

To the Letter Matthew 5: 21-24; 27-28; 43-47 (ZCC 8/17/13)

21 “You have heard that it was said to the ancient ones, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘Whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 22 But I tell you, that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be in danger of the judgment; and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ will be in danger of the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna. 23 “If therefore you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery; 28 but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. 43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. 44 But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? 47 If you only greet your friends, what more do you do than others? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same?”

Christians are taught in Scripture that we are to obey the law of God and the law of the land. Can you think of a situation where you could obey the letter of the law and be wrong?

School starts soon—if you are near a school the speed limit might be 25 miles per hour. If you are driving by there might be a crowd of kids walking near the road and they might be acting silly and pushing and shoving and shouting and playing games as they walk along. Even though the speed limit is 25, you may not want to drive that fast. Why? If you drive that fast, you may run over a kid who is being silly. What is the letter of the law? 25 MPH. What is the SPIRIT of the law? The spirit of the law is keeping kids safe from harm. In that case, you may need to drive slower than required by the law.

Suppose you love to swim and suppose you have taken all the Red Cross lifesaving courses. You go to the beach and you see that the “no swimming” signs are up because of the currents. You look out and you see a small child in the water struggling. No one else is around. You look at the water and see the current isn't so bad where she is—but it is against the law to go in the water—what do you do? What is the letter of the law? Don't go in the water. What is the spirit of the law? Staying safe—saving lives. What do you do?

You probably have heard over and over again how Jesus butted heads with the Pharisees over this subject. They were so caught up in the letter of the law that they didn't care about the spirit of the law at all. In verses 17-20 of this chapter we see Jesus' relationship to the law—that he came to fulfill the law not to take it away and it also says that one must EXCEED the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees if they are going to get to heaven by their own hand—in other words, it isn't going to happen.

Have you ever wondered what it means that he came to FULFILL the law? You and I have read the verse many times—but do we really understand? The idea of “progressive revelation” comes to mind for me—That is the idea that, though God has not changed since the days of Genesis, he has revealed himself more and more and better and better since then. We find a more complete understanding of God in the Gospels and the MOST complete picture of the Father in the life and works of Jesus of Nazareth—in fact, Jesus said that if you have seen him—you have seen the Father.

There seems to be a similar revealing in the law. From the first giving of the law, each rule had a principle within—though the principle was not directly revealed. The Hebrews were simply required to hold to the letter of the law.

By the time Jesus came along, they were adhering to the letter, as they interpreted it, but many were violating the principle contained within. One thing that Jesus did was reveal the principle—the spirit—behind the law. He held to a higher standard than just the letter, he held to the principle. The law says that we are not to murder. The principle is that humans were created in the image of God—a special creation, if you will—and human life is to be treated with respect and honor. Not murdering is showing respect for human life, but hate shows disrespect.

One reason the Pharisees were mad at Jesus was because he messed up their system, the system that they had perfected, often using the letter of the law to do what was evil in the eyes of God—though they thought themselves righteous. For instance, the command not to steal holds the principle of property rights—yet they were using levitical law to take property from widows. It was legal, but violated the principle behind the law.

Verse 21 says. “you have heard that it was said to the ancients...” and Jesus was acknowledging that commoners could not read the law for themselves. Hebrew was no longer their language and even if one were literate, they were not likely to be able to read Hebrew. They were at the mercy of their teachers, those who read and interpreted the law for them.

This was similar to the Christian church in the Middle Ages where the commoners also could not read the Word (which was in Latin) and were bound to believe what they were told, even if it was incorrect.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made six statements about the law as given to the people and then explains the principle behind the law—the spirit of the law. We only read three of them, but the others are similar.

Jesus' desire was to show the true meaning and intent of the law in general, but also these six laws in particular. He wanted to correct the wrong conclusions reached by the scribes and Pharisees and passed on to the people.

To do this, Jesus used what I'll call “radical principles.” Between verses 21 and 47 we find five of those radical principles.

I've already talked about the first radical principle. When it comes to the law, the spirit matters more than the letter. The law was not meant to be mechanical but living. One main problem with the Pharisees was that they concentrated on the letter—but with no interest in the spirit of the law. 2nd Corinthians 3: 4-6 says: *4 Such confidence we have through Christ toward God; 5 not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God; 6 who also made us sufficient as servants of a new covenant; not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.* The Jewish leaders had so concentrated on the letter that they had destroyed the spirit.

Of course, the spirit of the law always has to take some form. The principle is that we want safe highways, so we set a maximum speed. We want to keep our lives safe so we outlaw murder. If the spirit is not included, we must be enslaved by the letter. The Pharisees did not murder because it was against the law. So they believed that they had kept the law perfectly—but they missed the greater point that we are to have loving and right attitudes toward our fellow human beings. The letter certainly matters, but to concentrate only on the letter brings disrespect to the spirit. Jesus says to put the spirit of the law first and allow it to interpret the letter of the law for us.

