

## Matthew 5:17-26

### The Good Effects of Right Thinking

*Ye have heard...But I say unto you...5:21,22*

Right thinking leads to right living. This was the theme in our last study. But not only is such a statement a theme to a Bible study – but it's a maxim that applies to our Christian lives. I can recall countless times in which this maxim was hammered into my head and heart by my Pastor. He pointed out that the battlefield in the Christian's life is the battlefield of the mind. The devil and the flesh and the world conspire to lead us to think one way while the Holy Spirit working in us leads us to think in another way.

We saw in our last study that the Lord Jesus addresses the way the subjects of the kingdom of heaven should avoid thinking when He begins a new section in the sermon on the mount with the words of v. 17 – *Think not*. We also noted in that study that for the first time in this sermon Christ is directing attention to Himself. Up to this point He had been addressing the matter of the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven. They're described in the beatitudes in terms of their character and their blessings. Then their function in this world is delineated in vv. 13-15. As subjects of the Kingdom we are to function as salt and as light – i.e. we're to endeavor to preserve what's good and prevent the flow of corruption and we're to dispel the darkness of this world with the light of the gospel.

And then beginning in v. 17 Christ draws attention to Himself. If we're to function as we should then we must know how to avoid wrong thinking regarding Christ and we must take up the matter of right thinking specifically with regard to Christ's purpose or Christ's mission. And so that mission is stated both negatively and positively. *Think not that I am come to destroy the law* – He says in the beginning of v. 17. Here is His mission negatively stated. *I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil* – there is His mission positively stated.

And in that positive statement I believe you find the essence of the gospel. Christ fulfilling the law – in His life; Christ paying our debt to the broken law in His death – that's the gospel of the kingdom. And if we can avoid wrong thinking with regard to Christ's mission and practice right thinking – then we'll be enabled to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

A number of things are required, you see, in order to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. We must, of course, have a right view of Christ. We must have a right view of Christ's relationship to the law of God. And we must have a right view of our own relationship to that law. Wrong thinking in any of these matters will inevitably lead to wrong living. We'll either be compassed about with pride – much the same way the Pharisees were – or we'll be so careless in our Christian duty that we'll appear to be hypocrites.

And so this matter of right thinking regarding the kingdom of heaven is enlarged upon by Christ throughout the rest of chp. 5. The Lord is concerned, in particular, with correcting the wrong thinking that was being propagated by the Pharisees. And so we see a formula

that is stated in vv. 21 and 22 and then repeated 6 more times bringing the total to 7 of our Lord's use of this formula. **{Trace the References}**.

Some have argued whether or not the Lord is making adjustments now to the law of Moses. Christ, being greater than Moses, we're told, has the sovereign prerogative to do what He wills with an inferior law. Such a view, however, doesn't so much put Christ against Moses as it puts God at odds with Himself. After all, it was God, not Moses, whose voice was heard on Mt. Sinai when the 10 commandments were given. It was the finger of God that inscribed those commandments in stone – not the finger of Moses. So it doesn't really make sense to say that Christ is making adjustments to the law.

Given the historical setting in which the Pharisees had so badly corrupted the law by their traditions then it becomes apparent that Christ is providing the proper interpretation of the law and that He's correcting wrong interpretations that were widespread at that time. Wrong thinking had led to wrong living and the evidence of that wrong living was readily seen through the pride and hypocrisy that prevailed in Christ's time. This is why I say that right thinking will lead to right living.

And so the thing I want to draw your attention to this morning is the good effects that Christ's corrective instructions should have upon the subjects of the kingdom of heaven. If we understand Christ's purpose in coming into this world correctly and if we understand the high view that Christ had of the law and if we understand our relationship to the law in the light of our relationship to Christ then these corrective measures that Christ is applying to the misuse of the law by the Pharisees will have a 3-fold effect upon the children of God. We could call it:

### The Good Effects of Right Thinking in Our Walk with the Lord

You'll note that I said *good effects* – I did not say *pleasant effects* – because the first effect of right thinking is not particularly pleasant, but it is very necessary and it is good. Consider with me, then, that the first good effect of Christ's teaching here is that:

#### I. We Learn to Abase Ourselves

The 6<sup>th</sup> commandment *Thou shalt not kill* would seem, on the surface of it, to be one of the easiest commandments to obey. I take it to be a token of common grace that there's enough respect for life to enable us to live quiet and peaceable lives for the most part. Oh it does seem that the crime of murder is ever increasing – so much so that you need to be careful where you go at night. And you need to lock your house at night. And such an increase in crime is a sure indication that as a nation we're beginning to reap what we sow when the prevalent teaching in our culture so cheapens life.

But if you follow the news in which we're constantly exposed to these awful crimes then it doesn't take long to perceive that more often than not these things take place in environments that really have no appeal to us – places like taverns or night clubs – or they take place in situations that we manage to avoid – things like domestic violence which

quite often arises between jealous spouses or ex-spouses. It's easy to view these crimes, in other words, as being something beyond us – something that takes place out there.

