

The Law & The Prophets (Part 1)

Introduction - Setting the Scene:

'The Kingdom of God.' What do you think of when you think of the 'kingdom?'

God is a king. His kingdom is the universe. His kingdom has natural laws that allow it to function. His kingdom has social laws that allow it to thrive. His kingdom has an ethical code.

When you think of God's throne where do you think of? When you think of his reign what do you think of?

God's Kingdom, as Pr Mark mentioned last Sabbath, is both *now* and *then*. It is a kingdom that *will be* and a kingdom that *is*.

A simple way to make the distinction between the kingdom *now* and *then* is that the Kingdom now is the 'Kingdom of Grace,' and the kingdom then is the 'Kingdom of Glory.'

The Kingdom of Glory - that kingdom that is currently a place of unapproachable light, is the presently unattainable state that can make God's kingdom seem somewhat inaccessible to us. Too often we focus entirely on that kingdom, and, like the disciples of old, we place our focus in the wrong place.

Jesus, confronting this oversimplification of God's Kingdom, said to His disciples "indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." *Luke 17:21*

When Jesus thought of God's kingdom being within us, He was not saying that the physical kingdom (the kingdom of glory) does not exist. He was simply saying that the Kingdom of God is relational, and wherever people live inside out it's principles, there it is in verity.

The Kingdom of Grace is really the manifestation of the principles of the Kingdom of Glory toward sinners. It is in fact God's glorious kingdom responding to the plight of people in need.

So, with that in mind, how do we become prepared to be accepted as citizens of God's Kingdom of Glory? That should have been made abundantly clear to you last Sabbath when Pastor Mark spoke to us about the Christians character, and the Christians influence. We are prepared for citizenship in heaven by becoming citizens of the Kingdom of Grace here and now - applying the principles of its reign in our today.

The Kingdom of Grace, like the Kingdom of Glory, is founded upon principles that make it the kind of kingdom that it is. To be an upstanding citizen of this kingdom your life will be governed by these principles - affecting the way that you relate to life, to God and to others.

These words, commenting on what was going through some peoples minds after Jesus had spoken the words that we examined last week, we get an insight into why He might continue His speech the way that He did.

"The rabbis saw that by His teaching the whole tenor of the instruction they had given to the people was set at nought. He was tearing down the partition wall that had been so flattering to their pride and exclusiveness; and they feared that, if permitted, He would draw the people entirely away from them." Ellen White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, pg 46

Point 1 - The Unchangeable Nature of the Law:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. 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. 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." Matthew 5:17-19

Because Jesus had just revolutionised the way his hearers viewed life, it is not surprising that He now chose to add a bit of a , so as to not be misunderstood.

"Do not think," He says.

He knew that it was probable that a percentage of His audience believed that he was, minimising (at best), dissolving (at worst), 'the Old Testament teachings - particularly the Torah.

'Far from it!' He seems to be saying.

'My purpose was not to take away from the Old Testament teachings,' He says, 'in fact, my life will be a direct fulfilment of many of those teachings.'

You can probably sympathise with how the Jews would've felt. It would probably have been very much like how the Catholic Church felt when Martin Luther and others protested against the long held traditions of the church. In fact, it is probably much like how we feel when somebody else challenges one of our convictions!

But you said you come to tear down the Jewish system! He had come to add substance and meaning to it for them. To bring a relevance to the words that had been living and true all along - though treated like lifeless, meaningless obligations.

In verse 18 Jesus goes to great lengths to demonstrate just how unchangeable He believes the Law to be.

Let me ask you a question. Is gravity variable, dependent on time, culture or circumstance? We hope not! Right?

Well, just as the laws of nature are necessary for the normal function of things (as we know it), so too God's law is unchangeably relevant for the optimum function of things in this universe. Trust Him - He designed us that way!

Affirming this idea in her book *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, Ellen White says: *"So long as heaven and earth continue, the holy principles of God's law will remain. His righteousness, "like the great mountains" (Psalm 36:6), will continue, a source of blessing, sending forth streams to refresh the earth."* Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, pg 49

But what about that last phrase? Till all is fulfilled? What did Jesus mean about that?

It's interesting to go back to the original language for this phrase. If you have an English Bible, it is likely that in both verse 17 and 18 the word 'fulfil' is used. But in the Greek they are two different words. This second word fulfil, which comes from the Greek word "ghin'om-ahee," is almost never translated as 'fulfilled' in the New Testament. In most instances it is translated as 'done' or 'be.' It is basically a way of saying that things have been brought to a completion.

