

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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I HAVE COME TO FULFILL THE LAW

Matthew 5:17-20

Today I would like us to look at an important passage, important because this passage establishes the relationship between the OT and the NT. Let's turn to Matthew 5:17-20. Here the Lord Jesus says this.

Matthew 5:17. Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

18 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.

19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men 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.

20 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.

The law has not been abolished

As we listen to the words of our Lord Jesus, we get this important message. The Lord Jesus is saying, 'Don't get the notion into your mind that I have come to abolish the law. I have not come to abolish the law.' It is important for us to constantly remind ourselves of this statement. In every generation, there have been people who wanted to teach that we don't need the law anymore, that under the new dispensation of Christ, there is no more use for the law.

The notion of abolishing the law has come again and again in the history of the church in what is called 'antinomianism', anti-law, people who want to throw out the law. This view states that Christians are exempt from the law of God.

And one of the consequences that have resulted with this kind of teaching is that every time there came a tremendous plunge in the standard of righteousness. Every kind of sins are being tolerated because there is no law against such thing.

Understand what Jesus is saying. 'Don't ever think that I have come to reduce the standard of righteousness that is required of a Christian. Don't think that you can go and sin, and at the end, get to heaven.' The Lord Jesus was a friend of publicans, tax collectors and sinners. But He did not lower His standard of righteousness to their standard. He came to save them. He came to raise them up to a standard of righteousness far above that of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Defining the law

Now, when we read that the Lord Jesus says, 'I have not come to abolish the law', we must understand what Jesus means by the law. Let's look at Jesus' own words in Matthew 22:34-40 and we will see what Jesus means by law. Here we read that one of the scribes wanted to test the Lord Jesus with a question. He said in v. 36, *Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?*

Matthew 22:37. Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

38 This is the first and great commandment.

39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

The law is summed up in these two statements. It is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. And your neighbour as yourself. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* So the Lord Jesus is saying that the whole law is to be understood in terms of its essence, that is to say, it is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbour as yourself.

When we understand the law in this way, we realize that surely, the law cannot be abolished. Far from being abolished, this is the essence of being a Christian. You throw away the law and there is no more Christianity to talk about.

The law means therefore that you shall love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. Everything you've got. That has never been abolished. In fact, the Lord Jesus makes it a central element in His teaching.

To be a Christian means to be a total Christian or nothing at all. Remember, all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. Everything. There is no teaching in the Bible in which you can be a partial Christian. The demand is radical and absolute. That's the way it is with God. 'And if the law requires everything, I require of you at least what the law requires. I have come to fulfill the law.'

Fulfilling the law

The righteousness to which the law pointed, now the Lord Jesus fulfills it by revealing the full meaning of what it was intended to hold. He drew out the full implications of the law as God intended them to be. One theologian said that 'Jesus fulfills the law by declaring the radical demands of the righteousness of God.' It is so radical that if your righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Take the seventh commandment of the Ten Commandments, *You shall not commit adultery.* In the OT, adultery was defined in physical terms, that only the physical act was considered as adultery. Now the Lord Jesus takes this commandment and brings out the full meaning of what God intended it to be. He says, 'If anybody looks at a woman so as to possess her in a lustful sort of way, then that person has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'

The Lord Jesus fulfilled the law by teaching the full implication of the law. And in this commandment, He wipes away the superficial notion that only sin actually committed is sin. He is telling us that God looks upon your hearts. The moment the thought of adultery is conceived in your heart, you have already sinned before God. That's the standard of righteousness that He requires of His disciples.

Paul and the law

Now, Paul teaches the same thing about the law. In the book of Romans, Paul says three things about the law. He says, the law is holy (Romans 7:12). The law is spiritual (Romans 7:14). And the law is good (Romans 7:16). The law is holy, it is spiritual, and it is good. Who would dare abolish what is holy, spiritual and good?

When Paul states that we are no longer under the law, he is referring to the dispensation of the law. That is to say, we are no longer under the old covenant, the dispensation of the law. We are under the dispensation of grace, the new covenant. But that is far from saying that we don't need the law and that we can throw it out of the window.

