

A New Law

JESUS said unto his disciples, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother with out a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift be fore the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with Him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

How would those who sat before Jesus on the mountain where He delivered this famous sermon, which in our modern Bibles covers three whole chapters, have ever recovered? When his words had ceased, and the sound of his ringing voice had died out, his listeners must have sat and pondered them in silence. The very last verses of Matthew 7 tell us: *And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (7:28, 29).*

We are used to these words, having heard them many times before. But for his immediate audience the whole nature of the message was unprecedented. He was describing for them a new law, one which could never be properly observed merely by outward motions of obedience. No, it was a law that was to be inserted into the very innermost reaches of their conscience, governing their very attitudes, setting itself up as an arbiter even of their thoughts. Surely they would have been reminded of the ancient prophecy from Jeremiah 31:

31 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: 33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

So superior is this new law that obedience to it will require a *righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the pharisees*. This concept alone was past imagining. How could the practices of the observant Jewish leaders, who governed their every waking moment by some inference drawn from the Law of Moses, ever be equalled, let alone superseded? If the Kingdom of Heaven, toward which every good heart longed, could only be attained in this

manner, it would have appeared to recede farther and farther away.

It is a good thing that Jesus had introduced the entire sermon with words filled with mercy, grace, promise, and hope, those that we call the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.* These were words addressed to the powerless, to those with no inner resources of their own. The Beatitudes were the very best starting place for that small crowd of followers who alone Jesus had found worthy that day to introduce to the terms of the New Covenant which make up the rest of the sermon.

From the standpoint of hindsight we can also see that Jesus introduced the laws of the Kingdom before He described exactly how they would be *put in their inward parts, and written in their hearts*. Would mere verbal instruction do it? Would fasting and prayer alter one's disposition toward obedience? If no amount of self-discipline, rigor, and attention to minutiae had availed the scribes and pharisees in their pursuit of righteousness, what sort of force, external or internal, could possibly motivate a person to live by principles that extend to the root of one's being?

The group of disciples on the mountainside could not have known about the reality of the Holy Spirit, who is indeed the activating principle that causes the human heart to love God's law, to desire it, providing also the power to fulfill it. The Spirit is the means whereby the law of God is written within us, so that it ceases to be merely a set of rules and regulations that, if their scope is really comprehended, cannot possibly be perfectly obeyed. In St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians, where He contrasts the two covenants in unmistakable terms, He declares with utmost force: *...for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified (2:16)*. How then shall that person who *hunger and thirsts after righteousness* (Mt. 5:6a) be able to live by that law? *Walk in the Spirit!* wrote Paul in that same letter. It is indeed the indwelling presence of God, the law written in our hearts, that provides the sheer ability to put the precious words of Jesus into practice.

Let's go back to today's text, to consider the magnitude of the expectations of the New Covenant. *[W]hosoever is angry with his brother with out a cause shall be in danger of the judgment*. Now, did Jesus not mean what He said? How often does anger rise up unbidden within oneself? How often is the jaw clenched, and the fingers curled into a fist, unknown to anyone but us? *In danger of the judgment*. This is the new covenant. It brings a new standard. It expects, even demands, obedience. *[W]hosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council. Raca:* "You idiot!" How frequently is our Christian spirit polluted, not by the sin and

wickedness that surrounds us, but by that which arises so readily within. Did Jesus mean what He said? *[B]ut whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.* “You worthless, stupid fool!” But it isn't the rude driver who cut me off in traffic with whom Jesus is concerned, nor the self-centered person in line in front of me at WalMart, nor the annoying phone solicitor who endures the explosive crack of my hung-up receiver for his efforts. No, it is I. And we've only looked at a mere fragment of Jesus' sermon, thus far!

I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. It is a law that oversees me not from the outside, but from within, through the indwelling Spirit. It monitors every motion I make, not with my hands and feet, not where I can parade my righteousness proudly before others, but in the very innermost secret spaces of my being. It stands as the guardian of every impulse, taking hold of me and drawing me back to God, before I yield to that which will separate me from Him. We call that conviction. It is a warning. For every sin unchecked can easily develop into an attitude, and an attitude unchanged can become a way of life, and a way of life lived out can yield *the judgment, or the council, or hell fire?* Did Jesus mean what He said?

Christ's sermon is over. Together with the crowd, we sit in stunned silence. But we are privy to a secret unknown to them. Within a few short years, the young Preacher will Himself be crucified so *that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit* (Ro. 8:4). Three days later He will rise from the dead to justify those who place their faith in Him. And in forty more days on Pentecost, following his ascension to the Father's right hand. He will pour forth that same Spirit upon the Church, the Spirit who inscribes the law of Christ upon the tablets of the heart.

Read this sermon for yourselves. It establishes a standard that is wonderful. There is not a principle within it with which we can take issue. It is as personal a word as could ever have been spoken. It is not academic. It is very easy to understand. We should be so familiar with its intention that it becomes like a post-it note hanging continually everywhere within us, so we will never miss it.

I think Jesus means what He says.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.