The second radical principle is similar. Conformity to the law must not be thought of only in terms of actions. Thoughts, motives, and desires are even more important than the letter. The principle of the law is concerned with the circumstances leading up to the wrong action. The action matters, but the act of breaking the law has its roots in breaking the principle.

The Pharisees were only concerned about the ACT of murder or the ACT of adultery. Jesus emphasized that it is the DESIRE to do these things that is REALLY reprehensible. The desire is the evil behind the evil and it is as bad or worse than the act. Jesus was telling them and is telling us that God is interested in the heart first. We should think think of pleasing God in terms of our inner being.

The third radical principle is, the law must not be thought of only in the negative—but also in the positive. The ultimate purpose of the law is more than preventing us from doing wrong, The ultimate purpose is to cause us to do and be and live and love right. God wants us to do right, not because of the law, but because for our love for righteousness. The focus of the law as the Pharisees understood it was negative. “you shall not steal” and “you shall not murder” “you shall not have other gods before me.” Jesus came to show that if we are lovers of righteousness, hungering and thirsting after it, we won't have to negatively avoid that which is evil—we will be embracing that which is right and good.

This is where we all get a chance to wag some fingers at the Pharisees. Let's do that. Wag your finger and say, “those Pharisees!” Do it again.

OK—I admit, it was a trick. See, I've been in the church since before I was born—and I'm afraid that many of us use the rules much like the Pharisees did. Often we are known for regarding the law only in negative terms as they did—adhering to a list of “thou shalt not's” that keep us looking and feeling righteous because of what we don't do and what we aren't—instead of having our righteous actions flow from our inner being—the principles and the actions that come from embracing the spirit of God's law.

The fourth radical principle is, the purpose of the law is to develop our spiritual character, not to keep us in a state of obedience to a set of oppressive rules. This is really important. Living a holy life should never be thought of as living in servitude—oppressed by a set of grievous rules. As he expounded the law, Jesus was offering them—and us—an opportunity to grow and develop as children of God, growing to be like him. In 1st John, we are told that the commands of Christ as NOT grievous. If we think the ethical teachings of the New Testament are narrow and restrictive, then we don't understand the gospel. The purpose of the Gospel is to bring us the Glorious LIBERTY that comes from being the children of God. If the principles of the law and of Christ's righteousness are IN us, then right love and right living and right acts will flow from our being.

The fifth radical principle is the law of God and the ethical teachings of Scripture are not an end unto themselves. They are more than rules we must try not to break. All of the law and all of the teachings have a greater end—that you and I might come to know God. The scribes and Pharisees had pinned the law up on the bulletin board so all could see. They viewed them in the negative--"I have not murdered or committed adultery or stolen or any of those things, so I am righteous before God and man." As long as they kept the code, they were A-OK. We Christians are expected to look at our relationship to God differently from that. We are to think in terms of pleasing God and in terms of our personal relationship to him. AS we prepare for bed and as we look back on our day, we shouldn't be going over a list of things we didn't do and the laws we didn't break—thanking God that all is well between us and him.

Jesus challenges us to ask, "was God supreme in my life today? Did I live my life to the glory and honor of God in all I thought as well as all I did? Has anything in my heart dishonored Christ? Have my thoughts, imaginations, and desires been within the will of God for me?" If we ask THOSE questions, we are examining ourselves in the light of our living savior—not in terms of mechanical rules.

The letter of the Law and the commands of Christ simply point us to the spirit. If we think we can live a victorious Christian life by simply following a set of rules, we have failed. A true Christian life is lived through a direct, living, and vital relationship to God through the Christ.

Let me try to quickly bring these radical principles to a point. Christian discipline is good and is essential—but if our main focus is conforming to the discipline then we have missed the point. Fasting and prayer are good, but if they are done for their own sake we have missed the principle—that of deepening our relationship to God.

This congregation was put here to glorify God and to learn more about him and to have fellowship and to do the work of Christ. Our public worship is not an end unto itself, if it became that—if it was a mechanical rule—then we might as well not meet at all.

From a personal standpoint, my job here is to help us all understand the Gospel better and to put it into action in our lives. My job is to seek to explain God's word in a way that helps us understand God better and know and love him more. If my purpose is simply to meet a mechanical requirement to preach a sermon, what I say is in vain and I might as well keep my mouth shut—in fact it would be better if I did.

According to Jesus, the law is not just a dead set of rules and regulations. The law is alive. God intends us to use it to find him and to develop a deep relationship with him.

The five principles I pointed out were definitely radical in Jesus' time. Unfortunately, many Christians give the Pharisees a run for their money on rule-following without the internal principles—without holding to the spirit of God's law.

Are we Christians because of what we are against and what we don't do, or are we Christians because of who God is in our hearts—because of what we are for and what naturally flows from our relationship with God?

Do you remember me quoting Mother Theresa recently? I think that same quote works here: “Instead of standing against evil, why don't we march forward for the good?”