Should we flatter ourselves, therefore, into saying that we meet the requirements of this commandment *Thou shalt not kill*? The Pharisees so flattered themselves. They applied the command no deeper than the outward act. And so based on their understanding – You may go so far as to wish the one you are at odds with was dead. You may go so far as to take the gun off the wall, load it and point it at the one who has provoked you – but as long as you don't pull the trigger – all is well – you are obedient and you can go on to rationalize your way out of the other commandments through the same process of applying them no deeper than the actual deed.

The Lord's point in this section and in several of the other sections that follow is that the law penetrates beyond the deed. God's law discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. *Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts* the Psalmist testifies in Ps. 51:6. The thing that led to the judgment of the flood in Gen. 6 was not merely the outward manifestations of wickedness. No doubt there was plenty of such outward manifestations. But listen to the words of Gen. 6:5 *And GOD saw that the wickedness of man [was] great in the earth, and [that] every imagination of the thoughts of his heart [was] only evil continually.*

Again and again throughout the book of Jeremiah the thing that Jeremiah condemns is a people that fail to give heed to God's word because they instead follow the evil imaginations of their hearts. Jer 7:24 *But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels [and] in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward.*

I should add here that these verses make it readily apparent that Christ was not adjusting the law of Moses for a new dispensation – He is demonstrating what had always been the truth of God word. The standard of the law of God has always applied not merely to the deed but to the heart thoughts and motivations behind the deed.

And so unjust anger is no different from the crime of murder. *Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment* our Lord says in v. 21. The same thing applies to the malicious use of words or slander – *whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca* (lit. good for nothing) *or Thou fool shall be in danger of the council and hell fire* (v. 22).

Now the commandment is much more heart searching. Now the word of God penetrates deeply and weighs our thoughts and intents. And now if we're honest we have to say at the very least – I'm not so sure that I have kept the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. I have allowed my thoughts to run wild. I have allowed my imagination to commit this crime. I have been guilty of slander and gossip and have committed murder with words. You begin to see how our Lord's teaching leads us to abase ourselves.

And besides transgressing what the law forbids I have also failed to measure up to what the law demands. I'm sure that most of you who are familiar with our shorter catechism know that in their analysis of each commandment the framers of our catechism deal with

the law forbids and with what the law demands. What is required – and what is forbidden is the approach that is taken to each of the commandments. This might seem in the minds of some to be adding something to the commandments. All but one of the commandments is expressed in terms of *thou shalt not* and they don't appear based on that expression to require anything – but only to forbid certain things. And if that's the way you think then you'd probably gain the approval of the Pharisees in Christ's time.

The thing to bear in mind when it comes to the commandments of God is that when Christ was pressed over the matter of what was the first and greatest commandment, He answered that the greatest commandment was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength and the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Upon those two commands hang all the law and all the prophets according to Christ (Mt. 22:40).

What this means, then, is that the command not to kill not only calls for the prohibition of the deed and the thoughts and attitudes which lead to the deed – but the command also calls for proper love and respect for your neighbor. Now we are led to abase ourselves all the more for not only have I transgressed this commandment countless times but I have also failed to measure up to what such a command calls for.

At this point I think we can make a very definite connection to this portion of the sermon on the mount to those opening words of the beatitudes – *blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.* The law of God, rightly understood and applied leads us to see how poor we are and leads us to mourn over our shortcomings.

And this is a good effect of the word of God. This is what keeps us humble – our acknowledgment that we come short of the glory of God – our confession that we have sinned and that we do sin. This is what fits us for grace. For when we begin to flatter ourselves into thinking measure up to God's law we become proud and pride is what denies us grace. Humility is what gains God's grace.

So we see the first effect of Christ's teaching here is that we learn to abase ourselves. Would you consider next that not only do we learn to abase ourselves, but:

## II. We also Learn to Increase our Estimation of Christ's Greatness

Remember Christ's stated purpose for coming into this world. *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil* (5:17). You can begin to see how a low view of God's law would lead to a low view of what Christ accomplished by His life and death.

Indeed, a low view of God's law could lead one to wonder why Christ would have come at all. If obedience is within our reach then why should Christ suffer and bleed and die? If it's a mere matter of conformity by an external act then Christ does not appear to be all that different from the Pharisees of His day.

But let the law of God be rightly understood – let the truth of God’s law apply as God intended it to not merely to actions but to words and thoughts and motives and now all of a sudden we gain an increased appreciation for the greatness of our Redeemer.

Here is One, now, who came in to a world of sin and yet never sinned. We say that so easily and we repeat it often but as we understand the truth of the law of God and the extent to which that law applies then His entrance into this world takes on much greater meaning and His accomplishment of sinless perfection causes us to marvel.

He was born to imperfect parents and yet He remained perfect. I’ve said this many times and it bears repeating again – when we hear the voice of God the Father at Christ’s baptism testifying that *this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased* – then we have cause for joy and thanksgiving. Christ from His birth to the formal beginning of His earthly ministry was perfect in every word, thought, and deed. He rendered obedience to the law of God.

