

Matthew 5:20

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[0 : 00] Our sermon this evening is taken from the passage which I have just read, St. Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 5. Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 5.

We shall be considering mainly verse 20, but I shall read from verse 17 again. Matthew, Chapter 5, Verse 17.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one little shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.

[1 : 00] But whosoever shall do them, shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

In the RSV it says, verse 20 says, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is a clear warning of our Lord Jesus Christ, telling us that he is not calling Christians to an easy life. It is a life of relationship with him as our Savior, and it is a life with some obligations.

It is not a life by which we will say, let us eat and rejoice, do what we want, because Jesus Christ has done everything for us.

[2 : 27] It is certainly in Jesus Christ, yet at the same time, it is a life of caution, and a life of some effort.

It is not a life by which we can sit and relax, but it is a life into which our own effort is taken into consideration.

Though we know we are saved in Christ, we also know that we have to put some effort in. It is a life which has got two sides, God working in us, and we play in our part.

It is a life of which St. Paul says, work out your own salvation with fear and with trembling. And he adds, because God is at work in you.

So there are these two sides to the life of the Christian. It is a life to which God has called you. It is a life in which God himself is working in you.

[3 : 40] But at the same time, it is a life to which you yourself are contributing. The fact that God is at work in us does not mean that we should relax and take it easy.

On the contrary, it means, as St. Paul says, we should work hard with fear and with trembling. But let us read the passage, the text again.

It says, I tell you, unless, for I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The way the verse is put immediately shows, it begins with four. It immediately shows that this verse has to be understood in its context.

We cannot take it out of context and be able to understand it. And the context here is from verse 17 to 20. In this verse 17, from verse 17 to 20, and in fact, there is a larger context from verse 17 to verse 48.

[5 : 00] Our Lord gives his attitude to the law. He gives his attitude to the law of the Old Testament. And he redefines the law and applies it to the life of the Christian.

Earlier on in verses 1 to 16, he deals with the Beatitudes by the Beatitudes. He tells what sort of character a Christian ought to have.

He gives a detailed description in the Beatitudes of the true Christian, who the true Christian should be. And we should read this Beatitudes from time to time.

Take it and read it coolly and see how Jesus means a Christian to be. Now he has, having described the Christian as somebody who is meek, somebody who is a peacemaker, he now considers the Christian's relationship with the law, the law of the Old Testament.

What is the relationship of you and me to the law in the Old Testament? What is the place of the law of the Old Testament in the life of the Christian?

[6 : 27] Are we still to obey the complete law of the Old Testament? Or because Jesus Christ is our Savior, we should say we are okay with Jesus Christ, therefore let us throw the law out.

what is our relationship to the law? What have we throughout our Christian life, since we became Christians, since we became aware of Christianity, how have we related ourselves to the law?

How have we taught of it? Here in this passage, our Lord to show us what attitude we should have to the law, he begins by showing us what his attitude is to the law.

He starts with first by saying that by his own behavior, people may have thought that he had come to abolish the law.

That is how he begins in verse 17. He says, do not think I have come to abolish the law. I have not come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it.

[7 : 48] You see, by his behavior, the Pharisees may have thought he had come to abolish the law. There is no doubt the Pharisees even thought he was a lawbreaker.

We find his disciples plucking the ears the grain of corn on the sabbath. we find Jesus himself healing on the sabbath day. And again, and again, we find his disciples eating with unwashed hands.

And worse of all, as one of our commentators points out, we find Jesus, Jesus must have looked a strange person to the Pharisees because he did not belong to the class of the scribes or the Pharisees.

Yet, he was standing before them as a teacher. And of course, a critical teacher at that. He was a very critical teacher. He didn't teach just what he had to teach.

He taught while at the same time criticizing the attitudes of the Pharisees. Look at, for instance, Matthew 23 where he gives a list of condemnations of the Pharisees and the scribes.

[9 : 04] that shows the critical nature of our Lord. So he must have looked as a kind of strange person.

The Pharisees, for instance, would have nothing to do with the common people. They referred to them as publicans and sinners. And yet, our Lord not only associated with these people, he sat down and ate with them.

In modern terms, that means these kind of people who we may refer to as the down and outs, those who may not have proper accommodation, or who may live in the parts of the cities which may be referred to as slum areas.