In this particular context it would seem that Jesus is using as kind of hypothetical hyperbolic example to prove the point that He was making about the unchangeability of the Law. It seems to me that He is virtually saying 'whilever heaven and earth exist my law will be relevant.'

It is evident, as you read on, that Jesus is obviously not saying that the law is irrelevant, for He says that whoever *breaks* one of the least of the commandments and teaches others that way of living is *least*.

Jesus is a big proponent of the idea that 'greatness is not measured so much in accomplishments, but in character.' But He also recognises that good character is displayed in heartfelt harmony with God (and the principles of His governance).

"While the system of types which pointed to Christ as the Lamb of God that should take away the sin of the world was to pass away at His death, the principles of righteousness embodied in the Decalogue are as immutable as the eternal throne...The love of God underlies every precept of His law, and he who departs from the commandment is working his own unhappiness and ruin." Ellen White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, pg 51,52

Point 2 - True Righteousness:

"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." Matthew 5:20

The word righteousness is a very 'Christian' word, and the problem with 'Christian' words is that they are often overused and under-comprehended.

What does the word righteousness mean to you?

We often define righteousness to be some kind of Divine checklist. We think things like 'if I can just do these things I will be a "righteous" person;' and often the things we put on the checklist are very good things, even things like 'Christlikeness,' but, no matter how good our checklist is, it is still an unhelpful way of thinking about righteousness.

True Righteousness, as Jesus points out, is not so much about what you do (on the outside), but is really about who you are (on the inside)!

In Jesus' mind the idea of being "righteous" is to be in harmony with Heaven - a true citizen.

The Scribes and Pharisees that Jesus references in this verse are living in this *checklist mindset*. Their entire paradigm is built upon a misconception of God in which His law is primarily about behaviour, and so they go through their lives with a fine tooth comb weeding out behaviours and putting on a good old show; but, as Jesus later comments 'inside they're like dead mans bones!'

Commenting on the unprofitable nature of this lifestyle, Ellen White says: *"A legal religion is insufficient to bring the soul into harmony with God... In their professed service to God, the Jews were really working for self. Their righteousness was the fruit of their own efforts to keep the law according to their own ideas and for their own selfish benefit. Hence it could be no better than they were. In their endeavour to make themselves holy, they were trying to bring a clean thing out of an unclean."* Ellen White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, pg 53,54

Speaking to the reason for this misapprehension, Paul writes *"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."* Romans 10:1-3

In the Apostle Paul's mind the reason for this misapprehension goes back to a misunderstanding of God's character. They do not have an accurate view of the Holiness of God and resultantly they cannot comprehend His government - for God's governance flows out of who God is.

When Jesus contrasts true righteousness with that of the scribes and Pharisees, He is demonstrating that what a man *is* is more important than what he *does*. The real duty of the Christian, more than skin deep, is to steward His God-given ability in love; and, consequently, the true call of the law of God is to the *hearts* of men, saying 'come to me! Love me and love others from your heart,' not merely a requirement for flawless behaviour.

Point 3 - Re-tracing the Law:

Now, keeping that idea tucked firmly behind one ear, let me take a deviation that I think will set us up for understanding what Jesus is about to do in the following verses.

What is the most important of all the gifts God has ever given to mankind?

Now, I did kind of set you up with that question. Most of you probably answered 'Jesus.' And if I'd said 'who is the most important gift?' Jesus would have been the correct answer. However, I think there is a sense in which the gift of free-will exceeds even the gift of Jesus in its fundamental importance to God - for God valued free-will so much that He was willing to give His only Son if it was abused.

The question then is: how are we stewarding that gift?

This question is, I believe, the question of the law of God; and, it I believe, the thing Jesus is trying to get across in verses 21-37 where He seeks to re-frame the law - in an attempt to redeem its beauty in the minds of his listeners.

He says: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment." But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, Raca! shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. "Furthermore it has been said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord." But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." Matthew 5:21-37*

In this passage Jesus is, as I said, re-framing the law. 'You have heard,' He says, 'but I say to you.' He is redeeming the true concept of the law in the minds of a people to whom the law has become *the creed of their Grandparents*.

In re-framing the law Jesus does not provide an exhaustive commentary on the 613 laws that the Pharisees imposed upon the people - He picked the heart of the law out.

