

True Righteousness

MATTHEW 5:17-20

As we continue our journey toward intentionality by reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount, we come to a passage that has surprised and confused many readers throughout the centuries. This passage contains one of the most complex – apparently contradictory – statements Jesus ever made.

In these few verses we hear Jesus saying that he did not come to destroy the law, but that he in fact came to fulfil the law. What makes this saying so complex? These words come from the mouth of the man who seemed to make it his life's mission to undermine the law at every turn. Imagine this; Jesus was the one who accused the Pharisees of having too many laws, he was the one who deliberately broke some of the most sacred laws by eating with people whom he should not have eaten with, speaking to people who should not have been spoken to, going to places where no good, law abiding Jew would ever dare to go (just to name a few of the laws he broke) ... In fact, Jesus was eventually even executed because he had broken the law.

Yet this law-breaker speaks of the law in such lofty terms that it becomes almost impossible to reconcile the teacher with the teaching. What we see in his life and ministry, and what we hear from his lips in this passage seem to contradict each other so violently that it leaves many readers rather sceptic.

So what do we make of this passage? In order for us to make sense of it, and apply it to our daily *intentional* Christian living, there are three questions we must ask...

Firstly, what is the law of which Jesus is speaking at this point? Clearly it is not the endless list of rules and regulations that the Pharisees and scribes had devised in order to interpret the Law. Jesus is not referring to the minute detail of the various stipulations that grew out of the Law, which were intended to help people apply God's law, but actually only made it impossible. Jesus was referring instead to the law of God as that code which regulates and guides our relationship with God and with others. If we must put down a list of this Law then we would have to say he was referring to the Ten Commandments, but it is best not to do so, because we will inevitably find ourselves doing the same thing the Pharisees and Scribes did – trying to apply the Ten Commandments by devising all sorts of clauses and stipulations. Let's rather say that the Law which Jesus was referring to, that Law which determines our relationship with God and others, is the Law of love that is written on our hearts by the work of his Holy Spirit.

Secondly, how does Jesus fulfil this Law? In two ways: (1) he fulfils it by living a life of perfect obedience to it; both on our behalf and as an example to us. Jesus' ethic, the Law of love that guided his relationship (through action) with his Father and the people whom he met and ministered to, was that of love. It was not a contradiction for him to heal someone on the Sabbath, for example, because he was being obedient to the Law of love and not the rules of men that expressly forbade such healing because it constituted work. (2) He fulfils it by being the very embodiment of it. Jesus is the personification of the Law! If we want to know what God's Law demands of us then we need not refer to lists and regulations... we need only look at the life lived by Jesus and the principles that guided his actions.

Thirdly, what then are the implications for our lives? This is simple... We are held to a higher standard than that of the rules and regulations made by men. Our code for life cannot be put down on paper. We are compelled by the example of Christ, by the eternal nature of Law which he said shall not pass, to live according to this standard – the standard of love. Love for God and others. If we truly love God it will show through our obedience to him. Love is what makes the difference... as human beings we all have a natural tendency away from obedience, there are very few people who enjoy rules. But there are even less people who don't enjoy pleasing and serving the ones they love and who love them. We obey God, not because his Law is good (of course it is) we obey God because we love him, because he loves us.

Food for Thought:

There is an old saying that goes something like this: "Love God, and do whatever you like."