These were the kind of people he showed he had time for. And in our day we know a gentleman does not look for friends among such people.

So imagine the shock of the scribes and the Pharisees and even the Sadducees when they saw Jesus Christ not only befriending such people whom they call sinners but sitting down to eat with them.

[10 : 21] So, he was really a strange person. So, they may have looked at him as somebody who had come to destroy the law.

He was not taking their law seriously. Thus, Jesus, and to some extent St. Paul, had a certain attitude to the law which the Pharisees would have seen as very radical at least.

If they would not call him a roi-breaker, they would say he was very radical in his attitude to the law. And this was mainly due to the fact that the law as it stood in those days may be referred to as the scribal law.

It was radically different from what the law in effect was meant to be. If they said the law, they did not mean just the Old Testament, they did not mean the law as we can all read it in the Old Testament, but they meant the scribal law.

That is the law of the scribes. The law of the scribes came about by a genuine attempt of the scribes. The scribes were very genuine and sincere in their attempts to obey God.

[11 : 46] God. But their sincere attempt to obey God, the law of God, soon degenerated into a kind of legalism.

And they built up all sorts of material alongside the law which people ought to obey. For instance, the Old Testament gives no detailed rules and regulations for life.

what we find are broad principles of the law. However, the later Jews, especially the scribes and the Pharisees, saw that that was not enough.

To them, the law should contain everything, every detail for life. So if a thing was not in the law explicitly, they said it must be there implicitly.

So it became their job, the job of the scribes, to work out the details of the rules and regulations that we must have in our daily life.

[12 : 57] For example, the law says you should keep the Sabbath holy, and you should not work on the Sabbath. the scribes will ask, what is work?

You may come to the answer that well, work means a number of things, including do not carry a burden. But the next question would be, what is a burden?

What amount of weight should we consider as a burden, so that we wouldn't carry that amount of weight on the Sabbath? Then came a number of answers.

One which is historically true was milk heavy enough for one swallow. Milk heavy enough for you to swallow at once was considered a burden.

Honey heavy enough to put on a womb, so you wouldn't carry that on the Sabbath. Sabbath. So the scribes, they spent long time arguing whether a tailor committed sin if he went out on the Sabbath day with a needle hanging in his dress, because the needle is heavy.

[14 : 17] It was a burden to carry the needle on the Sabbath day. Today, we have to respect these people. This was, to them, that was religion.

It was a matter of life and death. To them, that was the goal of religion. They had failed to see the main point in religion that man must seek the will of God, and when you have found the will of God, you dedicate your life to obey in it.

They did the dedication part. They dedicated themselves to obeying, but what they obeyed may have been wrong. This is what our Lord meant by saying that he had come to fulfill the law.

He had come to bring back the real meaning and significance of the law. he had come to bring out the fundamental meaning of the law, to bring out the point that in religion, in our relationship with God, in our attempt to obey God, we should realize that the main point is reverence to God and respect for man.

And that reverence to God and respect for man does not come by obeying petty rules and regulations, but it comes by love.

[16 : 05] And that is the emphasis of our Lord in his reinterpretation of the law. love. A positive commandment of love, love that builds a new character, love that builds a true character of true relationship with God, leading on to a new attitude to the law.

Hence our Lord says, his followers must be more righteous than the scribes and the Pharisees. on the face of it, it looks difficult because, as we have just explained, the Pharisees dedicated themselves to obeying the law.

If you look at it from the point of view of the law, you will realize that we stand honestly, we stand no chance with the Pharisees as far as the obeying of the law is concerned.

It could even be said obedience of the law was their profession. After all, the name Pharisee means the separated ones, those who separated themselves from society in order to perfectly obey the law and commands of God.

They did not want any contamination from the public, the common people, so that they would be in a better position to obey God. That is the meaning of Pharisee.

[17 : 39] They separated themselves in order to obey God. For instance, if they went to the market side and returned, they had to reach and avoid themselves of the contamination they may have had on the market side because they felt, well, if you go to the market side, you never know what sort of people you come into contact with, all sorts of sinners and criminals.

and when you come into contact with these people, you have to clean yourself. And in fact, worst of all, meeting non-Jews. And one interesting thing is that the Talmud itself, where these tribal laws have been written down, refers to a number of Pharisees.

