

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

MATTHEW 5:17-20

HAVING thus declared the necessity for character; and indicated its issue in influence; the King prefaced His enunciation of laws, by a prologue on the general subject of law.

Let us carefully examine this prologue.

- Let us first analyze it, that we may discover its revelation of the relation of the King to the law; and the relation of His subjects to the law; and,
- Secondly, let us notice two great principles, which are all-inclusive, and must be understood and remembered as we proceed to consider the law as He enunciated it.

When He said, "**Think not that I came to destroy the law, or the prophets,**" what did He mean by "**the law**" and "**the prophets**"? What did the phrase mean to the men who heard it?

If we can put ourselves in their place, and find that out, we shall have the true thought.

They were men born in Hebraism, brought up in the atmosphere of the Hebrew economy; and there can be no doubt that they understood Him to refer to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. These consisted of three sections the Law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, or Writings.

These men, therefore, certainly understood Him to say:

- I have not come to destroy the ethical code under which you have been living;
- I have not come to minimize morality;
- I have not come to loosen bonds which are intended to hold you to everything that is high and true and pure and noble;
- I have not come to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfil.

These men thought of the law and the prophets as giving the economy which conditioned their life in the minutest particular and detail.

They were governed by the law and the prophets; or they knew they ought to be governed by the law and the prophets; and that the measure in which they were sinning men, was the measure in which they were breaking the law, and disobeying the voice of the prophets.

The King ruthlessly swept away all the traditions of the elders; denying, by ignoring, the method of the Pharisee, the tithing of mint and anise and rue and cummin, the constant washing of hands. All this is of no value.

The matters of importance are:

- The law, *a Divine conditioning of life*;
- The prophets, *a Divine call to obedience*.

Thus He brought these men face to face with the ethical requirement, and declared, "**Think not that I came to destroy the law, or the prophets.**"

I have not come to minimize morality; within the sphere of My government there will be no license; none of these laws will be destroyed in My Kingdom; nothing will be abrogated by My coming "**I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.**"

There are various interpretations of the King's meaning when He said He had come to fulfil the law. All of them may be correct, but most of them are partial.

In my own study of these wonderful sayings of Jesus, I am more and more impressed that one of the surest methods of true interpretation is to get back and stand with the men who heard them.

Did He mean He had come to establish that great Kingdom wherein the law would be realized and obeyed? Yes, He meant that. But when the men heard Him, what did they understand Him to mean?

On the eastern sky, so long grey and dark, the glory of a new morning was flashing. These men who had lived so long in the cold winter tide "**the voice of the turtle is heard in the land,**" and felt that springtime was coming whenever He spoke.

Their hope was for the coming of the golden age, the dawning of the great day, of which the Psalmist sang, and which the prophets foretold. When He said, "**I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil,**" He meant: *I have come to realize all that the law attempted to realize.*

It is not likely that they saw the Cross in His program; although He knew it to be so. What they understood Him to mean was that He had come to fulfil the law personally, communicatively, universally.

And yet again. This was not merely the declaration of a personal determination; it was an official proclamation.

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

Here again one is tempted to ask, What did our Lord mean; "**Till heaven and earth pass**"?

The answer which comes most easily is that this was a figure of speech; that it was an indefinite way of saying that the law can never pass away. But it was not so. It is a most matter-of-fact utterance on the part of Jesus. When He said those words, it is as though He stood at the center of the cosmos; of Heaven, which was ever the supreme place with Him; of Earth, the things which are patent to the senses; and said: *The law cannot fail in the tiniest accent, in the minutest matter; it cannot be set aside, it cannot be abrogated, it cannot be trifled with as non-important while these things last as they are; “Till heaven and earth pass; . . . till all be fulfilled.”*

If we interpret the words by the constant law of Scripture we shall find that the words were not carelessly chosen.

- *Is heaven to pass away?* Yes, He says so; “**Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.**”

- *Is the material order in the midst of which the Son of God and Son of Man stood, in the midst of which we live, to pass away?* He says so.

The law, which is the statement in words of God’s ideal, cannot pass, cannot be done away, cannot be abrogated in one jot or tittle, until heaven and earth pass. It must last while the cosmos as it is, lasts.

But when heaven and earth pass, does the law pass into non-existence?

Until righteousness, the ultimate of law, be realized, law cannot pass; and that will not be till the heaven and earth pass. But beyond the heaven and earth that shall pass away, Peter saw “**new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness**” (II Peter 3:13). Then righteousness will be unhindered, dynamical, masterful. Then the law will pass. It will not then be destroyed; it will have passed from word into spirit, from the cold letter which affrights us, into the warm life which energizes. That is what we are living for, and working toward.

If you want to know how God is getting on, do not look around you to-day. Fight to-day, but look on to the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Do not let us read these words of Jesus as though they were merely human rhetoric! I have not come to destroy law. I have not come to destroy the prophets. I am come to fulfil them. The law will abide; the prophets will remain until this sin-scarred earth and sullied heaven pass; and there come the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

That is the King’s official declaration.

Underneath that declaration, and in the presence of that manifesto, we who have seen Him and love Him are to live and fight and serve, God helping us. Now, what does Jesus say of the relation of His subjects to law?

I am not referring to the law of Moses the Ten Commandments; but to the underlying principles which the law of Moses and the Ten Commandments imperfectly portrayed.

We need not attempt to discover the relation between the Mosaic economy and that of the King; all that He will presently explain. He will show us how far the law of Moses is binding on us still. It is a deeper, profounder matter with which He was now dealing:

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

This was a word of warning for the men inside the Kingdom.

Notice carefully, “**break**” and “**teach**.”

