

The Spirit and the Letter

(Matthew 5: 21-48)

(The Five Principles that Govern Matthew 5:21-48)

As we prepare to move into Matthew 5:21 and following let's review where we have been. Our Lord is concerned to describe the citizens of the kingdom of heaven. First and foremost, He gives us in the Beatitudes a general description of the essential nature of the Christian. Then He goes on to tell us about the function and the purpose of the Christian in this life and world by describing us as salt and light. Then we saw that this brings Him immediately the question of the relationship of the committed Christian to the law. It was essential that He should do this because the people to whom He was speaking were Jews who had been taught the law, and obviously they would evaluate any new teaching in terms of the law. So He had to show them the relationship of Himself and His teaching to the law, and He does that in verses 17-20 summing it up in that vital statement which we considered last week:

“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.”

Now here, at verse 21, He begins to show us what he means by this statement. He develops the relationship of the Christian to the law in two ways. He gives us His own positive exposition of the law, and He also contrasts it with the false teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. It can be said that the whole of the remainder of the Sermon, from verse 21 right through to the end of chapter seven is nothing but an elaboration of that fundamental teaching of Jesus'. Our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if we are to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

- For the remainder of chapter five Jesus does this by concentrating on a true understanding of the law over against the false teaching of the Pharisees and the scribes.
- His main concern in chapter six is to show the true nature of fellowship with God, over against the Pharisaical teaching and practice on this matter.

· Then in chapter seven He is concerned with what true righteousness looks like, once more contrasted with what was taught and practised by the Pharisees and the scribes.

This is the essential analysis of the teaching, which we must try to hold in our minds, if we are to understand what Jesus is saying here.

In verses 21-48, then, our Lord is concerned mainly to give a true account of the law. He does this by putting forward a series of six statements. The first is in verse 21: "You have heard that it was said by those of old, "You shall not murder". The next comes in verse 27 where He says "You have heard that it was said by those of old, "You shall not commit adultery.' Then in verse 31 we read: "Furthermore it has been said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce". The next is in verse 33: "Again you have heard that it was said by those of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord ". Then in verse 38 we read: "You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." And the last is in verse 43: "You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."

It is important, before we come to deal with each of these statements individually that we consider them together as a whole. You will see at that there are certain principles which are common to all six. I would like to suggest that our Lord was really more concerned about these common principles than He was about the particulars. In other words, He lays down certain principles and then illustrates them. Obviously, therefore, we must make certain that we really grasp the principles first. There are five of them.

1. First, it is the spirit of the law that matters primarily, not the letter only.

The law was not meant to be mechanical, but living. The whole trouble with the Pharisees and the scribes was that they concentrated only on the letter, and they did so to the exclusion of the spirit. It is a great subject— this relationship between form and content. Spirit is always something that must be embodied in form, and that is where the difficulty arises. Men and women will ever concentrate on the form rather than on the content; upon the letter rather than upon the spirit. The whole purpose of the

letter is to give body to the spirit; and the spirit is the thing that really matters, not the mere letter. Take, for example, this question of murder. As long as the Pharisees and scribes did not actually murder a man they thought they had kept the law perfectly. But they were missing the whole point and spirit of the law, which is not merely that I should literally not commit murder, but that my attitude towards my fellow should be a right and loving one. Likewise, with all these other illustrations. The mere fact that you do not commit adultery in an actual physical sense does not mean that you have kept the law. What is your spirit? What is your desire as you look, and so on? It is the spirit, not the letter that counts.

It is clear, then, that if we rely only upon the letter we shall completely misunderstand the law. Let me emphasize that this applies not only to the Law of Moses, but still more, in a sense, to the Sermon on the Mount. We can look at the letter of the Sermon on the Mount and so miss its spirit. There are people who do this with turning the other cheek, and giving to those who ask gifts of us, bringing the whole teaching into ridicule. We always have to ask the question: What is at the heart of Jesus' teaching given the particular words he is using?

That does not mean of course that the letter does not matter; but it does mean that we must put the spirit before it and interpret the letter according to the spirit.

Now take a second principle, which, is really another way of putting the first.

2. Conformity to the law must not be thought of in terms of actions only.

Thoughts, motives and desires are equally important. The law of God is concerned as much with what leads to the action, as it is with the action itself. Again it does not mean that the action does not matter; but it does mean very definitely that it is not the action only that is important. The scribes and Pharisees were concerned only about the *act* of adultery or the *act* of murder. But our Lord was at pains to emphasize to them that it is the desire in person's heart and mind to do these things that is really and ultimately reprehensible in the sight of God. Jesus repeatedly taught that it is out of the heart that evil thoughts, and actions come. It is the heart or the spirit of person that matters. Jesus always understood conversion as starting in the heart and working outwards from there.

(Please refer to the illustration at the end of last week's sermon to see this depicted schematically).

So we must not think of this law of God and of pleasing God merely in terms of what we do or do not do; it is the inward condition and attitude that God is always observing. In Luke 16:15 Jesus addressed this when saying to the Pharisees:

“You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

The next principle we can put in this form.

