

A Heavenly Law©

Matthew 5:17-20

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Do you hear the change? As we continue with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount there seems to be a change in his tone, don't you think? Before – we heard about blessings – blessings simply because of who we are as children of God – the merciful, the spiritually hungry, the righteous, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

But now, Jesus makes a little turn in his teaching. What was comforting in his sermon now has a challenge and a potential to be uncomfortable. I mean, he is talking about the Law of Moses – the Ten Commandments that have been what every religious person followed – he is saying he has not come to abolish that law, given by God, but to fulfill it.

Well, that isn't so uncomfortable although it might be somewhat confusing. But what he says next could be cause to turn and run for the hills (except they were already in the hills).

Jesus tells the people they should be following the law even more than the scribes and Pharisees! Do you realize how astonishing that probably sounded to the common people there on that hillside?

It would be like telling an average catholic to be more devout than the pope. Sort of.

Jesus says “until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

Sounds pretty clear that the law is important to God, doesn't it? In the Hebrew letters, which is the language the Old Testament is written in, (most of it anyway) there are little tiny marks that indicate how to pronounce a word, and that mark is called an *iodh*. It's like an apostrophe in our English language. If that isn't there or in the right place, the entire interpretation could be incorrect.

There is also a little line at the foot of a letter called the *tittle* that again, is so important in translation. Hebrew is such an interesting language with all its little marks and scratches. You read it from back to front, from right to left. It has lots of puns and different meanings.

But Jesus is saying here that the Law is as important as every little mark in the language it's written in. It is so sacred that not even the smallest detail of the Law will ever pass away.

The Law – to the Jewish people – was thought of in four different ways. It first and foremost meant the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Given straight from the hand of God!

But the people also thought of the law as being the Pentateuch – which means The Five Rolls (or scrolls) – or what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament ... Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. That was their Bible, so to speak.

They also used the phrase “the law and the prophets” to mean the whole Scripture – meaning the entire Old Testament, much as we know it today.

And then they used the term The Law to mean the oral or the scribal law. Those were the laws that were written to keep the original laws.

So, is what Jesus is saying in this sermon a contradiction of some sort? We are used to hearing stories from the New Testament where Jesus and later, the Apostle Paul, seemed to condemn the law. Is Jesus affirming the law here, but condemning it in other places?

It really depends on which of these uses of the term “The Law” we are referring to, and I think it is most certain that Jesus condemned the scribal laws – not the Ten Commandments.

If we look at those Ten Commandments – the first law that God gave to Moses for the people to live by, we can see that it is pretty basic, right? It is very relational – really.

- You shall have no other gods before me, God says. Because God wants to be first and wants to have a relationship with us.
- You shall not make or bow down to idols.
- You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain.
- You should remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Take a day to rest from your work and remember the Lord.
- Honor your father and mother.
- You shall not murder
- You shall not commit adultery
- You shall not steal
- You shall not give false witness against someone.
- You shall not covet what your neighbor has (his house or his wife or even his donkey ... or his car)

It’s basic Kingdom Living 101. It’s how to live in harmony with God and others. It’s not that hard. There are a lot of “shall not’s but those are

undergirded by love and peace and justice – God’s rule for living in God’s Kingdom.

And with the coming of Jesus, God’s kingdom came into the world. It isn’t just a kingdom somewhere in the sky, a place to go when we die. It is the kingdom of God here and now because Jesus brought it to us.

This law that was good and perfect when God first gave it, is the same law that Jesus came to fulfill – to teach the truth of how to keep it.

And as astonishing as it might have sounded, Jesus is saying the people should keep those heavenly laws way better than the scribes and the Pharisees were doing.

That’s because those guys – those so-called religious gurus – were more about all the thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations they wrote themselves so people would keep the Ten Commandments.

William Barclay, scholar and commentator, writes this about the scribal laws regarding not working on the Sabbath:

“To carry a burden on the Sabbath Day is to work. But next, a burden has to be defined. So the scribal law lays it down that a burden is food equal in weight to a dried fig, or enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow ...” Get the picture?

Their lists of rules to keep the rules go on and on and on, making the law a terrible burden that is literally impossible to keep.

The scribes wrote the rules and the Pharisees spent their lives studying every detail of those rules and making sure they and everyone else obeyed each one. They were full of self-righteousness and, unfortunately of judgment and condemnation. Surely this is not what Jesus is teaching the people to do even better than these religious rulers.

Well, if we take a look at other teachings of Jesus, we can be sure that is not what he means. What are some of the things you think of when you remember what Jesus has taught? How has he taught you to live?

- To love others
- To turn the other cheek
- To forgive
- To not judge
- To put others first

- To feed the hungry
- Visit the sick
- Visit the prisoners

These are all relational too, aren't they? If you think of these relational commandments of Jesus in line with the Ten Commandments, you can see, can't you, that the fulfillment of the Law Jesus is talking about has the same foundation as those Ten Commandments.

And that is what Jesus says we should be doing. And if we look at it that way and do it with genuine love and compassion for others and love for God, we will be doing it far better and much more authentically than those rule keeping scribes and Pharisees.

This is the way of God's Kingdom. These are the rules of the Heavenly Law – it's about loving God with all our hearts; putting God first; taking time for rest and worship; it's about community and compassion and peace and respect.

It's what the first law taught about living in a new community of God people and it's what Jesus affirmed and taught that is still ours today.

We are his authentic followers when we live by these heavenly laws. God's laws; Jesus' teaching; disciples' keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.

May our eyes be opened to see glimpses of God's truths; may our ears be opened to hear God's voice; and may our mouths be open to tell that warm truth of God's amazing love shown to us through His Son, Jesus everywhere we go.

May our hearts be open for loving others the way God has loved us. Our prayer hymn is #324 ... "Open My Eyes That I May See."