

Title: New Discipleship and the Old Law

Text: Matthew 5:17-48

This section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48) is definite in itself and clear in purpose: it contrasts the new law of love with the old law of works.

Jesus was reared in the Jewish law, and could well have said with the psalmist: "O how I love thy law." Surely he had no wish to remove even a "dot" (the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet) or a "iota" (one small part of a Hebrew alphabet letter). Yet it is probable that Matthew belonged to the conservative Jewish wing of the early church, and that therefore he was eager to stress Christ's concern for the Law, lest those who might be converts from Judaism should fear that Christ was a heretic. The fact is that Christ broke with the Law which faithful Jews almost revered. Paul told Gentile converts that they need not enter the new faith through any Judaistic door, and Christ himself said: "You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you." Thus the break: Jesus becomes a new Law. How could he break with the Law, and yet "fulfill" it? The six instances or teachings of our Scripture will show this. I would like to consider them and then I shall return to answer our question.

(1)n First Case : DISCIPLESHIP AND THE LAW IN REGARDS TO MURDER.

(vs 21-26)

The Law was clear: "Thou shalt not kill" is the sixth commandment. But Christ goes beyond and beneath the Law. If a man is angry with his neighbor, or if he says something mean about his neighbor he is guilty of murder. Such a man is not brought before human courts, but stands nevertheless before the judgment seat of God. Contempt, anger, and a

cherished grudge are so dark in God's sight that, if the angry man brings a special sacrifice to the Temple, he would be wise to leave it there while he seeks reconciliation with his enemy, and only then return to worship.

Jesus is quite clear about this basic fact - we cannot be right with God until we are right with men; we cannot hope for forgiveness until we have confessed our sin, not only to God, but also to men, and until we have done our best to remove the practical consequences of it. We sometimes wonder why there is a barrier between us and God; we sometimes wonder why our prayers seem to go as far as the ceiling. The reason may well be that we ourselves have erected that barrier, because we are at ends with our fellowmen, or because we have wronged someone and have done nothing to put things right.

2. SECOND CASE (VS. 27-30) : DISCIPLESHIP AND THE LAW IN REGARD TO ADULTERY

This recalls the sixth beatitude. The Law confined adultery to sexual ^{union} (intercourse) with ^{one's} the wife. The tenth commandment forbids a man to "covet" his neighbors's wife. But Christ says that the sexual desire is as wrong as the unworthy sexual act: vs. 28 " I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." It were better to cut off the lustful hand and to pluck out the lustful eye. I would like to point out that no literal fulfillment of cutting off the hand or plucking out the eye is expected, but we use the carefulness as escape and as excuse for indifference. The sharpness of the language shows the ~~stringency~~ strictness of Christ's concern. We dramatize our temptations, and go to meet them, instead of thrusting them from us. Even if the eye should not be amputated, the lustful look should.

We agree, as did the Jews, that good intentions are reckoned in God's mercy as good deeds; but we assume, as did the Jews, that evil intentions are not as bad as evil deeds. ^{We Reason} Why not? Maybe if a man shrinks from the deed, his desires have changed. But that is not necessarily true. Look at the sexual "freedom" and the prostitution of our times, and then read again versus 27-30. There is a great gulf set.

3. THIRD CASE: (VS. 31-32) DISCIPLESHIP AND THE LAW IN REGARD TO MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE.

The "certificate of divorce" was the man's privilege because a wife then could not divorce her husband, but the "certificate" was still intended to protect the woman: it would not be retracted, and she would show it to prove her liberty. She would even apply to the courts for the certificate if her husband were diseased, or engaged in trade or vows contrary to the Law. There was concern for "the weaker sex." But Christ forbade divorce outrightly, for it is generally agreed among scholars that the words, "except for unchastity," are probably a late addition to the original text.

The early church had to meet the problem of divorce, as we do also in our time. If you read I Corinthians 7:12-15, you will see the church of Corinth wrestling with the same issue. If a husband is wanton, or murderous, or insane, should divorce be forbidden? In Mark's Gospel (10:2-9) Jesus says that the Law does not "allow" the "bill of divorcement," but suffers it because of the "hardness" of men's hearts.