You never find a man teaching that any commandment of God is unimportant, but that behind his teaching is the fact that he himself is breaking that commandment. **“Whosoever therefore shall break . . . and teach men so.”** That is a close connection, and the issue for that man is that he is to be least in the Kingdom.

It is not a question of being cast out of the Kingdom; it is a question of his losing the honors and the rewards; the sense that he is co-operating in the building of the city, and the bringing in of the new heaven and the new earth.

But mark also the other side, in which the same philosophy is manifest **“Whosoever shall do and teach them.”**

The only power of teaching is that of the doing which precedes it. No man ever teaches a commandment with power, if he is breaking it in his own life.

This is the relation of His disciples to law:

- Break the commandment, and teach men so, and you are least in the Kingdom.
- Do the commandment and teach men so, and you are great in the Kingdom.

Now from this analysis let us gather out the principles revealed.

The summary of all is in this last word of Jesus:

“I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees was beginning. It continued as He exhibited the benefits of the Kingdom; and when He enforced the claims thereof, it became more acute, until there came a day when He stood face to face with Scribes and Pharisees in constant conflict. In order to understand what He says here, we must turn to chapter 23:

“Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe” (Matthew 23:1-3).

Have you ever noticed that Jesus said that these men were to obey the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees? His quarrel is not with their teaching, in the measure in which it is an interpretation of law. He sweeps ruthlessly aside, as we shall see again and again, their whole teaching, when it becomes traditional merely. In so far as they sat on Moses’ seat, men were to do and observe all they told them.

“But,” He continued, **“do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not.”**

That is the whole story. At last He unmasked them.

He warned His disciples, however, at the beginning, that their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. When at last the time came to expose them, He explained the inner meaning of their failure. He began His preaching with the manifesto and the eight Beatitudes. He closed it for the public, by hurling eight woes upon the heads of the Pharisees.

- **“They say and do not.”** That was the trouble with them.
- **“They bind and bear not.”**
- **“They do to be seen of men.”**
- **“They love the uppermost (chief) seats . . . and the greetings.”**

All the rest is a growth. The root is “they say and do not.” Jesus declared that in His Kingdom the prime necessity is that there must be a righteousness which exceeds that.

What is the righteousness that exceeds? He that **“shall do and teach,”** the same shall be great. You are to do and say; you are to be and teach; you are to do to be seen of God; you are to be poor and meek and merciful.

Briefly, the righteousness of the Pharisees was the righteousness that conditioned externalities only. The righteousness that the King demands is one that conditions the hidden and the internal, and so conditions the externalities.

The righteousness of the Pharisees is the righteousness which expresses itself in the correct garment, and the wide phylactery on which quotations from law are written; something wholly for the eyes of men.

Here is a point at which to pause, lest we misunderstand.

The righteousness which exceeds is not the righteousness which is careless of testimony; but it begins farther back. The Pharisee is careful about the platter and the cup, the tithing of mint and anise and rue and cummin.

- The righteousness that exceeds is not careless about the platter and the cup;
 - The righteousness that exceeds is not careless about the tithing of the small, the minute; but it does not begin there.
- The righteousness that exceeds is the righteousness that is anxious about righteousness, judgment, mercy, truth, the weightier matters of the law.***

The ethic of Jesus is far more severe than the ethic of Moses.

One other word. "**I came to fulfil.**" Is not that a stern word?

Oh to say it as it ought to be said! He says to these men standing about Him: Do not imagine that I have come to make things easy; I have not; do not imagine that I am going to let you loose from obligation; do not imagine for a single moment that I am going to destroy law or prophetic interpretation of law; I have come to fulfil. These multitudes would give anything to be let loose from obligation to law; I have not come to do that.

It is Christ's word to this hour.

There is to be no license for passion. Here in My Kingdom, says Christ, you are not to be permitted the indulgence of sin if you pay pence; you are not to be excused from moral obligation and ethical exactitude, because you have high ideals.

"**I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil,**" and as the King utters the words, the flaming splendor of the law bursts upon us and the white searchlight of the Divine holiness lays bare our inner sin.

Do not imagine that if you give yourself to Christ and crown Him King; He is going to minimize moral obligation. Do not imagine for a single moment that because you trust in this great, wounded, stricken, dying Redeemer; you are going to be allowed to nurse your sin, and refuse to confess it, and go on insulting His holiness.

"I am come to fulfil."

As He speaks one is affrighted. And yet, oh sinning heart, behold the Man Who speaks. While you see the white light of Divine holiness gleam from His eyes; see also the tender, God-like compassion of those eyes; and know this, that ere He has finished the prophecy of that word, "**"I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil,"** He will in some mystery of death and pain have taken hold of paralysis, and replaced it by empowerment.

So that the King says; If you are going to follow Me, you must be pure, and you can. I will make you pure. You must fulfil law, and I will enable you to do it; I have come to fulfil. It is a great word; the last cry of the dying agony of the Son of God is in it.

Yet that is not the final thing.

The triumphant shout of the risen Christ is in it. From that moment until this, He has taken men who come to Him to fulfil law in them, and so make law unnecessary.

We do not want any Ten Commandments now, because His word is written in our hearts. We want no external standard to show how short we come, for we have the eternal dynamic that shows how great we may become in Jesus Christ.

Thus the King sets forth the value of law.

It is a guide to righteousness in the sense of being a text-book revealing its expression. Law is not, nor can it ever be, the dynamic of righteousness.

The law is a revelation of righteousness, and as a revelation of requirement cannot become obsolete until the righteousness described is realized. That righteousness exceeds that of Scribes and Pharisees.

The King will next proceed to describe it by example. The prelude may well affright us; it is a flaming sword; but let us follow the King, and we shall find that the great message of law is the evangel of grace.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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