Love of a person will accomplish what rules or laws cannot accomplish. Christ brought love in. God's love inspires man's love. It is not law first, but love first and then law. After all, as the apostle Paul wrote, "Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:10). Also, "The law came through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17). On another occasion Paul wrote, "So that the law is become our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith is come, we are no longer under a tutor." (Gal. 3:24-25).

Paul Needed Christ

This whole emphasis on the inadequacy of law to lift men up is demonstrated in Paul's own life. During the time that he was a brilliant young Jewish lawyer, struggling valiantly to keep the law to perfection, "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law a Pharisee; as touching zeal persecuting the church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law found blameless" (Phil. 3:5-6), he was completely frustrated and unable to obtain righteousness. Hear him as he describes his condition, "For that which I do I know not: for not what I would, that do I practice; but what I hate, that I do. But if what I would not, that I do For the good which I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I practice ... For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord ... There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." (Romans 7:15-19, 22-25; 8:1-4).

Christ lived his entire life under the Law of Moses, fulfilling it perfectly, respecting it highly, but realizing that it had served its purpose and was ready to be taken away. Having fulfilled it, he nailed it to the cross, giving us "a perfect law, the law of liberty" in its place. Let us rejoice that we are under the new law, the law of love. Let us also rejoice that we have the person of our divine Savior to inspire us to want to live according to the standards that set for us. Christ led the way. He asks us to do nothing that he did not do, lays no burden on us which he did not carry. We can follow him all the way. "For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15). In this life we find the incentive, the motivation that leads us to want to live his kind of life. Let us follow him in life that we may live with him after death throughout all eternity.