
Life: Genuine Righteousness

Matthew 5:21-48

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Matthew 7:28-29 ²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Why does the sermon on the mount end like this? The crowd is astonished at Jesus' teaching. Was it because of the content? That may have contributed to their wonderment. But what blew the crowd away was that Jesus was doing something completely different from their religious leaders. Their religious leaders were interpreters of the Mosaic Law and by extension, the Old Testament. They were explaining what the text meant and what was expected of the people.

But Jesus was doing something completely different. He was teaching with authority. What does that mean? Is Jesus' teaching different because he is not giving opinion and advice, but is teaching the Law "with authority"?

No, the difference is that the religious leaders were interpreting the Mosaic Law. Jesus as King of the kingdom of heaven is exercising His kingly authority *to give His own Law*. They were astonished that Jesus exercised authority to make His own Law.

I want to commend to you *But I Say unto You* by Dr. John Reisinger. IT is one of the best treatments of the questions and issues that we will explore today.

We will encounter, "You have heard... But I say to you..." 9 times in these verses. What is Jesus saying?

There are basically three primary interpretations with many variations of the first two.

Dispensational - This is the Kingdom Ethics for the Millennial Kingdom.

Covenantal - Jesus is merely interpreting and explaining the Law. He is not giving anything new. He is largely correcting the misuse and misinterpretation of the Law by the Pharisees.

New Covenant - Jesus is expanding, explaining, and giving new Law, the Law of Christ. Though elements of the Mosaic Law and Ten Commandments are in it, it is not simply a restatement or heart-oriented interpretation *as though this is what the Law meant all along*.

Where does the Sermon on the Mount clearly state or even imply that Christ definitely and deliberately is correcting distortions by the religious leaders? Where do we see that in this

particular discourse? When we research all of Jesus' "It was said" statements, we find that each is Mosaic in its origin and is not a pharisaical distortion. Christ is responding to laws that Moses gave and taught. Christ is not contradicting Moses. Jesus is saying that the law given to Moses was good and necessary for that time; however, the citizens of the new kingdom need higher laws. (See Reisinger, Kindle Edition).

Now we do not deny that the Pharisees had distorted the Mosaic Law at many points. Jesus openly rebuked them for teaching the doctrines of men as if they were the commandments of God (Matthew 15:1-9), but how do we know that was his purpose in the Sermon on the Mount? What is there in the text that leads us to that conclusion, and what specific distortions does Christ correct? We find no textual support for the *pharisaical distortion* view. Jesus is not primarily interested in bringing a correct view of the Moses Law over into the New Covenant. Rather, He is showing how much further His new kingdom laws go when compared to the old. He is giving new and higher truth that Moses never taught. Christ sometimes applies the same truth that Moses taught, but does so in a manner that Moses did not do. At other times, Christ makes new and more spiritual demands on his disciples because they are now under a covenant characterized by enabling grace. Neither Moses nor the law covenant could have made these demands or laws. (See Reisinger, Kindle Edition).

Now some say that the translation in our ESV is incorrect. They contend that the correct translation is "You have heard it said BY men of old..." meaning that men of old gave an incorrect interpretation of the Law. The ESV, however, has it right. Jesus means that Moses in the law said something TO the fathers. As one great Greek scholar said, Jesus now "assumes a tone of superiority over the Mosaic regulations" (A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures, Vol. 1, p 44). J. Jeremias ... expresses the same view in even stronger language when he states that "Jesus establishes a new divine law when he opposes his 'But I say unto you' to the Word of Scripture." (Cited in Reisinger).

We simply cannot square the idea that the Decalogue is God's full and final word on ethics and morality with the "But I say unto you..." contrasts spoken by our Lord in Matthew 5. The Tables of the Covenant did indeed contain the highest expression of both the Law of God and His holy and sovereign character *at that point in history*. However, they are not *THE eternal and unchanging moral law of God*. They are not the last and final word on morality and holy living. Jesus and the New Testament Apostles are. (See Reisinger, Kindle Edition).

One final issue to note. Not all of these are in the Ten Commandments. A few are quotes from Greek translation of the Law. Some are from the so-called civil sections. This has led some of our Reformed friends to insist that the Ten Commandments and the Civil Code are in force now except where the New Testament clearly rescinds them. In doing so they have compounded their error by contradicting Paul and Jesus with effect of bringing believers back under the Law.