And when we follow Him to the mount of transfiguration and hear that testimony from His Father again then we have even greater cause for praise and thanksgiving. By that time in His ministry He has been slandered but He never slandered in return. He has been maligned and accused of being of the devil but He never sank to the level of His adversaries. He is still pure in every deed and every word. His motives are pure. His anger is pure – not the malicious anger that characterizes lost sinners.

And when He is brought to trial and treated most unjustly and with great cruelty still He is as innocent as that lamb that typified Him. Our salvation is traceable to the fact that *when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed [himself] to him that judgeth righteously* (1Pet. 2:23).

He loved God and He loved men. And He endured every provocation that could have tempted Him to stop loving God or loving men. When He was challenged and when traps were set for Him to catch Him in His words – He steadfastly endured in His obedience. And when He was apprehended and tried and forced to appear before a council that had already determined His fate and used the occasion of a trial to search for an excuse to carry out their malice – still He went willingly as a lamb to the slaughter. He kept the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment even while His enemies broke it in their hatred and murder of Him.

Stop and ask yourself – what does it take to provoke you? What does it take to bring forth the kind of thought or word that would make you a murderer based on the standard of God’s law? And if we’re honest we’ll have to acknowledge that it doesn’t take much. I fear that we’re easily provoked.

And then consider Christ and as you understand the full extent to which the law of God applies and you behold Him accomplishing His stated purpose of fulfilling the law – then your estimation of His greatness should and will vastly increase and you’ll come to appreciate in some measure why the salvation He accomplished is called in scripture *so great salvation* (Heb. 2:3).

We heard earlier in our service the reading from Jn. 3 in which John the Baptist utters those memorial words – *He must increase, but I must decrease* (Jn. 3:30). That is certainly a noble expression – but I wonder if you’ve ever considered how such a thing could be accomplished? Here’s the way it’s accomplished – listen to the words of Christ as He gives the true interpretation of the law. When we measure ourselves by that law we can’t help but be abased and when we measure Christ by the law then we can’t help but rise in our estimation of His greatness.

It remains for us to consider finally and briefly the third good effect of Christ’s teaching which that:

### III. We Learn How to Strive for Righteousness

You remember what Christ said in v. 20 *Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

I have often used this verse to teach the need for Christ’s imputed righteousness. Only by the righteousness gained by Christ’s perfect life and death can we qualify for the kingdom of heaven. But there is also a very practical way in which our righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and that is by properly understanding the standard that we strive to obey.

Oh the Pharisees could appear without to be righteous. But their righteousness only amounted to the appearance of white-washed sepulchers according to Christ. If we would strive to measure up to the righteousness that is given us in Christ – then we must strive for something more than the appearance of a white-washed sepulcher. We must strive for inward purity. Ps 51:6 *Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden [part] thou shalt make me to know wisdom.*

We must strive, therefore, not to merely abstain from pulling the trigger when the weapon is in our hand, but we must strive to overcome the hatred and anger and malice that would lead to the very thought of doing someone harm. We must strive for self control and for patience. In practical terms this come about as you think on Christ.

Have you been treated unfairly? How fairly was Christ treated? – you must ask yourself. Have you been slandered and maligned? Is there a sense in which you can say, based on Christ’s teaching, that you’ve been murdered by others? Then don’t fall to the same level as those that so treat you. Think on Christ. Think on His treatment and His response to His treatment. Think on what a high crime it is to be guilty of the sin of murder – a crime that may be committed through words unwisely spoken or through thoughts that are harbored and nourished in the heart. Such sin exposes one to the danger of judgment and hell fire. Should you place yourself in the position of such exposure?

Thank God, this morning, that Christ exposed Himself to that judgment on your behalf. Thank God this morning that Christ’s purpose was to fulfil the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment in it’s precept and it’s penalty. I trust, then, that you will know the good effects of Christ’s

teaching. Right thinking leads to right living. If you're thinking right then you'll be moved to abase yourself. The law of God penetrates deep into the heart and soul. I'm reminded of that vision of Christ by John on the Isle of Patmos when Christ's eyes are described as a flame of fire. I think the vision teaches that the eyes of God see the deed and see past the deed to the heart. How far short we fall of the glory of God once we understand the truth of the law of God.

But how great Christ should rise in your estimation also as you contemplate that law. What wondrous words and what gracious words are spoken by our Redeemer when He says *I am come to fulfil the law*. What an accomplishment against such overpowering odds. The first Adam failed in a perfect environment to render the obedience that was required. But the last Adam succeeded even in an environment that was hostile toward Him and hostile toward the very notion of obedience to God.

If you're thinking right about yourself and about Christ – then you're striving won't be losing. You'll be striving from gratitude and humility and you'll be free from the pride and hypocrisy that springs from ignorance.

May the Lord bless you, then, in your striving as you endeavor to shine in His kingdom.