"God's Law is a call to stewardship. It is not about taking away our power or pleasure. On the contrary, it tells us that we have power and represents the way that power should be used." DB

In selecting the heart of the law Jesus breaks it up into six major areas of stewardship:

1. The Power of Harmony
2. The Power of Commitment
3. The Power of Love
4. The Power of Integrity
5. The Power of Mercy
6. The Power of Grace

The Power of Harmony is the gift of wholeheartedness. Dysfunction occurs when this gift is not stewarded as it should be. Jesus references anger as a breach of the 6th commandment, and that it is. However, it seems evident that Jesus' whole premise is that each of the commandments are not really stand-alone requirements, but all reflect the central command to live within an other-centered paradigm.

We have been given the freedom to treat people as God would treat them - with love and kindness. The power to live in harmony with others enables us to have 'a conscience that is without offence toward God and men' (Acts 24:16). This gift enables us to be ambassadors for God and be both *blessed and a blessing* (as Pr Mark was saying last week); or, to use the words of Deuteronomy 5:33 it enables it 'to go well with us and our children.'

Jesus makes an affront to the human inclination to *shame* and *blame* others instead of owning the situation and seeking restitution. In Matthew 5:24 He says "*leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift*" as if to say that we have no business seeking restitution with God while holding grudges and having bitterness toward our fellows. Jesus makes it clear that a steward of God's image (a citizen of the kingdom) will seek for harmony with all around Him - just as God does.

The Power of Commitment is the gift of relational faithfulness. Jesus here makes reference to the 7th commandment of course; but, yet again we see Jesus driving deeper than that expression alone. Commitment, Jesus says, is not only about the actions, it is about the heart! To be committed to someone in a marriage relationship means devoting your whole self to the flourishing of your spouse. This, far from being a restrictive prohibition, is the very key to a blissful relationship that mirrors the triune fellowship present in the Godhead itself. To be entirely dedicated to someone forever opens up a pathway to a quality of intimacy not experienced by those who are double-minded.

The Power of Love is the gift of 'agape.' Selfless love is, of course, at the heart of all of the ten commandments, because it is the core characteristic at the heart of God. This next 'but I say to you' of Jesus' is no exception.

Obviously there are circumstances where a divorce is the best option, but Jesus seems to be addressing a specific problem that was present in His day, and, it doesn't take much looking to see that it is also a problem today. That problem - taking divorce lightly. It seems that to Jesus, divorce should never be seen as a *plan A*. He seems to indicate that because marriage is a Divine institution it is to be treated with utmost importance and sanctity (and this applies more broadly than just in the case of divorce).

God values love! He created us for the kind of love that is not dependent upon the response of the other person. A love that creates its response rather than merely reacting. This is His dream for relationships, and, it seems to me that Jesus is seeking to lift this value back to its proper place. Divorce, He believes, is always a last resort - when there can be no reconciliation.

The Power of Integrity is the gift of trust. When you are a 'person of your word' Jesus says, you can be trusted. It is important that we see this as both a gift of power and of stewardship; because, when we have integrity people *will* trust us with things (giving us power), and, when we have integrity we are giving them the opportunity to also give us their trust.

Jesus, addressing this matter of integrity says "Do not swear at all... let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." Putting His finger on the pulse of human ability, Jesus identifies that we are not always capable of doing everything that others might wish we would do. So, rather than promise things that we cannot deliver, Jesus recommends that we only ever commit to things that we know we have the resources to accomplish. This means that we won't fail others expectations, but it also means that we won't be taking other peoples opportunities by trying to be "all things to all people."

James 4:14,15 offers a bit of practical counsel "What is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." I don't think Jesus was aiming at the words so much as the heart, but even so, following this practical counsel will help to train our mind to think in terms of God's ability - not our ability.

The Power of Mercy is the gift of benevolence, and *the Power of Grace* is the gift of image-bearing. But I'd better not cheat, for that's not my passage. Pr Mark will be reflecting on these with you next Sabbath.

Conclusion:

For me, the rubber really meets the road in this passage, at the idea of stewardship. Jesus is re-framing the law to make it honourable again in the minds of the people, bringing to light the liberating love of a Father who wants flourishing for His children, and, contrasting the paradigm of keeping the law as some sort of a *vain tradition* with the joy of living in harmony with Heaven!

To me, the take home message of this passage is:

"The law was never intended to be a burden, but rather, is both the emancipation proclamation for an enslaved people and embodiment of the principles that lead to true liberation." DB

"In heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their Creator. Obedience is to them no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy. So in every soul wherein Christ, the hope of glory, dwells, His words are re-echoed, "I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart." Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, pg 109

It is my prayer that this will be your experience both today and forever!