The Talmud says there are those who were called the shoulder Pharisees. The shoulder Pharisees were those who went around with very high shoulders, showing how holy they are, and looking down on everybody else.

Our Lord himself gave a parable of one of these kind of Pharisees. We find that in Luke 18, Republican and the Pharisee, he says, the Pharisee says, for instance, look, I thank God that I'm not like other men.

I do this, I do that, I do that. How often do we Christians show this kind of holier-than-thou attitude?

[19 : 21] We feel self-satisfied because when we look around ourselves, we find people whose relationship with God, we believe, is not as good as ours.

Instead of relating ourselves to God, to the standard of Jesus Christ, we may often turn around and look at others around us and say, well, I'm not like them.

I at least have a better relationship with God. We can very easily slip into situations where we become shoulder Pharisees.

Then there were those called wait-a-little Pharisees. Christians, they were always busy doing something religious. If you went to them, they would say, wait a little, I still have a religious duty to perform.

That's how their name came about. And many added it. The Talmud actually leaves seven of them. And some of them sounds very ridiculous.

[20 : 41] One, for instance, out of the commandment which we have just read, thou shall not commit adultery, they took it to mean that they would not even look into the face of a woman. And some of them were called the bruised Pharisees.

Because they are so busy running away from women, they run into walls. This may sound ridiculous and funny, but we can very easily slip into it.

it is an unconscious thing. Before we realize, we slip into a kind of legalism that has no love for its basis.

And if our attitude to the law is one that has no love for its basis, then it ceases to be a Christian attitude.

the Pharisees, the aim of the Pharisees were to satisfy the external requirements of the law.

[21 : 56] We can also like them, become so concerned with obeying God that we cease to be people who know and love God.

We can so easily, in our genuine attempts to be Christians, become legalists, not caring for what is going on within us, not caring for what is happening to us internally, and our right relationship for God, but only caring for the externals.

it is basically a question of motive, and what is our motive, our relationship with God.

The aim of the Pharisee was to satisfy the law of God, no matter how he did it. To them, the important thing was doing the externals, and it is theoretically possible, if we want to do only the externals, it is theoretically possible for us to come to a stage where we can say, I have done my duty as far as the law is concerned.

I have obeyed the law. I have obeyed all the commandments. I haven't wronged anybody. But the ideal that Jesus Christ is introducing in the Sermon on the Mount is the ideal of love, and there is no limit to that one.

[23 : 29] We never come to a point if we are acting out of love, when we can say, I have come to my limit. The demand of the Christian is completely different.

The Christian's aim is to show gratitude for the love of God, and as I have said, there is no limit for that one. You can never come to a point where you say, I have reached my limit.

So we can see now how it is possible for a Christian to be holier than the Pharisees. The Pharisees may, thank God, may say the Christian way is easy, but that would be a complete misunderstanding of the gospel.

Christ's emphasis is on the much needed inward holiness. A holiness that comes from within us.

It is a free development of our spiritual character based on our personal relationship with God. God so that when you become a Christian for the first time, it is not that you have now acquired certain number of rules and regulations to follow.

[25 : 04] That is saying that I used to be that, I used to do that, I used to do that, but now I no longer do that. That may be possible. I have withdrawn from them, I have to refrain from them.

That is not strictly the Christian attitude. What the Lord is saying here is that when we become Christians, we develop a new character, a character that is based on our relationship with him, and that character grows as we grow.

And out of this special relationship with God and our new character, we no longer see any point in doing what we did before.

Now, so the Christian attitude is not that we refrain from doing certain things, but that we see no point in doing them.

We do not just refrain, we do not train ourselves to refrain from certain things, but we are so committed to Christ and our desire to please him and our desire to have a good relationship with him that we build a character and that character continues to grow in such a way that verse 21 which we have been considering.

[26 : 37] in fact between verse 21 and 48 our Lord gives one illustration after the other to show what this new attitude to the law is.

To illustrate the Christian love and the legalism of the Pharisees to the Pharisee it was simply for instance let's take verse 21 the illustration our Lord gives for the Pharisee it was simply do not kill.

