

14. The Sermon on the Mount (Part 2)

The Jews in Jesus' time, like practicing Jews in our time, had a great love, a very great zeal for the scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Even two thousand years ago, the vast majority of Jewish men knew how to read, because it was believed that the first duty in life of every Jewish man was to know God's law. They thought any man deserved death if he dared speak against the law or changed the customs that Moses had given them (Acts 6:13,14; 21:28, 36).

We have already seen that Jesus had a great respect for the law, because during the temptation in the wilderness, he responded to each of Satan's arguments by quoting scripture. On more than one occasion, when questioned about a responsibility toward God, Jesus referred his questioner to what is written in the law.

However, Jesus was going to tell these people who were very religious, very devoted to the law, to repent, or change radically. He was going to make a clear distinction between what their teachers of the law said and what he himself said. Those who thought they already taught very well and followed the law, might have concluded that Jesus wanted to reject the law of Moses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clarified his position regarding the law that God had given the Israelite people in the time of Moses:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." (Matthew 5:17,18)

HE CAME TO FULFILL THE LAW

Not only did Jesus respect the law as much as any other Jew, but he said that he had come to fulfill it. He accomplished this in at least three senses. Galatians 4:4 reminds us that Jesus was born "under the law." It was still in force during his life on earth, and so as a Jew, he was obligated to keep it. In fact, he was the only person to perfectly respect the law. 1 Peter 2:22 writes of this as: "Who committed no

sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth". Jesus himself asked his adversaries, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46). None of them could respond by citing a single commandment that Jesus had violated. Jesus came to perfectly obey the law of God, to live without sin.

Secondly, Jesus "fulfilled" the law by doing all the things that it had prophesied in words and symbols on the subject of the Messiah, the Christ. Throughout the gospels, it is written that this or that took place "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets." In John 19:30, we see the last words of Jesus before he died on the cross: "So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit." When Jesus was resurrected, he tried to make his disciples understand the necessity of his suffering and his death. "Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me'" (Luke 24:44).

And thirdly, Jesus "fulfilled" the law by allowing it to serve its purpose. But what was this purpose? Paul tells us in Galatians 3:22-24:

"But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

The law should have led to Jesus because it speaks of him. Jesus said to the Jews in John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me." In addition, the law had to lead to Jesus in making men know their sinful state. As we later heard, "Scripture has confined all under sin" (Galatians 3:22). Romans 3:19,20 contains the same idea: the law was given "that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh

will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Seeing that they could never be perfectly righteous before God through the law, despite all their efforts, the Jews should have come to understand that they needed a Savior. The law was supposed to lead them to Christ. It is because of this that Paul wrote in Romans 10:4, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

Jesus didn't fail to respect the law of Moses, but when he obeyed all the requirements of the law, when he fulfilled all the prophecies, when the one to whom the law was supposed to lead for salvation had come, the law could—in a way—disappear. In effect, Jesus had not said, “the law will never disappear.” He said, “till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:18).

HE SAID TO RESPECT THE LAW AS LONG AS IT IS IN EFFECT

Jesus was very conscious of the fact that the old law would soon be coming to an end. When he spoke to the Samaritan woman in John 4, he indicated that the place of worshipping God would change: “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4:21). The place of worship would no longer be important, but it would be the manner of worshipping God that would be considered. Yet the law of Moses insisted again and again on the importance of making sacrifices only in the place designated by God.

Regarding the court of the temple in Jerusalem, the place where all the activities of the priests took place, where all sacrifices were supposed to be offered, Jesus further indicated the end of the whole system: “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’” (Matthew 24:1,2). About 40 years later, this prophecy was fulfilled by the army of the Roman Empire, which forever put an end to the Levitical worship ordained by Moses.

When he instituted the Lord's supper, Jesus spoke of a new covenant which he was establishing: “Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you’” (Luke 22:20). Shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem which we mentioned before, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews wrote, “In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13). The old covenant, already obsolete, disappeared, in fact, with the destruction of the temple.

Yes, Jesus made it known that the old covenant would be replaced, but in the Sermon on the Mount, he spoke to the Jews, who were still living under the old system. He thus spoke of certain things that had to be done under the old law but would come to an end under the new covenant, things such as the sacrificing animals on the altar.

What was Jesus' attitude about the Law of Moses while it was still in effect? This is what we see in Matthew 5:19:

“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

In other words, as long as the law was in force, Jesus ordered a rigorous respect for its requirements. God does not accept an attitude which allows a man to put aside the commandments of God or to substitute other practices in place of those God has ordained. Those who want to be citizens of the kingdom of God cannot act in this way. The words of Jesus show us that if a man did this with the Mosaic law while it was still in force, he was not the sort of man who could be honored in the kingdom which was to come.

HE ACCUSED THE JEWS OF NOT GUARDING THE LAW

In spite of the deep attachment of the Jews for their scriptures, they did not observe them as God wanted them to. Several passages attest to this fact. In Luke 1:17, the angel of the Lord described the task that John the Baptist would have: “He will also go

before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The Jewish people were religious, but they needed to be led back to the wisdom of righteousness.

Later, Jesus said simply, "Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?" (John 7:19). The apostle Paul spoke in the same way: "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified... You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?" (Romans 2:13,23).

But it was not only the Jews in general who did not respect the law. The warning concerned even the most religious among them. One of the most shocking things Jesus said in the Sermon on the

Mount is found in Matthew 5:20. "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." Most Jews who heard this teaching must have asked themselves how such a thing was possible. You see, the scribes and Pharisees were known for observing the ceremonies of the law in the smallest details. They separated themselves from other Jews who were, in their eyes, less pure. They were admired for their piety. But Jesus said it would be necessary to be more righteous than they were.

In our next lesson, we will see that in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed how the righteousness of men was not enough. He instructed us about the sort of righteousness that is required of each of us.