Paul speaks about the fulfilling of the law in many places. We see that in Romans 13:10 where he says that *love is the fulfillment of the law*. He says the same thing in Galatians 5:14. *All the law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* The law is fulfilled in one word: love. So Paul is repeating what Jesus had already said, that the law is to be understood in terms of its essence, which is love. And Paul says that we must love because love is the fulfillment of the law. He never said that there is no more law. He said that we are not justified by the works of the law. That is a totally different matter. Though we are not justified by the works of the law, we still need the law so that we may know how to love.

Being great in the kingdom of God

Now look at v. 19. Matthew 5:19.

Matthew 5:19. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men 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.

Two kinds of people are put in contrast in this verse. There is the person who relaxes the law, who performs the law in a slack manner. The Greek word refers to the action of loosening something, much like when John the Baptist says in John 1:27, *It is He who ... is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose*. It is the same Greek word than the word 'break' in Matthew 5:19. So this one, who breaks the commandments, who loosens the commandments, is said to be the least in the kingdom of God.

The other kind of person is the one who does, who follows the commandments of God. This one is called great in the kingdom of God. What does that teach us? This means that in the kingdom of God, everybody is not the same. There is a difference of greatness and smallness. Some shine as stars. Others have a light that is pretty dim.

Now think about that question. What makes you to be great or small in the kingdom of God? The difference lies in your conformity to the law of God. Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured in terms of your obedience to the commandments of God. Remember that well.

You might say, 'Who cares about greatness so long as I get there. As long as I am saved, that's enough for me.' This is a false modesty that is simply not being taught in the Scriptures. Look at Paul. Paul aimed for the greatest, not the smallest. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says that there are many people who run for the race and only one gets the prize. And he wants to win the crown. He says, *Run in such a way that you may obtain it*. Now, this is not modesty. This is to be spiritually ambitious. Paul was not content just to be saved. He was running the race in order to obtain the imperishable crown. He was running so that he may please Jesus. And greatness comes with it.

I think that if we are honest with ourselves, we have to recognize that in the heart of every person, there is a drive to be great in some way. And there is nothing wrong with that. But the motivation for greatness can be either carnal or spiritual. Do you know what motivates people to spiritual greatness or just to make it in the kingdom of God? It is their love for God which makes the whole difference. 'I aim to love God with all my heart. I aim to be exactly what He wants me to be in order to please Him. And because of that, I want to obey the law of God.'

I pray that God will so work in the churches today that we have people who press on for the highest, offering nothing less than their best to God.

The Pharisees

Now the Lord Jesus goes on to say something more. Not only greatness in the kingdom of God is determined by a righteousness which conforms to the law, but entry into the kingdom of God is not possible without a conformity to the law better than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. That's what the Lord Jesus says in v. 20. *Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.* The standard of righteousness in the kingdom of God is compared with the standard of the Pharisees.

Here we have to talk about the Pharisees. We often think of the Pharisees as a being the ultimate bad guys in the Bible. They represent the essence of spiritual badness. They have nothing to teach about godliness. They are just a bunch of religious people who went around behaving like hypocrites. If I were to ask you to think of synonyms for Pharisaism, my guess is that the following words would come to your mind: self-righteous, hypocrites, prideful, legalists, nitpicky, judgmental, and so on, so forth.

You know, when I ponder about the Pharisees and about how much space is devoted to them in the Word of God, I tend to think that this is more a distorted picture of the Pharisees than what they are in reality. You have to know something about the Pharisees. And I hope that what I am going to say will help you to get rid of the notion that the Pharisees were just a bunch of foolish hypocrites who only deserve criticism.

The Pharisees rose after the time when the law was being challenged, when people were throwing the law away because the Greek culture was invading Palestine. The very word 'Pharisees' meant 'people who were separated', separated from the crowd. Separated in what way? Separated in their total devotion to the law of God. The Pharisees' one aim was to do the law of God to the smallest details. They committed their entire life to obey God's law.