3. The law must be thought of not only in a negative manner, but also positively.

The ultimate purpose of the law is not merely to prevent our doing certain things that are wrong; its real object is to lead us positively, not only to do that which is right, but also to love it. Here again is something, which comes out clearly in these six illustrations. The whole Pharisaical conception of the law was a negative one. I must not commit adultery, I must not commit murder, and so on. But our Lord emphasizes all along that what God is really concerned about is that we should be lovers of righteousness. We should be hungering and thirsting after righteousness, not merely negatively avoiding that which is evil.

Psalms 119 is the longest Psalm in the Psalter. It is 176 verses long and the focus of this prayer is the Law of God. Listen to how the psalmist prays: “I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word. Your testimonies also *are* my delight *And* my counselors. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it. Incline my heart to Your testimonies, And not to covetousness. Let Your tender mercies come to me, that I may live; For Your law *is* my delight.” As we walk in the power of the Spirit we will discover more and more that as we love God's will, we will have a deepening hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

What is the fourth principle Jesus presents to us this morning?

The purpose of the law as expounded by Christ is not to keep us in a state of obedience to oppressive rules, but to promote the free development of our spiritual character.

This is vitally important. We must not think of the holy life, the way of sanctification, that is becoming more like Jesus, as something hard and grievous which puts us into a state of servitude. No, not at all. The glorious possibility that is offered us by the gospel of Christ is development as children of God and growing to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 'His commandments', says John in his first Epistle are not burdensome" So if you and I regard the ethical teaching of the New Testament as something that cramps us, if we think of it as something narrow and restrictive, it means we have never understood it. The whole purpose of the gospel is to bring us into 'the glorious liberty of the children of God', and these six statements in chapter 5 are simply particular illustrations of how we may arrive at that and enjoy it.

This in turn brings us to the fifth principle.

The law of God, and all these ethical instructions of the Bible, must never be regarded as an end in themselves.

We must never think of them as something to which we just have to try to conform. The ultimate objective of all this teaching is that you and I might come to know God. Now these Pharisees and scribes (and the apostle Paul said it was true of him too before he was truly converted) put, as it were, the Ten Commandments and the moral law on the wall, and having viewed them in this negative, restricted manner said: 'Well, now; I am not guilty of these various things, therefore I am all right. I am righteous, and all is well between God and me.' You see they viewed the law as something in and of itself. They codified it in this way, and as long as they kept to that code they said all was well. But the Lord said this is wrong.

So here's the application of these principles:

The one test which you must always apply to yourself is this, 'What is my relationship to God? Do I know Him? Am I pleasing Him?' In other words, as you examine yourself before you go to bed, you do not just ask yourself if you have committed murder or adultery, or whether you have been guilty of this or that, and if you have not, thank God that all is well. No. You ask yourself rather, 'Has God been supreme

in my life today? Have I lived to the glory and the honour of God? Do I know Him better? Have I a zeal for His honour and glory? Has there been anything in me that has been unlike Christ—thoughts, imaginations, desires, impulses? That *is* the way. In other words, you examine yourself in the light of a living Person and not merely in terms of a mechanical code of rules and regulations. And as the law must not be thought of as an end in itself, neither must the Sermon on the Mount. These sayings in chapter five are a tool which are meant to bring us into that true and living relationship with God. We must always be very careful, that we not do to the Sermon on the Mount what the Pharisees and the scribes had been doing with the old moral law. These six examples chosen by our Lord are nothing but illustrations of principles. It is the spirit not the letter that matters; it is the intent, object and purpose that are important. The one thing we have to avoid above everything else in our Christian lives is this fatal tendency to live the Christian life apart from a direct, living, and true relationship to God.

You see discipline in the Christian life is a good and essential thing. But if your main object and intent is to conform to the discipline that you have set for yourself it may very well be the greatest danger to your soul. Fasting and prayer are good things; but if you fast on a given day or pray at a particular hour order to carry out your discipline, then you have missed the whole object of fasting and praying. There is no point in either of them, or in observing Lent, or in anything else that is meant to be an aid to the spiritual life, unless they bring us into a deeper relationship to God. I may stop smoking or I may stop drinking during these six weeks or at any other period. But if during that time my poverty of spirit is not greater, my sense of weakness is not deepened, my hunger and thirst after God and righteousness is not greatly increased, then I might just as well not have done it at all. Indeed I would say it would be very much better for me if I had not done it. All this is the fatal danger of making these things ends in themselves. We can be guilty of the same thing with public worship. If public worship becomes an end in itself, if my sole object in a pulpit is to preach a sermon and not to try to explain the blessed gospel of God that you and I, and all of us, may come to know and love Him better, my preaching is vain and it may be the thing that will damn my soul.

These things Jesus teaches are meant to be aids to help us and illustrations of the Word. Next week we will move from the general to the particular as we consider verses 21-30.