Perhaps we have the beginning fo an answer in that word. But we must always guard against the temptation to dilute the teachings of Christ. Marriage biologically is for the ongoing of the race. More deeply it is for the joy of the family. Most deeply it is a sacramental act, "signifying the mystical union that is between Christ and his church," the bond between God and man. Anyone who says, "Oh, well, if it doesn't work out, we can get a divorce," is under judgment. Isn't it strange that we train for athletics, business, and the professions, but we do no train for marriage and the obligations of citizenship in God's kindom? In these verses the teachings of ~~Christ~~/ Christ is very clear. In Christian marriage the man and woman should give themselves to a preparation of the soul, far, far more deeply than in our "wedding rehearsals."

4. FOURTH CASE: (VS 33-37) DISCIPLESHIP AND THE LAW IN REGARD TO OATHS.

This passage deals with oaths and vows, but more with truth-telling, because oaths imply that some men lie. When we say, "Cross my heart," we are confessing that we are not always so serious with the truth. The rabbis of Christ's day carried on a hairsplitting controversy about oaths. An oath in the name of God was always binding, but an oath "by heaven and earth" or "by Jerusalem" was not.

But Christ sweeps away the whole business. "Let your ~~commitments~~ ~~be~~ yes ^{by} yes, and your no mean no." Why? Because a man's life is under God who is TRUTH. "Heaven" is his throne, "earth" is his footstool, and "Jerusalem" a city where he is king. So every oath or vow is directly or indirectly in his name - and every word we speak.

Again this strictness brings questions: should a physician tell the patient he has cancer if that word may kill the patient then and there from shock? The N.T. injunction is harder than a demand to tell the truth: we are to tell "the truth in love." How careless we are with words. Words are deeds, deeds of the lips. They can ~~be~~ hurt or save. They are the most instant means of communication with our neighbors, the most flexible and so the most easily twisted, ~~and the most~~

5. FIFTH CASE: (vs 38-42) DISCIPLESHIP AND THE LAW IN REGARD TO REVENGE.

The old law was "an eye for an eye"; so much injury inflicted, so much requital. We must remember that the law represented a great advance. It forbade more retribution ~~to~~ than injury, and ended the family ~~blood~~ blood feuds which at each alternate retaliation grew in violence and cruelty.

But Jesus here requires not merely a further advance but a totally new attitude: the disciple will not expect, much less demand, ANY requital. If an enemy strikes him with the back of the hand on the right cheek, he will endure the follow-through with the palm of the hand on the other cheek; if a hostile neighbor sues for the undergarment, he will let him have the outer ~~cloak~~ coat also; if a Roman soldier says, "Here you: carry this." the disciple will carry it not only the mile required by the law of the conqueror, but also an ~~extra~~ extra mile.

Compare the whittling down implied in OUR interpretation of "the second mile": we use it of any extra, unrequired labor (usually for our own good), but in the teaching of Jesus it is used of our act toward an enemy. But isn't this demand of Christ simply more than human nature can stand? The answer is NO. If it were ~~not~~ more than human nature could stand, Jesus would not have told us to live this way. ~~Jesus~~

Jesus told us to follow it to the letter. He told us to endure injury rather than inflict it, and he told us to ~~despise~~ to help the one who suffers. WHY? For the love of God, and consequent love of man. How is an enemy changed to a friend? Not by retaliation. Not by law. But by love - concern - patience - If we are truly concerned about our neighbor as a person and a child of God, one who needs to be saved, then we will not retaliate with force when we are wronged, but we will retaliate with love.

6. SIXTH CASE: (VS 43-47) DISCIPLESHIP AND THE LAW IN REGARD TO THE LOVE OF OUR NEIGHBOR.

In fairness, we must understand that the old Law never prescribed hatred of an enemy, but certainly "neighbor" was usually taken to mean a ~~fellow-Jew~~ fellow-Jew, despite the wider humaneness of certain teachings. "Love your enemies" was startling teaching. So was, "Pray for those who persecute you."

The scripture gives us three reasons for this new teaching and they are almost as startling as the teaching: (1) life is on a vertical line, and that line must be kept unbroken -- we must live as God's children; (2) discipleship should show others a new thing in the world. a choice between a life which is lived for self and a life lived under the freedom of God. (3) God is kind in his providence to the just and the unjust, and his children (being "perfect"; meaning, not sinless, but honest with God and therefore consistent in good will toward men) will do as he would do, trusting in his power and grace.

The problem with living as Christ commanded us to live is that so many people try to do so in their own power. In plain fact, we cannot keep the demands of Christ in our own broken and sinful powers. But, we can plead his pardon and receive by his grace a new heart and a right spirit, and so learn more and more to live in love toward God and our fellowmen.