The Pharisees were a highly respected group of people, respected by all the people of Israel for their high standard of righteousness. They were considered as the perfect examples of the righteous. The historian Josephus wrote about the Pharisees that they tried to 'do all things whereby they might please God.' The Pharisees' top priority was to promote a righteous lifestyle by teaching people how to apply the Word of God to every detail of life in spite of the political and cultural pressures of their time.

In their zeal to follow God, they often did more than what the law required. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in Luke 18:12, the Pharisee said, *I fast twice a week; I give tithes to all that I possess.* The Pharisees fasted twice a week, generally on Mondays and on Thursdays. This is more than what was required by the law. In fact, fasting was not required by the law except for one day of the year, on the Day of Atonement. *I give tithes to all that I possess.* This again is to do more than what the law requires. Under the OT law, there are certain things that you don't need to tithe. But many Pharisees went as far as to tithe everything that they had. And notice. This is more than giving ten percent of your income. So let's clear away the notion that the Pharisees were just a bunch of superficial hypocrites.

Where the Pharisees err

If the Lord Jesus treated them so harshly, it is not because they were so far from the truth, but precisely because they were so close to the truth. You see, it is often to those we love the most that we speak more directly. And this means that sometimes, we have to be harsh.

So what was Jesus' charge against the righteousness of the Pharisees? To make it simple, let me just quote one verse to you. Luke 11:42: *Woe to you Pharisees for you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.*

Jesus did not say that the Pharisees were not pious. He said that their righteousness was hypocritical. *Woe to you, ... hypocrites!* (Luke 11:44) And to be a hypocrite in the context of that verse means to emphasize the external performance of faith to the neglect of the internal, to the neglect of what relates to the heart. Justice, mercy, faithfulness, love. The lesson that we learn from this is that we can be so taken up with following the commandments of God that we forget what we ought to be, that we forget to practice the essence of the law, that is to love. And you know, this applies every bit to the Christians.

Are you a Pharisee?

Let me tell you this. There are many Pharisees in our churches today. There are many hypocrites walking around in our churches. You think I am harsh? Let me ask you these questions.

1. Why is that there are people who know all the right theological answers and don't seem to have a heart commitment to Christ?
2. Why is that when there is a clash between church tradition and what clearly appears to be the teaching of the Bible, tradition wins?
3. Why is it that there are some people who strive so hard to be right and end up in self-righteousness.
4. Why is it that the people who are preaching freedom in Christ keep adding more rules and regulations to the Christian life?
5. Why is it that we often see a discrepancy between the public image of the Christian and his private life?

You know what? You and I, to a certain extent, we are all Pharisees. The Pharisees to whom the Lord Jesus is giving such a harsh treatment are you and I. If we are not able to see ourselves in the Pharisees, then our Christian life would be only one of self-deception. You see, the Pharisees provide one of the best mirrors that we can find in the Bible to reflect the spiritual condition of our hearts. That is why a correct understanding of the Pharisees is so important for our spiritual growth. It always leads to a sense of spiritual bankruptcy and of need for God's help.

Because indeed, who can exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees? How can I meet such a standard? I just can't. I just can't.

But you know the good news? Do you know what God tells us in the Bible? Let us bow our heads and close our eyes. Meditate on what God has to say to us in His Word. This is what He is telling us.

'I never asked you to live the Christian life in your own strength. No amount of human effort is enough to reform the heart. You can try as hard as you can, it's not going to work. You have to let the Lord Jesus fill your life with the Holy Spirit. Because the Christian life is to be lived by the power

of My Spirit. Yield yourself to the Holy Spirit's control and give Him the steering wheel of your life. Then seek to know Me better everyday, through the suffering, the death and the resurrection of My Son.'

'As you are filled by the Holy Spirit and as you draw closer to Me day by day, you will experience My power working through you in ways that you know are not your own. Then your life will be characterized by a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees. And you will be called great in My kingdom.'