We must understand and accept that Christ is contrasting his rules for his spiritual kingdom with Moses' rules for a theocratic kingdom, and that both kinds of rule are "holy, just, and good." God ordained both, in their own time. Correctly exegeted in whole of the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament, each section shows that Christ is appealing

directly to His own authority as the Son of God. He has the authority to interpret and apply Old Testament Scripture in a new and higher manner. HE has the authority to give new Scriptures that contain new law. Christ is declaring his own authority as the new lawgiver. He does not appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures for His authority or His message. He does not appeal to good logic to prove His point. Christ is giving new and additional Scriptures that reveal new and higher law found nowhere in Moses. Unlike the other rabbis, our Lord never once appealed to another rabbinical writer to support any of his statements. He appealed either to an Old Testament text or to his own authority given to him by his Father. He always said either, "God said" or "I say." This is a key point in this discussion; what is at stake is nothing less than the full and final authority of Christ as the new and final lawgiver. (adapted from Reisinger, Kindle Edition).

One final word to keep us on track. Jesus is here giving His Law to what will become His New Covenant people, the church. This is how the church and believers are to act. This is not a guide for nations. Nations are ordained by God as ministers of justice. To them has been given the sword for the peace of the nation. There is not such thing as a Christian nation. But Christians, in the national sphere, must take care about how they engage others as "nations" and as "enemies".

Now let us take up the texts themselves and see what Jesus said to them, what Matthew wrote to the church and to us.

Regarding Resolving Anger (v.21–26)

Jesus begins with addressing sins related to anger and murder.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'

²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The Mosaic Law and Judgment (v.21)

The Law forbade murder, the unjustified taking of another human life. It did so in the most emphatic of terms, "Do no murder..." or the more familiar, "Do not kill..." All different forms of murder and killing were specified in the Law. Upon conviction of murder, the sentence of death was to be meted out by the family, usually stoning to death. The Law restrained murder by providing for immediate

judgment and capital punishment. The only provision was in the cities of refuge where a murderer could flee and had to live inside the city.

The Old Testament has many examples of murders. From Cain who killed his brother, to Moses who killed an Egyptian, to David who had Bathsheba's husband killed. There were varying judgments meted out with David the most glaring example of escaping the punishment under the Law.

The Law of Christ and Resolving Conflict (v.22–26)

Jesus warns that anyone who is angry, who insults another Christian or denounces another Christian are all liable the appropriate judgment. The sin here is of responding to relational conflict in these forbidden ways.

What the Law of Christ requires is a poise to resolve conflict quickly. Since Jesus is talking under the Law, the context of conflict reflects that. The allusion is to Cain and Able. Cain's failure led to his murder of his brother. Instead, when we come to worship, we need to seek to resolve the conflict before we come to worship.

The Law of Christ also requires the accused or charged to seek resolution without having to resort to the courts. This basic principle laid down by Christ is repeated and expanded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6. Christians are not to use the world's courts to resolve disputes between them.

Regarding Sexual Purity (v.27–30)

Jesus addresses the sexual purity required by God.

²⁷ "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.

The Mosaic Law and Adultery (v.27)

The law says, "Do not commit adultery." There were judgments that were attached to being caught in adultery up to and including capital punishment. The Law addressed the heart issues in the Ten Commandments by also forbidding coveting a neighbors wife and stealing a neighbors goods which included his wife.

The Law of Christ and Lust (v.28–30)

In the Law of Christ, the intent of the heart is addressed. To look on another person with the intent to lust after them is condemned as imagining sex with them. It is adultery in the heart.

In the New Covenant, we are to carefully avoid what leads us sin. Some have referred to this as radical amputation. Jesus is focusing on the "it is better to..." This command then is a warning not to treat sexual sin lightly. It comports with all the other warnings in the New Testament about the seriousness of sexual sin. Those who will not repent of sexual sin are not believers. They will be judged.

Regarding Divorce (v.31–32)

The new lawgiver, our Lord Jesus Christ, addresses the issue of divorce.

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.

The Mosaic Law (v.31)

The Law required a legal process to divorce a spouse. Down through Jewish history, divorce became more and more prevalent and easier and easier to obtain. Marriage was not honored as God had intended. The Law was clear stipulating when a person could and could not divorce a spouse. It basically limited divorce to the breaking of the engagement or marriage if the woman was found to have had sexual relations before the marriage. It was severe and restrictive. Further, there was restriction on returning to an earlier marriage if there had been a second marriage that ended.

The Law of Christ (v.32)

The Law of Christ restores the original intent of God. At the time Jesus says this, it anticipates the rest of the New Testament teaching on marriage and divorce and even some of His own statements that were to come. Jesus' words establishes a different set of commands than were established in the Mosaic Law.