Thou shall not kill and as long as he has not killed anybody he is not guilty of that particular law. But our Lord takes this further.

our Lord says the law is not just do not kill but do not even be angry do not insult do not call your brother a fool.

I need to explain these three things further. Anger here means the anger that we have which we do not forgive.

[28 : 04] Naturally we become angry but we forgive. But in the case where we do not forgive and continue to brood on that anger this is the kind of anger our Lord condemns.

And then next he says do not insult your brother. Other translations says do not insult. But the old version here leaves it as *rakah*.

Now *rakah* here the meaning I imply from it in some places it means to spit. That is to spit on somebody to spit on the face of somebody is to indicate that you just do not value that person you do not respect that person you do not regard that person.

It is a very contemptuous attitude. And what our Lord is telling us here that it is not just the person who kills but also the person who gets unnecessarily angry with his brother the person who looks on his brother contemptuously is also wrong.

That is contemptuously you maybe by the position of your birth you say I was born into such and such a family but who are you? I hold such and such a position in society where do you stand?

[29 : 43] or I own such and such and who are you? Our contempt of others may not come in our words but in our attitudes and to such our Lord condemns.

The third one he says do not call your brother a fool. This is in verse 22. And a fool in this sense means do not say he is an immoral person.

Do not condemn or criticize him in this respect is to criticize his character. And while criticizing his character at the same time what you are doing is exactly what the Pharisee was doing in Luke 18 when he says Lord I thank you I am not like that publican.

So to say he is a fool he is an immoral person you are destroying his character and at the same time you are uplifting yourself.

the question is how often we will not cast doubts on other people's lives.

[31 : 16] How very easily we dismiss others. Here Jesus says to the Christian this is a new situation.

he says it is true enough you shall not kill. It is true enough thou shall not kill. But I say unto you the man who is a slave to anger the man who speaks contemptuously of others and finally the one who destroys the image of others the one who condemns unnecessarily may not have taken a knife to stab somebody but he is a murderer at heart and from the Christian principle he is already guilty.

because the Christian principle is a principle of love. It is an attitude to the law which is based on love and because it is based on love we get angry and the anger quickly passes.

We do not get into a situation where we refer to somebody as *rakah*. Because it is based on love we do not get into a situation where we begin the person whom you really love you do not turn around to that person and say you immoral brute.

That is the new attitude to the law that Jesus establishes for us. It is at this point that we should understand Jesus' command in verse 20 that unless our righteousness exceeds exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees we shall never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[33 : 24] This was an outward obedience. They wanted to keep the externals as much as possible. Jesus wants ours to come from within.

He wants a relationship that comes from within and a character that grows. For instance, a Pharisee may have looked at somebody and really get angry and said, if not for the law, I would have banged this brute on the head.

But as long as he refrains from doing it, he feels satisfied. from the Christian point of view, as soon as you come to the point where you said, if not for the law, I would have banged him on the head.

From the Christian point of view, as seen in the sermon on the mount, you have already done it, and you are already guilty. Ours is not a catalog of do's and do's, but a new attitude to life.

It is a life lived by the renewal of the spirit within us, and not a mastering of rules and regulations.

[34 : 56] If your Christian life is that of an attempt to master certain rules and regulations, if it is simply an attempt to obey the law, then you have to think again.

But if you dedicate your life to Christ and you are committed to him, then you would like to live a life that shows your love to him.

Then you will build a new character and you will live an enjoyable Christian life. Satisfying both to yourself and to your God because it is now something that comes from within.

It is a relationship you have built up and not rules that you have mastered. Have we found personally there no attitude to the law.

Let us pray that Jesus himself who commands that we should have an attitude of love will open our hearts and fill it with that love.

[36 : 20] Amen. Let us pray. Lord Jesus we come before you we thank you for your word to us this evening we thank you for the truth of your word as is shown in the sermon on the mount we thank you that you did live such the word in scripture for us father we are praying that sometimes we see the good of your word we see how good your word is but when it comes to we ourselves applying it to our lives we find ourselves struggling so we are asking father that you fill our hearts with this love we fill our hearts with this love that will build a new relationship between us and you a relationship that will be satisfying and gratifying a relationship that will be to the glory of your name may your name be glorified in meités of

Jake