Jesus gives one ground for divorce. But we must be careful to notice what Jesus is actually saying. Sexual immorality - the word here is used to refer to all forms of sexual sin, not just adultery - is not automatic grounds for divorce. It is the only way that divorce does not set the spouse up to be committing adultery. What is actually in view here is remarriage as will be seen in other texts.

Once again, let me remind you that when Matthew writes, Paul has written 1 Corinthians 7 already. What Matthew writes must complement and correspond with what Paul wrote, not the other way around. Paul made it clear that Jesus addressed divorce and remarriage among believers (under the rubric of being Jews under the Mosaic Law).

1 Corinthians 7:10–11

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain

unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

Some important observations here that will help us when understanding what Jesus is commanding and forbidding.

Paul reinforced what Jesus said. Believers should not divorce.

Believers who do are "unmarried". This counters the idea that an unlawful divorce does not end a marriage. All divorces end a marriage.

Divorced believers may only remarry their former believing spouse or may remarry after they die (1 Corinthians 7:39).

If the divorce is because of unrepented of adultery, then the believer may remarry.

If the divorce is a result of an unbelieving spouse leaving or divorcing, the believer is free (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).

We must assert that nothing Paul says contradicts what Jesus taught. Nothing Jesus says contradicts what Paul taught. This means we need to be very careful with Matthew 5:32 and not isolate "whoever marries a divorced woman (person) commits adultery.". The second phrase must be connected to the first. Given Paul's writing, it cannot mean that a divorced person can never remarry (which is the position of many). Nor can it mean that a divorced person can remarry regardless. Synthesizing the two texts brings us to this conclusion: Remarriage after a divorce is permitted if (a) the former spouse has died (Paul), (b) the original marriage is restored (Paul and Jesus), (c) the spouse who left is an unbeliever (Paul) or (d) the divorce was because of adultery (Jesus). This last one is from what Jesus says in Matthew 19:9, "9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." Here Jesus makes another "I say to you" statement. As in our text, Jesus does not issue a command per se, but makes an observation with a command underneath it.

In the rest of the New Testament, we find the underlying reasons and rationale for Jesus' statements. At the root of it is the aim that marriage model the relationship between Christ and the church.

Regarding Oaths (v.33–37)

The Law of Christ deals with our being promise keepers.

³³ "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.

The Mosaic Law (v.33)

The law demands that you keep the promises you have made and to treat them as though you had made them to God. This is not the commandment "Not to bear false witness against your neighbor." This is a commandment about keeping promises and honoring contracts. The Mosaic Law upheld oaths to bind one's word.

The Law of Christ (v.34–37)

Under the Law of Christ, vows and oaths between believers should not be necessary. A simple yes or no should suffice. But Jesus is also countering the way that Jewish people swore - this is like "swearing on your mother's grave." We should be people who not only speak the truth, but whose word can be trusted. Again, we find expansions, explanations and applications of this all over the New Testament.

Regarding Retaliation (v.38–42)

Jesus gives commandments that cover the issue of responding to oppression.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

The Mosaic Law (v.38)

The law says, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This was not about placing restraints on punishment but rather, to be sure the proper justice was actually administered. The main purpose of this legislation was not to ensure that punishment would avoid inappropriate severity, but that those in authority would mete out adequate and just punishment. This is clear from every time it occurs in the Law.

This removed the decision about what punishment certain crimes should receive from the victim or the judge. The Law simply dictated the punishment. For example, under this, a person who made a false accusation against someone else, would receive the same punishment that the accused would have received if the accusation were true. Imagine that.

It is impossible to make these verses mean that Christ is contrasting His teaching with the alleged distortions of the Pharisees. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said" and immediately quotes exactly what Moses said about an eye for an eye. As in Matthew 5:27, 28, our Lord here never mentions either the Pharisees or their distortions. He simply quotes the Law and then says, "Not that, but this instead..."

The Law of Christ (v.39–42)

Jesus says to turn the other cheek and to do more than is demanded.

Christ, in this passage, is: 1. telling individuals not to act according to the Old Covenant eye-for-eye law of retaliation; 2. taking the responsibility for these actions out of the hands of the court and the judges; 3. placing the responsibility for the correct response entirely on the conscience of the individual disciples; 4. requiring his followers, as individuals, to think and to respond in terms of His law, rather than in terms of Moses' law. There is no getting around that on this issue.

This is a very hard saying. Do not physically resist the one who is evil. You would not believe the amount of writing that has tortured this text. Who is the evil person here? Under what circumstances is a Christian permitted physical self-defense? What does the rest of the New Testament say about this? Hint... not much. So whatever your position on this is, be sure that you are not functioning like the scribes and Pharisees to negate the full force of the Law of Christ.

If someone slaps you as an insult - the slap here would be a back handed slap - don't strike back. Don't respond to a personal suit against you by going to the court... give them what they want and more. Compelling a person to carry their load for a mile was the right of a Roman soldier during the Roman occupation of Israel. If someone asks to borrow something, over provision them. What is all this getting at? It is exposing several sinful attitudes and commanding a poise very, very different from the Law and from the world:

We must be poised to suffer being insulted and possibly even endure physical attacks.

We must renounce all retaliation and striking back.

We must be willing to show grace to oppressors.

We must be poised to do more than asked, to provision more than required, to live by a preparedness to give up our rights.

Fundamentally there it is. Jesus commands you to give up your rights. Philippians 2 tells us that Jesus did this even to going to the cross in order to look after our need for salvation and our interest in the kingdom.

I know many of you do not agree with what I am saying. Is there a discussion or even a debate to be had? Maybe. But not in way that negates the Law of Christ. Your argument is not with me. Your argument is with King Jesus. You must give attention to Jesus' warning: if you insist on responding like the world, don't be surprised when the world ruins you.

Regarding Enemies and Neighbors (v.43–48)

Jesus presses home the fundamental scope of the Law of Christ.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The Mosaic Law (v.43)

Here is a case where the Law says no such thing. This is a case where they have heard it said outside the Scriptures. The Law does not say, “ ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy.” The Law defines “neighbor” as a Jewish person in the covenant. Leviticus 19:17–18 is an example of many texts in the Law:

¹⁷ “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Because neighbor was defined as a Jewish person in the covenant, a “brother”, then the Law did not require love for those outside the covenant. The reasoning went, “Since love is only commanded of neighbor and others in the covenant, then hatred of enemy is allowed.” In some rabbinical writings, it was even required. Yet, what the Law actually required that the same protection and the same care was to be given to an enemy’s property and goods as given to a neighbors. (Deuteronomy 22:1-4).

The Law of Christ (v.44–48)

Jesus says, “Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” This is radical. This is the kind of love required of us as believers. We are to not only love those who love us, but to love those who hate us. Why are we to love like this? Jesus gives us the reasons.

This kind of love is an expression of our sonship. It is more than a kingdom thing. It is a family thing. When we respond to enemies with love in words and deeds, then we are reflecting the general love God has for all. God sends sun and rain upon both the just and unjust.

This kind of love goes beyond the normal and thus has a kind of reward and recognition. There is no commendation for loving people who love us. Even the wickedest of people do that.

This kind of love distinguishes us from unbelievers. Christians should be marked by the power and permanence of their love for each other. But we

also are marked by love for those who hate us, persecute us, who slander and revile us.

Now, one word of clarification. To love like this does not mean that we are to try to manufacture feelings of affection or love. This is not talking primarily about emotions. Emotions are the result of what we believe. What Jesus and the Apostles call for is for us to believe these commands in such a way that we want to do good in words and deeds for our brothers and for our enemies. (It is tragic and evil when we consider brothers to be enemies.) All through the Bible we are commanded to love in word and deed. Love for enemies is manifested not just in saying so, but in doing good for them.

We must be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. His perfections are the pattern and power for our own. This kind of love then is the root of which all the commands that Jesus has given are the fruit. When we love with perfect love then:

We will not be angry with our brothers and will seek quick resolution to conflict.

We will love our spouses and our sisters in such way that we will not give way to lust and guard our lives for purity.

We will love our spouses with a covenant keeping love that will seek to avoid divorce.

We will love God and neighbor with a promise keeping, words honoring integrity.

We will love our enemies so that we will reject taking our own revenge against them and will be poised to do even extravagant good for them.

Reflect and Respond

This is the perfection, the mature spirituality required by the Law of Christ. This is what it means to be a complete Christian.

Having seen and hear how many of you have responded to others, both Christian and non-Christian, with your sinful words and deeds, God calls on you to repent. Don't dismiss this sermon. Don't dismiss this preacher. This is the truth. This COVID time and exposed the deep corruption of hateful thoughts, words and deeds. Many of you have fallen far short of the beatitudes and these commands. This is not a time for theological debate. This is a time for deep, personal examination. Humble yourselves. Repent. Go to your brother or sister who you have spoken against or spoken evilly about and confess your sin and be forgiven.